

X. “Seek the LORD”

11-May-03 Zephaniah 2:1-15

Theme: Seek the Lord so that you may be saved in the remnant that survives the certain coming of the wrath of the Day of the Lord.

Key Verse: Zephaniah 2:3 “Seek the LORD, all you meek of the earth, who have upheld His justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility. It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the LORD’s anger.”

Review

Last week, we began our study of Zephaniah in chapter 1. We were introduced to the subject of the Day of the Lord Zephaniah says that Day of the Lord is coming soon, and He is going to judge all creation. The focus of judgment then narrows down to the people of God, whose specific religious sins of idolatry, adultery, and apostasy are denounced. Zephaniah continues to pronounce judgment on the various peoples of Jerusalem before widening his scope to describe total destruction of the land. This Day of the Lord is the *Dies Irae* – the Day of Wrath.

Understanding that the Day of Yahweh involves a theophany in which God manifests His powers may serve as a useful starting point for comprehending the origins of the Day. The first chapter of Zephaniah’s prophecy presents in sequence **three connected images**. The first depicts the reversal of the order of the cosmos as sustained by the provisions of the covenant with Noah (vv. 2-3). The second describes a sacrificial feast connected with the curses symbolized in the covenant-making procedure manifested at the time of the establishment of the Abrahamic covenant (vv. 7-8; cf. Gen. 15). The third presents a frightful image of God’s appearance with darkness, thick darkness, cloud, and trumpet, reflecting the theophany associated with the establishment of the Mosaic covenant (Zeph. 1:15-16). Thus, the **Day of Yahweh in Zephaniah 1 is associated with the establishment of the successive covenants made with Noah, Abraham, and Moses**. The Day of Yahweh therefore may be seen as the Day of his Covenant. **On this day, He establishes his sovereign lordship over men**. God’s lordship throughout the world finds its meaningful structure in the coming of the great Day when He enforces the provisions of His covenant. This Day of the Lord has come already, and it is still to come at the end of the age (1 Th. 1:7-10). We are to be ready for the day of His coming.

Introduction

Given the awesomeness of the description of the Day of the Lord in Zephaniah 1, the prophet calls us to respond in repentance. The call to repentance which follows the prophet’s solemn announcement of the coming of the Day of Yahweh must not be misinterpreted. This call does not imply that somehow the arrival of the Day may be turned back, or even delayed. However, **some possibility exists that protection may be provided for the repentant at the arrival of the Day**. This slim hope the prophet holds out as his primary motivation for urging the people to turn from their sinful ways (vv. 1-3). **The second motivation for repentance is more fearsome in its perspective**. In considering **the coming devastation of other nations**, Judah may find adequate reason to accept the pealing of the death knell that has sounded for them also (2:4-15).

Exposition

II. The Call to Repentance Sounds Before the Arrival of God's Great Day (2:1-15)

A. Seek Now, for Perhaps You May Be Hid in That Day (2:1-13)

- 1 *Gather yourselves together like stubble,
yes, gather together like stubble,
O nation that has no shame;*
- 2
 - a *Before*
 - b *the decree gives birth
(like chaff the day passes over),*
 - a *before*
 - b *the burning of the wrath of Yahweh*
 - c *shall come on you,*
 - a *before*
 - b *the Day of the wrath of Yahweh*
 - c *shall come on you.*
- 3 *Seek Yahweh
all you meek of the land
who do His justice;
seek righteousness,
seek meekness.
Perhaps you shall be hid in the day of the wrath of Yahweh.*

The first section (1:2-18) was *declarative* in form. It made known to the hearers in no uncertain terms the realities associated with the Day of Yahweh. **But this section comes in the form of an admonition. As a matter of fact, these three verses contain five admonitions (gather, gather, seek, seek, seek).** These five admonitions are joined by three temporal clauses (before, before, before) to emphasize the urgency of the admonition being directed to Judah (v. 2).

