

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.

Remember how chapter 1 began?

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. (v2-3)

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

And remember how chapter 1 ended (v17-18):

“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.
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.”

The wages of sin is death.

How can you escape the wrath and curse of God due to us for sin?

Our catechism says it this way (q85)

“To escape the wrath and curse of God due to us for sin
God requires of us faith in Jesus Christ, repentance unto life,
with the diligent use of all the outward means
whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption.”

This is the basic point of Zephaniah 2:1-3

1. Zephaniah Calls the Humble to Seek the LORD (2:1-7)

a. If You Seek the LORD You May Escape His Anger (v1-3)

Gather together, yes, gather,

O shameless nation,

² *before the decree takes effect^[a]*

—before the day passes away like chaff—

before there comes upon you

the burning anger of the LORD,

before there comes upon you

the day of the anger of the LORD.

³ *Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land,*

who do his just commands;^[b]

seek righteousness; seek humility;

*perhaps you may be hidden
on the day of the anger of the LORD.*

The wrath of God is coming – the burning anger of the LORD –
and if you would avoid the day of his anger,
then *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.*

Judgment day is coming.
What are you seeking?
What are you looking for?
What is it that gives you purpose and meaning in life?
Where do you find refuge and comfort in hard times?

After all, “hard times” are pictures of the final judgment.
I’ve often spoken of God’s “common wrath” –
God’s general displeasure with humanity,
which manifests itself in the “misery of this life.”

We usually hear about “common grace” –
God’s general favor that keeps life from being as bad as it could be.
The sun shines upon the just and the unjust –
good things happen to both the just and the unjust.
Sometimes the wicked prosper!

Common wrath is the same.
The blizzard comes upon the just and the unjust.
Whether it’s a locust plague, the death of a loved one, or cancer –
God’s common wrath reminds us of what every sin deserves.
And every time you see something terrible happen,
you should remember that Judgment Day *is* coming.

As Paul said to the Athenians:
“The times of ignorance God overlooked,
but 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.” (Acts 17:30-31).

Zephaniah speaks of this coming day of judgment
and calls the humble of the land to gather and seek the LORD –
to “seek righteousness; seek humility.”

Jesus echoes this when he told his disciples not to worry about what they eat and drink,
or what they would wear,

but,
“Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,
and all these things will be added to you.”

If we believe that judgment day is coming,
then everything in life must be oriented around that day.

Think of how Paul talks about this coming day of judgment:
it is the day when Christ (the man appointed) will judge the world in righteousness.

So what does it mean to seek the LORD, seek righteousness, seek humility?
A few weeks ago we looked at Philippians 2,
where Paul says that we should have the same mind as Christ –
humbling ourselves and seeking first the interests of others ahead of our own.

Seeking the LORD means that you want what he wants.
What does God want?
Remember Micah 6:8?
“but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly/wisely
with our God.”
Seeking righteousness means that you want to create the sort of environment
where justice prevails.
In your workplace – in your home – on the basketball court –
you want to see Christ’s kingdom advance.

Maybe you don’t have much clout.
Maybe you’re only one person in an office culture that is arrogant and cruel.
But you seek righteousness in how *you* treat the victims!
You can pursue humility in your refusal to participate in their cruelty.

And seeking humility is closely related.
Because you are not concerned about yourself and your own status.
Just as Christ humbled himself and endured the cross,
you are also willing to endure unjust suffering for the sake of Christ.

For you who are husbands – seeking righteousness and humility
means taking the time to lead your family in the worship of God,
and using that time to help your family see how what seeking the LORD means.
If you only seek the LORD on Sundays –
or if you only seek the LORD on Sundays and during family worship –
then you will have difficulty seeking righteousness and humility.

This has to be something that drives you in your daily life.

What are you living for?
If you are living for something other than the Triune God,

then you are not seeking him!

