

Perhaps it is fitting that as I was working on this sermon
my children were listening to the audio version of *The Last Battle*, by C. S. Lewis.

Because the Last Battle is the theme of the prophet Zephaniah.

While all of the prophets move from judgment to punishment to salvation,
Paul House has argued that the first six of the minor prophets focus on the theme of judgment,
the verdict against Israel, Judah, and the nations;
and that the next three – Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah –
focus on the punishment of Israel, Judah, and the nations;
and that the final three – Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi –
focus on the restoration of Israel, Judah, and the nations.

Zephaniah summarizes the themes of Nahum and Habakkuk
like Micah summarizes the first six prophets of the twelve.

As House puts it, “Cosmic punishment is at the forefront as the book begins,
since the whole earth will be swept away in the wake of God’s anger.
This cosmic devastation becomes more detailed as the book progresses.
Judah is the specific target of the day, as is Philistia (2:4-7), Moab and Ammon (2:8-11),
Cush (2:12), and Assyria (2:13-15).
And at the end of the time of judgment a remnant from many nations
will worship Yahweh (3:9), and Judah will experience restoration (3:14-20).
Very systematically the structure of the prophecy reveals these implications
of covenant and cosmic punishment.” (House, 94).

Introduction: “The Word of the LORD that Came to Zephaniah” (1:1)

The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah the son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah.

Who was Zephaniah?

He prophesied during the days of Josiah (ca. 640-609 BC).
But he is also said to be the son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah
the son of *Hezekiah*.

While it is possible that there were other men named Hezekiah *besides* the king –
the great-grandfather of Josiah.
It is curious that both Zephaniah and Josiah share a great-grandfather named Hezekiah!
On the other hand, Amariah was one of the high priests during the reign of Hezekiah,
so it is also possible that Zephaniah is a priest.

But either way you go, he is likely either a member of the royal family,
or else a member of a priestly family.
And God calls him to declare that the Day of Wrath is coming upon both king and priest alike!

The structure of the book is relatively simple.

There are three sections, each containing several declarations by the LORD,
followed by commentary by the prophet.

In chapter 1, the first section, there are five speeches – three by Yahweh, two by Zephaniah –
describing the coming Day of the LORD.

1:2-18 Five speeches (3 Yahweh, 2 prophet) describing the Day of the LORD

Y proclaims catastrophic judgment (2-6)

Z announces the coming day (7)

Y declares that it will be “on the day of the LORD’s Sacrifice” (8-13)

Z describes that day (14-16)

Y declares that the coming destruction comes because of sin (17-18)

1. The LORD Announces Cosmic Judgment because of Judah’s Sin (1:2-6)

² *“I will utterly sweep away everything
from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD.*

³ *“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^[a] with the wicked.
I will cut off mankind
from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD.*

One commentator has said that there is ‘no hotter book’ than Zephaniah in the OT.
(quoted in Kaiser on 1:3).

Zephaniah uses the same word for “sweeping away” four times in two verses.

The picture is that of coming to an end.

Isaiah 66:17 speak of those who consecrate themselves to partake of pig’s flesh
(an abomination under the Law of Moses) –
that they will come to an end together.

Jeremiah 8:13 uses the same word to speak of how the LORD came to gather his people,
but found no grapes on the vines, nor figs on the fig trees –
(think of Habakkuk 3 – which we just looked at last time).

Jeremiah says that what God had given them has come to an end.

Psalms 73 speaks of the wicked being swept away (coming to an end) in a moment.

But in every other place where God says that he will sweep things away,
he speaks of partial sweepings – targeted sweepings.

Here God says that he will sweep away all mankind – and indeed, every living thing!

God says that he will sweep away *man* (adam) and beast;
as well as the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea –
in other words, God is speaking of a cosmic judgment
in which he will sweep away all the creatures of the heavens, the earth, and the seas –
and the “rubble” with the wicked.

The word for “rubble” could better be translated “that which makes one stumble” –
which strongly points to the theme of idolatry –
a theme which appears in the very next verse!

In other words, the LORD opens his message to Zephaniah
by saying that he will cut off “the adam” (mankind) from the face of the earth –
all because humanity (the adam) has pursued stumbling blocks (idols)
rather than follow the living and true God.

