

Dr. Gary Yates, Book of the 12, Session 24, Zephaniah

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This is Dr. Gary Yates in his lecture series on the Book of the 12. This is lecture 24 on the Book of Zephaniah.

In Deuteronomy chapter 18, the Lord had promised to the people of Israel that he would raise up for them a prophet like Moses.

What that promise really focused on was the fact that God, throughout Israel's history, would provide a prophet like Moses who would speak his word and convey his message to the people in every generation. The Book of the 12 demonstrates and proves that God was faithful to his word. Even at a time in Israel's history when they were unfaithful to him and had not kept their covenant responsibilities, the Lord, first of all, raised up a group of prophets during the Assyrian crisis.

We've talked about their ministry. God also raised up then as Judah was facing the Babylonian crisis, a series of prophets to prepare the people for that, to warn the people of the judgment that was coming. Even at this late hour after God had threatened and warned of judgment that was coming for generations, giving them one last opportunity to repent.

The prophets Nahum and Obadiah ministered during this time and they preached judgment against the people that had oppressed or had carried out God's judgment against the people of Judah. Nahum focused on the judgment of the Assyrians. Obadiah focuses on the judgment of the Edomites.

There are two prophets in the Book of the 12, Habakkuk and Zephaniah, who specifically preached to the people of Judah and warned them of the judgment that was coming and how God was going to use the Babylonians in the same way that he had used the Assyrians. Now, the message of Zephaniah and Habakkuk complements the message of the major prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Jeremiah ministered to the people in the land and began his ministry several years before the Babylonian invasion.

Throughout this period he is warning the people that they must turn to God or that they must submit to the Babylonians in order to avoid further destruction. God was also faithful to the exiles that were living in Babylon from 605 forward and even provided prophetic voices for them. Ezekiel was taken into exile in 597 and preached the word of the Lord to the exiles that were there in Babylon.

Daniel, who is a political official from Judah and one of the exiles and a political official in both the Babylonian and the Persian government, he was a prophetic voice as well. So, he's included in our English Bibles among the major prophets. He's included in the Hebrew canon among the writings.

We're going to look first at the message of Zephaniah and then we're going to look at the message of Habakkuk. I know that's out of canonical order, but it seems like the message of Zephaniah, we can identify the historical period of his ministry a little bit more clearly than with Habakkuk. So I want to talk about him first.

The message of Zephaniah is that Zephaniah says that the judgment that God is prepared to bring against Judah is the Day of the Lord. The Day of the Lord is fast approaching, and this judgment will be severe and ultimately cosmic in scope because the judgment that God brings against Judah will ultimately be a judgment that God pours out on the entire world.

So, we've seen this concept of the Day of the Lord. It's a prominent motif and theme in the Book of the 12. It's emphasized at the beginning of the book of the 12 in the prophecy of Joel.

It's also talked about in the book of Amos. Amos tells the people that they should not be looking forward to the Day of the Lord because they believe that it was going to be a time of deliverance. Amos warned them that it was going to be a time of judgment.

Zephaniah is going to say the same thing. In the way that Amos had warned, the Assyrian crisis is the Day of the Lord and it's imminent. This is a specific time in history when God is coming down to judge his people and to bring retribution on them for their sin.

They have become the enemy of God and that's why God is going to judge them. Zephaniah is going to warn the people of the same thing. Now a new installment and a different stage of the Day of the Lord is occurring.

God is judging the people at the hands of Babylon, and as the enemy approaches, that is the Day of the Lord. Joel, during the time of the post-exilic period, tells the people that another Day of the Lord is on its way if they do not repent and get right. So, this theme and this motif runs its way throughout the book of the 12.

In terms of historical background, we talked about some of this when we were dealing with the book of Nahum, but the transfer of power from Assyria to Babylon and the movement from the Assyrian crisis to the Babylonian crisis began in earnest in 626 BC when Nabopolassar asserts the independence and establishes the independence of Babylon from Assyria. From that point forward, Nabopolassar and

his son Nebuchadnezzar are going to be the instruments that God uses to bring down the Assyrian empire. Nabopolassar eventually allied himself with the Medes, and this powerful military coalition began to aggressively attack the Assyrians from that point forward.

In 614 they bring about the fall of Asher. In 612 BC, they brought about the fall of Nineveh, which was the fulfillment of the prophecy of Nahum. And then in 609, what was left of the Assyrian army finally fell to the Babylonians at the city of Haran.

A few years after that, Nabopolassar's son Nebuchadnezzar led the Babylonian armies in a victory over the Egyptians at the city of Carchemish in 605 BC. That is a critical moment in the history of the ancient Near East and a critical moment in the history of Israel and Judah because that victory established Babylon and the Neo-Babylonian empire as the dominant power in the ancient Near East. After that victory, Nebuchadnezzar is immediately going to march to the south and try to establish his control over the countries that are in Syrian Palestine.

His father is going to die that year and he'll have to hurry back to Babylon to take control of the throne. But he will also, in the year 605, take back the first group of exiles from Judah. That smaller group of exiles is going to include Daniel in that group as the most prominent figure.

