

CALLING ON THE NAME OF THE LORD:

A SERMON ON ZEPH 3:9–10

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Today we are going to look at a text that is unfamiliar to many and that may seem foreign to use as a text supporting missions in the 21st century. Turn with me to the book of Zephaniah. I am going to first fit our text from chapter 3 into the over flow of the book, then expound the text itself, and then finally consider some of its implications for missions today. Let's pray.

Fitting Zeph 3:9–10 into Zephaniah's Thought-Flow

Zephaniah was one of Yahweh's prophets—a covenant enforcer during the days of Josiah's reformation. As a seer, he was able to see the dark shadows in the hearts of many of his contemporaries, and he was able to foresee the dark clouds of judgment that were beginning to intrude over the earth—foreshadows of what he termed the day of the LORD. Look with me at chapter 1:

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....

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.

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.

The day of the Lord is nothing to take lightly. It is day of darkness, pain, and punishment. It's like the fires of sacrifice consuming sinners rather than a substitute. God takes sin seriously, and so should we.

In 2:1–3:7 Zephaniah uses his first explicit commands, urging those who will listen to seek the LORD together in order to avoid the coming punishment.

¹ Gather together, yes, gather, O shameless nation, ² before the decree takes effect — 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; seek righteousness; seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the LORD.

With two statements of “Woe” in 2:5 and 3:1 he then unpacks the state and fate of the rebels from the world and from Jerusalem, thus supplying further motivation for seeking the Lord together. Yahweh’s punishment will reach Philistia to the west, Moab and Ammon to the east, and the imperial powers of Cush and Assyria to the south and north. And if God’s fire’s of judgment will surround Jerusalem, the rebels in the capital city will equally be overcome by the Lord’s just wrath.

At this, Zephaniah transitions back to engaging the remnant of faithful. He already called them to “seek the LORD together” in 2:1 and 3. Now, in light of the state and fate of the rebels of both the world and Jerusalem, we read,

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. 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 Charge to Wait for the LORD (v. 8a)

Everywhere else in the OT the term for “waiting” is used positively or neutrally, never negatively (Ps 33:20; Isa 64:4; Dan 12:12; Hab 2:3). Thus, we read in Ps 33:20, “Our soul waits for the LORD; he is our help and our shield.” With this, while the “you” in 3:1–7 addressed the feminine singular “city” of Jerusalem, the “you” in 3:8 shifts back to masculine plural, recalling the addressees of the earlier commands in 2:1 and 3. As such, I believe Zephaniah’s logic is this:

Initial Commands: Seek the Lord together (2:1–4)

Ground/Reason: Because of the negative state and fate of the rebels (2:5–3:7)

Inferential Command: Therefore, wait for the LORD (3:8–10)

In the midst of trouble, in the midst of darkness, when sin runs rampant, remnant of God hear me: Wait for the LORD for the day when he rises up as covenant witness.

Two Reasons to Wait for the LORD (vv. 8b–10)

We now get two reasons to wait for the LORD both introduced by the subordinate conjunction “for.”

3:8b Look first at verse 8:

Wait for the LORD ... *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.

The first reason that the remnant of faithful followers must persist in their hope of salvation is because God still intends to punish the wicked of the earth (cf. Hab 1:2; 3:17–19). Although at present, injustice still reigns, like those who prepare metal for melting (Ezek 22:19–22) or sheaves for threshing (Mic 4:12–13), the Lord has determined to “gather” (Ezek 16:37; Joel 3:2; Zeph 3:18; Zech 14:2–3) all people groups (“nations”) and political powers (“kingdoms”) for judicial assessment (cf. Isa 24:22). And at that time, his molten jealousy for the honor of his name will finally “pour out” upon “all the earth,” destroying all those who are hostile to him (cf. Zeph 1:17–18). Because the coming punishment is certain, the remnant of Judah must continue to wait in hope, confident that God will act (Isa 64:4).

3:9–10 Look with me now at verse 9 for the second reason Zephaniah gives for Judah’s remnant to persist in Godward trust. It is here that I want to focus the rest of this message:

⁸ Wait for me, declares the LORD, for the day when I rise up to seize the prey ... ⁹ *for* at that time [i.e., the time of the great judicial ingathering] 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.

The prophet here envisions that some of the peoples [note the plural] will not be destroyed in Yahweh’s fires of wrath but will instead be transformed into a community of worshippers. Specifically, God will purify their speech—or, as the Septuagint renders it, he will change their tongue—so that they will with one voice call upon the name of the LORD and together serve him shoulder to shoulder (Zeph 3:9; cf. Rev 7:9–10). To call on Yahweh’s name (cf. Zeph 3:12) is to outwardly express worshipful dependence on him as one’s savior, king, and treasure. As the psalmist declared (Ps 116:4, 13, 17),

⁴ Then I called on the name of the LORD: “O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul!” ... ¹³ I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD.... ¹⁷ I will offer to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving and call on the name of the LORD.

