

A Day of Judgment

Zephaniah 1:1–2:3

Studies in Zephaniah #1

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“**T**herefore, wait for me, declares the LORD” (3:8). This is what Zephaniah proclaims later in his prophecy, calling the faithful people of God to await the coming of their Lord. The coming, or, advent, of the Lord is Zephaniah’s one great theme. Waiting is a part of the Christian ethic. We are to await the Second Coming of Jesus. We are to wait for marriage until we engage in sexual relations. We are to wait for the Lord to call us into his service. We are to wait.

Children, we live though in a culture that’s all about *not* waiting! We wait for Christmas to open the gifts, but we’ve already seen all the ads and made up a wish list that we already know is full of things we’re getting! This is why the Christian season of Advent is so important for us. Over the next four Sunday’s we re-focus our collective memory that our forefathers and foremothers waited for the coming of the Lord in our flesh; we refresh *our* hope in his coming again in glory. And so we pause our series through Romans so that we can reflect during the so-called “Holiday Season” and its craziness and take up **the word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah** (1:1) and its message of waiting. The first section of Zephaniah this morning proclaims that the Lord’s advent would be a Day of *Judgment*.

Its Declaration (1:2–6)

Of this Day of Judgment, Zephaniah proclaims *its declaration* in verses 2–6. He proclaims the coming of the Lord’s judgment against the world in verses 2–3. **“I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth”** (1:2). Note the creational language of verse 3 that emphasizes how comprehensive this coming judgment would be: **“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”** (1:3). And by including the fish, it would be worse than the Flood.

But this would not be a time for the people of God to throw stones at the world, as if they and we are “holier than thou.” Children, what happens to a bully that laughs at someone else as they get punished? They get the same punishment eventually. We see that here. What you have to know is that Zephaniah ministered in the days of King Josiah, whom we read about in 2 Kings 21–23. While the northern kingdom of Israel had already been destroyed and taken into captivity by the Assyrians, things looked to be on the up and up in the southern kingdom of Judah and its capital Jerusalem. Josiah had reformed the worship of the Lord according to the law of God and a revival ensued. Yet no matter how much reform Josiah accomplished wickedness was still rampant and God’s recompense was required. New storm clouds gathered in the east; the Assyrians were declining and the Babylonians would eclipse them.

Zephaniah saves his most graphic proclamation for the people of God in verses 4–6. **“I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem”** (1:4). That’s Exodus language. The prophet is saying that the Lord is going to

do “a work that is remarkable and worthy of being remembered.”¹ But while this phrase was once used to speak of redemption, now it speaks of judgment. Why would the Lord do such a thing to his own people? Because the church was not pure; it was infected with false worship. Judah was full of **the remnant of Baal...idolatrous priests...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, those who have turned back from following the LORD, who do not seek the LORD or inquire of him** (1:4–6). To use a New Testament phrase, it was time “for judgment to begin at the household of God” (1 Peter 4:17). Zephaniah was declaring the coming judgment on the horizon by the hands of the Babylonians; but with all the prophets, there is always another horizon. The Babylonians were just the trailer for the main feature of the Second Coming at the end of the age. And the same judgment is declared to us today. There are unbelievers within the church of believers. There are weeds among the wheat. There are goats among the sheep. And we need this warning today. The OURC is infected with the false worship of self. We view God like an ATM machine we can draw money out whenever we want. We treat our church like it’s a drive thru Starbucks that’s there when we need it. We consume the Word but don’t use those calories on someone else in service but on ourselves in selfishness.

Its Description (1:7–18)

Zephaniah goes on to proclaim this Day of Judgment and *its description* in verses

¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets: Volume Fourth, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai*, trans. John Owen, 22 vols. (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 15:191.

7–18. When the Lord says, “**Be silent before the Lord God! For the day of the Lord is near**” (1:7), he is saying, “I have spoken, now submit to my Word!”² Children, have you ever argued with your brother or sister, had your mom or dad say it’s time to be separated and calm down, but then you kept on arguing, and finally, you heard the words, “Silence!” God wants to humble Judah here.

This judgment is described in terms of consuming the wicked like a **sacrifice** (1:7–8) on the altar. Who were the sacrificial victims? “**The officials and the king’s sons and all who array themselves in foreign attire**” (1:8). “**Everyone who leaps over the threshold,**” that is, they go into the temple and who **fill their master’s house with violence and fraud**” (1:9). Those who **trade**[ed] with their brothers and sisters and **weigh**[ed] **out silver** (1:10–11). Notice verse 12. The Lord says, “**I will search Jerusalem with lamps**” (1:12) to find those he calls **complacent** (1:12). The image used here is that there are some in the covenant people who had become like the impure dregs at the bottom of a bottle of wine. If you open a bottle of wine this Christmas, drink half of it, but then leave it out through New Year’s Day, watch what happens. In the same way there are some of us who in this church are sedentary and just want to settle into the back of the church, off to the side of fellowship, and don’t get involved in anything beyond Sunday morning. The prophet says of you that you say “**in their hearts, The Lord will not do good, nor will he do ill**” (1:12). You think nothing of how your actions or non-actions affect your brothers and sisters. You are complacent and think this congregation will be here forever. You think everything will get done by someone else and you have no

² See Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets: Volume Fourth, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai*, 15:203–204.

concern to serve. You show up because you have to. You do not engage God in prayer or praise. You do not leave changed by the grace of God. You show up inconsistently; you do not worship when you go on vacation; you show up late for worship but would never drop your kids off late to school; you show up for work exhausted and even sick, but stay away from the house of the Lord because you stayed out too late on Saturday night or because you don't feel well! To you the Lord says, **"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"** (1:13).

"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" (1:14). Look at how Zephaniah describes it with all the descriptions he could muster: **"a day of wrath...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"** (1:15-16).

He comes to **"bring distress on mankind, so that they shall walk like the blind"** and that **"their blood shall be poured out like dust"** and that **"their flesh like dung."** Why? **"Because they have sinned against the Lord"** (1:17). And there is no amount of money or power that can deliver you from God: **neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them** (1:18). He summarizes saying, **"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"** (1:18).

Its Desertion (2:1–3)

Finally, this Day of Judgment is proclaimed in terms of *its desertion*. I don't mean that it will desert and flee away because the Lord issues a harmless threat of judgment; but I mean you can desert that day of which the New Testament says, "It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment" (Heb. 9:27).

To that "**shameless nation**" Zephaniah called them to "**gather together...before there comes upon you the burning anger of the LORD, before there comes upon you the day of the anger of the LORD**" (2:1–2). How could they and how can we desert this day of final judgment? We flee from God's wrath by fleeing to him. We hide from his judgment by hiding ourselves in him. We are saved from God by God! **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**" (2:3).

One writer said it like this: "When the Lord speaks in hardest terms to his sinful people, yet they are to read in it an invitation and allowance to come to him by repentance."³ This Advent season you are called to repent of your self-worshipping selfishness, O church!

You see, the irony is that as the storms clouds gather and as the hurricane approaches, the safest place right in the middle of it! God calls us to find our safety amid the coming judgment in Jesus Christ. How can he hide and protect us? All the declarations and descriptions of judgment here came upon our Lord on the cross. He did not desert that judgment, but took our sins and thus God's wrath upon himself. Amen.

³ George Hutcheson, *Exposition of the Minor Prophets* (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace Publishers, Inc., 2001), 299.