

REJOICING IN HOPE: UNDERSTANDING AND APPLYING ZEPHANIAH

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I delight in this opportunity to supply this years Hugh D. Brown Lectures, and I thank my dear brother Edwin and his team for the invitation. My overarching title is “Rejoicing in Hope: Understanding and Applying Zephaniah.” I have just completed seven and a half years of commentary work on this book, and I am eager to supply you a taste of the glories our God disclosed to me. Of Zephaniah Luther declared, “Among the minor prophets, he makes the clearest prophecies about the kingdom of Christ.”¹ Much earlier, the Apostle Peter noted that “God foretold by the mouth of all his prophets [including Zephaniah] ... that his Christ would suffer” (Acts 3:18), and then he adds that “all the prophets ... proclaimed these days” of the church (3:24).

Pray with me: Sovereign Savior of the world who overcomes night with light and satisfies the humble with abundant life in your presence, meet us in these hours. For the sake of your name, Lord Christ, open your word that we may behold dreadful and glorious things that can help us seek you together and wait for you to act finally and decisively as you have already acted initially and truly. We praise you for our great salvation and the hope that is ours in Christ. Amen.

Open your Bible to the book of Zephaniah, a brief fifty-three verse book that one scholar has tagged the climax of the book of the Twelve minor prophets.² This book portrays the day of the Lord in furious fire that both consumes God’s enemies and purifies a multi-ethnic community of worshipers for a transformed Zion.

Note the superscription in 1:1: “The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah the son of Cushi, son of Gedalia, son of Amaria, son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah.” The prophecy’s nature: a word ... a living and authoritative word because its source is Yahweh. In this book Yahweh is King over all (3:15), and he stands as a mighty Warrior (1:14; 3:17) who commands armies (2:9), who will famish all the earth’s gods (2:11), and whose just jealousy for the world’s allegiance blazes like fire and will consume all the earth (1:18; 3:8). The prophecy’s messenger: a certain Zephaniah, whose five-person

¹ Martin Luther, “Lectures on Zephaniah,” in *Lectures on the Minor Prophets I: Hosea–Malachi*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, trans. Richard J. Dinda, vol. 18 of *Luther’s Works* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1975), 319.

² Paul R. House, *The Unity of the Twelve*, JSOTSup 97 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 147–51.

genealogy shows that he has royal lineage, for his great, great grandfather was the reformer king Hezekiah. Not only this, because his father was Cushite, Zephaniah was likely bi-racial. Cush was ancient black Africa, and Zephaniah's grandmother was likely African, married into the Jewish royal line, and then named her son, "My Blacky," celebrating her ethnic heritage. Support for this view comes in the fact that Zephaniah shows a unique interest in Cush, for it's the only region he uses as an example of the multi-ethnic, global restoration at the end of the age (3:9–10). As a bi-racial prophet, Zephaniah's life displayed the hope of a diversified people of God in fulfillment of Yahweh's promises to Abraham regarding blessing to the nations (Gen 12:3; 22:18). Finally, the prophecy's historical backdrop is the reign of king Josiah of Judah, whom Yahweh redeemed from the depraved darkness of his father Amon's reign and who instituted a spiritual reform that Zephaniah's preaching served to promote.

The book supplies the Savior God's invitation to satisfaction. In this first lecture I hope to overview the setting for the Savior's invitation and then consider stage 1 of this invitation.

Lecture 1: Seek the Lord Together to Avoid Punishment (Zeph 1:1–3:7)

Chapter 1 provides the setting for the book's main exhortations by calling readers to revere Yahweh in view of the nearness and nature of his impending wrath on Judah and the world. 1:2–6 provides the context for the call to revere the Lord, and 1:7–18 then provides the makeup of the call.

The Context of the Call to Revere God (1:2–6)

We start in 1:2–3: "I will surely gather [ESV/NIV = "sweep away"] everything from the face of the earth,' declares the LORD. 'I will gather man and beast; I will gather 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,' declares the LORD." You may rightly hear echoes of the flood judgment in these verses (Gen 6:7). You may also notice how Yahweh's judicial assessment moves from "man ... beast ... birds ... fish" (Zeph 1:3), which is the reverse order of how God created them (Gen 1:20–28). Thus, Zephaniah paints the coming punishment as a de-creation back toward chaos. The "rubble" that God will destroy with the "wicked" are likely idols (cf. Ezek 7:19–20).