The prophets often linked calling on Yahweh’s name with the day of the Lord and future work of God in the messianic era (Isa 12:4; Joel 2:28–32; Zech 13:9). For example, in the days when the child king rises in power and initiates the great end-times second exodus, Isaiah asserts (Isa 12:4):

And you will say in that day: “Give thanks to the LORD, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples, proclaim that his name is exalted.

Similarly, and you may have already anticipated this, in the very text that Peter cites at Pentecost in Acts 2 to support the outbreak of good-news declaring prophecy in various tongues (Acts 2:19–21), Joel declares (Joel 2:30–32):

³⁰ And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. ³¹ The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ³² And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.

The day of the Lord includes not only punishment but also new creation, the transforming of once-hostile peoples from the nations and kingdoms of mankind into servants of a new king who call out to him for help and in thanksgiving and praise. They smell like smoke, but their lives have been preserved because they looked to the only sovereign, savior, and satisfier.

Now, what we read next identifies that Zephaniah is actually here envisioning the reversal of past judgment. Verse 10 says,

From beyond the rivers of Cush my worshippers, the daughter of my dispersed ones, shall bring my offering.

“Cush” was the center of black Africa and located in modern Sudan, and the rivers were likely the White and Blue Nile (see Isa 18:1–2). The region of Cush and the people associated with it were named after Cush, Noah’s grandson through Ham. Cush’s son Nimrod is the one who built ancient Babel. We first learn of Cush in Genesis 2, where it is identified as a terminus of one of the four rivers flowing from Eden. So, because Zephaniah envisions the worshippers gathering to Yahweh at his sanctuary to give him offerings, it’s as if the descendants of those once exiled from Eden are now following the rivers of life back to their source in order to enjoy fellowship with the great King (Gen 2:13; cf. Rev 22:1–2).

And these worshippers are made up of a multi-ethnic group from the “peoples” of the world, all of whom have transformed tongue—new speech patterns that call on the name of the LORD. In this light, because these worshippers are tagged “the daughter of my dispersed ones,” we likely have here an intentional vision of the reversal of the Tower of Babel judgment. You will recall that in Gen 11:9 we read that:

[The place] was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the *language* of all the earth. And from there the LORD *dispersed* them over the face of the earth.

When it says God confused “the language,” the Hebrew word is the same as that translated “speech” or “tongue” in Zeph 3:9, and when it says that God “dispersed” the peoples, it uses the same word for “my dispersed ones” in Zeph 3:10. Back in Zeph 2:11–12 declares Yahweh’s punishment on Cush, but here he predicts that even the most distant lands upon which he has poured his wrath will have a remnant of “worshippers” whom God’s presence will compel to the transformed Jerusalem, thus reversing the curse of Babel.

A Missional Response to 3:9–10

So how should we respond to Zeph 3:9–10? Where do we place the fulfillment that is predicted within salvation history, and how does this text address missions in the 21st century?

The development of the new creational, multi-ethnic community of 3:9–10 will happen “at that time”—namely, at the day of the Lord, when the fires of God’s judgment pour out against the nations and kingdoms of the earth. Paul envisions this day as still future, when he asserts that the Lord Jesus will be “revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thess 1:8–9). Peter, too, highlights the future, unexpected nature of this day: “The heavens and the earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.... But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed” (2 Pet 3:7, 10).

But while in a very real sense the day of the LORD that Zephaniah envisions is still future for us, there is another very real sense in which the day of punishment for the elect is now past and we are even now enjoying the transformed speech, unity, and worship envisioned in Zeph 3:9–10. Peter declared that “all the prophets” foretold Christ’s sufferings and subsequent glories, including the glories seen in and through the church (Acts 3:18, 24; 1 Pet 1:10–11). Zephaniah never explicitly predicts Jesus’s coming, yet we see the prophet foreseeing the Messiah and his mission in at least two ways: (1) Zephaniah portrays the day of the Lord as God’s sacrifice by which he satisfies his wrath and gains victory over all evil. The biblical authors apply the images of both sacrifice and victory to Christ’s first and second comings. (2) Zephaniah envisions the church age, wherein Christ’s death initially fulfills Zephaniah’s vision of the day of wrath against sinners and inaugurates the multi-ethnic gathering of worshippers in the presence of the King.

1. Recognize that Christ’s sacrificial death initiates the day of the Lord for the elect.

For Zephaniah, the day of the Lord is a time of war when Yahweh will pour out his wrath on the rebellious of the earth (Zeph 1:15–17), whom the prophet portrays as a “sacrifice” ready to be consumed (1:7–8; cf. Jer 46:10; Rev 19:17–21). Right order exists only where God is exalted over all, and his just jealousy moves him to re-establish order by overcoming evil. He accomplishes this only by killing either the sinner or a substitute (Lev 17:11; Heb 9:22). By failing to “draw near” to the Lord (Zeph 3:2), especially through his provision of a substitute sacrifice (cf. Lev 9:1–10:3), those in Jerusalem and beyond were exposing themselves to *becoming* the sacrifice.