From this point forward, the kings of Judah and the leadership of Judah will answer to Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. They will be forced to pay tribute to them and there will be severe consequences if they do not do that. On a yearly basis, Nebuchadnezzar and his armies are going to make campaigns into Syria-Palestine.

One of the things that they did there was that they often dealt with rebellious nations that had refused to pay their tribute and were not being faithful vassals. That issue leads to the second exile that takes place in 597. The king of Judah, Jehoiakim, rebels against the Babylonians.

There was always this tension during the time of his reign where he vacillates back and forth between Egypt and Babylon. At a point Jehoiakim rebels against the Babylonians, refuses to pay tribute. As a result of that, Nebuchadnezzar is going to bring his armies to Jerusalem.

They arrive in the city in 597. Before they get there, King Jehoiakim has actually died. So when Nebuchadnezzar arrives in the city, he's going to take a second group of exiles, a larger group this time.

The second group of exiles will include the prophet Ezekiel. Later in the year 593-592, Ezekiel will be called a prophet while he is living as an exile in Babylon. King

Jehoiakim, the 18-year-old son of Jehoiakim, who had only been on the throne for three months, was 18 years old.

He was also taken away and held captive in Babylon. So, that's the second phase and the second stage of the exile. The prophet Jeremiah during this time is warning the people of the judgment that's coming and telling them that they've reached a point where avoiding the judgment completely is not an option.

The only way that they can spare Judah from total destruction is that the kings and the leadership and the military need to submit to Babylon and need to recognize that God has given control of Judah over to Nebuchadnezzar. If they will submit to him, then the nation would be spared and God would keep them from total destruction. However, when Nebuchadnezzar came to the city in 597, he installed a king on the throne in the place of Jehoiakim.

This was Jehoiakim's uncle, Zedekiah. He is essentially placed on the throne to be a puppet of the Babylonians. They put him there because they believe that he is someone they can control.

As long as he will pay his tribute, and Jeremiah says, as long as he will submit to Babylon, things will go well. However, the military and the Judean officials that are under Zedekiah ultimately convince him to rebel against the Babylonians. So, rejecting the advice that Jeremiah gives him, he rebels against the Babylonians and refuses to pay tribute.

This leads to the third and the ultimate stage of the Babylonian exile. Nebuchadnezzar will again bring his armies to Jerusalem. This time, instead of sparing the city and giving it another chance, he will take Zedekiah as his prisoner.

He will destroy the city of Jerusalem, destroy its gates, and burn the temple. A large percentage of the people are either killed by this invasion or by the siege, or they are taken away as exiles. Basically, after the years 587-586, all that's left are the poor people in the land.

Jeremiah graciously agreed to stay there and to minister to these people and to offer them spiritual counsel, encouragement and directives from the Lord. But essentially, this brought the kingdom of Judah to an end. Zedekiah is taken away as a prisoner.

Because of his rebellion, when he and his family are captured, his two sons are executed. Zedekiah is then blinded. The last thing that he saw was the death and the execution of his sons.

He's taken away to Babylon, and he will remain there for the rest of his life. And so, the last two of Judah's kings, Jehoiakim, the 18-year-old king who only reigned for

three months, and Zedekiah, his uncle, who was the king over Judah at the end, are both going to be prisoners in Babylon. They're going to share in the fate of the people at large.

Zephaniah's ministry actually occurs sort of as a prelude to the upcoming Babylonian crisis. He is warning the people of the need to repent in advance of these three stages of exile. And really in some ways, perhaps even in advance of the time that the Babylonians become a dominant power.

From what we can tell in the circumstances and the situations that are described in the sins that Zephaniah is confronting here, Zephaniah's ministry actually begins during the reign of King Josiah. Josiah was Judah's last godly king. He reigned from the years 640 to 609 BC.

He became king when he was eight years old. He was killed in the Battle of Megiddo when he was 39 years old in the year 609 BC. And what we have, if we look at Zephaniah and think about the context of his ministry, we have another example of where a minor prophet has a major impact on his society, on his culture, and on the people of God.

Josiah is remembered as one of Judah's most godly kings. In fact, the book of Kings assessing his rule and his reign is not just simply going to say that he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and that he followed in the ways of his father David. It's actually going to say that there was no other king who obeyed Josiah to the degree that he did and followed the Lord's commands.

In a sense, in the book of Kings, he is presented as the ultimate example of obedience. The reason for this is the series of reforms that Josiah carries out where he calls the people back and aggressively attempts to initiate reforms that will bring about more faithful worship of the Lord and adherence to the Lord's commands. My understanding of this is that as we look at the background and the context and setting of Zephaniah's ministry, is that Zephaniah himself seems to have played a significant role in helping those reforms to come about.

Now, let me just mention a couple of things about Zephaniah as an individual in the time and context of his ministry. Zephaniah chapter 1 verse 1 says this, the word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah and then it's going to mention his family line here for several generations. The son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah.

All right, so there's an interesting discussion here. We know the name of Hezekiah. He's another one of Judah's most famous, most godly kings.

