

## A TRAGIC STORY WITH A HAPPY ENDING

### **Zephaniah 1:4 (OT Lesson)**

<sup>4</sup>“I will stretch out my hand against  
Judah  
and against all who live in Jerusalem.  
I will destroy every remnant of Baal  
worship in this place,  
the very names of the idolatrous  
priests—

### **Zephaniah 1:13-17 (Gospel Lesson)**

<sup>13</sup> Their wealth will be plundered,  
their houses demolished.  
Though they build houses,  
they will not live in them;  
though they plant vineyards,  
they will not drink the wine.”  
<sup>14</sup> The great day of the LORD is near—  
near and coming quickly.

The cry on the day of the LORD is bitter;  
the Mighty Warrior shouts his battle  
cry.

<sup>15</sup> That day will be a day of wrath—  
a day of distress and anguish,  
a day of trouble and ruin,  
a day of darkness and gloom,  
a day of clouds and blackness—

<sup>16</sup> a day of trumpet and battle cry  
against the fortified cities  
and against the corner towers.

<sup>17</sup> “I will bring such distress on all people  
that they will grope about like those  
who are blind,  
because they have sinned against the  
LORD.

### Message:

YOU MAY HAVE NOTICED THAT ALL THREE READINGS TODAY ARE TAKEN FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT—INCLUDING THE GOSPEL. I DID THIS DELIBERATELY TO MAKE THE POINT THAT THE BOTH THE OLD TESTAMENT AND THE NEW TESTAMENT PROCLAIM THE SAME GOOD NEWS, AND THAT IS THAT WE HAVE A GRACIOUS GOD WHO HATES SIN BUT LOVES THE SINNER—AND WANTS TO SAVE THE SINNER FROM THE CONSEQUENCES OF HIS SINS.

A LOT OF PEOPLE THINK THAT THE GOSPEL IS FOUND ONLY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT AND THE OLD TESTAMENT IS ALL ABOUT THE LAW. NOT TRUE. THERE'S PLENTY OF GOSPEL IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND PLENTY OF LAW IN THE NEW. TODAY WE FIND BOTH GOSPEL AND LAW IN THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHET ZEPHANIAH.

IF YOU DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT ZEPHANIAH, JOIN THE CLUB: HE SEEMS TO BE THE RODNEY DANGERFIELD OF THE OLD TESTAMENT. YOU REMEMBER RODNEY DANGERFIELD—THE GUY WHO GOT NO RESPECT? “*THE OTHER NIGHT MY WIFE TOLD ME TO TAKE OUT THE GARBAGE. I TOLD HER I HAD ALREADY TAKEN IT OUT. SO SHE TOLD ME TO GO OUTSIDE AND KEEP AN EYE ON IT.*” LIKE RODNEY DANGERFIELD, ZEPHANIAH GOT NO RESPECT.

ZEPHANIAH LIVED AND PRPHESED DURING THE LATE 7<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY B.C. HE LIVED DURING THE REIGN OF JOSIAH, THE LAST GOOD KING OF JUDEA. JOSIAH WAS A GOD-FEARING KING WHO “DID WHAT WAS RIGHT IN THE EYES OF THE LORD. HE LAUNCHED A VIGOROUS CAMPAIGN TO GET RID OF THE PAGAN RELIGION THAT WAS RUNNING RAMPANT IN THE LAND. HE TORE DOWN THE ALTARS WHERE THE PEOPLE WORSHIPPED PAGAN GODS LIKE BAAL AND ASHTORETH. HE DESTROYED THE SITES WHERE CHILDREN WERE BEING SACRIFICED TO MOLECH, A CANAANITE GOD. HE RENOVATED SOLOMON’S TEMPLE AND DISCOVERED THE LONG-LOST BOOK OF THE LAW—THE WRITINGS OF MOSES—AND ORDERED THAT THEY BE READ ALOUD TO ALL THE PEOPLE OF JUDEA.