But lest those in Judah think they may escape, Yahweh moves from global catastrophe to local destruction in 1:4–6. Look at 1:4: "I will stretch out my hand

against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I will cut off from this place the remnant of Baal.” Yahweh’s earthly address was Jerusalem. At the very location of his temple-palace dwelt a holdout of those worshipping the Canaanite’s false storm and fertility deity. While English translations vary, the Hebrew of 1:4–6 suggests “the remnant of Baal” included four overlapping sub-groups:

1. “the idolatrous priests along with the priests” (1:4c)—that is, illegitimate, non-Levitical clergy who led in worshipping idols (1 Kgs 12:31–32; 13:33–34) and who served alongside legitimate “priests” who failed to teach God’s law, guard knowledge, and preserve what was holy (Lev 10:10–11; cf. Zeph 3:4)
2. “those who bow down on the roofs to the host of the heavens” (1:5a; cf. 2 Kgs 17:16–18; 21:3, 5, 12; Jer 19:13)—the star worshipers;
3. “those who bow down and swear to the LORD and yet swear by Milcom”—those paying lip service to Yahweh (i.e., swearing *to*) but giving highest allegiance to another god (i.e., swearing *by*) (Zeph 1:5b)
4. “those who have turned back from following the LORD, who do not seek the LORD or inquire of him”—those living self-ruled, self-dependent lives (1:6). To “turn back from following the LORD” (1:6) always refers to covenant disloyalty (Pss 44:18; 78:57; Isa 59:13), which the people demonstrated by failing to rely on God (cf. Deut 4:29; 2 Chr 20:3–4; Ps 105:3–4; Jer 29:13) or by not wanting to know his will or word (cf. 1 Kgs 22:5; Amos 8:12) (“seek” and “inquire”).

Elsewhere we learn that Josiah’s reform sought to eradicate all instruments and individuals associated with these very activities (2 Kgs 23:4–5, 10, 24). What is clear is that Yahweh is no respecter of persons. Whether priest or commoner, if you choose to turn away from God and refuse to seek him and pray to him, condemnation will come.

The Makeup of the Call to Revere God (1:7–18)

Now we come to the heart of the setting section. Like a herald preparing courtiers for a king’s arrival (Judg 3:19), Zephaniah urges his audience to revere the Lord (Zeph 1:7a) because of the temporal nearness and sacrificial nature of Yahweh’s impending punishment against Jerusalem (1:7b–13) and the world (1:14–18). “Be silent before the Lord GOD! For the day of the LORD is near.”

Notice how the impending nature of Yahweh's day is not the main point of the prophet's message. Within this book, every image of darkness and light, devastation and delight, serves to motivate the prophet's exhortations. In 1:7 it comes not in the form of a command but in the form of a Hebrew exclamation "Hush! Be silent!" Listeners need to revere God. Why? Look at the rest of 1:7: "For the day of the LORD is near."

Throughout the Prophets, the phrase "the day of Yahweh" (יִום יְהוָה) and its abbreviated parallels ("the/this/that day") refer to the ultimate time when God will punish and restore the whole world and to the periodic pen-ultimate days that clarify and anticipate it. That is, the day of the Lord includes both (1) God's final and decisive move to execute justice and to re-establish right order in the world (e.g., Zeph 1:14–18; 3:8–10; cf. 2 Thess 1:9–10; 2 Pet 3:10) and (2) any number of historical foretastes of this end time wherein God restores peace by judging wickedness—not only that of the broad world (e.g., Jer 46:10; Joel 3:9–16; Obad 15; cf. Isa 2:10–22; 13:1–22; Ezek 30:1–9) but also that of Israel/Judah (Ezek 13:5; Amos 5:18; Zech 14:1; cf. Isa 3:1–4:1; Joel 1:15; 2:1–11; 3:1; Mal 4:5[3:5]).

