

Our theme for this evening is stated in verse 5.

“The LORD within her is righteous; he does no injustice;
every morning he shows forth his justice;
each dawn he does not fail; but the unjust knows no shame.”

This theme will return in verse 15 –

“the King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil” –
and again in verse 17 –

“the LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save.”

Jerusalem’s hope is the *presence* of the LORD in their midst –

“the LORD within her” – “the LORD your God in your midst”.

As Paul will say, “If God is for us, who can be against us?”

There is a definite change in tone here –

because throughout the first two chapters, Zephaniah’s message has been:
“if God is against us, who can be for us?”

In chapter 1 Zephaniah spoke of the coming Day of the LORD –

the day of wrath and destruction that is coming on the whole earth.

“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 stumbling blocks with the wicked.
I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth, declares the LORD.” (1:2-3)

All of creation is under God’s wrath and curse.

And last time we saw in chapter 2 the application of this to the Jew first, but also to the Greek.

The day of the burning anger of the LORD is coming.

Therefore Zephaniah calls the humble of the land to seek the LORD.

He warns of God’s coming wrath against Philistia, Moab and Ammon –
the near neighbors of Judah –
but also Cush and Assyria – the distant enemies of God’s people.

At the end of chapter 2 he speaks of the coming judgment on Nineveh – the capital of Assyria –
but then, at the beginning of chapter 3

he speaks of God’s wrath against Jerusalem.

Introduction: Woe to the Oppressing City (3:1-5)

*Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled,
the oppressing city!*

² *She listens to no voice;*

*she accepts no correction.
She does not trust in the LORD;
she does not draw near to her God.
3 Her officials within her
are roaring lions;
her judges are evening wolves
that leave nothing till the morning.
4 Her prophets are fickle, treacherous men;
her priests profane what is holy;
they do violence to the law.
5 The LORD within her is righteous;
he does no injustice;
every morning he shows forth his justice;
each dawn he does not fail;
but the unjust knows no shame.*

The greatest threat to Jerusalem is not Nineveh!
The greatest threat to Jerusalem is *Jerusalem*.
The greatest threat to the church is *herself*.
It is the prophets and priests of Judah who “do violence to the law.”

After all, the judges are wolves – devouring the poor.
The prophets are fickle and treacherous – not standing for justice and mercy!
The priests profane what is holy.
They all do violence to the *torah* – the law of God.

But in verse 5 we have a reminder that God is different.
“The LORD within her is righteous.”

God is just.
He does what is right.
And if you need evidence – remember that every morning, the sun rises.
Atheists may say that we do not need God to explain the rising of the sun,
but when you ask them where the sun came from,
they have no answer.
(I know, they say “the Big Bang” – but that begs the question,
where did that come from?)
God promised in Genesis 8:22 – after the flood –
that “While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat,
summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.”

And God is faithful to his promises.
He is just.
When he says that he will do something, he does it.

1. The LORD Offers Hope for Jerusalem and the Nations (3:6-13)

a. The Purpose of Judgment: a Call to Repentance (v6-7)

⁶ *“I have cut off nations;
their battlements are in ruins;
I have laid waste their streets
so that no one walks in them;
their cities have been made desolate,
without a man, without an inhabitant.
⁷ I said, ‘Surely you will fear me;
you will accept correction.
Then your^[a] dwelling would not be cut off
according to all that I have appointed against you.’^[b]
But all the more they were eager
to make all their deeds corrupt.*

Why does God bring difficulty into our lives?

God says that *in this case* he has brought judgment upon the nations
so that Jerusalem might repent.

Think about that.

“I have cut off nations...” so that Jerusalem would repent.

Sometimes God brings judgment on someone else, so that *you* might repent.

Now, it’s true that the nations deserved judgment.

God is just.

But he judges corrupt nations so that other corrupt nations would repent.

Is anybody listening?

In the Arab spring, corrupt regimes were toppled.

Already, it appears, their replacements are falling prey to corruption.

Hitler’s Germany fell.

The Soviet Union fell.

Apartheid South Africa fell.

Is anybody listening?

“But all the more they were eager to make all their deeds corrupt.”

God does not care whether your nation is a democracy or a monarchy.

He does care whether justice and mercy characterize the nations.

And he especially cares that justice and mercy characterize his church!

Indeed, when you look at the “two cities” that Zephaniah contrasts –
Nineveh and Jerusalem –

you could say that God brings judgment upon the nations
so that the church would repent.

And as we go through Zephaniah 3

we will see that judgment upon “the nations” includes the “Jew first and also the Greek”;
and that the warning to “the church” is also to “the Jew first and also the Greek.”

