

1

The man, the message, the season

Please read Zephaniah 1:1 and 2 Kings 22:1-23:37

In 1960 the playwright Robert Bolt completed what has now become a famous dramatic portrait of the sixteenth-century Roman Catholic humanist philosopher, Sir Thomas More. The title given to the play, which was subsequently made into an Oscar-winning film, was *A Man for All Seasons*.¹ The choice of both the character and the title seems to have been influenced by a concern to highlight this world's need for men of principle. In *Thomas More*, Bolt clearly believed that he had found such a man. Here, it is alleged, is a man who is willing to stand for that which he considers right, no matter what personal consequences may follow.

The basic storyline, at least according to Bolt, is well known. For a brief period between 1529-32 Thomas More the scholar was appointed Chancellor of England. Those were the days of an absolute monarch, and there were few who held such

power as King Henry VIII. But Thomas More was someone who was prepared to defy even the wishes of Henry, and go to the scaffold, rather than sanction the king's divorce from Catherine of Aragon and remarriage to Anne Boleyn. Other complex issues were undoubtedly involved in this historical episode, but Bolt's primary contention is that, in Thomas More, sixteenth-century England had a man of outstanding principle, and this fickle world is always in need of such heroes.

Now whatever we may decide to be the rights and wrongs of the playwright's judgement on this particular individual, it is certainly true that Old Testament prophets were generally of this mould. They too were men of principle. As the Epistle to the Hebrews reminds us, among their number were those who were 'tortured ... faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawn in two; they were put to death by the sword' (Hebrews 11:35-37). There was, however, an important distinction between them and the hero of Bolt's play. Those Old Testament heroes lived, suffered, and very often died, not simply as men of principle, but as mediators of the Word of God, a word that will 'endure for ever'. Indeed, it is because this is so, that these men and their messages will always be welcome among the true people of God.

With the opening verse of the book of Zephaniah we are brought face to face with *a man with a message for all seasons*—a man who spoke seriously and solemnly to his own day and who, because his message had a higher source of authority than even his own sincere heart and mind, continues to speak to every age. It will be our initial purpose to introduce this man and the message he delivered nearly 2,600 years ago. We shall want to know who he was, the nature of his task and the circumstances in which he lived—in other words, we shall need to acquaint

ourselves with the man, his message and the season in which he conducted his ministry.

But, of course, any exposition cannot be allowed to end there; it must inspire us to enquire about the way in which this man and his message speaks to every age, including our own. Therefore, when this superscription is properly understood it will be seen to throw light on a number of important issues of continuing significance.

The man: who and what was he?

Our investigation of this important opening verse begins with the stated identity of God's chosen instrument on this occasion and the nature of the task he was called upon to perform.

1. His name

The first thing that we are told about this man is his name. It was 'Zephaniah'. Although it would probably be incorrect to attribute too much significance to the precise meaning of the name itself, we should at least note that his name means 'Hidden of the Lord'. Therefore, as many commentators have pointed out, it is possible that this could be a reference to his once having been the object of some special providential deliverance during a difficult period in his life, but this is by no means certain.

2. His royal ancestry

We are then informed that he was a man with a significant ancestral history. Like many of his kind, the sum total of our information about him is meagre, and yet this superscription does provide more of his genealogical details than is normally afforded an Old Testament prophet. We are informed that he was 'the son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah,

the son of Hezekiah'. It would seem that the main purpose of this information is to identify him as a descendant of Hezekiah, the fourteenth king of Judah, and to show that he was related to the king in whose reign he lived and ministered. In other words, he was of royal lineage.

3. His calling

Finally, we are introduced to the nature of his calling: he was a prophet of the one true and living God. We are justified in recognizing him as such by virtue of the book's opening words: 'The word of the LORD ... came to Zephaniah ...' This kind of statement is typical of one called to the prophetic office and is used elsewhere in the Old Testament in identifying such men (e.g., Jeremiah 1:1-2; Ezekiel 1:3; Hosea 1:1; Joel 1:1; Jonah 1:1; Micah 1:1; Haggai 1:1; Zechariah 1:1; Malachi 1:1). This designation is the most important thing about the man. He was a prophet. Prophets were, quite simply, messengers of God. They were called by God and entrusted with a particular task. If a man presumed to take this office upon himself, then he was regarded as a false prophet (Deuteronomy 18:20-22). A true prophet was a man who had responded to a divine call. As such his function was to stand between God and men and proclaim his Word. They were mediators of a message. Their role and function was to deliver what God had entrusted to them—nothing more, nothing less.

As mediators they were indispensable to the needs of the people. The main reason for this is simply explained. When speaking of God, theologians frequently remind us that he is 'Other'; that is, that the Creator of the universe is so holy, so separate from us, so transcendently above and beyond us that, if we are ever truly to know God, then he must take the initiative in making himself known to us. The Infinite and Holy One must

stoop; he must condescend. Man cannot find God simply by relying on his own initiative. Furthermore, it is not merely man's finitude that forms a barrier to his knowledge of the infinite; it is also his sinfulness. By nature, like Adam, his instinct is to run and hide from God (Genesis 3:8). This view of man is in stark contrast to that of so many modern theorists who would have us believe that the world's religions represent man's long search for God. From a biblical point of view, the truth could not be more different. Although the world's religions may serve as a testimony to the existence within man of a sense of God's 'eternal power and divine nature', the religions themselves are an expression of man's determined flight from him (cf. Romans 1:18–32). Nevertheless, despite this, God condescends to make himself known, and the fullest and clearest way in which he has chosen to do so is by raising up servants specifically entrusted with the task of bringing his word to the people.

Whenever this happened it was considered a tremendous privilege, both for the messenger and the recipient of the message. For the messenger, the privilege lay in the fact that God had saved him, drawn him into his work and then made him an instrument for the dissemination of his will among the people. But it was also a tremendous privilege to be a recipient of the message, regardless of its precise content—whether it was an announcement of mercy or a warning of wrath. The fact remains that *God* had stooped to communicate, that the divine Sovereign had condescended to speak to a fallen world.

The message: what was he called upon to declare to the people?

When considering the message that the prophet was called upon to declare to the people, there are three points that need to be observed.

1. A message from God

Firstly, Zephaniah was to declare a message from God to the people. It is vitally important that we remember that although Zephaniah was given the solemn responsibility of delivering the message of this book to the people, he was not its ultimate author. He was an ambassador. He was God's chosen instrument; he was 'carried along by the Holy Spirit' (2 Peter 1:21). His great task was to set before the people 'the word of the LORD'.

2. A message of judgement

Secondly, the message that Zephaniah was called upon to deliver was primarily one of judgement. It was not entirely without hope, and in this respect his was typical of the messages that prophets were normally commanded to bring. Theirs was always a communication which combined the realities of judgement and mercy. Nevertheless, it was primarily a message of judgement that Zephaniah was to bring to the people of his day. The message was essentially this: that God would soon come to judge the people of Jerusalem and Judah for their sins. There would be no escape. Jerusalem would fall. It was a prophecy that was fulfilled in 586 BC when the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, finally defeated Judah, ransacked the temple and deported most of the nation's inhabitants to various parts of his empire.

3. An unwanted message

Thirdly, Zephaniah's message was one that the overwhelming majority of the people did not wish to receive. This too is the most frequent response of men and women to the Word of God. Not only did they not want to receive it; they were unwilling to believe it. 'After all,' they reasoned with themselves, 'we are the chosen people; we are the ones to whom the ancient promises

have been delivered; surely God could not contradict himself and subject us to his wrath!' At the heart of this perspective was a terrible one-sidedness with respect to God's ancient promises. The people were only willing to recognize the promises of blessing that God had made to the faithful and obedient, but woefully overlooked his equally valid pledges to judge the faithless and disobedient (cf. Deuteronomy 28).

And the fact is that the nation of Judah was ripe for judgement. Despite the miraculous intervention of God in preserving the nation from the Assyrian threat during the days of Hezekiah, the people had still turned their backs on him, and had done so in the most dreadful manner. Not only had they given themselves to idolatry, but they had also introduced prostitution into their cultic rituals and sacrificed their children on the altar of Baal (2 Kings 21:6–9).

The season: when did Zephaniah live and minister as a prophet?

The final clause of this opening verse invites us to consider the precise timing of the prophet's ministry. He lived and ministered 'during the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah'. These details immediately inform us of three things.

1. Days of reformation

Firstly, Zephaniah's ministry took place during days of reformation.² Josiah was the first godly king in Judah since Hezekiah. The latter had died in 686 BC and it was not until 640 BC that Josiah became king. Even then he was only eight years old and nearly sixty years had elapsed between his reign and that of his great-great-grandfather. As we have already observed, the intervening years had been characterized by the most appalling idolatry.