HE ORDERED THE PRIESTS TO CELEBRATE THE PASSOVER IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE INSTRUCTIONS GIVEN IN THE *BOOK OF EXODUS*—SOMETHING THAT HADN’T BEEN DONE SINCE THE TIME OF THE PROPHET SAMUEL. ALL OF THESE WERE PIOUS AND RIGHTEOUS THINGS TO DO. TRAGICALLY, HOWEVER, IT WAS TOO LATE. JUDEA HAD GONE TOO FAR DOWN THE SAME PATH THAT THE TEN NORTHERN TRIBES OF ISRAEL HAD GONE DOWN OVER A CENTURY BEFORE, WHEN THEY STOPPED WORSHIPPING YAHWEH AND STARTED WORSHIPPING PAGAN GODS.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE NORTHERN TRIBES IS DESCRIBED THE *BOOK OF 2<sup>ND</sup> KINGS*: “*THEY FORSOOK ALL THE COMMANDS OF THE LORD THEIR GOD AND MADE FOR THEMSELVES IDOLS.... “THEY SACRIFICED THEIR SONS AND DAUGHTERS IN THE FIRE. THEY PRACTICED DIVINATION AND SORCERY AND SOLD THEMSELVES TO DO EVIL IN THE EYES OF THE LORD, PROVOKING HIM TO ANGER.”* THEIR PROPHETS HAD WARNED THEM AGAIN AND AGAIN THAT IF THEY DIDN’T RENOUNCE PAGANISM GOD WOULD FALL ON THEM WITH ALL HIS WRATH. BUT THEY DIDN’T LISTEN.

THEY MOCKED THE TRUE PROPHETS AND BELIEVED THE FALSE PROPHETS WHO TOLD THEM NOT TO WORRY BECAUSE EVERYTHING WAS FINE. AND SO FINALLY, GOD SENT THE KING OF ASSYRIA TO CONQUER THEM AND HAUL THEM OFF AS PRISONERS TO SAMARIA WHERE THEY LOST THEIR IDENTITY AND WERE ASSIMILATED INTO THE PAGAN CULTURE OF THE ASSYRIANS. THEY BROUGHT DISASTER ON THEMSELVES AND JUDEA WAS HEADED IN THE SAME DIRECTION.

ZEPHANIAH SUPPORTED AND APPROVED OF WHAT JOSIAH WAS DOING BUT HE KNEW IT WAS ALREADY TOO LATE. WHEN A SOCIETY STOPS WORSHIPPING GOD AND TURNS TO PAGANISM, IT VERY RARELY RETURNS TO GODLY WAYS. AND SO FOR ALL THE GOOD JOSIAH ACCOMPLISHED WITH HIS REFORMS, AFTER HE DIED THE PEOPLE OF JUDEA REVERTED TO PAGANISM SO GOD TOLD ZEPHANIAH THAT THE DAY WAS NEAR WHEN JUDEA WOULD PERISH: “*THE GREAT DAY OF THE LORD IS NEAR—NEAR AND COMING QUICKLY. LISTEN! THE CRY ON THE DAY OF THE LORD WILL BE BITTER... THAT DAY WILL BE A DAY OF WRATH, A DAY OF DISTRESS AND ANGUISH, A DAY OF TROUBLE AND RUIN, A DAY OF DARKNESS AND GLOOM, A DAY OF CLOUDS AND BLACKNESS.*”

SO ZEPHANIAH FOUND HIMSELF IN THE UNENVIABLE POSITION THAT SO MANY PROPHETS BEFORE HIM HAD OCCUPIED: HE HAD TO TELL A SINFUL AND UNBELIEVING PEOPLE THAT THEY HAD AROUSED GOD’S WRATH BY BREAKING HIS COMMANDS AND REFUSING TO ASK FOR HIS FORGIVENESS, AND THAT THEY WERE ABOUT TO BE DESTROYED.