Zephaniah anticipates the Lord's day in both respects. In 1:7 with the statement "the day of the LORD is near" he introduces a unit that runs to 1:13 all focused on the imminent and localized punishment that Babylon will bring upon Jerusalem in 586 BC (cf. 3:7). So we see him identify specific locations in Jerusalem in 1:10: "On that day ... a cry will be heard from the Fish Gate, a wail from the Second Quarter, a loud crash from the hills." And again in 1:12: "At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps [catching them unexpectedly], and I will punish the men who are complacent." Notice, too, how this coming punishment targets both leader and commoner alike. God castigates the political leaders in 1:8: "I will punish the officials and the king's sons and the all who array themselves in foreign attire." Then he targets the religious leaders in 1:9: "On that day I will punish everyone who leaps over the threshold, those who fill their master's house with violence and fraud." In 1:7 God was call "Sovereign Yahweh," and now we read of "their Sovereign's house" (1:8), which likely refers to the temple. But God will not only Jerusalem's leaders; his wrath will reach the common man. 1:12: "At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the men who are complacent, those who say in their hearts, 'The LORD will not do good nor will he do ill.'" The complacent are those who neither fear God's wrath nor desire his blessings. They are those who live like deists or practical atheists, acting as though the Lord is not really watching and does not really care. Yahweh's day of wrath was near against Jerusalem, and because of this, Zephaniah's audience needed to revere God.

But this localized punishment was to be matched by a more ultimate, global punishment. Compare the opening of 1:7—“the day of the LORD is near—versus the opening of 1:14—“the *great* day of the LORD” is near. At 1:14 we switch from the localized punishment of Jerusalem in 586 BC to the global, eschatological judgment coming on the whole world at the end of the age. Note the broader scope in 1:17: “I will bring distress on mankind.” And then again at the end of 1:18: “In the fire of my jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed, for a full and sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.”

Those listening to Zephaniah need to revere God. Let your hearts be hushed before his presence. The pre-emptive, typological day already came upon Jerusalem, bringing devastation and destruction. Therefore, we can be sure that the greater fury that the Lord promises is coming. The Lord takes sin seriously. He must, because he is just! He will pour out his fury against all forms of rebellion. Thus, he declares in 1:17: “I will bring distress on mankind so that they shall walk like the blind, because they have sinned against the LORD.” There it is.... Where there is sin, there will be retribution. Because God is just, he must hate and identify and punish every failure.

Within this book, the objects of Yahweh’s wrath include the idolatrous and self-led (1:3–6), the Scriptureless and prayerless (1:6; 3:4), the conceited and oppressive (1:9, 16; 2:8, 10, 15; 3:1, 3–4), the apathetic and passionless (1:11; 2:1), the deaf and unresponsive (3:2), the trustless and self-dependent (3:2). They sit indifferent and self-righteous, with neither concern for God’s judgment nor a longing for his blessing (1:12; 2:1, 15; 3:5, 8). Chaff is chaff regardless of where it is found, and though in Zephaniah’s Judah the hold-out of faithful was mixed with the majority of rabble, on the day of wrath, God “will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Matt 3:12; cf. Zeph 2:1–2). He will eradicate all forms of iniquity, whether idolatry, syncretism, and self-rule (1:3–6); violence, deception, and complacency (1:9, 12); pride, vain boasts, and taunting (2:8–10, 15); rebellion, defilement, and oppression (3:1); resistance, unresponsiveness, and shameless treachery and abuse (3:2–5). Indeed, like he did at the flood (Gen 6:11–13; cf. Zeph 1:2–3), he will gather and destroy all who fail to fear him but instead multiply their corruption (3:7). The Warrior-King (3:15, 17) will act decisively, removing arrogance from his city (3:12) and eliminating those who afflicted her (3:19). He will cleanse the earth and reconstitute the mountain of his holiness for his presence (3:11–12; cf. 3:5, 15, 17). And when he comes, the day will be unexpected and filled with cataclysm, conquest, and sacrifice. Let’s consider each of these characteristics of Yahweh’s day.

