

Living the Message

OPEN THE BIBLE *Make the Connection*



December 2015 The Book of Zephaniah Discussion Guide

December Dates to Note:

MEETING WILL BE HELD:

Date: _____ Time: _____

Place: _____

Person to Contact with Questions: _____

PASTOR'S INTRODUCTION TO Zephaniah:

- Monday, December 2, 7:00 p.m., Gronseth Fellowship Hall, West Campus

BEFORE YOUR SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Read Zephaniah.

- a. We suggest you read through "Zephaniah: Theme and Purpose" on page 4 and "Who or What Is . . . ?" on page 5 before you begin your reading.
- b. Use the "To Guide Your Reading" section on pages 6 - 8 to help you think through what you read, paying particular attention to the questions in boldface.

2. If possible, attend, listen to, or watch the DVD of the Pastor's Introduction to Zephaniah.

3. Read and recite this month's memory verse often! It is:

"The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing."

– Zephaniah 3:17 NIV

Our goal and prayer is that you will walk away from each study having had at least one important insight that informs your faith and your knowledge of God's Word. In other words, we hope you will discover a "message" just for you!

AT YOUR SMALL GROUP MEETING

Welcome

Welcome to the December meeting of your *Living the Message* Bible discovery group. In order to keep to your agreed-upon time frame, place a clock where it is clearly visible or ask someone to be “timekeeper” and let the group know when 15 minutes remain for discussion and closing.

Opening Prayer

Pause to quiet your hearts and minds with a few moments of silent prayer. Then have someone open with his or her own prayer or pray the following together:

Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to prepare the way for your only Son. By his coming give us light on our path through the darkness of this world. Use this time of study to clarify how we have embraced darkness rather than light, rouse us from all complacency in thought and action, and renew us in a spirit of humility and hopefulness. In your precious name, Amen.

This Month’s Memory Verse

Recite this month’s memory verse (including the book, chapter, and verse) together as a group.

"The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing."

– **Zephaniah 3:17 NIV**

Getting Under Way

As we prepare for both the First Advent and Second Advent (the coming and return of Christ), which message from the Prophet Zephaniah seems most relevant for our world and our lives: pending judgment or a renewed world to come?

Setting the Scene

Before beginning discussion, invite your small group facilitator and anyone else who attended, listened to, or saw the DVD of the Pastor’s introduction to Zephaniah to share what they learned.

Discuss Together

Go to “To Guide Your Reading” on pages 6 – 8. Discuss together the questions in boldface and/or others of the questions that particularly struck members of your group. Remember, a good discussion on fewer questions is better than rushing through all the questions. If you wish, ask if any of the questions (boldface or not) were of particular interest to someone and begin there.

Following your discussion, go to “For Next Month” on the next page for reminders about your next meeting and closing prayer.

FOR NEXT MONTH

Our next meeting will be in January:

Date: _____ Time: _____

Place: _____

Person to Contact with Questions: _____

January's Reading Assignment: 1 & 2 Timothy

January's Memory Verse:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

—2 Timothy 4:7

Save the date! Next Pastor's Introductions:

- Monday, January 4, 7:00 p.m., Room 482-86, Minneapolis Campus

CLOSING PRAYER

Gather requests for prayers, encouraging both things for which God's help and guidance is needed and things for which people are grateful. If someone is comfortable doing so, ask that person to pray aloud a prayer bringing these concerns to God, or take time for silent prayer during which these concerns can be brought to God. End with a prayer of your own, by reciting the Lord's Prayer, or by praying the following together:

O Lord God, Heavenly Father, as you see fit... we humbly and courageously ask that you will afflict us when we are too comfortable, and comfort us when we are afflicted. In Jesus' name, Amen.

FOLLOWING YOUR SMALL GROUP MEETING

Ponder

Someone once said: "Complacency is a blight that saps energy, dulls attitudes, and causes a drain on the brain. The first symptom is satisfaction with things as they are. The second is rejection of things as they might be. 'Good enough' becomes today's watchword and tomorrow's standard."

Zephaniah Theme & Purpose

In three chapters Zephaniah ranges through the major prophetic themes of judgment and salvation. The book announces judgment in comprehensive terms matched only by the extensiveness of God's transformation and restoration. The book prompts consideration of the communal consequences of sin and squarely focuses any future beyond judgment on God's removal of the judgments and reconstitution of a faithful people.

The book was very likely written during the reign of Josiah, which extended from 640 to 609 B.C.E. Its content would indicate that Zephaniah was one of the voices that supported Josiah's reform efforts during the early years of his reign and bemoaned their ultimate failure. We know little else about the author.