1. The first verse begins with a coupling of admonitions that have created many problems for interpreters. As a verbal form, the root concept conveys the meaning of "gathering stubble." But what is the significance of this unique imperative, *gather yourselves together like stubble?* **The admonition may be interpreted as a form of derogatory address. Judah is worth no more than stubble.** Its populace ought to bunch together in a manner that acknowledges this utter worthlessness. Let them stand as sinners worthy of judgment. **Either they must humble themselves to the dust, or they must expect the humbling of God.** Either they reckon rightly concerning their own worthlessness as servants of a holy God, or they must expect to be gathered and burned as the stubble. The various proud peoples of the earth today would benefit by taking heed to the admonition of the prophet of old. This phrase indeed is offensive to the self-esteeming person. But it provides the exclusive way to a slight glimmer of hope for sinners.

This solemn call to self-abasement is addressed to a *nation that has no shame*. God's people are this time called a *nation*, the usual description of pagan people. Although at times used of Israel itself, the term could have been used deliberately to equate *shameful* Israel with the pagan nations in their behavior and attitude towards God. **Only a nation blinded to its own sin could feel no shame in the midst of such guiltiness.** Tottering on the brink of utter destruction by the

Minor Prophets: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

righteous judgments of God, the nation goes blithely on its own way, oblivious to the calamities staring it in the face.

2. The prophet now casts his admonition in a **framework of urgency**. **Only a narrow space of time stands between the people and their utter devastation**, for once the Day arrives they will have no future opportunity for repentance. **The sinner must not wait until the Day arrives in order to humble himself before the Lord**. *Chaff* suits ideally the brevity of the time now remaining for repentance. Chaff hovers momentarily, floating in the air. A gust of wind swirls about, and it is gone in an instant. Because of its lightness, the chaff is easily and quickly blown away. In just such a manner, the time intervening between the present moment and the descent of the fierce wrath of Yahweh passes away in an instant. No time remains to dillydally before that Day.

3. The only adequate refuge from the consuming wrath of Yahweh may be found in Yahweh Himself. So the prophet informs the people that they must *seek Yahweh*. The arrival of the Day of Yahweh will be a terrifying experience to all except those who previously have found their refuge in Him.

Three times the prophet admonishes the people to *seek*. This mild-sounding admonition implies **a wholehearted pursuit after God**. It inevitably includes an unshaken trust in that which is being sought (cp. Jer. 29:13). Since this admonition is plural in form, it underscores **the idea of a corporate and communal questing after Yahweh**. As such, it may be regarded as a **summons to worship**. For only as the assembled community solemnly pledges the submission of its will to the will of Yahweh may a meaningful “seeking” of the Lord be achieved.

The prophet rounds off his admonition on a rather tendentious note. He encourages his hearers, but he **provides no blanket assurance of deliverance**. The theologically significant word concerning God’s help in this verse is *perhaps*. The term *perhaps* employed by Zephaniah generally expresses an expectation that falls short of absolute assurance. **Not the slightest possibility remains that the Day of Yahweh’s wrath shall be turned back**. It shall burn like fire among Israel, consuming all. The entirety of the universe shall be overturned. Even the meek of the earth must undergo this purging judgment. **But perhaps. Possibly in the coming of the Day, the meek may be hid**. As the fire burns, the Lord’s meek may be preserved. Of course the purposes of the Lord shall be established. None of these attached to Him by faith shall be lost. They already have passed through the judgment of God. Yet God’s holiest people may undergo the severest of chastening judgments. They may suffer alongside the rebellious. The exile of Judah carried in the stream of its displacement the pious Jeremiah along with an unrepentant remnant. **This perhaps of the prophet still speaks. For who knows the seasons of the Lord’s judgments? Who can say when He will determine that the grossness of iniquity has become full? Now is the time to seek the Lord with all your heart. You may be hid on the Day of His appearing.**

B. See Now, for Consider the Devastation of Nations (2:4-15)

The second incentive for repentance is found in God’s word of judgment on the nations. Zephaniah uses the example of what awaits the surrounding nations as a warning, giving Judah good reason to repent, as he had warned them to do (vv. 1-3). **Zephaniah covers the four directions of the compass in his review of the nations to be judged**. He announces the devastation of Philistia to the west (vv. 4-7), Moab and Ammon to the east (vv. 8-11), Cush to the

Minor Prophets: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

south (v. 12), and Assyria, which although it lay to the northeast of Judah, always invaded from the north (vv. 13-15).