And the problem is not that Judah is a faithful remnant in the midst of the wicked nations!
The problem is that Judah is *just like* the wicked nations.

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.
Zephaniah anticipates Paul’s lumping together of Jew and Gentile:

⁴ “*I will stretch out my hand against Judah
and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem;
and I will cut off from this place the remnant of Baal
and the name of the idolatrous priests along with the priests,
⁵ those who bow down on the roofs
to the host of the heavens,
those who bow down and swear to the LORD
and yet swear by Milcom,
⁶ those who have turned back from following the LORD,
who do not seek the LORD or inquire of him.*”

Verses 4-6 then describe how God will bring judgment upon Jerusalem.

Notice that Zephaniah starts with the impending judgment –
and only then brings up the reason.

I will stretch out my hand...
I will cut off from this place...

Yahweh says that he will cut off various groups:
the remnant of Baal – Baal worship had been introduced into Jerusalem by Athaliah,
the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel – who had married the son of Jehoshaphat;
so God will cut off the name of the idolatrous priests along with the priests –
after all, even the priests who bow down and swear to the LORD
are also swearing by Milcom (elsewhere known as “Molech”).

You cannot serve two gods.

You cannot bow down and swear to the LORD,
and yet swear by another god.

But Zephaniah says that even the priests of Yahweh in Jerusalem are corrupted.

They bow down to Yahweh when they are in the temple –
but on the roofs, they bow down to the host of heaven
(Ezekiel sees a vision of this from exile in Babylon).

And so the LORD says he will cut off
“those who have turned back from following the LORD,
who do not seek the LORD or inquire of him.”

Like Habakkuk – but very much unlike Hosea or Amos –

Zephaniah starts with a declaration of the coming punishment.

The reason for the punishment is clear: idolatry.

But there is no effort to persuade or convince.

There is no lengthy account of the wickedness of Jerusalem.

Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah all focus on the impending doom that awaits.

We saw how Habakkuk moves from complaint to silence to worship.

Zephaniah has no complaint – but like Habakkuk, he brings silence and worship together.

In reply to God’s opening announcement of the coming wrath,

Zephaniah calls for silence:

2. Zephaniah Calls for Silence (1:7)

⁷ *Be silent before the Lord GOD!*

*For the day of the LORD is near;
the LORD has prepared a sacrifice
and consecrated his guests.*

If we pay attention to the “staging” of the book – who is speaking (and to whom),
then verse 7 is Zephaniah’s comment,
which interrupts God’s announcement of punishment.

Zephaniah says, in effect,

“The LORD has spoken.

Let all the earth be silent before him.” (the same word “*has*” that Habakkuk used in 2:20)

Silence is hard.

Our noisy hearts want to keep chattering –

but God’s prophet calls us to be silent before the Lord GOD –

because “the day of the LORD is near”

We have seen the importance of the Day of the LORD in Joel
and throughout the prophets.

The day of the LORD is the day when God comes in judgment against his enemies.

Zephaniah says that the reason why we should be silent before God

is because this day of judgment is at hand.

“The LORD has prepared a sacrifice and consecrated his guests.”

This is the language used of Samuel –
both when he first anointed Saul (in 1 Samuel 9)
and when he anointed David in 1 Samuel 16.

In 1 Samuel 16:5 Samuel said to the elders of Bethlehem,
“‘Consecrate yourselves, and come with me to the sacrifice.’
And he consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.”

By consecrating Jesse and his sons (probably by anointing them with oil),
Samuel is marking them as special guests for the sacrifice.
(We heard in Joel 2 the prophet calling the people to “consecrate a fast” –
whereby the people would engage in ceremonial washings, anointings,
and likely abstain from sexual relations for a time [e.g., Exodus 19]).

Now Zephaniah says that the LORD has prepared a sacrifice.
The LORD is the “Samuel” who has consecrated his guests.
And on the day of the LORD’s sacrifice:

3. The LORD Decrees the Time and Place of His Judgment (1:8-13)

⁸ *And on the day of the LORD's sacrifice—
“I will punish the officials and the king's sons
and all who array themselves in foreign attire.*

The day of the LORD’s sacrifice is either a good thing or a bad thing –
depending on who you are!

For Saul, the day of the LORD’s sacrifice was a bad thing –
because Saul did not wait for Samuel.

For David, the day of the LORD’s sacrifice was a good thing –
because David waited on the LORD and served him.