He is the one who trusted the Lord in the context of the Assyrian invasion in 701, and Judah was spared, and Jerusalem was spared and actually was not totally destroyed by the Assyrians in the same way as the northern kingdom, specifically because of Hezekiah's faith. Now, commentators will discuss here, is this Hezekiah the king of Judah? Probably the argument against that is the fact that it seems as if we were talking about Hezekiah, that it would specifically mention that he was the king of Judah. So that may be the argument against this.

However, the argument for it is that whenever a prophet is identified in the prophetic books, it's extremely rare that we would have anything more than a mention of his father. But here we have the family line mentioned for four generations. So, the fact that this point is highlighted to me seems to indicate that Zephaniah does come from the family of King Hezekiah.

If that is the case, then we have another example of just all of the varied circumstances from which God ultimately calls his prophets throughout the time of the Old Testament. Amos was a landowner and a herdsman and seems to have had fairly significant holdings. Micah is called by God from a place called Moresheth Gath.

Isaiah is somehow connected to the royal family as well. Zephaniah seems to have one of those connections. Ezekiel and Jeremiah are called from more priestly families.

So, God intervenes and calls these men out of a variety of circumstances. The reality is that God still does that today, as he calls people. But the prophets come from a variety of circumstances.

It appears that Zephaniah has a connection to the royal family. It also appears that the preaching of Zephaniah had an impact on King Josiah, the king in that day. Now some ideas about and some facts about the reign of Josiah.

Josiah became the king at the age of eight. It is going to tell us that really from the very beginning of his life, he follows the way of the Lord in spite of the wicked example of Manasseh that had come before him and then Ammon directly before him. Two of Judah's most wicked kings.

Manasseh had reigned for 55 years and had perpetrated all kinds of idolatry. He had brought idolatrous objects into the temple for worship. It says that he had brought the Asherah into the temple.

He offered one of his sons as a sacrifice to the false gods. So, he had done all kinds of corrupt things. He had also promoted violence and injustice, which I think was connected to some of his theological convictions.

And so, 2 Kings 21 is going to say that Manasseh did more evil than all of the kings that had come before him, even more evil than the Amorites that were in the land before the Israelites had taken control. 2 Kings chapter 21 verses 13 to 15 also says that Manasseh had sealed Judah's fate with its apostasy. God had determined that he was going to wipe Jerusalem like a dish because of the apostasy of Manasseh.

The interesting thing is that in spite of what looks like a final pronouncement there, God is still providing the opportunity for the people of Judah to repent and to avoid God's judgment. So, there has been this long reign of evil for 55 or 60 years in the reign of Manasseh and Ammon. Ammon carried on the policies of his father.

So, when Josiah comes to the throne at the age of eight and at a very early age begins to seek the Lord, that's a significant contrast. We might ask the question, well, what was it that specifically led Josiah to do this and to take this direction in his life? I think there are some early influences there. His mother is mentioned, Jedidah.

I think Josiah likely had a godly mother who was leading him in this direction. He also had advisors and priests like Hilkiah and others who had advised him in that direction. But I believe one of the other influences is very likely the prophet Zephaniah himself.

Now we get some insight into the reforms that Josiah carried out, the timing of these things, and the progression of Josiah's relationship with the Lord in 2 Chronicles, chapter 34 and verse three. What it tells us in 2 Chronicles 34.3 about Josiah is that it says, for in the eighth year of his reign, while he was still a boy, he began to seek the God of David. So, when he came to the throne and was eight years old, there were already godly influences in his life.

Then as he becomes a man himself at the age of 16, in the eighth year of his reign, he seeks God his father. So that's going to determine the direction of his entire life. That early foundation is critical to the quality of his reign for its duration.

But then it's also going to say that in his twelfth year, he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places, the asherim and the carved and the metal images. So in his twelfth year, when he was 20 years old, in the year 628 BC, Josiah began to aggressively purge the idolatrous elements that his fathers Manasseh and Ammon had brought into the worship of the people of Judah. Now, we tend to associate the reforms of Josiah, and they do take a step forward; we tend to associate that with something that happened in the eighteenth year of his reign.

Because in the eighteenth year of his reign, in 622 BC, repairs were being made to the temple in Jerusalem. While they were cleaning things out and while they were repairing the temple and restoring it to what it should be as a place of worship, they

discovered a hidden book of the law that had been lost and forgotten. It was a portion of the law of Moses.

It seems specifically like it might have at least included a significant portion of the book of Deuteronomy. It gives the covenant commands, it gives the warnings of what would happen. When that scroll, this newly discovered scroll, the law of God had been forgotten, things were so corrupt and so evil in the times of Manasseh and Ammon, they had even lost the law of God and God's commandments.

The king was supposed to write these commandments out for himself, but the law had been ignored. But when they bring this law and they bring this newly discovered book of the law to King Josiah, they read it to him, he tears his garments, he realizes how serious this message is, and he instigates further reforms to bring the life and the behavior and particularly the worship of the people of Judah back to what God wanted from them. But the interesting thing is we trace this progression.