1. To the West: Philistia (2:4-7)

- 4 For
Gaza will be abandoned,
Ashkelon devastated;
Ashdod—at noontime they will drive her out;
Ekron will be uprooted.
- 5 Woe to the inhabitants of the territory of the sea,
nation of the Cherethites.
The word of Yahweh is against you;
Canaan, land of the Philistines:
- “I shall destroy you
so that there is no inhabitant.”
- 6 The territory of the sea shall be
pastures with caves for shepherd
with walled fences for flocks.
- 7 The territory shall be
for the remnant of the house of Judah.

Upon them they will find pasture;
among the houses of Ashkelon
in the evening they will lie down.

For Yahweh their God will visit them,
and will return their captivity.

It is an interesting feature of Zephaniah’s prophecy that he does not say why the judgment of God is to fall on these people. Perhaps this is because Amos had already made the case well (Amos 1:6)

4. The order in which the Philistine cities are mentioned begins with the southernmost city of *Gaza* and moves northward along the coast to *Ashkelon* and *Ashdod*. The inland city of *Ekron* is mentioned last. Gath, the fifth city of the Philistine pentapolis, may have faded to insignificance or have been under the control of Judah at this point. The diversity of terminology, as well as the cumulative impact created, has the effect of underscoring the totality of the destruction envisioned.

5. **First the area had been identified by reference to its noteworthy cities (v. 4). Now it is defined by reference to its position among the peoples of the world.** They possess *the territory of the sea*, which represented the western extremity of the land promised to Israel (Ex. 23:31; Num. 13:29; 34:6; Dt. 3:27; Josh. 1:4). As *Cherethites*, they hail from, Crete, having been assigned their coastal territory by the providential orderings of God (Ez. 25:16; cf. Dt. 2:23; Amos 9:7; Jer. 47:4). As *Canaan*, their land had been promised to God’s people. As *Philistines*, they were the long-standing enemies of Israel.

Minor Prophets: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

6. Instead of continuing as a commercially favored territory through which the major trade route connecting three continents perpetually passed, this seacoast will be reduced to open pastureland, totally void of commercial enterprise.

7. A new motivation for repentance on the part of the nation of Judah also emerges. **For the first time the prophet mentions explicitly the expectation that a remnant shall remain.** To this remnant shall be granted the full possession of the land of promise, including the *territory* of the Philistines. The blessing of the law book of Deuteronomy shall be renewed, for they shall dwell in houses they had not built, and He *will return their captivity* (Deut. 30:10-3). **As judgment would come in fulfillment of the curses of the covenant, so restoration would come in fulfillment of the conditions of the covenant.** Judah's neighbor to the west would be devastated without hope. But for God's people restoration would arise after devastation.

2. To the East: Moab and Ammon (2:8-11)

- 8 *I have heard
the reproach of Moab,
and the taunts of the sons of Ammon,*
- in which*
- a they have reproached*
 - b My people,*
 - a and magnified themselves*
 - b against their border.*
- 9 *Therefore as I live, declares Yahweh of hosts, God of Israel:*
- a Moab*
 - b will be*
 - c as Sodom*
 - a and the sons of Ammon*
 - c as Gomorrah—*
 - d a possession of nettles,*
 - d a pit of salt,*
 - d a desolation forever.*
- a The remnant of My people*
 - b will plunder them,*
 - a that which remains of My nation*
 - b will inherit them.*
- 10 *This (destiny) shall be theirs
in place of their pride.
For they have reproached and magnified themselves
against the people of Yahweh of hosts.*
- 11 *Yahweh will be fearful among them,
for He will make lean all the gods of the earth.
They shall worship Him,
every man from his own place,
(even) all the islands of the nations.*

Minor Prophets: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

Now the prophet speaks against blood-relatives of Israel instead of aliens set against Israel. The remnant theme is enlarged so that God's preserved people shall participate actively in the spoiling of their enemies. Finally, the message now sounds forth **for the first time in Zephaniah that worship of the living God shall extend to the uttermost extremities of the earth.** Much of the phraseology in verses 8-9 echoes the narrative of the destruction of the very valley in which Lot the father of the Moabites and Ammonites formerly dwelt (Gen. 19:24-25). **It is appropriate that the destroyed cities of Sodom and Gomorrah should be mentioned again in this judgment. Moab and Ammon emerged out of destruction and would return to it.** For trying to destroy others their own land would be devastated.

