

“Summer in the Minor Prophets - Zephaniah” | Zephaniah

Trinity Presbyterian Church | Reverend Steve Johnson

June 29, 2025

Zephaniah (p. 788)

Zephaniah is the next book in our summer series on the Minor Prophets, and we’ve been going through the minor prophets chronologically. Now before we go through the passage, because it is a less familiar book, I’m going to first give some background to it. But before we do that, let’s pray and ask God to do the work in us that only He can do.

Where were you this past Thursday when the tornado sirens went off? I had seen the tornado watch switch to a warning and so I was in the car driving home when the sirens and phone alerts went off.

What feeling do you get when you hear that siren go off? Maybe you get a pit your stomach or maybe you’re one of those weird storm chaser types that gets all excited and tries to find the best view of the storm. Now what would your response be if you heard that siren again and again and again, but there wasn’t ever any storm? You’d probably develop a completely different response to it, right? Well, that happened to me when I was kid. During the mid-90s I lived in the small town of Lester Prairie, a farming town of about 1000 people. And that town had a siren that would go off every day. Twice. Once at noon and once at 6pm, that is unless it was the first Wednesday of the month, in which case it went off at 1pm instead of noon. And that siren was located on an old water tower, behind a fire station no more than 100 feet from our house. So naturally, we got annoyed quite quickly with this siren. It would wake up my sister if she was napping, the dog would howl, and one time my little cousin was visiting and when the siren went off he panicked and ran for the street and was thankfully stopped.

So my mom had had enough of it and decided to figure out why it went off twice a day and if we could silence it. Turns out that for some farming communities like Lester Prairie, the town siren would go off to call farmers in for lunch and supper. Now this was the 1990s, not the 1890s, so we figured that was a little out of date. So my mom went to the city council to request that the siren stop being set off twice a day. But there was one city council member who seemed to be the power guy, who said that the sirens tell his nephews when to come back from the park, so the council decided against my mom’s request. A

while later, the old water tower was torn down and the siren was brought down with it. For a few months we thought our problems were over until we saw them installing that same siren onto the fire station, now even closer to our house. But once a new mayor was elected as a write-in candidate, my mom submitted her request once again and the siren was finally done away with.

The prophet Zephaniah, along with the other prophets, proclaimed messages that were like tornado sirens. They warned of the coming storm of God's judgment. And for some of you here today, when you hear a warning like what you'll hear in Zephaniah, you'll have feelings of panic, kind of like my little cousin when he heard the siren. But maybe for some of you, you've heard this warning of the coming judgment of God again and again and again and again for years and years, and a passage like Zephaniah doesn't have much impact on you. Perhaps it's a little annoying hearing *another* sermon on the judgment of God. Why doesn't the pastor preach on something practical and relevant to today? My hope and prayer today is that as we hear Zephaniah's warning of the coming day of judgment that God would move us away from both the response of panic and the response of apathy. My hope is for God to give us ears to hear the warnings of Zephaniah and to ready us for the day of judgment so that we can stand confidently *and joyfully* on that day.

## **I. What was going on?**

So who was the prophet Zephaniah? We read in the first verse that he was **"the son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah."** The name Hezekiah wasn't uncommon, but the fact that Zephaniah goes back four generations to mention him probably means that this was King Hezekiah. So Zephaniah was likely of royal lineage. Other than that, we don't know much about Zephaniah as a person.

Now what was going on in his day and context? Verse 1 says that he prophesied **"in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah."** King Josiah reigned over the southern kingdom of Judah between 640-609 B.C. and so scholars estimate that Zephaniah prophesied around 623 B.C. This date is about 100 years after the northern kingdom of Israel fell to Assyria, and so here is Judah in a bad spot like Israel was, where idolatry and wickedness were rampant and God was proclaiming judgment on them. The kings immediately prior to Josiah were evil, like his father Amon, and they led the nation deep into idolatry. Now do we have any 8-year-olds in here? Well Josiah became king at age 8.

Imagine that! And thankfully, by God's grace and mercy, Josiah was a good king and did what was right in the eyes of the LORD. Josiah brought about many great reforms in Judah. He repaired the temple and in the process of repairing the temple the Book of the Law was found. And so Josiah brought obedience to the law of God back to God's people. He also went on a rampage against idolatry in the land. Sadly, Josiah's reforms did not stick after his death. He was the last good king of Judah. Four evil kings followed him, leading the people back to idolatry, and in a mere 23 years after Josiah's reign, Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians would be sent by God to destroy Jerusalem and exile a remnant of God's people.

So it seems that Zephaniah's message likely came in conjunction with Josiah's reforms, but prior to their success. And as the book seems to hint – the reforms wouldn't be permanent and God's judgment was still coming soon to Judah and the surrounding nations.

Zephaniah's message was addressed to Judah in light of King Josiah's impending reforms and also to the surrounding nations, so like many of the other prophets, like Isaiah, you'll hear him warn the nations of God's judgment. But Zephaniah's message wasn't just for the people living in his day. It is a message for all people throughout history, for us, and as you'll see, he prophesied of a Day of judgment that is much bigger than what Nebuchadnezzar would bring – it will be a judgment of all the world.