He began to earnestly seek God in his eighth year. He began to purge Judah of idolatry in his twelfth year. He carried out these reforms in connection with the discovery of the Book of the Law in 622.

The obvious point here is that there were things that had impacted Josiah's life and the direction of his ministry before the Book of the Law was ever found. And so, in addition to, I think, the influence of his mother, the influence of other godly leaders, the preaching of Zephaniah is likely one of the reasons why Josiah had been encouraged to carry these reforms out before the discovery of the book of the law as early as 628 BC. Now, part of what lends to that argument is when we look at the conditions that Zephaniah describes that are going on in Judah.

When he talks about the spiritual condition of the people, what we see here is that there's a confirmation that Zephaniah is ministering during a time of rampant idolatry. It clearly looks like the messages and the indictment that he's providing against the people here, the message seems to fit more with what the conditions of Judah were before Josiah's reforms rather than after. And we go to Zephaniah 1 verse 4, and the Lord says this: I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all of the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

God's judgment is coming. He's going to stretch out his hand. Why will it happen? Well, the rest of the verse clarifies this.

And I will cut off from this place the remnant of Baal, the remnant of Baal. So here we have, there's the worship of the Canaanite gods. And in Manasseh's reign, he brings the Asherahs into the temple and other idolatrous objects.

This is what we would expect to read before these reforms are carried out. And the name of the idolatrous priest along with the priest, those who bow down on the roofs to the host of heaven and those who bow down and swear to the Lord and yet swear by Milcom. So, two other idolatrous practices.

The people of Judah at this time, they are worshiping the astral deities and the starry hosts that were part of pagan worship. And then in the second part of verse five, there's this idea of syncretism because there are people who are bowing down and swearing to the Lord. And yet at the same time, they are swearing to the god Milcom.

And the god Milcom here or Molech, this is the Ammonite god and his worship is mentioned at several places in the Old Testament. He is the god specifically in the Old Testament that seems to be most associated with child sacrifice. And we know that Manasseh, 2 Chronicles chapter 33 verse 6, Manasseh had offered his son as a sacrifice to the gods.

This worship of Milcom or Molech is associated with Baal worship. It's associated with child sacrifice. And so those are the sins that are going on.

Three things are mentioned here. Worship of Baal, worship of the starry hosts, worship of Milcom. Now the meaning of the name of this god Milcom is, we obviously have the letters M, L, and K here, which represent the word for king.

And so, this god is a god who is recognized by the Ammonite people as their king. Some English translations will translate this and see this as referring to a human king. But here, in the context of the mention of the starry host and the mention of Baal, what we have here seems to be syncretism.

They are swearing both by Yahweh and by Milcom. They don't see the fundamental inconsistency of trying to worship both of those things. So, the fact that these practices and the worship of these gods and these deities is part of what Zephaniah is condemning here in the early chapters of Zephaniah would seem to indicate to us that this is the condition of Judah at the beginning of Josiah's reign.

The reforms that we read about in 2 Kings and in 2 Chronicles have not taken place. So, if we read between the lines, it would seem to be that one of the things that motivated the preaching or the reforms of Josiah was not just the discovery of the book of the law in his 18th year, not even just the influence of the officials and the leaders that had a role in his life from the very beginning, but it's the preaching of Zephaniah that helped to motivate probably the greatest religious reforms that Judah ever experienced. As all of these various influences are coming into play in his life, Josiah determines that his reign and his rule are going to be focused on

attempting to remove the idolatrous influences that Manasseh and Ammon have brought into Judah and have made such a prominent part of Judah's worship.

Ultimately, he is going to remove the high places. He's going to take away the idolatrous objects. Speaking of child sacrifice, he is going to defile the Valley of Hinnom in 2 Kings 23.10, which was the place where these child sacrifices were going on.

There was actually a Tophet in the land of Judah, just outside the city of Jerusalem. Josiah is going to defile that place so that it can no longer be used as a sacred burial site because in God's eyes, those things were an abomination. So Josiah had a heart for the pure type of worship and the pure type of devotion that God desired.

He devoted his rule and his reign to bringing those things about. He not only did this in the southern kingdom of Judah, but we also see that he extends these reforms and he extends his influence where he's calling the people back to a pure devotion to God into territory that was originally part of the northern kingdom. Because of the weakening of Assyria, Josiah may actually take control of these territories.

Ultimately, one of the reasons that Josiah was looking forward to the fall of the Assyrian empire, and as he saw Babylon rising, it gave him hope because he believed that this was a way that perhaps he would be able to reunify the southern and the northern kingdoms. Ultimately, Josiah died because he got involved in this conflict politically in a way that God ultimately did not want him to do. However, the reforms that Josiah carried out had a tremendous influence on his culture.

I think what we could say about Josiah is that Josiah bought Judah more time. The reforms and the return that he carried out and the way in which he fully obeyed the Lord and it says in Kings, he did not turn to the left or the right. The devotion of Josiah to the Lord ultimately delayed the judgment that God had threatened to bring during the time of Manasseh.