8. Both *Moab* and *Ammon* were blood-relatives of Israel, descendants of Lot's incestuous acts committed in a cave with his two daughters (cf. Gen. 19:30-38). Both nations in Zephaniah's day resided near the rim of that area which had been consumed by the conflagration sent on Sodom and Gomorrah. **Both the Moabites and the Ammonites had a long history of acrid animosity against the people of God.**

9. The God of Israel, swears that *Moab will be as Sodom, and the sons of Ammon as Gomorrah.* The tradition of this holocaust must have lived on vividly among the Moabites and Ammonites, since they lived on the rim of the Dead Sea, and had opportunity to see constantly the effects of God's judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah. Their origins traced back over twelve hundred years to this past event of divine judgment. All their intervening generations had lived within the vicinity of this awe some calamity. Now their future fate, settled irreversibly by divine oath, is declared to be the same as the utter destruction of those cities. **Striking is the fact that the very land which is left a scoured desolation will become the possession of the remnant of Judah. Why would Judah want such a possession? The prophet introduces a new perspective on the future for the remnant of His people. At last the patience of Abraham shall be rewarded. As a stupendous act of faith, he had surrendered his claim on the choicest portion of the land specifically promised him by the Lord (Gen. 13:8-17). But now the land claimed by Lot's descendants shall revert to its rightful heir.**

Unless the sovereign and undeserved grace of God had intervened, the fate of the entirety of Judah's populace would have been no different than the fate of Moab and Ammon (Is. 1:9). **The true purpose of God in the destruction of the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah is fully realized only as it is seen as mirroring the final reality of divine judgment.** It shall be more tolerable in that Day for the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah than for those who reject the emissaries of the Christ (Matt. 10:15).

10. The verse emphasizes the breaking of the pride that has characterized Moab and Ammon for so many centuries (cp. Is. 16:6; Jer. 48:29). Moab had become internationally repugnant for her arrogance. Will God's people of Zephaniah's day hear the message of the prophet? If such utter devastation should fall on Moab and Ammon for their sin of pride, can Judah expect to escape the Lord's judgments apart from obeying the prophet's admonition to "seek humility" (v. 3)? Only among the meek of the earth would any hope of survival be found.

11. Ultimately a religious problem lies at the root of Moab's and Ammon's pride. A remarkable picture emerges. After the devastation of both Judah and the surrounding nations, a turning in adoration to the living God occurs. **Most striking is the concept that the nations of the world will worship the Lord in their own locale. Now Zephaniah sees the worship of the true God spreading outward to the ends of the earth.** Every nation shall become sacred as a center for

Minor Prophets: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

the Worship of the Lord (cp. Mal. 1:11). Zephaniah's distinctive imagery of each person worshiping in his own place anticipates a central aspect of the worship perspective provided by Jesus (Jn. 4:21-23). So Zephaniah joins the grand prophetic tradition in announcing the coming day in which God's judgment on the nations will have its final issue in their adoration of the true and living God. **These expectations find their fulfillment currently when the gospel of Christ is proclaimed among the most distant island populations.** For now the glorious day has come in which the sun never sets on the worshipers of the true God.

3. To the South: Cush (2:12)

*12 Also you, O Cushites—
slain of My sword
are they!*

12. Cush, or Ethiopia, had reached the zenith of its power when it controlled Egypt in the Twenty-fifth Dynasty (c. 716—663 BC). It was ended in 663 BC by the Assyrian invasion of Egypt. The destruction noted by Zephaniah could be harking back to this event, or the geographical designation could be used more loosely to mean Egypt as a whole. On the other hand, he may be citing the most distant known nation to the south and intimating that the judgments of God are going to extend over the entire earth. Most striking is the disproportionate brevity of the oracle in comparison with the other three in this series. It may be an intentional literary device to focus on the swift sword of the executioner. The Lord's own personal sword, wielded by his own hand, strikes the deathblow for the Cushites (cp. Dt. 32:40-42). **If the avenging sword of the covenant reaches down to Cush, Israel's southernmost enemy, can Judah expect to escape?** The Israel of Zephaniah's day must remember that once in David's day the sword of the Lord had been turned against his own beloved Jerusalem (2 Sam. 24:16-17). Should they not now be awakened to see the potential threat against them in that awesome sword of the Lord stretched against the Cushites?