Characteristics of the Day of the Lord

The Day as Cataclysm

With echoes of the Lord's encounter with Adam and Eve following their sin (Gen 3:8) and of his appearance before Israel at Mount Sinai to establish the old covenant (Exod 19:16; Deut 4:11; 5:22), Zephaniah and the other biblical prophets often associate Yahweh's day of wrath with darkness, wind, earthquake, and clouds. "A day of wrath is that day ... a day of darkness and gloom, a day of cloud and thick darkness" (Zeph 1:15). The foreboding images of tempest and shadow, gloom and quaking display Yahweh's fierce and impending presence and highlight the nearness of his day of destruction against both individuals (2 Sam 22:12; Job 15:22) and nations (Isa 13:10; 30:30; cf. Ezek 30:3; Joel 3:15; Zeph 1:15), including Israel/Judah (Isa 5:30; 8:22; 29:6; cf. Joel 2:2, 30–31; Amos 5:18, 20; 8:9).

Whereas many in Israel envisioned the day of the Lord to be one of light, the prophets stressed that for all the unrepentant, it would indeed be night. "Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD! ... It is darkness, and not light" (Amos 5:18; cf. Ezek 32:7–8; Joel 2:2, 10, 31; 3:15; Amos 8:9; Mic 3:6). When God enters our space and time, the natural forces react; storms awaken and ground quakes. "You will be visited by the LORD of hosts with thunder and with earthquake and great noise, with whirlwind and tempest, and the flame of a devouring fire" (Isa 29:6; cf. 30:30; Joel 2:30–31). With Joel, we must declare, "The day of the LORD is great and very awesome; who can endure it?" (Joel 2:11). Such depictions of the Lord's day should cause hearts to tremble. "Be silent before the Lord GOD! For the day of the LORD is near!" (Zeph 1:7).

The Day as Conquest

The darkness of Yahweh's day of fury may at times refer not to storm but to the sensory experience of dying as a victim of divine war. On the day of the Lord, the lights of life indeed go out for the enemies of God. Thus, Zephaniah portrayed this day as one of "distress and anguish ... ruin and devastation ... darkness and gloom ... cloud and thick darkness." It is "a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements" (Zeph 1:15–16). Such images recall Yahweh's conquest of Canaan (cf. Num 13:28; Deut 1:28; 3:5; 9:1 with Deut 6:10–11; Josh 6:5, 20) and portray his day of wrath as a more ultimate conquest, wherein God reestablishes a new people in a transformed land. We see this also in Zeph 1:13, where the very language of curse against the Canaanites from Deut 6:10–11 and 28:30, 39 is applied to those in Jerusalem.

Associated with Yahweh's day are common sounds associated with war: cries of pain, terror, and tumult (1:10–11) and the blast of a trumpet (1:16). “The sound of the day of the LORD is bitter” as “a Mighty One,” Yahweh the Sovereign Warrior, “cries aloud there” (1:14). “The LORD utters his voice before his army.... For the day of the LORD is great and very awesome” (Joel 2:11; cf. Jer 46:10; Zech 14:1–3).

The Day as Sacrifice

After highlighting the nearness of the day of the Lord, Zephaniah grounds his declaration in the reality that God had already “prepared a *sacrifice*” (Zeph 1:7). Atonement reestablishes right order, and it is only accomplished by killing the sinner or a substitute (Lev 17:11; Isa 22:12–14; Heb 9:22). In Zeph 3:2 we learn that a key problem in Zephaniah's Jerusalem was that the city had failed to “draw near to her God.” By failing to “draw near” to the Lord, principally through his provision of a substitute sacrifice (cf. Lev 9:1–10:3), those in Jerusalem and beyond had prepared themselves to be the sacrifice.

Sacrificial fires are nothing less than a divine war against wickedness. Hence, after describing the day with cataclysmic and conquest imagery, God stressed, “I will bring distress on mankind ... because they have sinned against the LORD” (Zeph 1:17). He then appropriates images of sacrifice to describe what he would do against his enemies: “Their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung.... In the fire of his jealousy all the earth shall be consumed” (Zeph 1:17–18; cf. 2:2; 3:8; Mal 2:3). Zephaniah and other prophets commonly associate fire with the day of the Lord, and it aligns well with images of cataclysm, conquest, and sacrifice (e.g., Hos 8:14; Mic 1:7; Zeph 2:2; 3:8; Mal 4:1[3:19]; cf. Isa 29:6; Joel 2:3, 5, 30; Amos 5:6; Obad 18; Mic 1:4; Nah 1:6; 3:15). With this, both Jeremiah and Ezekiel compare Yahweh's punishing of his enemies with a great sacrifice (Jer 46:10; Ezek 39:17, 20–21).