God announces his intentions and his designs, but when people will respond in the right way, God will either cancel judgment or he will delay judgment. I think that's ultimately what we see happening because of the reforms of Josiah. However, what we also see in Kings is that the sad part of this is that Josiah's reforms delayed the judgment, but they did not cancel it or postpone it.

The reason for that is that very quickly after his death, Judah is going to ultimately return to its idolatrous practices. 2 Kings chapter 23 verses 25 to 27 say this: Before him there was no king like him who turned to the Lord with all of his heart, with all of his soul, with all of his might, according to the law of Moses, nor did any like him arise after him. Still the Lord did not turn from the burning of his great wrath by

which his anger was kindled against Judah because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked him.

The Lord said, I will remove Judah out of my sight as I have removed Israel, and I will cast off this city that I have chosen Jerusalem, and the house of which I said, my name shall be there. So, ultimately, he delays the judgment. He brings about a postponement of the judgment.

But when Judah returns to its sinful ways and when these reforms and the effects of what Josiah did to purify Judah's worship all very quickly disappear, the warnings of judgment go back into effect. Jeremiah and the other prophets are going to warn that God is bringing judgment against his people because they've gone back to their idolatrous ways. Second Kings chapter 23, verse 10, Josiah defiles the Tophet that was out in the Valley of Hinnom so that the abominable practice of child sacrifice will not continue.

However, Jeremiah mentions Jeremiah chapter 7, verses 31 and 32. He also talks about this in chapter 19. The Valley of Hinnom is going to become a valley of slaughter where there are going to be dead bodies stacked up because the people have gone back to the idolatrous practices that were being carried out there.

It seems that they have even returned to the practice of child sacrifice. Josiah is going to remove the idolatrous images like the metal idols and the Asherah that Manasseh and Ammon had brought into the house of God. But we see a vision in Ezekiel chapter 8 where the temple is filled with all kinds of detestable and abominable images.

They're all over the walls. There are images of animals and creatures and all sorts of things that are being portrayed as God. And what God says to Ezekiel, I will not share my glory with these idolatrous images that have been brought back into the house of the Lord.

So, Josiah purges these objects and these images, and then they are going to be brought back and reintroduced. Some of the exiles that are living in Egypt in Jeremiah chapter 44 are going to say, things were going great for us until Josiah carried out these reforms, and we stopped offering our offerings and bringing our gifts to the queen of heaven, these Canaanite fertility gods. We're going to go back to that because things will be better for us.

So, the people quickly turned back to their idolatrous ways. As a result of that, Zephaniah's warning, the day of the Lord is coming, that message became more urgent. Josiah responded to that message.

When Josiah heard the day of the Lord was coming, he responded to that message. When Josiah heard of the curses that were found in the book of the law in Deuteronomy 28, he listened to God and responded to that. He recognized that this was an urgent issue.

It was a national emergency, but the people quickly forgot about that and judgment came into effect. Josiah led a godly regime for 31 years. After his death in 609, every one of the kings of Judah and his sons that follow after him, every one of them are labeled as kings who did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord.

When Josiah dies, he's replaced by his son Jehoahaz, who's on the throne for three months. The Egyptians come back through the land. They remove him, take him off the throne, and he's replaced by Jehoiakim. Jehoiakim was an especially wicked and ungodly king.

He does evil in the eyes of the Lord. Then, he died before the Babylonians took the city in 597. Jehoiakim, 18 years old, was only on the throne for three months.

But King says, he did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord. Then finally, Zedekiah, a weak, ineffective ruler who disobeyed God, did not listen to the prophetic counsel. King says again, he did what was evil in God's eyes.

So, after Josiah, Judah enters into this period of darkness. They return to their idolatrous practices. The king ceased following the Lord.

As a result of that, the Babylonian invasion is going to come. Systematically in 605 BC, 597, and then in 586, the warnings that Zephaniah gave about the coming of the day of the Lord are going to be executed and carried out by God. All right, now let's look at the message of Zephaniah.

I just want to briefly talk about the structure of the book. It's a short and a brief book, but I think there's a clear and definable and recognizable structure that kind of helps us to think about how we should read this. The book of Zephaniah seems to be laid out in what we refer to as a chiasmic structure.

The theme of Zephaniah is repeatedly the day of the Lord is coming. What this chiasmic structure does is that it develops and unfolds and helps us to see what this day of the Lord will be like. At the beginning, in the first element of this chiasm in chapter 1 verses 2 to 6, Zephaniah is going to talk about the coming judgment of Judah.

The wicked are going to be judged and destroyed, and this is going to be the judgment of the day of the Lord. Moving beyond that in verses 7 to 13, the next element is that this judgment is specifically going to fall on the leadership and the

rich and the wealthy and those who are influential in Judah. We have the word sarim, the word for official, being used in Zephaniah chapter 1, verse 8. Then at the end of chapter 1, verses 14 to 18, the judgment of the day of the Lord moves beyond Judah, and it extends to all of the earth.

