

The Book of Zephaniah

*I will bring distress on mankind, so that they shall walk like the blind, because they have sinned against the LORD, their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung.
(Zephaniah 1:17 ESV)*

*Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, who do his just commands; seek righteousness; seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the LORD.
(Zephaniah 2:3 ESV)*

*The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.
(Zephaniah 3:17 ESV)*

Zephaniah: The Great Day of the Lord

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Zephaniah

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Introduction:

Good morning and happy new year! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Zephaniah. This morning we are going to do something a bit different as we walk through the whole book of Zephaniah. And instead of parking in a few verses, we are going to jump around so that we can get more of a birds eye view of this important book in our bibles.

Now as you are finding Zephaniah in your bibles, I just want to share a quick story. It was a few years ago and Krysta and I were driving from Midhurst to Orillia for a New Years Eve party. The weather was awful and we toyed with the idea of turning around several times over the drive. We thought, ‘will this party really be so good that we want to risk ending up in the ditch?’ Well we made it safe to our friends house and we had a great time AND we made it home safe as well. Phew.

But throughout that drive there and throughout the night, I struggled to really be present as I was nervous about getting back home safe. I felt like I was playing with fire driving up and down Horseshoe Valley in the middle of the snow storm. But that foresight, that ability to see the potential consequences for a taking a certain risk is really something that we can take for granted. That’s why we often look back at the decisions we made in our teens and early twenties and say,

'how dumb and naïve was I? Did I really not see that that dumb decision would lead to a bad ending?!' Well the truth is, you and I probably were young and dumb.

Being able to see that our decisions will have consequences is something that we cannot take for granted. And when we look to the book of Zephaniah, we get a glimpse of the inevitable consequences coming hard and fast to an unsuspecting people. Judah had watched as their brothers and sisters in the northern tribes of Israel faced the judgement of the Lord just over a hundred years before. But did Judah amend their ways? Did they pull a 180 and learn from their family's mistakes? Nope. Rather than learning from their siblings mistakes, they snuck out the same windows, skipped classes, stole mom and dad's car, and ended up having to pay the consequences.

Sure there were bright spots in which you thought true and lasting change for the better might come but they burned out fast. Josiah was the king in power as Zephaniah prophesied. He in fact was one of those bright lights who made huge reforms counteracting the mistakes of his father but they did not last as his sons brought the nation into further ruin. The people of God were asleep at the wheel and heading fast into destruction.

The inevitable was on its way and Judah did not seem to see it coming. But they weren't the only blind ones. The surrounding nations who had refused to bow to the God of Israel would have to face judgement as well. The time had run out and God would execute His justice and vengeance on sin. But it would not be the end of the world. For as we will see this morning, after the storm of judgement comes, God promises to make all things new.

Now with these things in mind, hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today:

The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter; the mighty man cries aloud there. A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements. (Zephaniah 1:14-15 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Now those verses get your attention don't they? The message of Zephaniah could be summed up in the words: 'the day of the Lord.' His message was that the clock was about to strike midnight and God's wrath would be poured out on the earth. But before we go any further, I think it would be helpful to clarify something so our minds aren't running down bunny trails. So let's quickly ask, *what is the day of the Lord?*

What is The Day of the LORD?

The theme of the Day of the Lord is something that is not unique to Zephaniah. Other prophets such as Joel and Micah spoke of it and in reality, most of the minor prophets, actually all the prophets, had something to say about the day of the Lord. That is because in biblical terms, and this is important, there are MANY days of the Lord. One commentator puts it this way:

The result of this (prophecy unfolding) is that there may be numerous 'days of the Lord' before *the* day of the Lord that will inaugurate a new order that will never again be at risk or destabilized.¹

That's a helpful insight. The prophets looked ahead, and they saw a great mountain range, but from their vantage point they couldn't discern the distance between the peaks. There were many "days of the Lord" - many little peaks - but there is ultimately one DAY OF THE LORD - the ultimate peak at the height of the mountain range.

So when Zephaniah spoke these words to Judah I am sure he was thinking back a hundred years prior when his brothers and sisters in the Northern Kingdom were taken into captivity by Assyria. For the Northern Kingdom, that WAS a day of the Lord. That was one of those *little* peaks. And for the southern kingdom, the people that Zephaniah was speaking to; their *little* mountain peak was fast approaching. Look with me again to verse 14:

The great day of the LORD is **near**, near and **hastening fast** (Zephaniah 1:14 ESV)

¹ Andrew E.Hill & John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, (Michigan, Zondervan, 1991), 673.