The LORD says to Zephaniah that the coming day of the LORD’s sacrifice
will be a day of punishment for the officials and the king’s sons –
“and all who array themselves in foreign attire.”

“Attire” may be too vague a term.

This is not the word for an ordinary garment –
but for splendid garments – whether for kings or warriors or worshipers.
And that fits the context.

After all, judgment is coming on *officials* and *king’s sons*
who array themselves in *foreign attire*.

Foreign attire communicates the idea of a foreign allegiance to a foreign god.
If you are consecrating yourself for the *LORD*'s sacrifice,
then you should not show up wearing the raiment of a foreign deity!

This is precisely the problem in Matthew 22 when Jesus speaks of the wedding feast.
The king invites the “officials and king’s sons” – but they will not come.
So he sends out his servants to bring in the ordinary folk to the wedding feast.
And when the king comes to see the guests,
he discovers a man who had no wedding garment.
In other words, what he is wearing is *foreign* to the occasion.

As we come to the wedding feast of the Lamb,
we must be dressed in garments appropriate to the occasion –
as the hymnwriter says,
“dressed in his righteousness alone, faultless to stand before the throne.”

In verse 9, Zephaniah uses another image rooted in the book of Samuel:

⁹ *On that day I will punish
everyone who leaps over the threshold,
and those who fill their master's^[b] house
with violence and fraud.*

Why will God punish those who leap over the threshold?

Well, *who* refuses to step on the threshold?

The Philistine priests of Dagon do not step on the threshold of Dagon.

In 1 Samuel 4, the Philistines captured the ark of the covenant.

The glory of the LORD departed from Shiloh –

and Eli and his two sons died on the same day –

leaving Israel without a priest and without the presence of the LORD.

But in 1 Samuel 5, when the ark of the covenant is brought to the temple of Dagon,
the image of Dagon falls down twice before the LORD,

and the head and hands of Dagon were lying cut off on the threshold.

“This is why the priests of Dagon and all who enter the house of Dagon
do not tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day.” (1 Samuel 5:5)

So “those who leap over the threshold” are traitors to the LORD,
and they fill their master’s house with violence and fraud.

Zephaniah’s point is that if you practice the superstitions of the surrounding nations,
then you are bringing their violence and deceit into God’s house.

On the day of the LORD’s sacrifice,
the rulers and priests of Jerusalem will be found to be like Saul – and not like David.

But it is not just the rulers and priests.

¹⁰ *“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.*

¹¹ *Wail, O inhabitants of the Mortar!
For all the traders^[c] are no more;
all who weigh out silver are cut off.*

The Fish Gate, as the name suggests, was the place where fishermen from Tyre would bring their catch. The Second Quarter was where the “new money” built their fashionable houses. The Mortar was the “Wall Street” of ancient Jerusalem.

In other words, the merchants and traders will also be cut off. In Revelation you also see the same progression:
when kings and princes are corrupt,
the inevitable result is the corruption of trade as well.

And so God says:

¹² *At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps,
and I will punish the men
who are complacent,^[d]
those who say in their hearts,
‘The LORD will not do good,
nor will he do ill.’*

If we are honest with ourselves, then we often say this in our hearts!
But we are complacent –
this is a great Hebrew phrase:
“the men who have congealed upon their dregs” –
after the fermentation is complete,
you will find a thick sludge of sediment that settles at the bottom.

That is what complacency is!
A thick, useless sludge left over from the process of fermentation.

But when you say in your heart
“The LORD will not do good, nor will he do ill,”
you are setting yourself up for disaster.

¹³ *Their goods shall be plundered,
and their houses laid waste.
Though they build houses,*

*they shall not inhabit them;
though they plant vineyards,
they shall not drink wine from them.”*

I want you to think about this.

Why does Jerusalem get included in the judgment that will fall on all the earth?

Because Jerusalem *looks like* the rest of humanity.

They dress like foreigners (v8).

They follow foreign superstitions (v9).

They do business like foreigners (v11-12).

And they mingle together the worship of Yahweh

and the worship of foreign gods (5-6).

It can be really easy for us to say,

“Our rulers are corrupt – but we’re stuck with this – we can’t help it!”

But God consistently warns his people to “come out of her” –

Have nothing to do with corrupt business practices.