Listen to verse 8:

b. Therefore Wait for Me – for My Day of Wrath (v8-13)

⁸ *“Therefore wait for me,” declares the LORD,
“for the day when I rise up to seize the prey.
For my decision is to gather nations,
to assemble kingdoms,
to pour out upon them my indignation,
all my burning anger;
for in the fire of my jealousy
all the earth shall be consumed.*

We looked at the beginning of chapter 3 last week.

God’s purpose is bringing judgment on the nations is so that his church would fear him.

The purpose of his “common wrath” is so that people would repent and believe in his son
as Paul said,

“Now he commands all people everywhere to repent,
because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness
by a man whom he has appointed;
and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Judgment day is coming upon the whole world.

God will gather the nations – he will assemble kingdoms –
to pour out upon them his indignation – “all my burning anger.”

Fire will come upon all the earth.

The echoes of God’s promise that day and night will not cease
reminds us of God’s promise to Noah after the Flood.
God had said that he would never again destroy the world by water.
But as God taught Israel,
if water doesn’t work, try fire.
If water doesn’t cleanse, then fire will!

The judgment of water did not cleanse the earth from its impurities.
And so a judgment of fire will come upon all the earth –
and all the earth shall be consumed.

Luke’s gospel speaks often of this:

John the Baptist started baptizing in the Jordan –
and he warned the crowds who came to him:
“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come...”

I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming,
the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.
He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.
His winnowing fork is in his hand,
to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn,
but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” (Luke 3:7, 16-17)
John came proclaiming a baptism with water for repentance –
and warning of a baptism of fire that Jesus would bring.

Jesus later refers to that fire in Luke 12:49.

“I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled.
I have a baptism to be baptized with,
and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!
Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth?
No, I tell you, but rather division.
For from now on in one house there will be five divided,
three against two and two against three.”

Jesus refers to the coming fire as a baptism – just like John did.
Jesus will undergo a baptism of fire in his death.

After all, what would have happened if Jesus had poured out the Spirit and fire
before his death and resurrection?

Zephaniah’s words in verse 8 capture the point well:
“in the fire of my jealousy all the earth shall be consumed.”

Why must Jesus undergo a baptism of fire?

So that he can pour out the Spirit and fire without destroying us!
But the coming of Jesus draws a sharp dividing line between humanity.
Either you are part of Jesus’ family – or you are not.
And the claims of Jesus’ family will divide the nations and families of the earth.

And then after Jesus takes the fire of God’s wrath in his death,
in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit and fire are poured out upon the earth.

On the day of Pentecost the promise of Zephaniah 3:9 comes to pass:

**i. At That Time I Will Change the Speech of the Peoples that They May
Call upon the Name of the LORD (v9-10)**

⁹ “*For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples
to a pure speech,
that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD
and serve him with one accord.*

¹⁰ *From beyond the rivers of Cush*

*my worshipers, the daughter of my dispersed ones,
shall bring my offering.*

The LORD promised, through Zephaniah, that when he poured out his wrath upon the nations,
he would also change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech.

You should hear an allusion to the Tower of Babel.

In Genesis 11, the speech of the nations was confused because they rebelled against God.
Now, the speech of the peoples will be changed to a pure speech.

Isaiah 19:18 says that “in that day [the day of judgment against Egypt]
there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan
and swear allegiance to the LORD of hosts.”

And that is what happened in Acts 2
when all the languages of the nations were lifted up
in the praise of the mighty works of God.

And then in Acts 8, we hear of one who came from “beyond the rivers of Cush” –
a reference to where the Nile River divides in two –
when the eunuch of the queen Candace came to Jerusalem to worship.

And when Philip proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ to this eunuch,
he is baptized in water and returns to his home rejoicing.

**ii. On That Day I Will Remove the Haughty from My Holy Mountain,
but Leave the Humble Who Seek the LORD (v11-13)**

¹¹ *“On that day you shall not be put to shame
because of the deeds by which you have rebelled against me;
for then I will remove from your midst
your proudly exultant ones,
and you shall no longer be haughty
in my holy mountain.*

¹² *But I will leave in your midst
a people humble and lowly.*

Verses 11-12 reminds us that the coming of this day is a good thing –
in part because it removes the proud and haughty from the church.

Zephaniah sees that exile and destruction are coming upon Jerusalem.

But on *that* day, Jerusalem will not be put to shame (the “you” is feminine singular).

But he sees beyond the exile.

He sees that when God removes the proud and haughty from his church,
then the humble and lowly will prosper.