The setting is a society in turmoil due to the failures of both political and religious leaders. Chapter 1 relates some of Jerusalem and Judah's sins, including idolatry, apostasy, and unbelief.

Chapter 2 concerns itself with the coming Day of the Lord, a time of near total destruction through which God will heal the moral and religious collapse. Zephaniah's prophetic announcement of God's coming judgment evokes repentance, but does not promise delivery for the repentant. There is only a "perhaps": *Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, who do his commands; seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the Lord's wrath* (Zephaniah 2:3). Judgment, then, is directed at the entire community.

Chapter 3 again announces the coming judgment, but then offers words of hope: Through God's transformative act, a faithful nation will arise from the remnant of the community that survives the destruction and a time will come when all nations will call upon God's name. And so, in spite of its emphasis on the coming destruction, the book ends with a song of joy celebrating what will follow the destruction—a nation not only protected by God from its enemies, but a nation that knows God's presence in their midst. Whereas now they know fear, there will be no reason for fear. Indeed, the words of Zephaniah 3:9-20 are extraordinary depictions of future hope that will come through refining (vv9-13), rejoicing (vv14-17), and restoration (vv18-20).

Zephaniah's message of coming judgment through dire and almost complete destruction gives us cause to reflect on not only the consequences of one's individual guilt, but of the consequences of communal guilt. What happens when a society as a whole allows moral collapse? Is it possible for anyone not to be affected or survive? What happens to the innocent?

Taken as a whole, Zephaniah does what much of scripture does—it exposes our desperate human need for a Savior, promises God's transformative love, and points to the loving gift of Christ.

Content on this page draws heavily from www.enterthebible.org's summary and overview of Zephaniah written by Dr..Richard W. Nysse, Former Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, and is used with permission.

Who or What Is . . . ?

Day of the Lord. The Day of the Lord was generally celebrated as the day of the Lord's deliverance of the people of God, both in past history and in expectations for the future. Amos reversed this understanding. The Day of the Lord became the day of the Lord's judgment against the people of God for their rebellion through injustice and idolatry. Zephaniah follows Amos's reversal. However, Zephaniah, along with other prophetic traditions in Judah, works the theme in more than one direction. The Day of the Lord is against both Judah and the nations, after which it can function again as a day of the Lord's deliverance. In the latter case, the deliverance is perhaps more properly termed restoration and transformation. The people and the world (including the nations) are remade into a faithful worshiping community.

Remnant. While in no way minimizing the devastation of the judgment, the concept of a remnant opened the way for a future beyond the judgment. In Zephaniah, the first chapter opens and closes with worldwide destruction as the envisioned future. Beginning in the second chapter, a surviving group is discussed. This remnant is not a group that has been spared from the devastation; rather, they are survivors who have gone through the judgment. From the surviving group God reconstitutes a faithful group. The remnant is given pure speech and appropriate humility. They are promised the protection of God and are invited to join in God's own celebration of the renewed life of the remnant.

Seek the Lord. In Zephaniah "seeking the Lord" (and equivalent expressions) is understood as a constant posture of faith. Not to seek the Lord is understood as rebellion, whether in the form of turning away (1:6) or of indifference (1:12). Once the judgment of God sets in, seeking the Lord is no guarantee that one would be hidden from the searching of God (compare 1:12 with the "perhaps" of 2:3). Characteristics of the transformed people that God creates after the judgment will include seeking refuge in the Lord and calling on the name of the Lord. The movement is from failure to seek the Lord to the Lord's seeking out the people in judgment and then to the people seeking the Lord in post-judgment fidelity.

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WEEK 2 – ZEPHANIAH

1. What does Zephaniah say is the only way the people might escape the coming judgment? (2:1-3) How do you seek God? What gets in the way?

2. What sins had the nations around Judah committed and how would they be punished? (2:4-15) What hope does Zephaniah offer? (2:7)

3. To those who scoffed and asked why the Day of the Lord that the prophets foretold had not come, Peter offers an answer (2 Peter 3:1-13). What is that answer and how does it illustrate God's mercy, grace, and love? What advice is there for us still waiting for that final Day of the Lord yet today?

WEEK 3 – ZEPHANIAH

1. Why did God warn the people about the coming judgment and how did they respond? (3:1-7)
2. Following the judgment against Judah and the nations, God promises a conversion of the nations (3:8-13). How do you envision this happening? What pictures come to mind? What biblical passages?
3. Zephaniah 3:17-20 provide timeless promises of God's loving care. Which words of promise are most meaningful to you at this time in your life? As you read them closely again, how do you see Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection fitting into God's promises there?
4. **What have you learned about God from Zephaniah? What does God want you to discover about yourself in reading and reflecting on Zephaniah?**