

ST. ARMANDS KEY LUTHERAN CHURCH
Sarasota, Florida

CONVERSATION ON THE MINOR PROPHETS

Session Plan #3 for Thursday, February 26, 2015

This week focusing on two Seventh Century B.C. prophets:

NAHUM and **ZEPHANIAH**

OPENING PRAYER

MUTUAL SHARING OF GOD'S PEACE

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF NAHUM

A) THE PROPHET –

1. **NAHUM** – means “*consolation*;” in original Hebrew also translated “*comfort*” or “*compassion*”
2. Native of Elkosh (“*God my bow*”), hence he is called “the Elkoshite.” (1:1)
 - a) some think this place is located at the modern *Alkush*, a village on the east bank of the Tigris River, about two miles north of Mosul, in modern day Iraq
 - b) others think it is a small village in Galilee, possibly near Capernaum
 - the word “Capernaum” actually means ‘village of Nahum.’
3. Occupation unknown

B) TIME OF WRITING – estimates range from 663 B.C.E. to about 612 B.C.E.

- a) Nineveh is known to have been destroyed by the combined armies of Cyaxares the Mede and Nabopolassar the Babylonian in 612 B.C.E.; the Book of Nahum had to have been written before that time
- b) ..earliest date identifiable in the Book of Nahum (3:8) is the fall of No-amon, the Egyptian Thebes, (near present day Luxor on the Nile River) captured by Assyria about 663 B.C.E.
 - Thebes regained independence in 654 B.C.E.
 - ..since Nahum does not allude to that event it may be that his book was written between 663 – 654 B.C.E.
- c) ..recall that Jonah had been sent by God, 100+ years earlier, to preach repentance to the inhabitants of Nineveh and many had responded favorable.
 - ..but now Nineveh was back to its old ways
 - ..God gave Nahum the task of preaching renewed divine judgment

C) THE SETTING –

1. **Assyria** – a loosely-knit empire of different peoples, held together by trade and strong and very cruel rulers.
 - a) ..a military state throughout its later history
 - b) ..idolatrous religion was practiced
 - c) ..cruelty and savagery dominated in controlling its people (3:1)
 - d) ..its far-flung wars and oppression are believed to have gradually exhausted its resources, both human and financial

2. Assyria's Rulers –

- a) ..cruel, violent and barbaric; constantly boasted of their victories
- b) ..gloated over the fact that: *“space failed for corpses”*
- c) ..known to have made *“pyramids of human heads”* and they *“covered building pillars with the flayed skins of their rivals”*
- d) **ASSURBANIPAL** (669-625 B.C.E.) exceptionally cruel
 - ..he ruthlessly tore off lips and limbs of captured kings
 - ..forced 3 captured rulers of Elam to drag his chariot thru the streets
 - ..compelled a prince to wear around his neck the decapitated head of his king
 - ..he and his queen had a garden feast, with the head of Chaldean monarch, whom he had forced to commit suicide, hanging from a tree above them

3. The City of Nineveh

- a) Capital of Assyria during Nahum's ministry; at that time was at the peak of wealth, power and fame (cf. 3:16-17)
- b) ..an impregnable fortress
 - about 30 miles long; 10 miles wide
 - protected by walls (100' high; top width allowed 3 chariots to drive side-by-side
 - 1200+ defense towers
 - moat outside these walls 140' wide and 60' deep
 - supplied with ample water from Tigris River
 - population estimates about 1 million people
- c) ..about 614 B.C.E. Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon headed up a coalition of all the enemies of Assyria.
 - for 2 years Nineveh lay under siege
 - finally heavy rains flooded the Tigris River, which swept away a huge section of city wall; through this opening the enemy entered and captured the city (cf. 2:6; 3:13)
 - ultimately, city was plundered of its rich spoil (2:10-14)
 - all that remains today are 2 great mounds of earth
- d) Esarhaddon II – was Nineveh's last king
 - proclaimed a 100 day fast
 - very last night spent in drunken orgies (1:10; 2:5)
 - finally, understanding his fate, he burned himself alive in his palace (3:15-19)

D) MAIN TEACHINGS –

1. In its original Hebrew, it is a poetic book; sometimes likened to Song of Deborah in Judges 5
 - a) Chapter 1 is psalm, set in alphabetical form, setting forth the majesty and power of God and His Mercy and Justice in dealing with humans
2. Main message is the downfall of Nineveh
 - a) In Book of Jonah God forgave Nineveh; in Nahum, God announces and executes its doom (2:11-13)
 - b) The lasting importance of Nahum's message is that he prophesied in a time when Assyria and Nineveh showed no signs of decay (1:12; 3:16)