I once worked for a corrupt boss.

If I had remained his assistant manager,

I would have become corrupt as well.

Paul is very clear what our obligations are.

When it comes to the government Paul says in Romans 13:

“Pay to all what is owed to them:

taxes to whom taxes are owed,

revenue to whom revenue is owed,

respect to whom respect is owed,

honor to whom honor is owed.” (13:7)

But when it comes to business – our economic activity –

Paul urges us in 2 Cor 6, “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers.

For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness?

Or what fellowship has light with darkness?

What accord has Christ with Belial?

Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever?

What agreement has the temple of God with idols?

For we are the temple of the living God; as God says,

‘I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them,

and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them,

says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing;

then I will welcome you,

and I will be a father to you,

and you shall be sons and daughters to me,

says the Lord Almighty.”

[Paul blends together material from Lev 26, Is 52, Ezek 20, and Ex 4]

And Paul applies this in the next verse:

“Since we have these promises, beloved,
let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit,
bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.” (2 Cor 6:14-7:1)

Paul does *not* say that Christians may have no economic dealings with non-Christians.
Rather, he says that we should not be unequally yoked.

If two animals are yoked together,
then they must walk the same direction together!
You can have all sorts of business dealings with unbelievers.
But Zephaniah illustrates for us what happens
when God’s people are yoked to unbelievers.

When we are yoked to unbelievers, then we start living the way they do –
we start acting like them, dressing like them, imitating them,
loving what they love – worshipping what they worship.

It’s interesting that Zephaniah and Paul both speak of “consecrating.”

Zephaniah said that the LORD had “consecrated” or “made holy” his guests.
Paul says that we should “cleanse ourselves” bringing *holiness* to completion
in the fear of God.

And so in reply to God’s proclamation of the coming judgment,
Zephaniah describes the great day of the LORD:

4. Zephaniah Describes the Great Day of the LORD (1:14-16)

¹⁴ *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.*

¹⁵ *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,*

¹⁶ *a day of trumpet blast and battle cry
against the fortified cities
and against the lofty battlements.*

In verses 14-16, the voice changes again.

Now it is Zephaniah speaking of the day of the LORD in the third person.

He weaves together many of the judgments of Deuteronomy 28 –

the curses of the covenant which God pronounced upon Israel if they forsook him.

And, the LORD himself concludes Zephaniah 1 with a withering declaration

that the wages of sin is death:

5. The LORD Declares that the Wages of Sin Is Death (1:17-18)

¹⁷ *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.*

¹⁸ *Neither their silver nor their gold
shall be able to deliver them
on the day of the wrath of the LORD.
In the fire of his jealousy,
all the earth shall be consumed;
for a full and sudden end
he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.*

I want you to see how total and complete is this destruction.

There is no hint in Zephaniah of any exceptions here.

Mankind – “*adam*” – is doomed.

Nothing will be able to deliver them from the day of his wrath.

No patron can speak on their behalf.

No silver or gold can pay their ransom.

In the fire of God’s jealousy all the earth shall be consumed,

for a full and sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.

The wages of sin is death.

All have sinned.

Therefore all must die.

There is a great medieval hymn called the Dies Irae – the Day of Wrath –

which appears to have taken its inspiration, at least in part, from this passage.

The hymn reflects on the terror of that day,

and asks, what am I supposed to say, when that dreadful day arrives?

My only hope is the cross of Christ.

“Remember, merciful Jesus,

That I am the cause of Thy way:

Lest Thou lose me in that day.”

Because as that day of wrath and terror –

that day of darkness and gloom – approached,

our Lord left Peter and the two sons of Zebedee to watch and pray,

and he prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me;

nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.”

And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping.
And he said to Peter, 'So, you could not watch with me one hour?
Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation.
The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.'

Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed,
"My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done."
And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy.

So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time,
saying the same words again.
Then he came to the disciples and said to them,
'Sleep and take your rest later on.
See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.'
(Matthew 26:39-45)

The Sons of Zebedee had said that they were able to drink the cup (Matthew 20:22) –
and Jesus said that they would drink it [someday] –
but tonight, as the great and dreadful Day of the LORD came upon Jesus,
they demonstrated that they could not stand with Jesus.

He must drink the cup alone.
He must endure the day of ruin and devastation
so that they can survive that day.