*“GATHER TOGETHER, GATHER TOGETHER O SINFUL NATION, BEFORE THE APPOINTED TIME ARRIVES...BEFORE THE FIERCE ANGER OF THE LORD COMES UPON YOU. SEEK THE LORD, ALL YOU HUMBLE OF THE LAND...SEEK RIGHTEOUSNESS, SEEK HUMILITY; PERHAPS YOU WILL BE SHELTERED ON THE DAY OF THE LORD’S ANGER.”*

NOW IF YOU WANT TO KNOW HOW THE PEOPLE REACTED TO ZEPHANIAH’S MESSAGE, ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS TO IMAGINE HOW PEOPLE OF TODAY WOULD REACT TO THE SAME MESSAGE. (re-read)

*“GATHER TOGETHER, GATHER TOGETHER O SINFUL NATION, BEFORE THE APPOINTED TIME ARRIVES...BEFORE THE FIERCE ANGER OF THE LORD COMES UPON YOU. SEEK THE LORD, ALL YOU HUMBLE OF THE LAND...SEEK RIGHTEOUSNESS, SEEK HUMILITY; PERHAPS YOU WILL BE SHELTERED ON THE DAY OF THE LORD’S ANGER.”*

IT’S ALWAYS THE SAME OLD STORY. GOD BLESSES HIS PEOPLE AND THEY TAKE CREDIT FOR THE BLESSINGS. HE CHOSE ISRAEL TO BE A LIGHT TO THE NATIONS AND THEY PLUNGED THEMSELVES INTO DARKNESS. HE OFFERED THEM DIVINE GUIDANCE AND THEY PREFERRED TO GO THEIR OWN WAY. *“WOE TO THE CITY OF OPPRESSORS, REBELLIOUS AND DEFILED! SHE OBEYS NO ONE, SHE ACCEPTS NO CORRECTION. SHE DOES NOT TRUST IN THE LORD, SHE DOES NOT DRAW NEAR TO HER GOD.”* THE DAY OF THE LORD COMES WITH SUDDEN AND TERRIBLE VIOLENCE UPON, *“...ALL THOSE WHO TURN BACK FROM FOLLOWING THE LORD AND NEITHER SEEK THE LORD NOR INQUIRE OF HIM”*

THE RESULT? JUDEA WAS INVADDED AND CONQUERED. JERUSALEM, THE PRIDE OF JUDEA AND THE GLORY OF ISRAEL, WAS PILLAGED, SOLOMON’S TEMPLE WAS DEMOLISHED AND THE PEOPLE WERE EITHER SLAUGHTERED OR HAULED OFF AS PRISONERS OF WAR. SO IT WAS PROPHESED AND SO IT CAME TO PASS.

THE TRAGEDY WAS EVEN GREATER THAN IT APPEARED BECAUSE GOD HAD CHOSEN THE ISRAELITES TO BE A LIGHT TO THE NATIONS AND WHEN JUDAH—THE LAST AND GREATEST TRIBE OF ISRAEL—FELL, THE LIGHT WENT OUT AND THE WORLD WAS PLUNGED INTO DARKNESS. ALL HUMANITY WAS LEFT TO DIE IN THEIR SINS. AND IF THE STORY HAD BEEN WRITTEN BY SOPHOCLES OR SHAKESPEARE THAT’S PROBABLY WHERE IT WOULD HAVE ENDED. IT WOULD HAVE BEEN A TRAGEDY OF EPIC PROPORTIONS, AN ACCOUNT OF WHAT HAPPENS TO MAN WHEN HE TURNS HIS BACK ON GOD AND GOES HIS OWN WAY.

BUT GOD HAD DIFFERENT PLANS FOR MANKIND BECAUSE GOD IS NOT A GOD OF TRAGEDY—HE IS A GOD OF HAPPY ENDINGS. IN SPITE OF HIS PEOPLE’S THANKLESSNESS, IN SPITE OF THEIR ARROGANCE, IN SPITE OF THEIR INDIFFERENCE, IN SPITE OF THEIR SINS—HE WOULD SAVE THEM. SINCE THEY REFUSED TO ACT IN THEIR OWN BEST INTEREST, HE WOULD ACT FOR THEM. GOD WOULD COME TO THE AID OF HIS PEOPLE AND OF ALL MANKIND, BECAUSE HE LOVES US. WE DON’T DESERVE HIS LOVE, NEVERTHELESS HE LOVES US. WE DON’T ASK FOR HIS HELP, NEVERTHELESS HE HELPS US.

