



# INTERNATIONAL FELLOWSHIP OF CHRISTIANS AND JEWS™

The Bible studies presented in *Journey Through The Scriptures* are intended to be a devotional and practical teaching series, rather than a formal or in-depth examination of biblical theology. For the deeper meaning of many aspects of theology, and of Jewish practice, holidays, and events, we suggest that you consult Rabbi Eckstein's book explaining Judaism for Christians, *How Firm A Foundation*, and his 3-volume CD-ROM teaching series, *Returning to Zion*, all of which are available from *The Fellowship*.

# JOURNEY

Through The Scriptures



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## Study Points

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2. The Lord's Anger Against Nineveh
3. Nineveh Will Fall
4. Woe to the Ninevites
5. Warning of Judah's Judgment
6. The Great Day of the Lord
7. Imminent Judgment on the Nations
8. A Hopeful Future for Jerusalem

## The Prophecies of Nahum and Zephaniah

### The Lord's Anger Against Nineveh *Nahum 1:1-15*

The books of Nahum and Zephaniah are among the twelve prophetic books often referred to as the Lesser or Minor Prophets, beginning with Hosea and ending with Malachi. These books are so-called because of their brevity as compared with works such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

In the Jewish canon (list of biblical books), these twelve prophets are counted as a single book, which they were originally since they were small enough to be written on a single scroll. Nahum and Zephaniah were contemporaries as pre-exilic prophets—those who wrote before the exile of Judah to Babylon in 587 BCE.

Nahum prophesied the destruction of the great city of Nineveh, which occurred in 612 BCE. The Assyrian empire was the reigning power of Nahum's day. Given his message of God's judgment on Assyria, Nahum begins with a majestic picture of God as a fierce avenger of evil. The Assyrians were fierce conquerors who inflicted horrific cruelty on their victims—so their judgment would be just.

The Assyrians also deported conquered peoples to other parts of their empire, as when they conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE. Over 100 years before Nahum, the prophet Jonah had been sent to the city to pronounce its judgment (in about 750 BCE), only to see the people repent. This time, however, there would be no repentance.



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# The Prophecies of Nahum and Zephaniah

## Nineveh Will Fall *Nahum 2:1–13*

Nahum’s vision of the fall of Nineveh is as graphic and detailed as if he had witnessed it himself—which he may well have done after his prophecy was delivered. As we would expect of God who is the supremely righteous Judge, His punishment always fits the crime. The Assyrians had terrorized other nations for generations, striking fear in the heart of a city as they approached. Now it was their turn to man the city walls of Nineveh and marshal their defenses as they watched in fear for the invader to come.

The soldiers in “red” and “clad in scarlet” were the Medes and the Babylonians, whom the Lord sent to overthrow Nineveh and crush the Assyrian empire. The city’s royal palace was destroyed under the onslaught of the invaders, and the great plunder taken from Nineveh was simply the plunder they had carried away from other nations—a case of robber being robbed in turn. Nahum’s reference to “*the lions’ den*” (2:11) is apt, for lions were a favorite symbol of Assyrian kings for their ferocity and prowess in killing their prey. The lions’ den, referring to Nineveh as the home of the Assyrian empire, would be destroyed.

1. How did the Assyrians’ defeat help to “restore the splendor of Jacob,” meaning at this time the southern kingdom of Judah and its capital, Jerusalem (2:2)?

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2. What do you think is meant by the unusual description of Assyria’s handpicked troops stumbling as they raced to defend Nineveh against its invaders (2:5)?

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3. Read 2 Kings 18:17–37 and then describe the joy that must have been felt in Judah when Nahum prophesied in 2:13 that Assyria’s messengers would be silenced.

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## Something to Think About:

The judgment of Nineveh reminds us of the futility of any earthly power shaking its fist, as it were, in the face of God and His people. Indeed, the power of God to protect and deliver is a message of comfort to Israel today as her enemies vow her destruction. Let us pray for her protection and deliverance at God’s hand and in His perfect time.

# The Prophecies of Nahum and Zephaniah

## Woe to the Ninevites *Nahum 3:1–19*

Up to this point in Nahum’s prophecy, the merciless cruelty of the Assyrians, and thus their deserving of judgment, has been only hinted at. But now the full indictment is delivered against Nineveh as Assyria’s capital. We learn that Nineveh was a “*city of blood*” (3:1) a reference to the Assyrians’ practice of slaughtering hapless peoples and inflicting cruelty on those who survived the invasion. A sure sign of Nineveh’s true character was the fact that no one would be found who would shed a tear over her destruction.