The blended images of war and sacrifice depict the way that Yahweh justly secures atonement and re-establishes a state of right order in which the redeemed celebrate him as supreme and value his image in others (cf. Isa 22:14; 34:2, 6). Such is the goal of the day of the Lord.

Christ as the Agent of Yahweh's Final Day

Jesus spoke of the future “day of judgment” wherein God would judge all people in accord with their deeds (Matt 12:36; cf. Matt 7:23; 10:15; 11:22–24; John 12:48). All those on earth “will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of

heaven with power and great glory” (Matt 24:30; cf. Acts 1:9–11), and at this time, Jesus says, “he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect” (Matt 24:31; cf. 1 Thess 4:16; Rev 8:7). Jesus associates Zephaniah’s great day of ingathering directly with his second coming (Matt 24:36, 42, 50; 25:13; cf. Mark 13:32; Luke 17:24) and with the future resurrection (John 6:39–40, 44, 54; 11:24), which would be unexpected for all who are in darkness (Matt 24:43, 50; Luke 12:46; 17:30). As Zephaniah foresaw, at this time, Christ will gather all nations to himself and separate the wicked from the righteous (Matt 3:12; 25:31–32; cf. 13:24–30; Zeph 1:2; 3:8). He will punish the former with “unquenchable fire” (Matt 3:12; cf. 7:21–23; 25:41; 2 Thess 1:7–10; 2 Pet 3:7–10). However, he will welcome and feast with the latter (Matt 25:34; 26:29; Mark 14:25), and they will know him for who he is (John 14:20).

John tagged the culminating battle of the ages “the great day of God the Almighty” (Rev 16:14) and “the great day of their wrath,” of which he queried, “Who can stand?” (6:17). In keeping with Zephaniah’s presentation of the day of the Lord (Zeph 1:7), John also envisioned that the results of this final war against evil would be a sacrificial feast for the birds (19:17–18). Peter stressed: “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” (2 Pet 3:7). He then adds that, for those in darkness, “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 3:10; cf. 1 Thess 5:2; Rev 3:3). Christ’s second coming fulfills, in part, Zephaniah’s vision of global destruction at the end of the age. God takes sin seriously, and so should we.

The Substance of the Savior’s Invitation to Satisfaction, Stage 1: Seek the Lord Together (2:1–3:7)

Having established the need to revere the Lord, Zephaniah shifts from the setting of the Savior’s invitation to satisfaction to its actual substance. He signals this first by the lack of any connection in 2:1 and then by the inclusion of imperatives, which always carry the highest-level appeal. The primary exhortation comes in two stages. Stage one includes a charge to bundle together in submission to the Lord (2:1–2), a charge to seek the Lord in righteousness and humility (2:3–4), and two parallel reasons to seek the Lord together (2:5–15; 3:1–7).

The Charge to Bunder Together in Submission to the Lord (2:1–2)

We begin in 2:1–2: “Gather together, yes, gather, O shameless nation, 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.” Zephaniah now addresses his primary audience Judah as “shameless nation” (lit., “the nation not longing” for Yahweh; cf. 1:12). He urges listeners to “gather” together using a Hebrew root usually associated with collecting straw or sticks in contexts of punishment (2:1; cf. Exod 15:7; Nah 1:10). The context here, though, is more positive. As people collect desirable straw or grain after separating the chaff, the faithful remnant must “bundle” themselves in unity (cf. Joel 1:14–15) and separate from everything destined for God’s fiery wrath. “Bundle yourselves ... before the decree takes effect ... before there comes upon you the burning anger of the LORD.” The prophet repeats the preposition “before” to emphasize that the time to repent is fleeting, and he repeats the phrase “anger of the LORD” to stress that the need to repent is serious (Zeph 2:2).

The Charge to Seek the Lord in Righteousness and Humility (2:3–4)

In addition to the two imperatives in 2:1, we now get three more in 2:3. Having addressed the nation broadly, the prophet now narrows focus to the remnant of “the land” who have already humbled themselves before Yahweh. That this remnant remains unnamed and that in 2:5 and 12 he actually addresses the nations with his speech suggests to me that Zephaniah’s audience include the remnant of faithful not only from Judah but also from those beyond Judah who would heed his instruction. “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.”