3. Written for the benefit of Judah. While saying nothing of the sins of Judah, Nahum really wrote to comfort the Jewish nation of Judah; assuring them that as alarming as their circumstances might appear to be, the nation threatening them would fall; they would be delivered; the captor of the 10 tribes of Israel (*their cousins in the former northern kingdom*) was at last being punished
4. Nahum speaks both of the goodness and severity of God (*compare Zeph. 1 with Romans 11:22*)

E) LESSONS FOR CONTEMPORARY APPLICATION –

1. **God rules** over all the earth, even over those who do not acknowledge Him as God
2. No nation is too powerful for God to destroy
3. God's patience with the wicked eventually wears out
 - a) Compare Nahum 1:2-3 with 2 Peter 3:9-12)
 - b) For a nation to survive it must be established on the principles of righteousness and truth
4. Nahum serves as a reminder of the need for righteous indignation
 (consider this quote from Raymond Calkins writing in The Modern Message of the Minor Prophets, Harper – *“There is a place for a book like Nahum, even in the revelation of Grace... We need it, for it reminds us that love degenerates into a vague diffusion of kindly feeling unless it is balanced by the capacity of righteous indignation. A man who is deeply and truly religious is always a man of wrath. Because he loves God and his fellow men, he hates and despises inhumanity, cruelty and wickedness. Every good man sometimes prophesies like Nahum.”*)

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF ZEPHANIAH

A) THE PROPHET –

1. **Zephaniah** means *“Jehovah hides,”* or can be translated *“He whom Jehovah has hidden,”* or *“whom Jehovah hides or protects”* (1:1)
2. Two other “Zephaniahs” are mentioned in the O.T. (1 Chron. 3:6 & Jeremiah 21:1); there is no reason to connect either of these with the prophet.
3. Zephaniah was a great-great-grandson of Hezekiah, king of Judah (716-687 B.C.E.); thus considered to be of the royal bloodline of Judah
 - a) ..he is only prophet whose ancestry can be traced backward 4 generations
 - b) ..normally, genealogy of a prophet is taken back no further than his father
 - c) ..Zephaniah shows himself to be a distant relative of King Josiah and those to whom he addresses his prophecy
4. Jerusalem is thought to have been his home
 - a) ..reference to it as “this place” (1:4)
 - b) ..very familiar with its topography

B) TIME OF WRITING –

1. 640 – 625 B.C.E. is probable
2. During reign of JOSIAH, the son of Amon; Josiah was the last good king of Judah who reigned from 641 to 609 B.C.E. (2 Kings 22-23)
 - a) ..it can be inferred from his allusions to the state of morality & religion that these prophecies took place before the great reforms which began in 621 B.C.E. (cf. 1:4,8,9,12; 3:1-3,7)

3. His writing was thus about 100 years after the Assyrian captivity of Israel began
 - a) .. Samaria fell in 621 B.C.E.
 - b) ..Zeph. 2:13 - indicates it was before the destruction of Nineveh (612 B.C.E.)
4. Zephaniah as the first of a series of prophets sent by God to the southern kingdom of Judah before its fall in 587 B.C.E., and after the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C.E.
5. Isaiah and Micah had lived to see the fall of Samaria, capital of the northern kingdom, but had died before Zephaniah's time
6. Zephaniah lived in a crucial time in international affairs; for a century Assyria had dominated southwest Asia, but was now declining in power; Babylonia was becoming the dominant influence in that world
7. Zephaniah really had a 2-fold purpose: Israel must be warned and awakened, but so must all nations!
8. Zephaniah was followed by Jeremiah, Habakkuk and Ezekiel – all of whom delivered special warnings from God to Judah

C) THE 'WORLD' SETTING –

1. JUDAH:

- a) **HEZEKIAH** was succeeded by his son, **MANASSEH**
 - Manasseh was a wicked ruler
 - raised altars to Baal and Ashtoreth (2 Kings 21; 2 Chronicles 33:1-9)
- b) **AMMON** succeeded Manasseh, and followed in father's footsteps
 - a reign of great wickedness (2 Chronicles 33:21-25)
- c) **JOSIAH** succeeded Ammon, and was considered a good king of Judah
 - idols and altars to other gods were destroyed
 - bones of priests who had offered idol sacrifices were gathered and burned
 - during cleansing of Temple, a copy of the LAW was found and read before Josiah
 - Temple cleansing followed with enthusiastic Passover observance (2 Kings 22-23)
- d) **Religious and moral conditions**
 - reforms of Josiah reached their peak in 18th year of his reign
 - despite those reforms, Judah had same ungodly attitude that characterized Israel
 - people were cruel and corrupt
 - social injustice & moral corruption were widespread
 - luxury and extravagance abounded
 - idols were still worshipped
 - people refused to receive correction (cf. 3:2, 7)