I grow weary of the politics and maneuvering that you see in the church.

It happens in every denomination.
It happens in every congregation.

But Zephaniah warns us that *we* should not be that way!
After all, God will remove the proud and haughty –
and he will leave the humble and lowly.

What is it that characterizes the humble and lowly?

*They shall seek refuge in the name of the LORD,
13 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.”*

There are four things here:

First, they shall seek refuge in the name of the LORD.
The haughty think that they can handle it themselves.
If only we organize and caucus and maneuver,
then we can get our way!
But the humble seek refuge in the name of the LORD!

How do you seek refuge in the name of the LORD?
Pray – seek his face – humble yourself before him
and acknowledge that *you* are not able to “handle it” yourself!

But second, they do no injustice.
Since they seek refuge in the name of the LORD,
they also do justice to their neighbors.
If I think that I can handle it myself,
then I will be likely to manipulate others to “get them on my side.”
But if I seek the LORD, then I will not worry about “others,”
because I know that if I do justice to others, then God will be glorified.

But how do you know when you are “doing justice” to others?

Third, “they speak no lies, nor shall there be found in their mouth a deceitful tongue.”
If you are speaking truth in love,
then undoubtedly you are doing justice.
Too often we have too high an opinion of our own opinions.
We are sure that we are right,
and therefore we need to make sure that our opinion prevails.
But when we have that mindset,

then we can end up speaking deceitfully in order to get our way.

If your position requires deceit in order for you to “get your way,”
then you are not “doing justice” to others.

And finally, the humble and lowly are characterized by grazing and lying down unafraid.
We heard last time that the seacoast would become pastureland for Israel –
and that the remnant would be the sheep that would graze (2:7).
Here Zephaniah adds that none will make the humbly and lowly afraid,
because they take refuge in the name of Yahweh,
they do no injustice – and they speak no lies.

In other words, for the humble and lowly,
“the LORD is my Shepherd.”

And when the LORD is my shepherd, I pass through the Valley of the Shadow of Death –
and yet I fear nothing – because my trust is in the LORD.

And with this trust and confidence in the LORD,
we rejoice!

2. Zephaniah Calls Jerusalem to Rejoice (3:14-17)

a. Rejoice Because the LORD Has Taken Away the Judgments against You (v14-15)

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.*

Rejoice, O people of God, sing for joy and shout with gladness –
because God has taken away the judgments against you!

At the beginning of Zephaniah we heard that all humanity was under God’s curse.
But for the humble and lowly, who trust in the LORD and seek refuge in his name,
God has taken away the judgments against you.

We now see more clearly, in Christ, how God has done this.

He who knew no sin became sin for us.

He bore our iniquities.

But he also has cleared away our enemies.

You can see both the legal aspect of our justification (he has taken away the judgments),
and the triumph of the Divine Warrior (he has cleared away your enemies).

And this comes together in the royal image at the end of verse 15:

“The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil.”

The Old Testament rarely uses the phrase “king of Israel” to refer to God.

A quick check only identified two instances:

here and in Isaiah 44:6

“Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts:

‘I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god.

Who is like me? Let him proclaim it.

Let him declare and set it before me, since I appointed an ancient people.

Let them declare what is to come, and what will happen.

Fear not, nor be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it?

And you are my witnesses!

Is there a God besides me? There is no Rock; I know not any.’” (44:6-8)

God is often referred to as *King* – king of glory, king of nations, etc. –
but King of Israel is usually the title of the earthly king.

Now, we saw two weeks ago that Zephaniah is the great-grandson of Hezekiah –
which probably makes him the cousin of the current king, Josiah!

Here is a member of the royal family saying “the LORD is the King of Israel.”

Most of the Twelve tend to go after judges, prophets, and priests.

Zephaniah is one of the few prophets who goes after the royal family!

In 1:8 he said that God would punish the “king’s sons” (1:8).

But this gets interesting when you think about the Triumphal Entry in John’s Gospel.

John says that the crowds went out to meet Jesus, crying out:

“Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,
even the King of Israel!” (John 12:13)

And in verse 15, John says that it is written,

“Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming sitting on a donkey’s colt.”

John weaves together Zephaniah 3 and Zechariah 9,

to show that Jesus is the King of Israel – not merely the Son of David,

but the LORD himself, who is in their midst.

[Andrew Brunson, Psalm 118 in the Gospel of John, 235]

After all, John’s point is not merely to say that Jesus is the Son of David who reclaims the throne

but that Jesus is the Son of God – Jesus is *Yahweh himself* –

who has come to dwell in the midst of his people.

b. On That Day the LORD in Your Midst Will Rejoice over You (v16-17)

¹⁶ *On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:*

“Fear not, O Zion;

let not your hands grow weak.