That's going to be one of the elements about the day of the Lord that is different from what we saw in Amos. Amos focused on the day of the Lord as the judgment that was going to come on Israel. Zephaniah goes back and forth between a judgment that is going to fall on Judah and then ultimately a judgment that is going to fall on all the earth.

When we look at the book of Joel, that type of judgment is introduced there as well. The day of the Lord as being a judgment that God would bring on the nations, that was something that we also saw in the book of Obadiah in verse 15 and forward. The people of Edom rejoiced at the destruction that had come upon Judah in their day.

But what the people of Edom did not recognize is that there was a day of the Lord that was coming against them. Obadiah speaks of this as a judgment that will spread throughout the earth. That's what we have at the end of chapter 1. So, there are three elements in chapter 1. There's the judgment of the wicked in Judah.

There's the judgment of the wealthy, and the officials and the leadership referred to as the Sarim and the warning that the day of the Lord is coming. Then the day of the Lord is near and it's going to impact and affect the entire earth verses 14 to 18. We have the middle of the chiasmic structure in chapter 2, verses 1 to 3. This is really the heart of Zephaniah's appeal because Zephaniah is calling on the people in light of this judgment to repent.

In light of the repentance that Josiah had in response to the warnings of the prophets in the book of Deuteronomy, God spared them from judgment. If this repentance had been long-lasting, then perhaps the judgment of the Babylonian crisis could have been avoided entirely. But here's the appeal that's given in chapter 2, verses 1 to 3. After this terrible judgment has been described in chapter 1, Zephaniah is going to help us to understand that it's imminent, it's near; we're not just talking about the day of the Lord that's going to happen at the end times.

This is something that is right around the corner if these people do not change their ways. So, what Zephaniah does in light of that, verse 1, gather together. Yes, gather all shameless nations before the decree takes effect, before the day passes away like chaff, before there comes upon you the burning anger of the Lord, the day of the anger of the Lord.

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.

So, this idea of God's wrath and God's anger, that's what's being described for us in chapter 1. In light of that, if the people will seek the Lord, if they will seek righteousness, there's still the opportunity that judgment can be averted. God has already said, I'm going to wipe Jerusalem like a dish. That seems like an absolute statement because of the wickedness during the time of Manasseh.

But God moves the deadline once again and gives the people another opportunity to repent. I believe that in Jeremiah's day, as he's preaching, he's going to do the same thing. He will go to the temple.

He will read the scroll of his prophecies after he's been preaching for 20 years. The Lord says, maybe they'll take this to heart, and maybe I will avoid and not send the calamity that I've threatened to send against them. God is still giving people the opportunity to repent.

But what we see here is that, in a sense, the message of hope that is being offered by Zephaniah is a little bit different than what we've seen previously. Now, if they will seek the Lord and now if they will seek righteousness and seek humility, very similar to what Amos had said in Amos chapter 5, now there's simply the possibility that those who are righteous might be hidden on the day of God's anger. A sense that this judgment can be totally averted is kind of out of the picture now.

But if there are enough righteous people, they will be hidden. I do believe that if this revival that Josiah had brought about if it had become permanent if the people had completely carried through on their commitments to the Lord, the judgment at this point still could have been averted and still could have been avoided. So that's at the middle section of the book.

That's the appeal that Zephaniah is trying to make to these people. Then what happens in the remainder of the book in chapter 2 and 3 is that the elements that we have seen in chapter 1 appear in reverse. The last element in chapter 1 verses 14 to 18 had been the warning of the day of the Lord that was going to come upon all the nations.

Well, in chapter 2, verses 4 to 15, we have a judgment and a series of judgment oracles against the nations that are around Israel. There is the warning of judgment that God is going to bring against four specific peoples and four specific nations. Then he's going to turn back in chapter 3, verses 1 to 7, to the judgment of the corrupt city of Jerusalem and the corrupt leaders, the officials, and the Sarim in chapters 3 verses 1 to 7. Then, finally, the last element of the book, and this kind of

bookends the beginning and the end, we have the coming restoration of Judah and its fortunes.

I think what's going on here, this is in chapter 3 verses 8 to 20, Zephaniah's vision has moved from the horizon of what is in the immediate future. He is talking about what is going to happen in the eschatological future. Here we're not just talking about even return from exile.

We are talking about the full and the final and the complete restoration of Israel where they will be permanently in the land and blessed by God and restored after this time of judgment. We have this devastating judgment against Judah at the beginning of the book. We have the coming reversal of this and the restoration of Judah at the end of the book.

There's this nice chiasmic structure that joins together the judgment of Judah and the judgment of the world. It is cosmic in scope. There is an appeal to repentance at the middle part of this book, but then after God has carried out his judgment, there's this hope that ultimately there is going to be a restoration.

Now I'd like to go back to chapter 1. I would like for us to notice the nature of the day of the Lord that God is planning to bring against his people. The judgment here, as is often the case in the prophets, we've talked about this before, we definitely have the white water of God's wrath in this passage. The judgment that is being described here is described in just absolutely devastating terms.

Ultimately, as we've talked about, this judgment is cosmic in scope. It is a judgment that will fall on both Judah and the nations. Again, as we've talked about with the day of the Lord in other passages and other places in the prophets, the day of the Lord here is both near and far.