2. ASSYRIA:

- a) From time of Micah to Zephaniah (700-630 B.C.E.) Assyria maintained supremacy over the world; but things were changing
- b) Revolts were common; Josiah, however, remained loyal until the death of Assurbanipal, king of Assyria 668-633 B.C.E.; thereafter, Assyrian empire began to disintegrate rapidly

3. BABYLON:

- a) 625 B.C.E. Nabopolassar, king of Babylon (625-605 B.C.E.) declared the independence of Chaldea, which caused war between Babylon and Nineveh (*Assyria*)
- b) With help from the Medes, who captured Ashur – a chief city of Assyria (614 B.C.E.), Nebuchadnezzar, son of Nabopolassar, destroyed Nineveh (612 B.C.E.)
- c) final remnant of Assyrian army defeated @ Haran (609 B.C.E.) which left Babylon the supreme power to the east

4. EGYPT:

- a) Pharaoh-necho had determined to assist Assyria @ Haran (609 B.C.E.)
 - Josiah attempted to stop him @ Megiddo, but was defeated and killed
 - Egypt then dominated Judah for 4 years
- b) 605 B.C.E. Nebuchadnezzar pursued Egypt as far south as Judah
 - Judah then became dominated by Babylon
 - After his father's death, Nebuchadnezzar returned to Babylon to assume the throne and took Daniel and others with him

D) MAIN TEACHINGS –

1. Book of Zephaniah can very simply be outlined as:
 - a) **“Look Within”** – Judgment is coming on Judah (1:1 – 2:3)
 - b) **“Look Around”** – Judgment is coming on the nations of the world (2:4 – 3:8)
 - c) **“Look Beyond”** – Judgment will give way to glory (3:9-20)
2. In broader summary form, Zephaniah:
 - a) ..begins with an awful picture of devastation & doom, when God comes in judgment against Judah and announces that the “day of the Lord” is near (1:2-18)
 - b) ..calls on meek to repent and seek God so that they can be part of the remnant who will be delivered and restored (2:1-3)
 - c) ..turns attention to heathen nations who will also share in the utter desolation of the “day of the Lord,” showing that all people are accountable to Him (2:4-15)
 - d) ..shows Judah her sins and says that if heathens were to be punished, Judah could also expect punishment (3:1-7)
 - e) ..closes on a positive note: a remnant of God's people, after wickedness has been purged from their nation, would be gathered from the surrounding nations and returned to their homeland, ultimately pointing to the Messianic age (3:8-20)
3. Theme: **“Day of the Lord”** is of greatest importance in Book of Zephaniah; that day when the Lord would reveal Himself in his fullness to the whole world,, judging evil doers, and fulfilling his great purposes of redemption among mankind.
 - a) ..whereas Isaiah (39:6), Habakkuk (1:6) and Jeremiah (20:4) specified Babylon as the “rod” that God would use to smite Judah, Zephaniah brought God Himself before the Judeans as the one behind the judgment
 - b) Zephaniah presents the **“Day of the Lord”** as:
 - **“at hand”** (1:7) and **“near”** (1:14)
 - a day of darkness and terror (1:15-16)
 - a judgment against sin (1:17)
 - accompanied by great convulsions of nature (1:15)
 - to fall upon all creation (1:2-3; 2:1-15; 3:8) including Philistia, Ekron, Ashdod, Askelon, Chereth, Ammon, Moab, Ethiopia and Assyria (*especially Nineveh*)
 - a day of doom from which only a remnant will escape (redemption would come)

E) LESSONS FOR CONTEMPORARY APPLICATION –

1. Two components are seen in the coming of the Day of the Lord:
 - a) Judgment resulting in world destruction
 - popular opinion assumed that the Day of the Lord meant vindication for God's chosen people in the face of their enemies;
 - but, according to Zephaniah it means judgment first for God's people; then for their foes
 - b) A 'terminal' event, bringing all of history to a close
 - as such it shares characteristics with apocalyptic literature that portrays the end times
2. A clear affirmation that God is the ruler of the universe (1:2) and all nations are accountable to Him (2:4ff)
3. Zephaniah draws a picture of the Messianic age (3:14-20) though not specifically mentioning or describing the Messiah Himself.

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