In contrast to the ESV, the Hebrew suggests the prophet regards the remnant not as those who have followed God’s “commands” but as those who are humbly taking seriously his coming “judgment.” I translate the beginning of 2:3 as, “Seek Yahweh, all the humble of the land who have heeded his judgment.” In this book, Yahweh’s “judgment” relates to the day of reckoning that he has declared (cf. 3:5, 8). Zephaniah address 2:3 to those who have revered God (1:7) and who have already heeded his call to bundle together (2:1) in the hope of protection. It is these that the prophet charges to “seek the LORD, ... seek righteousness, seek humility!” (2:3a–c). According to 1:6, the remnant of Baal are those “who do not seek the LORD or inquire of him.” The humble, instead, turn from self-reliance to surrender.

Zephaniah explicates his call to “seek the LORD” from two angles. *First*, having spurned the chaos of injustice and rebellion, those humbled before God should “seek righteousness.” Pursuing “righteousness” is to align with right order in the cosmos (Pss 89:14; 119:75) and community (Gen 18:19; Deut 16:20; Ps 15:2) such that one values God and his image in others. Jesus urged those who were already his followers to “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matt 6:33). Similarly, here Zephaniah urges those already enjoying relationship with God to now see fruits of righteous deeds evident in their lives.

Second, to “seek the LORD” means seeking “humility.” A life of “humility” is one that is dependent on God (cf. Zeph 3:12; Ps 37:11; Isa 11:4). The humble life receives from his hand without fighting against his providence. It embraces one’s neediness and follows God’s lead. In Peter’s words, knowing that “God opposes the proud but gives grace to humble,” “humble yourselves ... under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you” (1 Pet 5:5–6).

Only those who seek the Lord, who seek righteousness and humility may be “hidden” from Yahweh’s coming fury (Zeph 2:3d; cf. 2:7, 9; 3:11–20; Ps 27:5). The prophets regularly use qualifiers like “perhaps” to help their hearers hope in but not presume on divine favor (Joel 2:14; Amos 5:15; Jon 3:9; Acts 8:22). We should not read here a limiting of Zephaniah’s knowledge or any uncertainty regarding God’s response toward repentance. Yahweh’s merciful character is unchanging (Exod 34:6–7), his promises are sure (e.g., Deut 30:1–14), and Zephaniah elsewhere emphasizes both the true potential of reconciliation with God (Zeph 3:7) and the certainty that the Lord will preserve a humble remnant (2:7, 9; 3:11–20).

So why should the faithful remnant from Judah and beyond seek the Lord? Zephaniah 2:4 declares it is because (“For”) Yahweh will soon destroy four primary Philistine cities. What is the prophet’s logic? Here is what I believe is happening: If God’s punishment falls on Judah’s immediate neighbor to the west, Zephaniah’s Judah should not think she will escape.

At this the prophet digresses, supplying to unmarked reasons why the faithful remnant needs to seek the Lord together. Each begins with the exclamation “Woe!” (2:5; 3:1). In 2:5–15 Zephaniah laments the state and fate of the rebels from around Jerusalem. Then in 3:1–7 he laments the state and fate of the rebels in Jerusalem. A key reason why those listening to Zephaniah must seek the Lord together is because of the lamentable state and fate of the rebels in the world. God’s wrath is coming, and not one wicked person will escape the anger of the Lord.

A Proper Response

a. Allow the seriousness of the day of the Lord to move you to revere God.

Zephaniah 1 portrays a God who demands reverence (1:7), whose just jealousy judges with flames of wrath (1:18; cf. 3:8), who confronts all affronts to his holiness (1:7, 12–13), whose justice shows no prejudice (1:8–9), and whose punishment is both terrible and complete (1:11, 15–18). Whereas some may minimize certain types of sins, believing them to be insignificant, Zephaniah simply asserts that any sin demands the full rage of Yahweh’s anger.³

The words the prophet uses to describe the outbreak of divine anger are breathtaking—a day of “wrath, distress, anguish, ruin, devastation, darkness, gloom, cloud, thick darkness, trumpet blast, and battle cry” (1:15–16). Can the situation be more ominous? Paul asserted Christ will come “in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not heed the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and the glory of his might” (2 Thess 1:8–9; cf. 2 Pet 3:10). How dreadful to have the source of all power and the upholder of all life working against you. I urge you today: Revere God!

b. Commune regularly with other believers to aid one another’s perseverance.