Yet God’s law sets forth a clear pattern of substitution (e.g., Exod 12:12–14; Lev 16:15–22, 33–34), and prophets like Isaiah show that this pattern was pointing to the sufferings of the royal servant (Isa 52:13–53:12). Each of the Gospel writers highlights the darkness that accompanied Jesus’s crucifixion (e.g., Luke 23:44), and Peter’s citation of Joel 2:30–31 in Acts 2:19–20 suggests that Peter identified this darkness with what the prophets said would precede the day of the Lord. Jesus is “the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29), and thus

we should understand that when Jesus bore God's wrath as the sacrificial substitute on behalf of the elect, he was partially fulfilling what Zephaniah said would happen at the day of the Lord.

Christ's first coming initiates the day of the Lord for the elect, but his second coming will be as warrior to unleash God's wrath against all the non-elect—the enemies of God. In his first coming he is the *object* of God's wrath; in his second coming he will be the *instrument* of God's wrath. It is between these two poles—the first and second comings of Jesus—that the church of Jesus Christ is growing and that missions is imperative. This leads us to Zeph 3:9–10.

2. *Recognize that the Church fulfils Zephaniah's hopes for a single reconciled community from every tribe and tongue.*

If the fires of judgment foreseen in Zeph 3:8 were bore for the elect by Christ at the cross, then his resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost mark the initiation of Zephaniah's vision of new creation begun in 3:9–10. John said,

I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me ... will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. (Matt 3:11)

In Jerusalem, Jesus initiated a great second exodus or ingathering in which many peoples would be saved (Luke 9:31; cf. Zeph 3:10, 19–20).

[He died] for the nation [of Israel], and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. (John 11:51–52; cf. Isa 49:5–6).

The church today, made up of believing Jews and Gentiles in Christ, is fulfilling this vision.

One way this is seen is in Luke's depiction of the early church's growth in the beginning of Acts. In the context of explaining a mission of making worshippers "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8), Peter's Pentecost sermon in Acts 2:17–21 cites Joel 2:28–32, which depicts the day of the Lord and mentions calling on God's name in ways very similar to Zephaniah (Zeph 1:15; 3:8–9). What is not found in Joel, however, but is present in Zeph 3:9–10 is the vision of transformed "speech" (LXX = "tongue") and united devotion, both of which Luke highlights in detailing the outpouring of "tongues" (Acts 2:4, 11) and the amazing kinship enjoyed by the early believers (vv. 42–47). Significantly, Zeph 3:10 uses ancient Cush (LXX = Ethiopia) as the sole example of global restoration, which likely explains why he places the story of the Ethiopian eunuch's salvation in Acts 8:26–40. Luke appears to be highlighting the fact that Zephaniah's vision of restoration is beginning to be fulfilled.

With this, in broader fulfilment of Zephaniah's restoration hope in 3:9–10, the NT is clear that Jesus's first coming marks the beginning of the end of the first creation and initiates the new creation, which corresponds to the new covenant (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15; Heb 8:13). In this age Jews and Gentiles in Christ together make up one people of God, the church (Gal 3:8, 14, 29; Eph 2:14–16), which Rev 5:9–10 says Jesus is shaping into "a kingdom and priests" "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (cf. Rev 7:9–10). Already, as priests, we are offering sacrifices of praise (Rom 12:1; Heb 13:15–16; 1 Pet 2:5) at "Mount Zion and ... the heavenly

Jerusalem” (Heb 12:22; cf. Isa 2:2–3; Zech 8:20–23; Gal 4:26). Nevertheless, we await the day on which the “new Jerusalem” will descend from heaven as (or to) the new earth (Rev 21:2, 10; cf. Isa 65:17–18), when our daily journey to find rest in Christ’s supremacy and sufficiency (Matt 11:28–29; John 6:35) will come to completion in a place where the curse is no more (Rev 21:22–22:5).

3. Act on the Fact that God Saves Worshipers without Prejudice

Convinced that the fires of God’s wrath have already fallen on Jesus for *all* who will call upon the name of the Lord, regardless of ethnic heritage (Zeph 3:8–10), we cannot help but desire that all peoples have the chance to call out to him for mercy and grace. We must hear Paul’s urgency in Rom 10:

¹³ “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” ¹⁴ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ¹⁵ And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” ... ¹⁷ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

Brothers and sisters, the marvel of your great salvation should motivate missions. Jesus said, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few” (Luke 10:2). The church of Jesus is to be an ever-increasing multi-ethnic community that follows the rivers of life back to the sanctuary of God. Missions exists today because the worshipers of which Zephaniah spoke are still being created. The peoples from the distant lands—whether those who have moved into our own neighbourhood or those that still remain in hard-to-reach places are living in darkness under the wrath of God. The day of the Lord is at hand, and they will perish under God’s just wrath unless, upon hearing the good news, perhaps from you, they are saved by Christ’s bearing of God’s wrath in their place. We need godly goers and we need godly senders. We need to hope in the one who has sparked this new creation and who alone changes mouths from cursing him to calling on him for deliverance and in thanks. Today, in the 21st century, God is reversing the curse of Babel, and he shaping ...

a great multitude that no one [will be able to] number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud [united] voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Rev 7:9–10)

I urge you to join me in this mission.