So, in a sense, Zephaniah is talking about historical judgments that will take place in his day. God will judge Judah, and then God will judge the nations around them. Beyond that, that is a preview of the great and final day of the Lord.

Again, at the end of the book, I think his focus becomes more on the distant horizon and the things that God has planned for the future. All right. The devastating nature of this judgment is reflected in a couple of ways.

I think part of this is just the terminology, day of the Lord. Remember, this is a term that was, I think, part of Israel's cultic traditions. It was part of their historical traditions where they celebrated the fact that God intervened on Israel's behalf.

At specific moments and places in history, he intervened to defeat their enemies. We could look at the Exodus. We could look at the conquests.

We could look at the victories that God gave to David. We could look at other times in Israel's history where God directly intervenes. At times, like in 2 Chronicles 20 during the time of Jehoshaphat, God literally fights the battles for the people.

However, now this day has become the day where God is going to judge Judah because they are his enemies. God is no longer playing for the home team, he is on the visitors. God is no longer a Yankee, he has become a Red Sox or vice versa.

I won't interpose in that rivalry, but God has changed his allegiances. The idea of the day of the Lord, again, was a concept in the ancient Near East that stressed the idea. It was often part of the rhetoric of warfare.

It was part of the rhetoric of kings that the kings would often claim, even if a campaign took weeks or months, they would claim that they had the power to defeat their enemies in a single day. Douglas Stewart, in his article, *The Sovereign's Day of Contrast*, explains this background. He says this: According to this apparently widespread ancient Near Eastern tradition, a truly great king or sovereign possessed such universal power and authority that he could complete a military campaign or even an entire war of conquest against his enemies in a single day.

Although the wars of most kings might last for weeks, months, or even years before coming to completion in a decisive battle, a true sovereign could win his war in a day. He calls attention to a Sumerian inscription that goes all the way back to 1960 BC that boasts that the Sumerian king of Ur captured the lands of Susa and then humbled them in one day. Now, I think we have a reflection of this, even in chapter two, verse four, when God begins to talk about the judgment of the nations.

He says, Gaza, the city of the Philistines, shall be deserted. Ashkelon, another Philistine city, shall become a desolation. Ashdod's people shall be driven out at noon and Ekron shall be uprooted.

This battle is going to be over. They are going to be put in flight by the middle of the day. So, the idea of the Day of the Lord in and of itself is a terrifying concept.

As this battle is described and as this judgment is described, it also recalls for us in verses two to four. I think the idea and the image and picture that we're given here is the wiping out and the reversal and the undoing of creation. The judgment that God is prepared to bring here sounds something like the judgment of the Noahic flood. Listen to what it says in verses two to four, I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, declares the Lord.

I will sweep away man and beast. I will sweep away the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea. Really, we have an undoing and a reversal of Genesis chapter one.

Day six, God creates the man and the animals. That's taken away. The earlier time of creation, God created the fish and the birds.

God sweeps them away. The judgment is total and cosmic in scope, and the rubble with the wicked, I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth. Then he says, I will stretch out my hand against Judah.

Part of the message and part of the rhetoric of Zephaniah is that we go back and forth between a cosmic judgment and a judgment that is focused on Judah. This is going to be a devastating judgment that will wipe out creation. This is the white water of God's wrath.

It is a reinstatement almost of the Noahic flood. Jeremiah uses similar imagery in chapter four, verse 23. I looked on the earth and behold, it was void.

It was without form and void. Tohu v' bohu, the same terminology that is used before God brings about the creative acts in Genesis chapter one. This judgment is going to restore or is going to bring the creation back to the state that it had before God had done his work of creation.

To the heavens, he says, and they had no light. I looked at the mountains. Behold, they were quaking.

On all of the hills, they moved to and fro. I looked and behold, there was no man and all of the birds of the air had fled. You want to understand how devastating the Babylonian invasion is going to be.

Imagine what it would be like if we undo Genesis chapter one. Zephaniah is going to say, imagine what will happen if creation itself is undone and taken away. I think we have a reference to the undoing of creation, the Noahic flood, and all of those things going on.

One of the other things that helps us to understand the devastating nature of judgment is that in chapter one, verse seven, the Lord says: be silent before the Lord God for the day of the Lord is near. It's right around the corner. It also says that the Lord has prepared a sacrifice, and he has consecrated his guest.

The judgment of the day of the Lord is compared to the sacrifices that the people offer and present to the Lord in the city of Jerusalem. However, the irony is the city and the people themselves have become the sacrifice that are going to be burned and offered up. So, in all kinds of different ways, this judgment is going to be a devastating judgment that God brings against Judah.

Then at the end of chapter one, it is going to be a judgment that God carries out against the nations. The nations that are mentioned in chapter two that make this more specific, there's mention of the judgment to the Philistines who are located in the west. There is a judgment of the Moabites who are in the east.