There are DAYS and THE DAY of the Lord. Understanding this will help us all read the minor prophets with much more clarity and insight. The DAYS can be many and may be localized, but the GREAT DAY will be across the whole world. And each of these mountain peaks help us to better understand and prepare for THE MOUNTAIN PEAK: the GREAT DAY OF THE LORD. Just like how David was an arrow pointed at the sun who ultimately fell short, these days teach us true things and provide a foretaste of the Day of the Lord that is coming. So, let's lean in and learn so that we can be prepared for the day of the Lord.

Let's ask the question: *what do we learn about the Day of the Lord?*

What do we learn about the Day of the Lord?

This is another extremely helpful question because as we will see, the Days and DAY of the LORD and their happenings are not at all one dimensional. One commentator likened the day of the Lord to a two-sided coin; one side being judgement and the other blessing.² You see, in Zephaniah, we get this incredible multi dimensional view of what God will accomplish when He comes again.

So what do we learn about the Day of the Lord? First:

1. It will be a Day of Judgement for the Nations

Now to see this we are going to jump around the book of Zephaniah to see this. Look with me at 1:2-3. The Lord declares:

“I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD.

“I will sweep away man and beast; I will sweep away the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, and the rubble with the wicked. I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD. (Zephaniah 1:2-3 ESV)

Zephaniah teaches us that when the Lord comes it will be a day of judgement for the nations. All people of all nations, from all classes of society, rich and poor alike, will face the judgement for their rebellion against the God of Israel. There is nothing less than complete destruction described

² David W. Baker, *TOTCS: Zephaniah*, (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), accessed via Olive Tree Bible Software.

in these verses. These verses remind us of Noah and the flood don't they? Where the increasing wickedness lead to the utter destruction of everything apart from Noah's family and enough animals to repopulate the world once the flood had subsided. That is the language that God has chosen to describe the coming judgement on the peoples of the world. They will all be held to account for their rebellion.

Our God is a God of compassion and mercy but He is also a Holy and Just God which means He MUST judge sin. And the judgement that falls upon people who refuse to bow to their lawful creator God will be complete ruin. That's what Zephaniah tells us.

Now one point I do not want us to miss is the fact that this is the God of Israel speaking to the nations. The God of Israel was no mere local deity. His dominion was not restricted to the ever-shrinking borders of Israel. No, the book of Zephaniah teaches us that the God of Israel is the Lord of the world. He is the sovereign One over all the nations. And throughout history and ultimately at the return of Christ, He will exercise His lordship and demonstrate His power and glory.

We see this at its peak in verses 2:13-15. Look with me there. Leading up to these verses, God had just pronounced that judgement would come for the surrounding nations which had been a thorn in the side of the people of Israel. After pronouncing judgement against, Philistia, Ammon, Moab and Cush, God singles out mighty Assyria. Zephaniah tells us:

¹³And he will stretch out his hand against the north and destroy **Assyria**, and he will make Nineveh a desolation, a dry waste like the desert...¹⁵ This is the exultant city that lived securely, that said in her heart, "I am, and there is no one else." (Zephaniah 2:13, 15a ESV)

God singles out Assyria as they were the super power of the day believing they were truly invincible. They cried out audaciously:

"I am, and there is no one else." (Zephaniah 2:15 ESV)

Do you see this? 'I AM' was how the God of Israel introduced Himself and here Assyria is seen using the same name. The Assyrians thought of themselves as gods! 'And that same thinking is ALL OVER the world today! The arrogance. The defiance. The audacity. The Day of the Lord, both the minor and the GREAT days of the Lord will be moments when people of all nations are held to account for the wrongs they have done. Sin will be punished, justice will be had, and God will be seen as the holy, sovereign and just Lord of all.

Assyria fell. Babylon fell. Every nation that exalts itself will fall. That is how the story ends. We see this in Revelation 18:

Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! (Revelation 18:2a ESV)

Babylon, pictured in Revelation as the epitome of self-reliance, pride, idolatry and sin is promised a great fall. And in that fall, the truth Zephaniah preached to the people of Israel will be fully realized on the GREAT DAY OF THE LORD. The day that all the nations will be held to account for the injustice they perpetuated, the idols they worshipped, the innocent lives taken, and their refusal to bow the knee to the God of Israel. This is what will happen on the Day of the Lord. It will be a day when our God will be glorified in his just and righteous judgements.

Before we jump ahead, I want to ask you: do you believe this? Do you believe that, when the Day of the Lord finally comes, the NATIONS will stand in judgement? Because, if you do, then it will change the way you evangelize.

How often do we shy away from evangelism because “we don’t want to impose” on people? Well, we see here that the coming judgement will be imposing! This message is for the nations! This is why, in the Book of Acts, the disciples are called to go to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH! Because the ends of the earth need to be warned and prepared for the day that is coming.