2. Days of discovery

Secondly, Zephaniah's ministry took place during days of discovery. We are informed that Josiah was sixteen years old when he 'began to seek the God of his father David' (2 Chronicles 34:3), and by the time he was twenty years old he had started to purge the nation of its idolatry. Then, in 622 BC (the one-hundredth anniversary of the Fall of Samaria!), when he was twenty-six years old, he discovered a copy of the law (the book of Deuteronomy). Appalled by what he read of the consequences that would befall a nation that had taken the path followed by Judah, Josiah humbled himself afresh before God. The Lord answered him by promising that the terrible judgement foretold in the law would not fall upon the people during his lifetime (2 Kings 22:1-20). But, far from encouraging complacency, this news simply served as a shot in the arm to the young king and his reformation. It was probably at this time, during the days immediately following the discovery of the Book of the Law, that Zephaniah's supporting ministry began.³ He was to give support to Josiah's reforms. So far, so good. From this it might seem that these were advantageous days in which to carry out such a ministry. But all was not what it seemed.

3. Days of danger

Finally, Zephaniah's ministry also took place during days of constant danger. The fact that reformation had already commenced did not mean that the supporters of God and truth had things all their own way. Students of biblical history have often wondered why the reformation under Josiah did not survive his death. The answer may well be that there were still those in the country who preferred the former days—the less puritanical days—and longed for their return. They hated this king and his book. They hated this killjoy prophet and his message. And he, Zephaniah, even in such days, had to stand

in the gap between God and men and, no matter what the outcome, proclaim his truth.

Points to ponder

As we turn from the opening introductory words of this prophecy, we need to ask ourselves the question: what do these words have to teach us today? Well, if we are allowed to fiddle with the order of our exposition and apply its message in a slightly different order, we would be justified in making four important observations.

1. It reminds us of one of the great needs of the church in the days in which we live.

As we shall see, the days in which we live are not so different from those of Josiah and Zephaniah. The nation in their day was in need of reformation—one that was spearheaded by a rediscovery of the Word of God. In our day the professing church of Jesus Christ is similarly in need of reformation. Certainly, in much of the Western world, we have been living off the blessings of a Christian heritage that is now in marked decline. Moreover, as the church has departed from its message, so society has slipped further and further away from God-honouring moorings. Therefore, what we need is a new reformation, a rediscovery of the timeless truths of the Word of God. This is something for which the church should be earnestly praying.

2. It teaches us something about the kind of men the church needs for such times.

We need men like Zephaniah. Of course, we cannot have prophets in the Old Testament sense, nor even like those that appeared in New Testament times. Such days have passed. The church has been built on the foundation of the apostles and

prophets (Ephesians 2:20) and that foundation will never need to be relaid. But we still need men who are called by God—men who will faithfully stand in the gap and, with urgency and compassion, without thought of the cost to themselves, proclaim God's Word among his people, and to an unbelieving world. When it is obvious that such men are in short supply, the church should be earnestly beseeching the throne of grace that God would again raise up men of this ilk in her midst.

3. It reminds us of the need we have for men whose great concern will be to bring the Word of God to the people in such times.

We need men who will be faithful in bringing to the people 'the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints' (Jude 3). In many modern churches men and women seem to be losing confidence in the authority of the Bible and the power of the Holy Spirit to effect a work through the preached word. Preachers too are often guilty of betraying the same lack of confidence. Men who once considered themselves preachers of the Word of God now seem happier in the roles of psychologist, magician, and/or entertainer. But what we need are men who are humble recipients of God's infallible Word and who are prepared to preach it 'in season and out of season' (2 Timothy 4:2).

4. It teaches us that we continue to be in need of the specific message of this book for our own times.

Zephaniah's message was 'a message for *all seasons*'. Although written some 2,600 years ago, and focusing on the somewhat unpalatable subject of judgement, this is a message desperately needed in our own day. As the church feels the increasing pressure of a secularized society to conform to its own material and temporal agenda, we are in need of a message that is going to focus minds on 'the Day of the Lord' and the need to prepare

for it. The world needs to hear this message too. Drunk as she is with her own rhetoric, which constantly assures her that this life is all there is, she needs to be reminded—whether she appears to be willing to listen or not—that a day is coming when every soul that has ever lived will stand before the judgement seat of Christ.