There's a judgment of the Cushites who are in the south. Then there is a message of judgment against the Assyrians that sounds very similar to what Nahum says in his book, talking about the judgment of the enemies in the north. So again, the historical judgment of these specific people ultimately are pointing to a judgment that God will bring against all of the earth and the final judgment that will come in the ultimate and the final day of the Lord in the last days.

All right. Finally, after all of this devastating message of judgment, after this is something that is going to happen to both Israel and to the nations around them, to Judah and the nations around them, there is a final announcement of death on the city of Jerusalem and Judah because of the rebellion and the unrepentance of its leaders. Chapter three, verse one says this: Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled, the oppressing city.

She listens to no voice. She accepts no correction. She does not trust in the Lord and she does not draw near to her God.

So, Judah is the target of this judgment, just like the nations, because they are a rebellious city. They do not accept correction. There is a call to repent in chapters two, verses one to three.

This oracle, in a sense, gives us the ultimate response. There would be a temporary repentance during the time of Josiah, but ultimately, they would not turn back to the Lord. One of the purposes and one of the reasons, I think, for the rhetoric where we have the judgment of Judah being tied and connected to the judgment of the nations is that this helps us to see the idea that Judah is no different than the pagan peoples around them.

They may think that they are exempt because they are God's chosen people, but the way that the prophet merges together the judgment of Judah and the judgment of the nations reflects the idea that they are just another wicked, disobedient people that on the day of the Lord are going to be the objects of his judgment. Verse five says 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. And so, because of that, and because they do not reflect the character of Yahweh, the Lord is ultimately going to judge his people.

All right. The final word in Zephaniah is that there is a message of hope, however. And as the prophet moves away from the near horizon and the day of the Lord that's near and this devastating judgment that is going to be like a sacrifice and like the undoing of creation, there's a hope for the distant future.

And chapter three, verse eight, is going to say, here's the encouragement for the people of God. Here's the encouragement for righteous people like Zephaniah, who are going to live through this time, and prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel. They lived through this, and they experienced the devastation.

The prophet says, here's the message from the Lord. Therefore, wait for me 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 and all of my burning anger, for in the fire of my jealousy, all of the earth shall be consumed. As you're living through these things, the Lord is saying to righteous people like Zephaniah and to the godly people, wait for me, and there will ultimately be a deliverance.

One of the things that we begin to see as a prominent motif during the time of the ministry of the prophets who were in the book of the 12, Micah, during the Assyrian crisis, wait upon the Lord. This is a time of mourning. Now, God will ultimately turn it into a time of joy.

The message of Habakkuk that we're going to look at in the next section parallels very closely here what Zephaniah says, wait on the Lord, he will ultimately make this right. God in the future will carry out a worldwide judgment that brings about the full, complete, and final restoration and salvation of his people. Okay.

Here's the last promise that I want us to look at in verse 9. For at that time, as God does this great work of salvation in the future, I will change the speech of the peoples into a pure speech, and all of them may call upon the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord from beyond the rivers of Cush, one of the people that is targeted for judgment earlier here, my worshipers, the daughter of my dispersed ones shall bring my offering. And so, what God promises to do here as he talks about changing the speech of the peoples into a pure speech is that I believe that what we have here, he has alluded to Genesis earlier, what we have here is a reversal of the curse that was put on the human race at the Tower of Babel. And when they rebelled against God and tried to build this tower and create this religious system in opposition to God, what God did was that he scattered the nations, he confused the languages, and that was a form of punishment.

Ultimately, here in the final salvation, in the day of the Lord, when God will save Israel, he will change the speech of all peoples. Even though there is a worldwide judgment and all the earth shall be consumed, there will be worshipers of God, not just from the dispersed people of Israel, not just from the exiles, but God is going to

change the speech of all the nations so that together they can worship the Lord. And in Isaiah chapter 19, when Isaiah talked about there being three people of God in the future kingdom, there will be Israel, there will be Egypt, and there will be Assyria.

It says that those foreign people will speak the language of Canaan. They will be able to speak a language that enables them to worship the Lord. So here in Zephaniah, where we have this devastating message of judgment, the day of the Lord is coming, and there is also this incredible promise that, ultimately, God will change the speech of all the nations.

God, through this purging judgment, will create a people that will worship him. Israel and Judah, as they are reunited, will be at the center of this. The last verse of Zephaniah says this, at that time, I will bring you in, at that 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.

God is going to restore the fortunes of his people. The message of the prophets is again encapsulated in this message that Zephaniah gave to Josiah and the people of Judah before the Babylonian crisis: You have sinned and broken the covenant.

You need to come back to God. If you do not, there is going to be judgment. When they do not return, when they do not fully repent, the judgment comes.

But there is the offer of hope and the promise that God will ultimately restore the fortunes of his people and reverse the terrible judgment that Zephaniah talks about. At the beginning of the book, there is an undoing of creation and the Noahic flood is going to return again. But at the end of the book, there is an undoing of the curse of Babel, and God will create a worshipping people for himself among the peoples and among the nations.

This is Dr. Gary Yates in his lecture series on the Book of the 12. This is lecture 24 on the Book of Zephaniah.