The masculine plural imperatives in Zeph 2:1 and 3 stress the individual responsibility of heeding God’s commands. Yet those heeding Zephaniah’s charges are to fulfill them *together*. No believer is to “seek Yahweh” alone (2:3). This is why Zephaniah’s initial charge opens by calling those who will listen to “bundle” themselves and “make a bundle” (2:1). God’s coming punishment will explode on the earth, and in his love, Yahweh wants people not to feel isolated but to find strength in united surrender. We must seek the Lord together.

The writer of Hebrews urged his readers to “exhort one another every day” (Heb 3:13) and to “consider how to stir up one another to love and good works ... and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (10:24–25). “The Day” is the ultimate “day of the anger of the LORD” to which Zephaniah points (Zeph 2:2–3). Partnership with other believers, seen especially through active local church membership, helps us continue to grow in holiness, which properly prepares us to see the Lord (Heb 12:14).

³ J. Alec Motyer, “Zephaniah,” in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 924.

c. Continue seeking the Lord, pursuing righteousness and humility.

Alec Motyer has rightly noted, “In the Bible the only way to flee *from* God is to flee *to* him.”⁴ Zephaniah yearns for his audience to be free from the fear of death (cf. Heb 2:15) and to experience “the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (12:14). He thus urges his audience to hunger for the Lord with a proper orientation of life (righteousness) and a proper disposition of heart (humility). Treasuring God should awaken love for others and nurture a sense of personal need for something more than the world offers (Zeph 2:3; cf. Matt 5:6).

To seek the Lord by pursuing righteousness and humility (Zeph 2:3), we must *first* turn from self-reliance and self-exaltation to radical God-dependence and God-exaltation. With John the Baptist, we each must say, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). In our piety and ministry, we must serve in God’s strength, not our own, and seek God’s commendation over that of men (Matt 10:28; Acts 5:29; 2 Cor 4:2; 10:17–18; 1 Pet 4:11). In our suffering, we should “not be anxious about tomorrow (Matt 6:34) but must be “casting all ... anxieties upon [God], because he cares” (1 Pet 5:7; cf. Phil 4:6–7). In our victories, we ought to declare, “By the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Cor 15:10). And when we boast, we should “boast in the Lord,” knowing that God only commends those who celebrate that “Christ Jesus ... became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor 1:30–31; 2 Cor 10:17–18; cf. Rom 2:6–7). The impoverished, not the proud, engage in prayer and praise, and by these God-treasuring acts, we magnify the Lord’s greatness and sufficiency. “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (1 Pet 5:5; Jas 4:6), and only in seeking the Lord is there any hope for protection on the day of his wrath.

Second, to truly seek the Lord by seeking righteousness and humility (Zeph 2:3) requires living impartial and loving lives rather than abusive ones. We must image God’s character (Deut 10:17–19) and value his image in others (Gen 9:6; Jas 3:9). Too easily, our God-given proficiency, power, or possessions move us to forget Yahweh as the great giver (Deut 8:14, 17; Hos 13:5–6) and to elevate ourselves over others, even at their expense. This was the case in Zephaniah’s day. Outsiders “taunted and boasted against the people of the LORD of hosts” (Zeph 2:10). Insiders, especially leaders, shamelessly engaged in “violence and fraud” and like wild beasts unjustly oppressed others (1:9; 3:1, 3–5). In contrast, “Yahweh is righteousness.... He never does wrong. Morning by morning he gives his judgment for the light” (3:5; author’s translation; cf. Deut 32:4). The Lord is one “who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth” (Jer 9:24),

⁴ Motyer, “Zephaniah,” 927.

and knowing him means that we will mirror in practice his delight in such things. So with Paul I urge you, “Flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart” (2 Tim 2:22). This type of living is what Zephaniah meant by “seek the LORD ... seek righteousness ... seek humility” (Zeph 2:3).