The reference to Thebes in Nahum 3:8 helps us date the book, since this great Egyptian city had been destroyed in 663 BCE. Thebes also had a river as part of the city’s defense, as did Nineveh; yet, though Thebes was considered impregnable in its day, it fell and was destroyed. Thus would be the fate of Nineveh. All attempts at resistance would be futile, for Nineveh’s troops would be rendered virtually useless when the day of battle came. There was no recourse; Nineveh’s wound would be “*fatal*” (3:19). But despite the completeness of the city’s fall, the nations who had felt the

Assyrians’ cruelty would rejoice as God brought about His justice.

1. What do the terrible descriptions of Nahum 3:4 reveal about the true inner character of the Assyrians?

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2. Why was the shame that God would inflict on Nineveh (3:5–6) a particularly appropriate form of judgment?

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3. Why were grasshoppers used in Nahum 3:15 to depict the complete destruction of Nineveh?

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## Something to Think About:

One lesson we can draw from the book of Nahum is the importance of showing mercy to those around us—especially to the weak and needy. God responds in mercy to those who are merciful. Indeed, Jesus’ followers are taught in James 2:13, “*Mercy triumphs over judgment!*” May we be known as people of mercy and kindness.

# The Prophecies of Nahum and Zephaniah

## Warning of Judah's Judgment *Zephaniah 1:1–13*

Zephaniah's message of judgment on Judah and the Gentile nations around her places him squarely in the prophetic tradition. And yet Zephaniah has one interesting distinction: he tells the reader more about himself and his ancestry than any other prophet. His genealogy in 1:1 reveals Zephaniah to be a fourth-generation descendant of King Hezekiah, one of Judah's righteous kings (see 2 Kings 18). Thus Zephaniah was of the royal line, possibly a resident of Jerusalem. The prophet's deep concern for Judah's holiness is evident in his stern denunciations of the people's sins, and his impassioned call for repentance.

It also needs to be noted that Zephaniah prophesied "*during the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah.*" Josiah (2 Kings 22) was the youthful king under whose leadership Judah experienced an amazing reformation as the Temple in Jerusalem was repaired after many years of neglect. More importantly, Josiah instituted spiritual reform when the high priest Hilkiah reported, "*I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the LORD*" (2 Kings 22:8). This discovery of the Torah and its subsequent reading led to a

restoration of true worship in Judah. Prior to Josiah's reign, the nation had experienced many years of spiritual decay and idolatry. Zephaniah's prophecy may reflect those awful days—especially if he ministered in the early years of Josiah's reign, before he instituted his reforms, which many Bible scholars believe was the case.

1. Why did Zephaniah begin his prophecy in 1:2–3 with a statement of God's judgment on the physical creation?

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2. How is Zephaniah's royalty reflected in the prophecy of 1:8?

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3. Why did God warn the people through Zephaniah that He would "*search Jerusalem with lamps*" (1:12) on the day of His judgment?

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## Something to Think About:

In one important sense, God is still searching the earth with lamps, as it were, seeking for those who will be faithful to Him. We do well to recall this declaration of God's desire for faithfulness on the part of those who follow Him: "*The eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him*" (2 Chronicles 16:9).

# The Prophecies of Nahum and Zephaniah

## The Great Day of the Lord *Zephaniah 1:14–18*

As is true of all the biblical prophets, the historical setting of Zephaniah is critical to the understanding of his message. King Josiah came to the throne in Jerusalem in 640 BCE, and according to 2 Kings 22:3, his reforms began in the eighteenth year of his reign, which would be 622. Zephaniah delivered his prophecy in about 625, which as noted previously means that his message predated Josiah's sweeping reforms. This is important because even though Josiah eliminated much of the idolatry in Judah and reinstated the celebration of the Passover, his reforms were largely undone after his death and the nation slipped back to her former ways.

In other words, Zephaniah's prophecy of God's displeasure at idolatry, and the certainty of His coming judgment, was relevant beyond the relatively brief period of spiritual revival under Josiah. The judgment for that generation came in the Babylonian oppression and exile that began only a few years after Josiah's reforms. Thus we read of "*the great day of the Lord*," a recurring phrase in the prophets that often has both an immediate and future prospect. Any day in which the Lord acts is a day of the Lord,

and indeed the emphasis of Zephaniah 1:14 is on the nearness of this day. The day of the Lord usually involves both retribution and restoration. Even though God judges, He will not destroy His people. The reference to "*the whole world*" (v. 18) is a reminder that all nations and peoples will one day be called to account before God.