If you are afraid, then your hands will grow feeble and weak.
But verse 17 gives you the reason why you should not 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.*

The LORD your God is in your midst,
a mighty one (a *gibbor* – the term used for a mighty warrior) who will save.

The *gibbor* in Hebrew is a mighty warrior –
think of David’s mighty men –
but here it refers to God himself as the Divine Warrior –
the “mighty one who will save.”

Zephaniah – the great-grandson of Hezekiah –
is not especially optimistic about the chances of a son of David succeeding.
Israel’s salvation will only come when God himself comes as the Divine Warrior.

But a *gibbor* should be more than just a big thug who can beat people up.
Here, as elsewhere, the *gibbor* is also one who speaks wise and persuasive words.
David – who was as much a *gibbor* as anyone in the OT –
was known for his singing as much as his fighting.

And that was because he – as well as anyone in the OT –
reflected God’s own character.

One commentator has referred to Zephaniah 3:17 as the “John 3:16 of the Old Testament.”
The LORD will rejoice over you with gladness.

It might be better to translate this “he will be quiet [over you] by his love

Think about this for a moment:
“‘To consider Almighty God sinking in contemplations of love
over a once-wretched human being can hardly be absorbed by the human mind.’
But that is exactly the point of the verse – God delights in you.”
(Barker & Bailey on 3:17 quoting Robertson)

This is why the LORD comes to Zion.
This is why Jesus came to Jerusalem.
The mighty warrior will come, casting down his foes right and left –
and when he finds the object of his love – the one for whom he came to the rescue –
he will be quiet over them – he will exult over you with loud singing!

And yes, this is a “you feminine singular.”

The LORD is a mighty warrior who will come to rescue his “damsel in distress”!
He is the white knight who defeats the dragon –
and then sings a tender love song to the princess!

Well, actually, “tender love song” might not quite capture the tenor of the last line of v17.
He will exult over you with loud singing –
this is more of a loud ringing cry –
a shout of triumph – a boisterous victory song!

(It might be more appropriate to see this as the mighty warrior singing,
“Another one bites the dust”!)

3. The LORD Rejoices (3:18-20)

a. I Will Gather You (v18)

¹⁸ *I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival,
so that you will no longer suffer reproach.*^[c]

Indeed, you have the LORD’s “love song of victory” in verses 18-20.

In verses 18-20 you have a striking contrast to chapter 1.

In chapter 1, God set forth 11 “I will” statements –
as God declared his coming wrath.

Now in chapter 3, God declares 9 “I will” statements –
declaring his coming mercy!

And God starts by gathering those who mourn for the festival
and he removes the reproach of Zion.

(If you turn the page, you will see in the book of Haggai
that this is precisely what happens next in the Book of the Twelve!)
The LORD will restore all his pilgrim people:

b. At That Time I Will Deal with Your Oppressors and Save the Lame (v19)

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.*

The “you” is still feminine singular –
God is still speaking to Zion.

Everything bad will be undone.
The oppressors will be dealt with –

whether the oppressors of verse 1 (the rulers of Jerusalem)
or the oppressors among the nations (Assyria and the nations).

The lame will be saved and the outcast gathered –
shame will turn into praise and renown in all the earth.

God will use the weak and foolish of the earth to shame the wise and powerful!
Think of how Jesus and the apostles speak of this.

c. At That Time I Will Make You Praised among All the Peoples (v20)

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.*

And with the change in status will come a change in reputation.

“I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth.”

Here the LORD suddenly shifts from the feminine singular to the masculine plural!

All of the “yous” in verse 20 are masculine plural.

Now God speaks to all Israel.

God has said that he will restore Zion – that he will restore their mother!

And when he restores their mother –

when the heavenly Jerusalem is established and secure,

then “I will make you [masculine plural]

renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth.”

We need to remember this important distinction:

there is the heavenly city – our mother, Jerusalem [Zion, you, feminine singular];

and then there are the churches on earth [Israel, you, masculine plural]

Too often the churches on earth have become proud and haughty,

thinking that we *are* the heavenly church.

Wherever humility has characterized the people of God,

their fame has gone forth throughout the earth.

Wherever pride and arrogance has turned us into oppressors,

then we bring shame upon ourselves –

and the name of God is blasphemed among the nations.

But God will have mercy on the humble remnant –

on those who humble themselves before the LORD and seek his face.

And so let us pray that the LORD will restore the fortunes of his people once again!