## II. What was Zephaniah's message?

Let's now walk through Zephaniah. And as we read it, you'll hear him sound the warning siren of the Day of the Lord 18 times. We'll see him proclaim two warning calls to Judah and the world, and in the middle of that he'll call the surrounding nations of Judah to repentance. But at the end you'll hear a very different message, one of hope and surprising joy. So look with me at Zephaniah 1 and let's consider The First Warning Call: God's Judgment of Judah and the World. Read with me Zephaniah chapter 1.

Zephaniah 1

**1** The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah the son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah.

<sup>2</sup> "I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth," declares the LORD.

- 3   **"I will sweep away man and beast;  
I will sweep away 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.**
- 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  
and the name of the idolatrous priests along with the priests,  
5   those who bow down on the roofs  
to the host of the heavens,  
those who bow down and swear to the LORD  
and yet swear by Milcom,  
6   those who have turned back from following the LORD,  
who do not seek the LORD or inquire of him."**
- 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.**
- 8   **And on the day of the LORD's sacrifice—  
"I will punish the officials and the king's sons  
and all who array themselves in foreign attire.**
- 9   **On that day I will punish  
everyone who leaps over the threshold,  
and those who fill their master's house  
with violence and fraud.**
- 10   **"On that day," declares the LORD,  
"a cry will be heard from the Fish Gate,  
a wail from the Second Quarter,  
a loud crash from the hills.**
- 11   **Wail, O inhabitants of the Mortar!  
For all the traders are no more;  
all who weigh out silver are cut off.**
- 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.'**
- 13   **Their goods shall be plundered,  
and their houses laid waste.  
Though they build houses,  
they shall not inhabit them;**

though they plant vineyards,  
they shall not drink wine from them.”

- 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.

In this first chapter, we see three main things: the extent of judgment, the reason for judgment, and the day of judgment. Let's look first at the extent of God's judgment. We see in verses 2-4 that the extent of God's judgment is all-encompassing. In verse 2 he says he **“will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth”** and then in verse 3 he includes not only mankind, but also all beasts of the field, birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea. The reference to all these animals brings us back to Genesis 1, to the creation of everything, and now here God is declaring the destruction of everything. All of creation is affected by the wickedness of man who was appointed to have dominion over it. After he proclaims a worldwide judgment, in verse 4 God specifically calls out Judah and Jerusalem for their wickedness. Even though they are God's chosen people, they will not be exempt when God judges all the earth. They too have turned their backs from following the Lord and will be held accountable for their rebellion. The first chapter ends with the bleakest

outlook imaginable: verse 18, **“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 extent of God’s judgment is universal. No one will be overlooked. No sin will remain hidden. No injustice will go unpunished. As Hebrews 4:13 says, **“<sup>13</sup> And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”**

That is the all-encompassing extent of God’s judgment. Next, the reason for God’s judgment. In this first chapter, the LORD gives a handful of reasons why his wrath is coming on Judah. One of the biggest reasons is idolatry. In verse 4, we see that the worship of Baal was being sanctioned by the priests. In verse 5 we hear that people were bowing down to the heavens to worship the stars. And in verse 5 we also hear that Judah was swearing by “Milcom” who was probably the god Molech, a god to whom child sacrifice was given. Judah’s idolatry was also syncretistic. What I mean by syncretistic is what we see in verse 5, that they would **“bow down and swear to the LORD and yet swear by Milcom.”** They followed the LORD AND other gods. That’s syncretism. But God is a jealous God (v. 18) and as we saw so clearly in the book of Hosea, he will not tolerate his bride committing spiritual adultery with another god. He is worthy to be worshiped exclusively and above all.

Other sins are given as reasons for God’s judgment: “violence and fraud” (v. 9), a trust in wealth (1:18), and pagan superstitions (1:9). But there is one more sin I want to mention that stands out, because even though this was written over 2500 years ago, humans haven’t changed. Look at verse 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.’”** This is a kind of deistic apathy about God that is still prevalent today. There is a general belief in God, but people believe that he isn’t really involved in their lives, that he doesn’t care how they live and won’t do them good or ill. So as we can see, the sins of Judah were many and heinous. God’s judgment was, and is, justified.

We’ve seen the extent of judgment and the reason for judgment, now we will consider the day of judgment. In the first chapter alone, he mentions this day 14 times. He’s sounding the tornado siren again and again. He describes this day in a variety of ways. He calls it **“The day of the LORD”** (1:7, 14), **“the day of the LORD’s sacrifice”** (1:8), **“the day**

**of the wrath of the LORD” (1:18), “the day of the anger of the LORD” (2:2, 3), and in verses 14-16 he gives a truly terrifying description of this day,**

**“<sup>14</sup> 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.  
<sup>15</sup> 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,  
<sup>16</sup> a day of trumpet blast and battle cry  
against the fortified cities  
and against the lofty battlements.”**

Zephaniah uses storm-like language to describe the day of the LORD’s wrath for sin, and no strength of humanity can withstand it, not the mighty man, not the fortified city, not the lofty battlement. There is no mere man nor manmade shelter that can shield you from this storm.

