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### Warnings and Promises From Zephaniah

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# Warnings and Promises From Zephaniah

ONE cannot but admire the God of the Old Testament prophets. Untrammled by twentieth-century concepts of love as mainly being nice, this God of the Word of God demonstrates His love not only by rewarding His chosen people and extending centuries of grace to the heathen but also by damning those of His own who ultimately resist Him and by destroying forever the heathen who irredeemably sin away their day of grace. Unfettered by situation ethics and the new morality, this all-wise God can tell the difference between right and wrong and require all men to render Him an account.

"I will utterly consume all things from off the land," says the Lord in Zephaniah 1:2. "I will consume man and beast; I will consume the fowls of the heaven, and the fishes of the sea . . . ; I will cut off man from off the land" (verse 3).

As with Adventists today, Zephaniah's commission was to proclaim an imminent intervention of God into an ever-worsening human situation. "The great day of the Lord is near," he proclaimed; "it is near, and hasteth greatly" (verse 14).

Today men ask whether our moment in history is "minutes to midnight" for an era of unprecedented crime and chaos in a world gone bad, or "minutes to midday," the threshold of an era of unprecedented joy and happiness in a world made new. Both concepts are, of course, correct; only emphasis makes a difference. To Zephaniah

it was unquestionably doomsday that loomed ahead: "That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness" (verse 15).

But unexpectedly Zephaniah's mood changed abruptly. There were joy and peace ahead, as well as darkness and a day of wrath: "In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear thou not: and to Zion, Let not thine hand be slack. The Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing" (chap. 3:16, 17).

Thus Zephaniah, like the other prophets, foretold both the fate of the wicked and the reward of the righteous. In chapters two and three he said, The just Lord who "is in the midst" of Jerusalem "will not do iniquity"; He who "every morning" brings "his judgment to light" (verse 5) will destroy the nations that are sinful—but will also make His remnant "a name and a praise among all people of the earth" (verse 20).

## Prophecies of Doom and Delight

Both phases of Zephaniah's message, the prophecies of doom and those of delight, deserve analysis, partly for what they have to tell us about God, and partly for what they have to tell us about how we ought to live.

But first, who was Zephaniah and when did he flourish? Zephaniah introduces himself in chapter one, verse one, as a great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah (Hizkiah in the

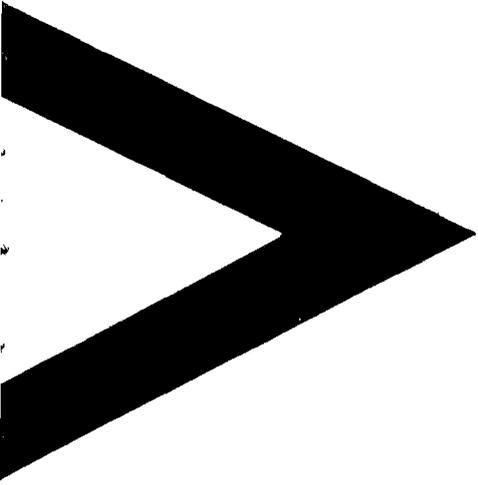
K.J.V.), and says that he was prophesying in the days of King Josiah (639-608 B.C.). In chapter 2:13 he predicted the as-yet-future overthrow of Nineveh, an event that took place in 612 B.C. It can thus be estimated that the date of his book is around 625 B.C. Clouds were gathering for the stormy sunset of the kingdom of Judah. The younger generation then alive was to witness Nebuchadnezzar's attacks on Jerusalem in 605 (when Daniel would be taken captive), in 597, and again in 586 (when Jerusalem would be destroyed, the Temple razed, the monarchy terminated, and a large portion of the population exiled to Babylon).

Such a man in such a time and place described God as about to wipe out the population of Palestine and of Nineveh. He claimed, in fact, that his assertion was "the word of the Lord" that "came" to him; that he was, indeed, quoting God verbatim: "I will cut off man from off the land, saith the Lord" (chap. 1:1-3).

Can we believe it? Can a twentieth-century Christian believe that God really talks and acts like this? Is it not possible that God was presenting Himself through Zephaniah, accommodating Himself to the very limited theological concepts of an apostate people at the risk of having His words misunderstood? In actual fact, when the punishment finally occurred, did it not come from the sword of Nebuchadnezzar rather than from God? Did not God merely "punish sin with sin" (compare *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 728)?

Every disclosure of an infinite Be-

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By C. MERVYN MAXWELL

ing to finite men must of necessity be more or less accommodated to human frailty. That Satan would misconstrue every revelation of God is common experience, which God, of course, foresaw. But in the case before us Zephaniah was at special pains to insist that it was God who was going to punish. He specifically rebuked anyone who would deny that this was so: "It shall come to pass at that time [says God], that I will search Jerusalem with candles, and punish the men . . . that say in their heart, The Lord will not do good, neither will he do evil" (verse 12). ("Evil" in this verse does not, of course, refer to moral badness but to woe and calamities. When the K.J.V. Bible speaks of "evil" tidings, for example, it does not refer to "immoral" tidings, but to "bad" news, as of disasters and distress.)

### Should Not God Punish?

On second thought, should not God punish? The humane Christian brought up in gentle surroundings and personally attracted to quiet living stands aghast at the thought. But let such a Christian pause shuddering in the shadows at a concentration camp during World War II and watch soldiers laugh in triumph at their ability to undress, gas, and bury a trainload of unsuspecting families in 45 minutes; or sit in a POW camp as a gleeful captor extracts the fingernails of his captive one by one; or dig in the rubble of a wartime city and hear the cries of a little grandmother as she screams for death, her body half burned but buried alive beyond hope of rescue—and then he will surely see that the sinfulness

of man is exceedingly wicked and selfish and cruel, and that the enemy of our salvation is indeed a serpent and a monster. Or let him hear under the altar the just demand of tortured, persecuted saints: "How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" (Rev. 6:10)—and then the words of Jesus will surely seem less incongruous, "I tell you that he will avenge them [His own elect] speedily" (Luke 18:8). Truly it will "not" be "an act of arbitrary power on the part of God" when "the glory of Him who is love" destroys sinners (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 764). Thank God, our Creator is not a king who will let hateful iniquity go on forever unpunished. "While He does not delight in vengeance, He will execute judgment upon the transgressors of His law. . . . By terrible things in righteousness He will vindicate the authority of His downtrodden law."—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 628.

Zephaniah's message about a God of punishment is true, all too terribly true. "If men cling to sin, they become identified with it. Then the glory of God, which destroys sin, must destroy them."—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 107.

The sinners in Zephaniah's day must have been desperately wicked to have deserved such righteous indignation. What, then, were their sins? Let us see.

Urban leaders oppressed the un-

derprivileged in Jerusalem: "Her princes within her are roaring lions; her judges are evening wolves; they gnaw not the bones till the morrow" (chap. 3:3). The clergy were superficial in a time of moral crisis: "Her prophets are light and treacherous persons" (verse 4). And the people, "the inhabitants of Jerusalem," were dishonest and avaricious: They filled "their master's houses with violence and deceit" (chap. 1:4, 9).

### False Religions

Many had taken up a false religion; some of these worshiped Baal (verse 4), others, on the flat roofs of their homes, offered sacrifices to the stars (verse 5). Other people had apparently only apostatized without taking up a false religion: They had "turned back from the Lord." Or had stopped praying: "They have not sought the Lord" (verse 6). Or had grown careless: They shrugged their shoulders and said God would not do either good or evil (verse 12). Others dressed like worldly people: "I will punish . . . all who array themselves in foreign attire" (verse 8, R.S.V.). Still others continued to worship God, while at the same time honoring some other god: "Them that worship and that swear by the Lord, and that swear by Malcham" (verse 5).

But God, is this all? Would You wipe out a nation just for these things? We can understand why

### Money in Bible Times—9

## THE SHEKEL

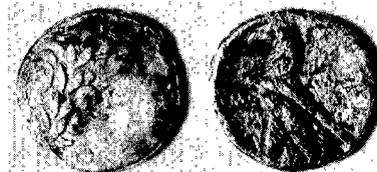
By KENNETH VINE

SOME have thought that the price paid for our Lord in the traitorous deal between the high priest and Judas was 30 silver denarii (Matt. 27:3). The Greek reads simply *argurion*, "silver," in the context "silver coin." However, today scholars almost unanimously agree that the coins were tetradrachms or shekels, most probably minted in Tyre (see Josephus, B.J., ii, 21. 2).

Such a shekel would have the head of Melcarth (Melkarth), god of Tyre and the sea, on the obverse, and on the reverse a side view of an eagle walking. The value of the shekel was approximately 40 cents (U.S.) so that Jesus was sold for approximately twelve dollars, or five pounds sterling.

In Matthew 17:24-27 is an interesting reference to "tribute" and a "piece of money." This tribute has

nothing to do with that paid to Rome, but rather to the Temple in Jerusalem. Annual tribute (Ex. 30:13) was levied to support the Temple and, according to our text, the tribute, or tax, amounted to a didrachm per person. The coin found in the mouth of the fish was a stater (shekel or tetradrachm) which, as Jesus said, was sufficient to pay the tribute "for me and thee." This coin is believed to be the same shekel as that paid to Judas for Jesus.



Shekel of Tyre

You would destroy the Ninevites. Their lust to conquer and pile up corpses and annihilate nations deserved punishment. But could You destroy Your own chosen people just for turning their backs on You and neglecting one another?

#### Archeology Helps

Archeology can help us a little to find an answer. While it gives no information about the god Malcham (or Milcom, as the R.S.V. spells his

name), it does affirm that Baal worship was a fertility rite, characterized by gross sexuality. In regard to similar sexual license indulged by the pagan Canaanites, God had said in the days of Moses, In all these things "the land is defiled: therefore I do visit the iniquity thereof upon it, and the land itself vomiteth out her inhabitants" (Lev. 18:25). Moses had gone on to warn that if ever the Israelites committed the same sins, they too would consequently be

driven out of the land (verses 26-28).