4. To the North: Assyria (2:13-15)

*13 a Let him stretch out His hand
b against the north,
a let Him destroy
b Assyria;
a let Him set
b Nineveh
c for destruction,
c dry as a desert.*

*14 a There shall lie down
b in her midst
c herds,
c every wild beast constituting a nation.*

*c Also the vulture
c as well as the screech owl
b among her decorative columns
a shall roost.*

Minor Prophets: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

*a A voice cooing
b in the window,
a destruction
b in the doorway;
for her cedarwork is laid bare.*

*15 This (is)
the ecstatic city,
the one living in security;
the one saying in her heart:
“I alone am,
and there is no other.”*

*Astounding!
She exists for desolation,
a dwelling place for the wild beast.
Everyone who passes her
will hiss
and dismiss her
with a wave of the hand.*

The last of Israel's neighbors to have the prophetic pronouncement of doom declared over them is Assyria, Judah's most threatening enemy. This nation's power had been weakened by the days of Josiah. But it still maintained resources sufficient to level Judah at any moment.

13. Almost unbelievable is the description of desolation which is to characterize the cultural metropolis of *Nineveh*. This city shall be *dry as a desert*. The greatest city of an era shall have no remnant to mark its existence. Nineveh was an awesome and seemingly impregnable metropolis. Yet it was overthrown suddenly and was left utterly desolate, as Zephaniah said. **In about 401 BC Xenophon passed the site of Nineveh and found not a trace of its existence in the shifting desert sands. The judgment of the prophet found a most literal fulfillment.**

14. The entire imagery depicts a **reversal of creation's order**. Humanity originally had been given the responsibility for exercising dominion over the whole of creation. But now the creation seizes power from the greatest of human empires and transforms it into a bestial wilderness. **Organized chaos has supplanted civilization.**

15. Three features characterize Nineveh before its destruction: ecstasy, security, and self-sufficiency. All this prosperity led Nineveh to a single conclusion. She assumed her own self-sufficiency. Even the divine attribute of self-existence she attributed to herself: *I alone am, and there is no other*. The Assyrian capital blasphemously assumed to herself all the prerogatives belonging only to God.

Conclusion

Amos the prophet said, “Seek the LORD and live, or He will sweep through the house of Joseph like a fire” (Amos 5:6). That was a direct and unqualified promise. If the people would seek God, then the fire of judgment would not come and they would live. In Zephaniah, one hundred years later, the promise is not so unqualified. The people are to “seek the LORD, righteousness . . . humility.” But the promise is only, “Perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the LORD'S

Minor Prophets: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

anger” (Zeph. 2:3). In the case of God’s destruction of Judah and Jerusalem by means of the Babylonians there was no guarantee that even the righteous would be kept from the calamity. How much greater is the promise to those of us who seek God’s face today! We may have difficulties in life, but **we are assured of God’s favor in the day of wrath—if we have truly sought Him and do what He commands.** Have we? Have you sought God and His righteousness? Are you among the humble of the land?

Zephaniah 2:4-15 contains an announcement of God’s rule over the entire world and a warning that all nations are answerable to Him. In every compass direction, the nations are judged. Not one will escape. Of special note is the judgment against Nineveh. Zephaniah blames it for being “carefree,” for saying, “I am, and there is none besides me” (2:15). This latter boast is **the theme song of our secular, self-satisfied age. We cry, “I am the master of my soul; I am the captain of my fate.” We boast that we do not need God.** We do not need anybody. How foolish! It is a lesson of history that those who exalt themselves are brought low (Is. 14:12-15).

So this second major section of the prophecy shows the Lord’s involvement with all the nations of the earth. Wherever unrighteousness is found, it shall be punished. **The announcement of judgment on the nations also functions to summon Judah to repentance.** Little time remains before the arrival of the Day of Yahweh. Judah must seek the Lord. Humility may make it possible for them to be hid on the Day of Yahweh’s wrath. Let them consider the Lord’s dealings with their national neighbors. Let them be moved by fear and by jealousy to turn to the Lord. **The Day cannot be turned back. But they may be among that remnant that shall be saved for the enjoyment of the plundered nations. Seek the Lord so that you may be saved in the remnant that survives the certain coming of the wrath of the Day of the Lord.**

Next week: Lesson 11 – Zephaniah 3 – “The LORD Your God in Your Midst”

Close in Prayer.