OUR GOD IS A GOD OF “NEVERTHELESS.” YOUR SINS ARE AS SCARLET, NEVERTHELESS THEY SHALL BE AS WHITE AS SNOW. YOU DESERVE TO DIE IN YOUR SINS, NEVERTHELESS I WILL WASH THEM AWAY AND MAKE YOU CLEAN. YOU DESERVE TO GO TO HELL, NEVERTHELESS I WILL GIVE YOU ETERNAL LIFE.

THIS DIVINE “NEVERTHELESS” IS THE CORE AND THE SUBSTANCE OF OUR FAITH. THE TEN COMMANDMENTS LAID OUT THE PATH FOR US TO FOLLOW IF WE WANTED TO HAVE PEACE WITH GOD. BUT WE CAN’T FOLLOW THEM BECAUSE WE’RE REBELS AT HEART AND WE’D RATHER BREAK COMMANDS THAN KEEP THEM.

SO GOD DID FOR US WHAT WE COULDN’T DO FOR OURSELVES: HE SENT A SAVIOR WHO OBEYED THE LAW IN OUR BEHALF AND THEN DIED IN OUR BEHALF TO PAY THE PENALTY FOR OUR SINS. THEN HE TOLD US THAT EVERYONE WHO TRUSTS IN WHAT THE SAVIOR DID FOR US WILL BE SAVED.

AND THANK GOD HE DID THIS—AND DOES THIS—BECAUSE AMERICA IS FOLLOWING DOWN THE SAME PATH AS ANCIENT JUDEA. GOD BLESSES US WITH COUNTLESS BLESSINGS AND WE TAKE CREDIT FOR THEM. HE FORGIVES OUR SINS AND WE REFUSE TO FORGIVE ONE ANOTHER. HE COMES TO US IN DIVINE SERVICE EVERY SABBATH AND WE CHOOSE TO SPEND OUR TIME ON “MORE IMPORTANT THINGS.” HE GIVES US WHAT WE NEED AND WE DEMAND MORE. HE GIVES US THE GIFT OF LIFE AND WE RIP IT OUT OF THE WOMB AND SELL IT.

COULD NOT THE WORDS ZEPHANIAH SPOKE TO THE JUDEANS BE SPOKEN TO US AS WELL: *“WOE TO THE OPPRESSORS, REBELLIOUS AND DEFILED! YOU OBEY NO ONE, YOU ACCEPT NO CORRECTION. YOU DO NOT TRUST IN THE LORD, YOU DO NOT DRAW NEAR TO YOUR GOD.”* YET LIKE THE ANCIENT JUDEANS, WE REMAIN COMFORTABLE WITH THE STATUS QUO AND EXPECT IT TO CONTINUE FOREVER. AND THEN THE WHOLE THING WILL COLLAPSE AND WE WILL WEEP AND MOURN.

AND WHEN WE FACE JUDGMENT, WHAT WILL WE SAY?

WELL, THERE WILL ONLY BE ONE THING WE CAN SAY THAT WILL SAVE US, AND THAT IS THAT WE PLACE ALL OUR TRUST, ALL OF OUR CONFIDENCE, AND ALL OF OUR HOPE IN THE ONE WHO SITS ON THE THRONE: THE LAMB OF GOD WHO TAKES AWAY THE SIN OF THE WORLD. THAT IS OUR LAST AND ONLY HOPE.

WE WILL PRAY: *“DO NOT JUDGE US, JESUS, OR WE ARE LOST WE KNOW THAT WE HAVE BEEN WEIGHED IN THE SCALES AND FOUND WANTING. WE BEG YOU TO LET YOUR SUFFERING AND DEATH COUNT FOR US. SAVE US, WE PRAY.”*

AND THE LORD WILL REPLY: *“THE LORD HAS TAKEN AWAY YOUR PUNISHMENT, HE HAS TURNED BACK YOUR ENEMY.” “BE GLAD AND REJOICE WITH ALL YOUR HEART” “THE LORD, THE KING OF ISRAEL IS WITH YOU; HE WILL QUIET YOU WITH HIS LOVE, HE WILL REJOICE OVER YOU WITH SINGING.”* AND THAT—AND THAT ALONE—WILL BE OUR HAPPY ENDING. AMEN.