And ultimately, this is why the Word of the LORD comes against the nations:

b. The Word of the LORD Against Philistia and the Seacoast (v4-6)

⁴ *For Gaza shall be deserted,
and Ashkelon shall become a desolation;
Ashdod's people shall be driven out at noon,
and Ekron shall be uprooted.*
⁵ *Woe to you inhabitants of the seacoast,
you nation of the Cherethites!
The word of the LORD is against you,
O Canaan, land of the Philistines;
and I will destroy you until no inhabitant is left.*
⁶ *And you, O seacoast, shall be pastures,
with meadows^[c] for shepherds
and folds for flocks.*

Zephaniah starts with the Philistines –

the historic enemy of Israel since the days of the Judges.

Four of the five Philistine cities are named (Gath is not mentioned here).

But Zephaniah says that the word of the LORD is against the Philistines,
and so God will destroy them “until no inhabitant is left.”

The coastal plain includes some of the best grazing land in the region.

It is also the easiest route for armies to march across the region.

Zephaniah portrays a situation where the inhabitants of the seacoast are destroyed,
and the region becomes pasture for shepherds and flocks.

But whose flocks?

c. The Remnant of the House of Judah Will Possess the Seacoast (v7)

⁷ *The seacoast shall become the possession
of the remnant of the house of Judah,
on which they shall graze,
and in the houses of Ashkelon
they shall lie down at evening.
For the LORD their God will be mindful of them
and restore their fortunes.*

The inhabitants of the seacoast are no more.

The flock will be the remnant of the house of Judah.

It is not that the remnant of Judah will pasture their flocks on the seacoast.

No, the remnant of Judah *will be the flock* that grazes on the seacoast –
and lies down in the houses of Ashkelon.

(And if it sounds strange to you that sheep will lie down in houses –
it would not have sounded strange to Zephaniah’s hearers.
Remember that this is a world of dirt floors and open doorways –
a world where animals come and go as they please!)

But the remnant of the house of Judah will be the flock
that grazes on the seacoast and lies down at evening.

I want you to see the connection between *seeking the LORD*
and the seacoast *becoming the possession* of the remnant of Judah.

How are they connected?
They are connected because of what *God* does.

Zephaniah concludes that all this will happen because Yahweh will be mindful of them –
in other words, that the LORD will look out for them –
and restore their fortunes (literally, “return their captivity”).
This is the great phrase found all through the OT referring to the restoration from exile.
It is used in Psalm 126 to speak of how God restored the captivity of Zion –
as well as in Job 42 to speak of how God restored the captivity of Job!

Think of how Jesus says it:
Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,
and all these things will be added to you.

NOT – seek first the kingdom of God – by which you will get what you need.
NOR – seek his righteousness – because doing things the righteous way
is what *really* works in God’s world!

No, you seek the LORD – you seek righteousness – you seek humility –
because that’s what you really want!

And if you *have God* – if you have righteousness and humility –
then God will take of the rest!

Too often we act as though doing things “God’s way”
will accomplish all the goods things we want.

But where did seeking the LORD get Jesus?
It got him crucified.
Before that?
He had no place to lay his head.

And Zephaniah says as much:
after all, what happens to the righteous remnant?

God restores their fortunes – he returns their captivity.

What does that mean?

It means that they were taken captive!

It means that they had been mistreated and abused.

And we hear about that in the LORD's verdict against Moab and Ammon in verses 8-9.

2. Yahweh Declares the Verdict Against Moab and Ammon (2:8-9)

a. Their Crime: Reviling and Taunting My People (v8)

⁸ *"I have heard the taunts of Moab
and the revilings of the Ammonites,
how they have taunted my people
and made boasts against their territory.*

In the second section of our text, the LORD declares the verdict against Moab and Ammon.

Moab and Ammon were the sons of Lot, Abraham's nephew.

They are thus cousins of Israel –

but hostile cousins who regularly fought against them.

David had subdued Moab and Ammon, so that they became subject to Israel,

but after a few generations, in the days of Jehoshaphat and Ahab,

Moab and Ammon rebelled.

Now, as we draw towards the end of David's kingdom,

Moab and Ammon are taunting the people of God

and making boasts against their territory.

But if you revile the people of God,

then you are really blaspheming God himself.

And God takes this personally –

as you can see by his oath in v9

b. Their Punishment: They Will Become Like Sodom and Gomorrah (v9a)

⁹ *Therefore, as I live," declares the LORD of hosts,
the God of Israel,*

*"Moab shall become like Sodom,
and the Ammonites like Gomorrah,
a land possessed by nettles and salt pits,
and a waste forever.*

Do you remember the story of Sodom and Gomorrah?