The day of the Lord will be a day of judgement for the nations. But secondly:

2. It will be a Day of Judgement for the Church

Look with me to Zephaniah 1:10-12:

“On that day,” declares the LORD, “a cry will be heard from the Fish Gate, a wail from the Second Quarter, a loud crash from the hills. Wail, O inhabitants of the Mortar! For all the traders are no more; all who weigh out silver are cut off. **At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps**, and I will punish the men who are complacent, those who say in their hearts, ‘The LORD will not do good, nor will he do ill. (Zephaniah 1:10-12 ESV)

God declares to HIS people, not the nations but JUDAH HERSELF, that on the day of the Lord He will search the city and judge His children. That is strong language isn’t it? This kind of

language is hard for us to swallow as it depicts a God who wars with sin, including HIS PEOPLES SIN, in a way that makes us feel uncomfortable. But we learn from this that our God is one who is intimately involved in the judgement he sends our way.

Now you ask, what led to this judgement? What brought this upon the people of God? Well jump with me to Zephaniah 3:1-5. The Lord declares:

Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled, the oppressing city! She listens to no voice; she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the LORD; she does not draw near to her God. Her officials within her are roaring lions; her judges are evening wolves that leave nothing till the morning. Her prophets are fickle, treacherous men; her priests profane what is holy; they do violence to the law. (Zephaniah 3:1-4 ESV)

If your bible didn't have any chapter headings, you would read these verses and assume that the Lord was still speaking to Assyria. But He is not! He is speaking to His own people! The people of Judah had fallen very far and their day of judgement was coming fast.

The people of God no longer looked like the people of God. Her leaders were corrupt and God likened them to roaring lions and wolves crushing everything in their path. Their prophets were fickle. The priests were twisting and distorting God's Word. Their worship had become sandwiched with idolatry and worship of the stars. Others fell into such apathy that they lived as though their God did not exist. In short, sin had infiltrated EVERY part of God's people. Judgement was inevitable.

Judah's day of reckoning, or little mountain peak came at the hands of Babylon in 586BC. They were taken into exile just like the northern kingdom of Israel for their rebellion against their God. Judah had stopped taking their call to faithfulness and holiness seriously and they were judged for it.

And friends, though hard to swallow, this remains a necessary warning for the people of God *today*. Jesus put it this way in the Sermon on the Mount:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘**I never knew you**; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’ (Matthew 7:21-23 ESV)

That's coming from *Jesus*. He will speak those words to everyone who has lived a double life. To those who have kept one foot in the world and one foot in the church. To those who have tried to have multiple dance partners and lost their devotion to God in the process. When the Lord comes again, the true children of God will be revealed. And just as important, those masquerading as His children will be exposed for who they are. The truth will come out. Those clinging to their sin with one hand and other raised to Jesus will have to give an account for their duplicity.

Are you clinging to something you know you shouldn't be? Is your bank account, or that promotion, or that dangerous relationship you're in? Or maybe its your family taking the place of God in your heart. Are you refusing to adorn Him with the praise He deserves? The warnings of God's coming judgement are meant to lead us to take a serious inventory of our hearts.

Do you remember Revelation 2-3? If you are following along with the 1-year RMM (Robert Murray M'Cheyne) reading plan, you will hear these warnings from our Lord every June and December. Here Jesus speaks to the seven churches and examines them. Like a surprise audit, Jesus inspects and demands change from His people. In revelation 2:2-5, speaking to the Church in Ephesus, Jesus says this:

But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. **Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.**
(Revelation 2:4-5 ESV)

That's New Testament stuff. That's more firm than we are used to isn't it? The call to holiness, faithfulness, love, and fidelity to Jesus is required JUST as much as in the days of Zephaniah. So as we start this year, it is a good time to ask: am I toying with sin? Am I refusing to cut ties with something or someone that I know I should? Am I playing with fire hoping to not be burned?

Judah was playing with fire and got burned. They were judged for their sin but thanks be to God; it was ultimately for their purification. And that is the third thing Zephaniah teaches us about the day of the Lord. What do we learn about the Day of the Lord?

3. It will be a Day to Purify God's People

Judah went through the storm in order not to be fully crushed but to be refined and purified. Just as you boil water while you are camping to do away with any bad bacteria, so Judah needed to be purified from the evil that had enveloped them. Look with me to Zephaniah 3:12-13 to see this.

After the judgement of the Lord, God declares:

I will leave in your midst a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the LORD, those who are left in Israel; **they shall do no injustice and speak no lies, nor shall there be found in their mouth a deceitful tongue.** For they shall graze and lie down, and none shall make them afraid. (Zephaniah 3:12-13 ESV)

Just like the mountain peak analogy, Judah saw a little peak of this when they returned to Judea after the exile. Rather than complete destruction, God used the storm to judge and purify His people. For God's judgement on His people is ALWAYS for their refinement and purification. It is to purge, clear out the mess, and leave us refined and purified.