1. In what way was the day of the Lord near for the recipients of Zephaniah's prophecy?

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2. How does the picture of the people of Jerusalem walking around "*like blind men*" (v. 17) aptly describe their distress at the Babylonian invasion?

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3. What does the prophet mean by his reference to God's fiery jealousy in verse 18?

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## Something to Think About:

Another way to translate the biblical word for "jealousy" in relation to God is "zeal." This is an archaic word that expresses a very contemporary fact, which is that God not only greatly desires faithfulness from His people, but is committed to bring this about in our lives!

# The Prophecies of Nahum and Zephaniah

## Imminent Judgment on the Nations *Zephaniah 2:1–15*

The people of Judah were not to be left without the opportunity to repent and change their ways. So the people are commanded to come together, to assemble themselves, before God's judgment falls. Zephaniah warned that this day would result in the disobedient and faithless being swept away like chaff in the wind—a familiar picture in an agricultural society. Chaff was the waste that was quickly and easily blown away by the wind as grain was tossed into the air in the process called threshing or winnowing. Zephaniah called on Judah to consider her ways and seek the Lord before the dreaded day of retribution fell. Sadly, however, history shows the only permanent cure for idolatry was captivity and exile in Babylon.

The remainder of Zephaniah 2 makes it clear that Judah would not be alone in suffering God's wrath. The Philistines were long-time enemies of Israel who lived along the seacoast. Their great cities of Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, and Ekron were to be desolated and emptied of their inhabitants. The judgment on Moab and Ammon was not only because of their sinfulness, but also particularly because of their antagonism toward Israel. Many Bible students are puzzled by

the reference to Cush, or Ethiopia. It could be that Zephaniah was simply including the farthest reaches of the earth as illustrative of God's intention to judge all nations. But there is no doubt why the prophet included the evil kingdom of Assyria, which came under particular condemnation in Nahum and was conquered in 612 BCE by the Medes and Babylonians.

1. What part does humility play in the call to seek God and restore His favor (2:3)?

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2. What was particularly offensive to God about the actions of Moab and Ammon (Hint: read Genesis 19:29–38)?

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3. According to Zephaniah 2:15, what arrogant boast of the Assyrians was so offensive to God, in addition to their well-known cruelty?

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## Something to Think About:

True humility always pleases God. Zephaniah 2:3 teaches us that humility includes not only the recognition that we are the creatures and God is the Creator, but a determination to do what is just and right, which means to do what He commands.

# The Prophecies of Nahum and Zephaniah

## A Hopeful Future for Jerusalem *Zephaniah 3:1–20*

We can rejoice that our God is ultimately a God of forgiveness and restoration who has a glorious future in store for His people. The prophecy of Zephaniah ends with the promise that God will never abandon His inheritance, Israel. But first the purging and cleansing must come. The people of Judah had no reliable guidance from either the royal palace or even the Temple, for the nation's rulers, prophets, and priests were corrupt (excepting King Josiah who would institute many reforms). The priests are indicted for treating their sacred responsibilities lightly. Such a careless attitude on the part of Judah's civil and religious leaders could not help but manifest itself in the faithlessness of the people. Thankfully, the day of God's people's unfaithfulness would be temporary. He would bring about a transformation in which the evil and arrogant would be removed and a remnant of the godly would be preserved. The idea of a remnant of Israel is a regular theme in the prophetic books. After the judgment and suffering of Israel is over, there will be a righteous people who are

eager to serve and please God. The realization of Zephaniah's description of Israel's future restoration awaits the Messianic age, when God will deal with Israel's enemies and no evil will ever trouble His people again. So the message of Zephaniah is one of coming judgment, both in the near and the far future, and of God's glorious restoration of His people.

1. According to Zephaniah 3:3, how were the rulers of Judah displeasing God?

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2. What does Zephaniah 3:9 prophesy about the nations' future response to the God of Israel?

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3. According to verse 20, one element of Israel's restoration will be that God brings them "home" to the land He gave them. How is this prophecy being fulfilled even today?

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## Something to Think About:

Zephaniah 3:20 serves as another witness to the fact that we today are being privileged by God to share in the restoration and ingathering of His ancient people! I am overjoyed to be able to offer *Fellowship* friends like you opportunities to participate in this fulfillment as we bring the remnants of Israel home via our *On Wings of Eagles* program. Thank you for sharing in this miracle!