In Genesis 19, Sodom and Gomorrah are depicted as the first nation

to experience Judgment Day (the day of the LORD) since the flood.

Only one family escaped from the ruin of Sodom:

Lot and his daughters.

Do you remember what happened to Lot and his daughters?

The girls thought that the whole earth had been destroyed,
and so they made their father drunk and slept with him.
One gave birth to Moab – and the other to Ammon.

Now Moab and Ammon are returning whence they came.
Their mothers had escaped the ruin of Sodom because of the faith of Abraham and Lot.
But now their descendents have returned to the practices of Sodom and Gomorrah –
they have not sought righteousness nor humility.
They do not seek the LORD.

Therefore,

c. The Result: The Remnant of My People Will Plunder Them (v9b)

*The remnant of my people shall plunder them,
and the survivors of my nation shall possess them.”*

This is the second time that Zephaniah has spoken of the remnant.
When God restores the fortunes of Zion
the remnant will prosper.
You can hear in Zephaniah’s tone a certain urgency.
It is only a remnant that will survive.

Implicit here is a call to faithfulness:
hold fast and seek the LORD!

After all, Zephaniah immediately goes on in verses 10-11 to warn that all nations will fare alike!

3. Zephaniah’s Application: All the Gods of the Earth Will Fare Alike (2:10-11)

¹⁰ *This shall be their lot in return for their pride,
because they taunted and boasted
against the people of the LORD of hosts.*

¹¹ *The LORD will be awesome against them;
for he will famish all the gods of the earth,
and to him shall bow down,
each in its place,
all the lands of the nations.*

Verse 10 makes it clear that this is the judgment against Moab and Ammon for their pride.
Pride goes before a fall.

If you taunt and boast against the people of the LORD of hosts,
then the LORD of hosts will come and do awesome things against you!

The gods of the earth will be cast down –
those who taunt and boast against the people of God will be plundered –
their gods will be famished because the worshipers of the gods of the nations
will have nothing to bring to their gods!

In pagan thought, the worshipers were supposed to bring food for their gods.
But now God will cause the gods of the earth to be famished
(literally, to grow lean!)

With the result that all the lands of the nations will bow down to the LORD!

The Vulgate (Jerome's Latin translation) translated this "the islands of the Gentiles,"
and Jerome comments on this,
"Even as islands have been set in the midst of the sea,
churches have been established in the midst of this world,
and they are beaten and buffeted by different waves of persecution.
Truly these islands are lashed by waves every day, but they are not submerged.
They are in the midst of the sea, to be sure,
but they have Christ as their foundation, Christ who cannot be moved."
[in ACCS, 213]

Augustine likewise points out that each one remains in its place.
The Gentiles do not need to become Jews in order to worship the LORD.

Here, Zephaniah establishes the principle that Paul will later articulate:
"to the Jew first, but also to the Greek."

As Paul says in Romans 2:9-11
"There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil,
the Jew first and also the Greek,
but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good,
the Jew first and also the Greek.
For God shows no partiality."

And Zephaniah 2:11 demonstrates that same point.
All the gods of the earth will be cast down.
But all the lands of the nations will bow down to the LORD – each in its place.
Every knee will bow.
Every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

And as if to illustrate the point,
the LORD replies in verse 12.

4. Yahweh's Application: The Cushites (2:12)

¹² *You also, O Cushites,
shall be slain by my sword.*

One verse – it could easily be overlooked.
What are the Cushites doing here?
Cush is far in the south.

It is one of the nations that is named to refer to the far ends of the earth.
It's like saying "Timbuktu."

The focus of the previous verses has been on Judah's immediate neighbors:
Philistia, Ammon and Moab.

Then Zephaniah applies this to all nations everywhere –
and God illustrates this by saying "even Cush" shall be slain by my sword.

But in the days of Josiah,
the real question for Zephaniah's hearers focuses on two cities:
Nineveh – the capital of Assyria – the dominant power in the region;
and, of course, Jerusalem – the city of Josiah the son of David.

Josiah would eventually die in battle against Pharaoh Neco of Egypt –
as Josiah fears that the Egyptians will assist the Assyrians against Babylon
(many had hoped that the Babylonians would be kinder than the Assyrians –
oops!)

Zephaniah speaks of the coming downfall of Nineveh in verses 13-15:

5. Zephaniah's Application to the Two Cities: Nineveh and Jerusalem (2:13-3:5)

a. The Desolation of Nineveh (2:13-15)

¹³ *And 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.*

¹⁴ *Herds shall lie down in her midst,
all kinds of beasts;^[d]
even the owl and the hedgehog^[e]
shall lodge in her capitals;
a voice shall hoot in the window;
devastation will be on the threshold;
for her cedar work will be laid bare.*

¹⁵ *This is the exultant city
that lived securely,
that said in her heart,
"I am, and there is no one else."
What a desolation she has become,
a lair for wild beasts!
Everyone who passes by her
hisses and shakes his fist.*

In the ancient world you have three types of land:
there are cities – fortresses – where you have lots of people (and lots of animals);
then there are cultivated lands or pastures – where you have farmers, shepherds,
(and domestic animals – with occasional wild beasts wandering through)

and then there is the waste – the wilderness or desert – where you have wild animals.

You frequently see the prophets speaking of how the vineyards and fields will become a desert – or how the desert will blossom like a fertile valley – but this is far more radical:

a city (indeed, a “great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle” [remember that description from Jonah 4:11?])

Archeologists tell us that the city of Nineveh was approximately 1,850 acres, making it almost as big as Babylon in its heyday. In contrast, the Old City of Jerusalem is about 225 acres.

Nineveh is the great and powerful city.

But Nineveh will become a dry waste like the desert.

Nineveh will go from the greatest power in the world

to being the lodge of owls and hedgehogs – all kinds of desert beasts.

Nahum had said of Nineveh,

“All who look at you will shrink from you and say,

‘Wasted is Nineveh; who will grieve for her?

Where shall I seek comforters for you?’” (Nahum 3:7)

Zephaniah, on the other hand, has no pity for Nineveh.

Judgment is coming – and everyone who passes by her hisses and shakes his fist.

And at first, it appears that chapter 3, verse 1, simply continues in the same vein:

b. The Woe to Jerusalem (3:1-5)

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

So far, this sounds very much like Nineveh!

The rebellious and defiled city – the oppressing city!

² *She listens to no voice;
she accepts no correction.*

Unless, of course, you remember the story of Jonah.

Because on *that* day, Nineveh repented!

But by the end of verse 2 you realize that Zephaniah isn't talking about Nineveh anymore.

He's talking about us!

He's talking about Jerusalem – the people of God!

*She does not trust in the LORD;
she does not draw near to her God.*

The rebellious and defiled city is not the city of man – but the (supposed) city of God.
When Jonah preached, Nineveh repented.
But when the prophets preached in Jerusalem to the people of God –
“she does not trust in the LORD; she does not draw near to her God.”

The problem is *not* that the *nations* are wicked and corrupt!
The problem is that the *church* is corrupt!

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.*

Yes, Nineveh will be overrun by wild beasts and will become a lair for desert animals –
but Jerusalem is *already* overrun by wild beasts –
roaring lions and evening wolves! –
that leave nothing till the morning.

Prophets, priests, judges – all do violence to the law.
The greatest threat to the church today is not Islam –
it is not atheism or materialism or postmodernism.
The greatest threat to the church today is herself!

When the church seeks the Lord and seeks righteousness and humility –
then regardless of what opposition may come,
the church prospers (the cross, after all, is the only way to glory!).

After all:

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.*

Here we see the problem for Jerusalem.
Yes, the LORD within her is righteous!
Therefore, if God’s people would return to the LORD and seek righteousness,
then perhaps God would have mercy on them.

After all, “if we confess our sins, he is faithful *and just* to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness!”

We’ll come back to verses 6-8 next week,
but I want to close with them tonight
in order to show the purpose of *why* God brings judgment on the earth:

Conclusion: The Purpose of God’s Judgments (3:6-8)

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.
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.*

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.”