

Zephaniah 1:13

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Therefore their goods shall become a booty, and their houses a desolation: they shall also build houses, but not inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, but not drink the wine thereof.

Analysis

Therefore their goods shall become a booty, and their houses a desolation—This verse pronounces covenant curses upon the complacent. **Booty** (meshisah, מְשִׁיחָה) means plunder, spoil—their accumulated possessions will be seized by invaders. **Desolation** (shemamah, שְׁמָמָה) means devastation, wasteland—their houses will become uninhabitable ruins. This fulfills Deuteronomy 28:30: "Thou shalt build an house, and thou shalt not dwell therein" and 28:33: "The fruit of thy land, and all thy labours, shall a nation which thou knowest not eat up."

They shall also build houses, but not inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, but not drink the wine thereof—This frustration of labor curse appears repeatedly in covenant warnings (Deuteronomy 28:30, 39; Amos 5:11; Micah 6:15). The verbs emphasize futility: people invest time, energy, and resources into building and planting, but never enjoy the results. Enemy invasion, exile, or divine curse prevents harvest. This represents complete reversal of covenant blessings promised in Deuteronomy 28:1-14, where obedience brings secure enjoyment of labor's fruit.

The theological principle is inescapable: covenant breaking brings covenant curses. God explicitly warned that disobedience would result in futility, frustration, and loss (Leviticus 26:16, 20; Deuteronomy 28:15-68). Haggai 1:6 describes identical frustration in post-exilic Jerusalem: "Ye have sown much, and bring in

little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm." Without God's blessing, human labor proves ultimately futile. Jesus warned, "Without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5)—apart from covenant relationship with God through Christ, even apparently successful labor lacks eternal significance.

Historical Context

This prophecy found literal fulfillment during Babylon's conquest. Many Judeans built homes and planted crops, only to have Babylon's armies destroy properties, confiscate produce, and exile owners before harvest. 2 Kings 25:8-12 describes systematic destruction: "[Nebuzaradan] burnt the house of the LORD, and the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem...And the army of the Chaldees...broke down the walls of Jerusalem round about." Babylon plundered everything valuable and left the land desolate.

Those exiled to Babylon experienced this futility personally. Jeremiah 29:5-6 instructed exiles to "build houses, and dwell in them; and plant gardens, and eat the fruit of them"—but they were building in captivity, not the promised land. Their labor in Babylon sustained life but represented loss of covenant inheritance. They worked for foreign masters, built foreign cities, enriched foreign kingdoms—the very futility Zephaniah prophesied.

The broader pattern extends beyond the Babylonian exile. Throughout history, when God's people abandon covenant faithfulness, they experience frustration, anxiety, and ultimate futility despite frantic activity. Ecclesiastes explores this theme: "Vanity of vanities...all is vanity" (1:2)—life "under the sun" without God proves empty and meaningless. Only covenant relationship with God through Christ provides secure foundation and eternal significance. Those who build on any other foundation will watch their life's work burn (1 Corinthians 3:12-15), experiencing the ultimate futility Zephaniah's complacent contemporaries faced when Babylon invaded.

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

1. How does modern pursuit of security through accumulated possessions mirror the futility Zephaniah warns against?
2. What does the frustration of labor curse teach about the necessity of God's blessing for genuine success and satisfaction?
3. In what ways can believers today build houses and plant vineyards (pursue legitimate goals) while maintaining covenant faithfulness as foundation?

Interlinear Text

לְשָׁמֶם הַבָּתִים לְמִשְׁפָּט הַיְלָם וְהַיְלָם
H1961 Therefore their goods shall become a booty and their houses a desolation
H2428 H4933 H1004 H8077

וְבָנָה אֶל אֵשׁ בָּו וְבָנִים
H1129 H1004 H3808 H3427
they shall also build and their houses but not inhabit

וְנִטְעָה אֶל אֶכְתָּם יִם אֶשְׁתָּה וְאֶת אֶתְמָם
H5193 H3754 H3808 H8354 H853 H3196
them and they shall plant vineyards but not drink the wine

Additional Cross-References

Amos 5:11 (Parallel theme): Forasmuch therefore as your treading is upon the poor, and ye take from him burdens of wheat: ye have built houses of hewn stone, but ye shall not dwell in them; ye have planted pleasant vineyards, but ye shall not drink wine of them.

Micah 6:15 (Parallel theme): Thou shalt sow, but thou shalt not reap; thou shalt tread the olives, but thou shalt not anoint thee with oil; and sweet wine, but shalt not drink wine.

Deuteronomy 28:30 (Parallel theme): Thou shalt betroth a wife, and another man shall lie with her: thou shalt build an house, and thou shalt not dwell therein: thou shalt plant a vineyard, and shalt not gather the grapes thereof.

Jeremiah 9:19 (Parallel theme): For a voice of wailing is heard out of Zion, How are we spoiled! we are greatly confounded, because we have forsaken the land, because our dwellings have cast us out.

Jeremiah 15:13 (Parallel theme): Thy substance and thy treasures will I give to the spoil without price, and that for all thy sins, even in all thy borders.

Deuteronomy 28:39 (Parallel theme): Thou shalt plant vineyards, and dress them, but shalt neither drink of the wine, nor gather the grapes; for the worms shall eat them.

Ezekiel 7:21 (Parallel theme): And I will give it into the hands of the strangers for a prey, and to the wicked of the earth for a spoil; and they shall pollute it.