But, God, our own Christian nations today are guilty of these same sins! Many of our political leaders are self-seeking and heedless of their people's needs. Many of our citizens are dishonest and turned-in upon themselves. Though our nations have a form of religion, they deny its power. And sex gone wild is the hallmark of our age.

Even our own church is not free from all these sins.

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## When You're YOUNG

By Miriam Wood

### QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

**Q.** One of my friends has been in a serious emotional crisis for several months. I've tried to do all I can to help

her, but I finally have realized that her need is beyond my capability to meet. With the best intentions in the world, I suggested to her that she seek professional help. To my surprise and dismay, she was deeply offended; she's been avoiding me ever since. Yet if she had been having severe eye problems I would have suggested a good eye doctor, and undoubtedly she would have appreciated it, as she would have for any other physical problem. Why should it be taken as a gross insult then, and grounds for a broken friendship, when one suggests professional help in the emotional field? Was I wrong in making the suggestion?

**A.** It seems to me that you did exactly right in urging your friend to consult someone competent to give her the help she apparently needs. All too often seriously mixed-up people mull over their very real sicknesses with their friends time after time when the latter are not trained to give the counsel needed. For that matter, it's really a serious responsibility to advise another person; before doing so, one would want to be certain he wasn't making a bad matter worse. However, I'm not surprised that your friend reacted as she did, since I've had the same sort of experience on occasions when I've felt constrained to suggest the need for professional help. I've often been asked to recommend physicians for physical troubles, but never for emotional troubles. Too bad, isn't it, that a stigma should be attached to this in the minds of some, particularly in an age when life is really too much for many strugglers.

**Q.** Do you have any opinions on abortion?

**A.** Very decided ones. But this column does not strike me as the place to set them forth.

**Q.** I get along better with my grandparents than with my parents. If the "generation gap" theory is true, that shouldn't be the case. My grandparents and I communicate very well when we're together. They're not always on my back about what I'm doing. How do you explain it?

**A.** It doesn't seem particularly mysterious. You have to remember that your grandparents aren't as involved with you, they're not so directly concerned with your conduct and your eventual success or lack of it. Having lived an extra generation, they're able to view the panorama of life from a somewhat "mountaintop" perch. They've learned that the road winds this way and that, through valleys of despair and peaks of joy. Also, I assume from your question that you don't spend a great deal of time with them. Therefore, there's not so much opportunity for the tension level to rise. Each day becomes more and more precious to those who are living in the sunset of life. Your grandparents are probably enjoying the continuity of the generations without permitting themselves to be agonized over passing peccadilloes of thought and conduct. In a word,

they aren't responsible for you. You're one of life's dividends to them, and apparently they are the same to you. It sounds like a happy situation.

**Q.** Why do you take such a "hard line" in this column? Why aren't you willing to dialog about such things as drugs, free love, et cetera?

**A.** Because I consider the basic principles of Seventh-day Adventism nonnegotiable.

**Q.** My father, who is not a Seventh-day Adventist, is very much opposed to my going away to boarding school next year. If I don't go I will have to attend a public school here in my hometown. He says this is a good school and I'd get a good education there. However, he's left it up to me, after making it clear that if I decide to go, there'll be a certain amount of alienation between us. Do you think attendance at an Adventist school is important enough for me to pay this price?

**A.** Yes, I think it is. A situation of this kind is a real heart-breaker, however, for apparently you and your father have been very close, in spite of your religious differences. Emotional closeness with parents nowadays is comparatively rare, and is not to be thrown away lightly. However, there are issues at stake more important than even your relationship with your earthly father—namely, your relationship with your heavenly Father. I've no doubt that you could obtain a good secular education in your hometown, but the most important aspect of your education would be totally ignored. You need to be in an atmosphere of Adventist orientation during these impressionable years. In a comparatively short time you will be part of the adult world; your relationship with your father will change somewhat, of necessity, merely by the process of your becoming a full-fledged adult, whether or not you go to an Adventist school. I would hope that in your discussions of the problem you would display respect for your father's viewpoint, patience with opinions that differ from your own, and the kind of filial attitude prescribed by the basis of your faith—the Bible. Most important, when you return home from school on visits and vacations, it is vital that your life show the worthwhileness of your choice, so that you can be a living witness to the value of Christian education. If your life style is no different from that of your non-Adventist young acquaintances, with the exception of the day on which you worship, the whole controversy doesn't make much sense.

**Q.** About that story in a recent issue of *Newsweek*—I was really shocked to read that "many Adventists no longer believe that the days of Creation were each twenty-four hours long." Is this true?

**A.** Who says they don't? I am acquainted with literally thousands of Adventists, including all our leaders at denominational headquarters. Not one of them, to my knowledge, is anything other than a firm believer in the literal six-day Creation week.