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# JOURNEY

## Through The Scriptures

### Answer Key for: *The Prophecies of Nahum and Zephaniah*

#### Page 2: The Lord's Anger Against Nineveh

1. In addition to God's desire to bring an evil empire to justice, this section also presents God as He who has both the power and the prerogative to judge any nation or people.
2. God's destruction of Nineveh would be so complete there would be no need for a second time.
3. From 2 Kings we learn that King Sennacherib of Assyria almost conquered Jerusalem in 701 until the Lord delivered His people. From then on, however, Judah was under Assyria's power in one way or another. God said this oppression would be finally broken when Nineveh fell.

#### Page 3: Nineveh Will Fall

1. The people of Judah had been oppressed and stripped of their possessions by the marauding Assyrians. But this oppression would be broken, and Judah would enter a period of prosperity.
2. This seems to suggest that these experienced soldiers, who had fought many battles, tripped over their own armor and/or weapons as they ran—the result perhaps of fear, or hurrying to dress for battle since the enemy had surprised them.
3. The Assyrian king Sennacherib sent his commander to make his demands on Judah and strike fear in the people's hearts by threatening to destroy Jerusalem. The people of Judah would hear no more such threats from Assyria!

#### Page 4: Woe to the Ninevites

1. These terms reveal not only this nation's complete lack of moral integrity, but her attempts to use spells, incantations, and other detestable practices to control the lives and fates of others.
2. The Ninevites were a famously proud people. Assyrian inscriptions show their kings gloating over the torture of their defeated enemies. The nation that was as proud as a roaring lion would be justly humiliated in the eyes of other nations.
3. Grasshoppers were well known in the ancient world, as they are today, as a vast destructive force without number, capable of leveling everything in their path.

#### Page 5: Warning of Judah's Judgment

1. This may serve as a reminder that God is the Creator and Judge of the whole earth, including the nations of the world, and as such has the power and the rightful authority to judge all people.
2. This verse singles out the royal family as being culpable for helping to lead the nation Judah away from faithfulness to God.
3. This is clearly a word picture describing God's thoroughness in the work of judgment, and also speaks of the impossibility of hiding from His hand—an appropriate warning for people who thought God would do nothing!

#### Page 6: The Great Day of the Lord

1. For the people of Judah, Zephaniah's warning pointed to the coming day of desolation when God would bring the Babylonians sweeping into Jerusalem to destroy the city and take the people into exile as captives.
2. It is obvious that blindness would be among the worst of all afflictions to have when trying to deal with an invading army—a graphic picture of the people's helplessness to resist their conquerors.
3. This is not human jealousy, but a description both of God's righteous indignation at His people's unfaithfulness, and His great desire to see them live before Him in faithfulness.

#### Page 7: Imminent Judgment on the Nations

1. Humility may be the most essential element in true repentance, for only those who are willing to humble themselves in recognition of their shortcomings and seek God's forgiveness can expect to enjoy His favor.
2. These two nations were related to Israel through Abraham's family, having his nephew Lot as their ancestor. Thus they should have been helpful to, or at least sympathetic to, the Israelites instead of antagonistic and vengeful.
3. The Assyrians boasted that they were the greatest of all peoples, and that no one could compare to them in splendor or power—a direct insult to the God of Israel.

#### Page 8: A Hopeful Future for Jerusalem

1. This verse pictures the nation's leaders as "*roaring lions*" and "*evening wolves*" who greedily devoured Judah's resources and cared nothing for the people's needs or welfare.
2. This verse tells of a day when the people of all nations will seek the Lord and become His servants!
3. God is bringing the Jews home to Israel today as part of the prophesied ingathering of Israel.



# JOURNEY

Through The Scriptures

## An Exciting Adventure of Discovery and Faith in the Pages of God's Word



Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, an Orthodox rabbi, is the founder and president of the *International Fellowship of Christians and Jews*.

He is an internationally recognized teacher of the Bible, and an expert in Jewish life and customs who has helped tens of thousands of Christians discover the Jewish roots of their Christian faith.

Rabbi Eckstein is also the author of several books, including *How Firm A Foundation*, an authoritative guide to Judaism for Christians, and *The Journey Home*.

Rabbi Eckstein has spent over 25 years helping Jews and Christians bridge the gap of misunderstanding and mistrust that has marked the past 2,000 years of their relationships. Realizing what could be accomplished if Christians and Jews came together in mutual respect and cooperation, and drawing on their shared biblical heritage, Rabbi Eckstein founded *The Fellowship* in 1983 to build bridges of understanding between these two faith communities.



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