The Lord has not changed and because of that, He still judges His children in order to purify them. That is why we see these warnings and reminders in the New Testament as well. They may use different words, but they carry the same force behind them. Paul in writing to the Corinthians said this:

But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined **so that we may not** be condemned along with the world. (1 Corinthians 11:32 ESV)

Rather than letting us be swept away with the wicked, God judges us so that we can be purified and refined and kept free from condemnation. That's what we experience in times of discipline from the Lord. Some of you are going through a purifying season as we speak. A time in which your mess is being cleaned up and taken to the curb. Those are the little mountain peaks.

BUT, when the Lord comes again, on THE DAY OF THE LORD, we will experience this purification IN FULL. Zephaniah saw that ultimate day when God's people would be forever rid of all that separated them from God. We will be free from all sin. Free from all of the deceit and wickedness that we had walked in. Free from all of the mess that had bound us. On the GREAT DAY, on the FINAL MOUNTAIN PEAK, we will be made as we were made to be. Thanks be to God!

What can we expect from the Day of the Lord? A judgement which leaves us purified and refined.

And lastly, what do we learn about the day of the Lord?

4. It will be a day of Rejoicing

Let's read Zephaniah 3:14-20 to see this:

¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! ¹⁵ The Lord has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil. ¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: "Fear not, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak. ¹⁷ The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. ¹⁸ I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival, so that you will no longer suffer reproach. ¹⁹ Behold, at that time I will deal with all your oppressors. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. ²⁰ At that time I will bring you in, at the time when I gather you together; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes," says the Lord. (Zephaniah 3:14-20 ESV)

The GREAT DAY OF THE LORD will ultimately be for the glory of God and His people who He has made His own. Israel would experience a minor fulfillment of this—a foretaste of this—after their exile. Cyrus, King of Persia sent them back home to rebuild in 539BC and they would have remembered God's promise that their judgement, through their exile, had been taken away. God would be in their midst as He was before! But do you remember what happened? They got home and they were pestered by their neighbours. They were still subject to another nation. And the temple, the center of God's people, when finally rebuilt, was only a footnote compared to Solomon's Temple that Babylon had destroyed. God's people would have to wait for another Day of the Lord for this promise to be fully realized. And that is what God intended.

The Day of the Lord that Zephaniah saw was also pointing FAR in the future to the day when God's people would be FULLY vindicated. It was looking to the day when Christ would come and fight NOT the Assyria's and the Babylon's of this world but SATAN and the rule of sin in our hearts and world. He would come as a baby in a manger and live in our place, suffer in our place,

bearing OUR JUDGEMENT, rise again in power, ascend to His glorious throne, and send the Holy Spirit to empower us to live as we were made to!

But friends, these words pointed even FURTHER. They point not only to the now but also to the not-yet. To the day when Christ will come again and restore all things to what they should have been. As God declares:

The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. (Zephaniah 3:17 ESV)

Don't those words make you think of the ending of Revelation? There we read:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "**Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.** He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. (Revelation 21:3-4 ESV)

Zephaniah was seeing a glimpse of what would be when God restores all things in the New Heavens and Earth. There the paradise that Adam and Eve once dwelt in before the fall will be fully restored. All sins and causes of sin will be removed and destroyed. And in their place, we will as God made us to in perfect harmony with Him and with one another. Men and women from every nation will be brought into the fold of God! God's people glorying in God, and Him glorying in us.

And friends this is the ultimate future for the people of God. For you and me! Paradise. Walking with God in the New Heavens and Earth, glorying in Jesus Christ, dwelling with one another with no fear of evil. No fear of death, or trace of sin. Elevation of God's people as the 'darlings' of heaven as Matthew Henry would put it. God SINGING over us His bride. This is what we are waiting for friends.

And we can look forward to this because God was faithful in sending us a savior so that OUR JUDGEMENT could be taken away. Friends, without Christ, there is no hope. There is no glorious future with God singing over us as Zephaniah saw. ONLY through Christ can we claim this hope! Are you trusting in something else? Are you hoping in something else? If you are, let

go of it and take shelter in the grace of Jesus Christ. Because the Day of the Lord will come for all but for those who are outside of Christ, the Day of the Lord will end only in judgement and wrath. But for the children of God, for those whose hope is in Jesus' atoning, judgement satisfying death, ALL that awaits is the joy and glory of our loving Heavenly Father through Jesus Christ. As Zephaniah tells us:

The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.
(Zephaniah 3:17 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray.