

Chapter 37 Zephaniah 1-3

Zephaniah's Day of the Lord

"The great day of the Lord is near—near and coming quickly." Zephaniah 1:14

On Super Bowl Sunday the newspaper led with a bold three-inch banner headline declaring, "Judgment Day" to describe the world's biggest playoff game, although soccer fans may disagree. Its interesting how easily a neglected biblical truth can be transposed in our age of entertainment to announce a championship football game. The most awesome, terrifying day the human race will ever face is used to hype a media event. Many would have read the headline without even a thought about the biblical meaning of the Judgment Day and those with a religious background, would have been amused by the connection between the Super Bowl and the old-fashioned idea of the Judgment Day. Not only is the biblical truth of judgment trivialized in this association, but for all practical purposes the Super Bowl excites the popular imagination far more than the Judgment Day.

Everything has been turned upside down, the trivial is transcendent, the immediate moment momentous, and having a good time is more important than knowing God. It used to be difficult to speak of God's judgment because we were confronted in the depth of our being by the wrath of the living, holy God. Things have changed. To proclaim divine judgment today in any meaningful and compelling way is to invite human disdain and ridicule. To speak of God's anger against sin and wickedness is to either incite human anger against biblical revelation or solicit an apathetic yawn from those inured to anything that is not entertaining.

Although the message of the prophets may seem anachronistic and foreign to many today, it is exactly what is needed to pull those who are contentious and those who are complacent into a God-centered new reality. The prophets' primary target was an audience unaccustomed to the intensity and urgency of God's message due to their idolatrous concentration on immediate personal gratification. We still have that audience today *and in some cases we are that audience*. For that reason, the Spirit-inspired purpose of the prophets remains as timely and as compelling in our day as it was in Zephaniah's. Perhaps what happen to Dietrich Bonhoeffer in prison ought to happen to believers today. In December 1943 he wrote:

"My thoughts and feelings seem to be getting more and more like those of the Old Testament, and in recent months I have been reading the Old Testament much more than the New. It is only when one knows the unutterability of the name of God that one can utter the name of Jesus Christ; it is only when one loves life and the earth so much that without them everything seems to be over that one may believe in the resurrection of a new world; it is only when one submits to God's law that one may speak of grace; and it is only when God's wrath and vengeance are hanging as grim realities over the heads of one's enemies that something of what it means to love and forgive them can touch our hearts. In my opinion it is not Christian to want to take our thoughts and feelings too quickly and too directly from the New Testament" (Letters & Papers from Prison, 157; see 282).

In contrast to Habakkuk, Zephaniah's family history goes back four generations to his great, great, grandfather king Hezekiah, who led a courageous reform movement in Judah (716-686 B.C.). It was said of Hezekiah that he trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel and that "there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before or after him. He held fast to the Lord and did not cease to follow him; he kept the commands the Lord had given Moses" (2 Kings 18:5-6). Tragically, Hezekiah's legacy was not passed down to his son, Manasseh, whose 55 year reign was marked by blatant idolatry, pagan spirituality, and child sacrifice. We are told that Manasseh "shed so much innocent blood that he filled Jerusalem from end to end" (2 Kings 21:16). When Josiah came to power in 639 B.C. at the age of eight, Judah had been steeped in pagan practices, religious syncretism, economic exploitation, and injustice for over half a century. It would remain that way for another 18 years before the Book of the Law was discovered in the temple and Josiah renewed the covenant in the presence of all the people. Even then, it appears that Josiah's renewal and reform may not have had a great impact in the minds and hearts of the people. Although it could be said of Josiah that he loved the Lord his God "with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength" (2 Kings 23:25), this does not appear true of the people. Their resistance to true reform, social justice and heartfelt transformation made Zephaniah's prophecy relevant throughout Josiah's reign, especially among the cultural elite.

It is intriguing to note the family connection between King Josiah and the prophet Zephaniah. Josiah was three generations removed from his great grandfather Hezekiah and Zephaniah was four generations removed from his great, great grandfather Hezekiah. They were contemporaries, with Josiah presumably being older than Zephaniah. Each had a distinctive calling, but both shared a passion for God and the courage to take a bold stand for faithfulness. Judging from the content of Zephaniah's prophecy he was well aware of how Judah's power-brokers thought and acted. The fact that Zephaniah and Jeremiah prophesied during Josiah's reign must have been an encouragement to the king in his efforts to bring reform and renewal. Together they formed a collaborative and independent witness that served to validate and verify the truth they were called to declare and uphold (Deut 17:6; 19:15).

The Day of the Lord

Zephaniah's prophecy focused on the great day of the Lord, the ultimate day of reckoning for all who reject God and rebel against his commandments, and the joyous day of homecoming for all who humbly trust in the Lord and obey his will. It is this Day of consequence that splits humanity and history into two by condemning the wicked and comforting the righteous. It is a day of wrath and a day of hope; a day of trouble and a day of triumph; a day of condemnation and a day of redemption. His prophecy was completely consistent with the Lord's word through Moses:

"Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for your or beyond your reach...See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you are

not obedient, and if you are drawn to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed...Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him” (Deut 30:11-20).

This is the “either/or” binary thinking that the world rejects in favor of tolerance, diversity and “both/and” inclusivity. The prevailing ethos of our day holds that no one can say who is right or wrong, true or false, without being arrogant, bigoted or elitist. Everyone is right in their own eyes and free to do as they please without disapproval. Political correctness and the myth of journalistic neutrality appear to be the order of the day. Modern open-mindedness rejects the exclusivity of the truth and refuses to distinguish between good and evil. In the eyes of the world, what the ancient prophets did was the height of arrogance and pride. The world fails to see that arrogance and pride belong not to those who submit to the truth of God, but to those who reject the word of the Lord. Modern Christendom takes Jesus’ warning against judgmentalism, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged,” and turns it against the truth, by rejecting moral discernment and the courage of biblical convictions. In Christianity without Christ, “freedom” encourages everyone to do what is right in their own eyes, in spite of Jesus’ promise, “You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free” (Mt 7:1; Jn 8:31).

In keeping with Zephaniah’s biblical dualism, Jesus concluded the Sermon on the Mount with an admonition to enter the narrow gate, “for wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it” (Mt 7:13). This narrow gate does not imply that the way of life designed by God is narrow-minded. It may appear that way to those on the Broadway simply because there is an alternative path and those who follow that path claim unequivocally that it is the way, the truth, and the life. The followers of Jesus have chosen the path of revelation instead of the highway of relativism. There is room for every kind of ideology, system, loyalty, and belief on the road that leads to destruction, but there is only room for truth on the way that leads to life.

The narrowness of the gate that leads to life has to do with the disciple’s single-minded, heartfelt commitment to follow the Lord Jesus. It has nothing to do with limited seating in the Kingdom of Heaven. Everyone is invited to choose the small gate and narrow path and nowhere is it implied that the entrance is so crowded that people can’t get in. The prophet Jeremiah offered the Lord’s invitation, “Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls” (Jeremiah 6:16).

Zephaniah, a contemporary of Jeremiah, was called by God to place himself at life’s intersection emotionally. He dramatically warned people of the devastating consequences of the Day of the Lord with such intensity and urgency that they could not help but take notice. He may have been accused of scaring people into obedience, but he could not have been charged with apathy. For love’s sake he was an in-your-face prophet, speaking what God wanted him to say in the way that God wanted him to say it:

“The Great Judgment Day of God is almost here.
It’s countdown time....seven, six, five, four....

After declaring the universal scope of God's judgment, Zephaniah began with God's verdict against Judah: "I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem" (1:4). This is followed by God's case against Jerusalem (1:4-13) and then another dramatic description of the great day of the Lord (1:14-18). This pattern is repeated in chapter two, beginning with Judah and then extending the message of judgment to the surrounding nations (Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Cush and Assyria). Chapter three begins again with Jerusalem, "Woe to the city of oppressors, rebellious and defiled!" (3:1-5) and then the Lord extends the message of judgment to the nations for a third time, saying, "I have decided to assemble the nations, to gather the kingdoms and to pour out my wrath on them—all my fierce anger. The whole world will be consumed by the fire of my jealous anger" (3:8). This is also consistent with the New Testament pattern. Peter wrote, "For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?" (1 Peter 4:17). In the book of Revelation, the Spirit of Christ judges the seven churches before the world is judged.

The fourth truth about God's judgment is that it is directed against those who consistently, continuously, and flagrantly disobey God's law. Zephaniah presents the character of God's justice as absolute rather than arbitrary. His judgment is consistent rather than capricious and his verdict is always righteous, never random. The prophet makes God's case against the wicked by presenting a litany of their evil actions, including idolatry, nature-worship, religious pluralism, and spiritual apathy (1:4-6). The cultural elite were guilty of embracing pagan prayers, pagan rituals, pagan practices, and pagan superstitions (1:8-9). The business people were guilty of dishonesty, greed, and of making money their god (1:10-11). The complacent were self-absorbed, preoccupied with their homes and livelihood. They were guilty of the sins of omission (1:12-13). Zephaniah summed up the sins of Jerusalem and profiled her leaders:

"Woe to the city of oppressors, rebellious and defiled! She obeys no one, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the Lord, she does not draw near to God. Her officials are roaring lions, her rulers are evening wolves, who leave nothing for the morning. Her prophets are arrogant; they are treacherous men. Her priests profane the sanctuary and do violence to the law" (3:1-4).

When Zephaniah turned his attention to the surrounding nations he spent more time describing the net effect of God's devastating judgment rather than the specific sins that caused it. Moab and Ammon are singled out "for insulting and mocking the people of the Lord Almighty" (2:10), and Nineveh is judged for her arrogance, because she says to herself, "I am, and there is none besides me" (2:15).

John Calvin interpreted God's judgment against the surrounding nations as an encouragement to God's people. If they were inclined to think that God's heavy hand of justice was on them alone, Zephaniah's prophecy made it perfectly clear that all people everywhere would be held to God's righteous standard and face the consequences for their evil actions. Calvin commented, "For when the Lord spares the wicked and chastens us, we are tempted to think that nothing is better than to shake off every yoke. Lest then this temptation should have assailed the faithful, the Prophet reminded them in time, that there was no reason why the heathens should flatter or

congratulate themselves, when God did not immediately punish them; for their portion was prepared for them” (Calvin, vol. 14, 240).

In keeping with Zephaniah’s prophecy that Ninevah, the capital city of Assyria, would be left “utterly desolate” and reduced to rubble (2:13-15), Nahum’s prophecy celebrated the fall of Nineveh. More than a century earlier, Jonah had preached a message of judgment up and down the streets of Nineveh, and much to his amazement and displeasure, the people repented and called on God for mercy (Jonah 3:6-9). Out of compassion, God relented and “did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened” (Jonah 3:10). But now God’s wrath was brought to bear against this ancient superpower. Against God’s whirlwind they were defenseless in spite of their chariots and soldiers. And even though they had “increased the number of [their] merchants till they [were] more than the stars of the sky,” they were destitute (Nahum 3:16). Nineveh’s history is positive proof that “the Lord is slow to anger and great in power; he will not leave the guilty unpunished” (Nahum 1:3). Like his contemporary Habakkuk, Nahum embraced divine judgment as an encouragement to God’s people. He affirmed, “The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him, but with an overwhelming flood he will make an end of Nineveh; he will pursue his foes into darkness” (Nahum 1:7-8).

The Day of Rejoicing

The fifth truth about God’s judgment is the identity of the recipients of God’s blessing. The Day of the Lord is not only a day of judgment but a day of blessing *and what a day of rejoicing it will be*. What is for some a day of wrath, will be for others a day of hope. Sorrow will give way to Joy. Having declared the devastating consequences for rejecting the Lord God, Zephaniah can now declare the good news for those who respond to the Lord. “Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem!” (3:14).

Earlier, Zephaniah hinted at the character of those who will be included in this joyful homecoming. He broke off his description of judgment just long enough to make this appeal: “Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility;” adding, “perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord’s anger” (2:3). And then right before his concluding burst of praise, he described the remnant of Israel that will be drawn to Zion from distant places to worship in spirit and in truth. The Lord will “purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him shoulder to shoulder” (3:9). They will know no shame and feel no pride. “Never again,” says the Lord, “will you be haughty on my holy hill” (3:11). Instead, they will be “meek and humble” and they will trust in the name of the Lord. They “will speak no lies, nor will deceit be found in their mouths” (3:13).

Zephaniah’s profile of blessing has a striking similarity to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. It is not the self-righteous, who are the recipients of God’s blessing and who oppose the wicked, but the meek and humble. As Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Mt 5:3-5). Like Jesus, Zephaniah did not base God’s blessing on human achievement nor did he attribute righteousness to religious effort. It is the Lord who graciously

purifies (3:9), redeems (3:15), and restores (3:20). We cannot save ourselves, it is the Lord who is “mighty to save” (3:17).

Zephaniah’s vision of blessing is consistent with his vision of the recipients of God’s blessing. Instead of presenting paragons of perfection and self-righteousness, he describes the meek and humble. Instead of hoping for a utopian paradise, he describes a true, life-fulfilling homecoming. Those who “look forward to the day of God,” said the apostle Peter, look “forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness” (2 Peter 3:12-13). This new creation will become the human habitat that God intended it to be, a place where the human heart is tuned to praise and the human body is restored to health. It will be a place where we are able to eat and lie down without fear. It will be a place defined by the presence of the Lord, who will delight in us and quiet us with his love. He will rejoice over us with singing and gather us to himself.

When Zephaniah declares, “The great day of the Lord is near—near and coming quickly,” there is a palpable sense of urgency and immediacy. The day of wrath looms before humanity as a dreadful day of reckoning that no one can endure apart from God’s grace. No one should wait for the day of judgment, as if time were on their side. We do not have the luxury to waste time, when everlasting life hangs in the balance. Only a fool would waste precious time seeking the Lord. As the author of Hebrews said, “Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts” (Heb 3:15; Psalm 95:7).

But when Zephaniah speaks of the day of blessing, his sense of panic and urgency is gone. His tone expresses a quiet confidence and trust. You can hear it in his words. The promise of God, spoken in the first person singular, calms the once shattered nerves and offers peace. Because the Lord has promised to never leave us nor forsake us, we can wait for patiently for his timing (Joshua 1:5; Matthew 28:20).

“At that time I will deal with all who oppressed you; I will rescue the lame and gather those who have been scattered. I will give them praise and honor in every land where they were put to shame. At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home.” Zephaniah 3:19-20