Now Zephaniah speaks of this day in two senses. It’s kind of like when you are driving out west and you see the Rocky Mountains from a distance and as you get closer what you thought was one mountain you can now see was actually two mountains, one in front of another. Zephaniah speaks of the day of the Lord in this sense. Judah and each nation mentioned in Zephaniah will face separate days of judgment in the upcoming years and decades. Judah would face their day of judgment in 586 B.C. with the coming of the Babylonians. The other surrounding nations like the Philistines, the Moabites, the Cushites, and the Assyrians would also face days of their own when their nations would end, mostly, or maybe entirely, by the hand of the Babylonians. So there was a day of imminent judgment that Zephaniah’s original audience would have to soon face. But that is not the only day of judgment. There is another mountain, a far larger mountain of judgment that is behind all other mountains. It is the day of judgment that all must face without exception. And that day comes when the Lord Jesus Christ returns in all of his glory with his heavenly host of angels. And the dead will all be raised, the righteous with glorified bodies like Jesus’ body, and then all will stand before the judgment seat of God. The righteous will be clothed with Christ and the unrighteous will be naked. That is the great day of the LORD, a day we must be prepared for.

Now we come to chapter 2 of Zephaniah and it begins with Zephaniah directing everyone's attention to the only way to be protected from the wrath of the Lord for sin. There is something they, and we, can do before that day comes. Here we see A Call to Repent: God's Judgment on the Surrounding Nations. Let's read the first three verses of Zephaniah 2.

**2 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.**

We see here that the LORD is calling people to gather together before the decree of judgment takes effect, before the anger of the LORD comes upon them. They are to gather together in humility and to seek the LORD in faith, in repentance, in prayer and in obedience. They are to turn away from living in rebellion against God and return to the Word of God. If they were to repent, then Zephaniah says in verse 3 that they would be hidden, sheltered on the day of God's anger. God is so patient, isn't he? After all of our wickedness, he still gives us an opportunity to repent and find shelter in him.

This is a much different tone than the first chapter, isn't it? Commentator Iain Duguid says of this, "Zephaniah was not merely writing to condemn his hearers for their sins, however. Rather, he was urging them to flee from the wrath to come and find a safe refuge from the storm, while there was still time. Like a tornado warning, the prophet's stark message of the danger of impending death was not designed simply to terrify his hearers, but rather to save their lives. His message has been recorded in the Scriptures so that it may have the same impact on us as it was intended to have on his original hearers. If Zephaniah's tornado warning about the oncoming and imminent destructive storm of God's fierce wrath against human evil and sin is still in effect, then all of us had better heed it and



seek shelter for ourselves while the opportunity exists. The day of the Lord is still a reality to be reckoned with.”<sup>1</sup>

There is a shelter to hide yourself in on the day of the anger of the LORD, and that shelter is not your own good works or your best efforts, it isn't your parents, it isn't how zealous you are for God, the only refuge is the Lord Jesus Christ. Psalm 2:12 says, **“Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.”** By faith in Jesus we are united to him, and as Colossians 3:3 says, our **“life is hidden with Christ in God.”** There is still time to turn your life around and follow Jesus, but we do not know how much longer. Do not wait another day to give your life to Jesus Christ – today is the day of salvation!

The rest of chapter 2 consists of God's proclamation of judgment for the nations that surrounded Judah. He speaks to nations east, west, north, and south of Judah. God is not singling out Judah for its wickedness; all the other nations who are not in covenant with God are still accountable to God. All of these nations would not recover from God's judgment... but Judah would be different. In verse 9 we read of a remnant of God's people, survivors of the coming judgment. These people would go into exile, but they would one day return to Jerusalem, to Judah, and re-establish their nation and their covenant with God. But even though the nations mentioned in chapter 2 wouldn't recover from God's judgment, there is still hope in this chapter for the Gentile nations of the world. Look at verse 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.”** This is a remarkable prophecy of all the nations of the earth bowing down to the LORD God. This will be fulfilled at the return of Jesus Christ. Philippians 2:10-11 says that **“at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”**

Now we come to chapter 3. Zephaniah 3 begins in a similar way to chapter 1, with a warning to call to Judah and the nations of the world. The first 8 verses speak of the sins of Judah, specifically its leaders, and it warns the nations that they are cut off. Verse 8 repeats

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<sup>1</sup> Iain M. Duguid and Matthew P. Harmon, *Zephaniah, Haggai, Malachi*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), 13.

the same phrase as at the end of chapter 1, that **“in the fire of my jealousy all the earth shall be consumed.”**

But when we come to the end of Zephaniah, verses 9-20, the prophecies take a striking turn. The day after Thursday’s storm was a striking turn, wasn’t it? Friday was beautiful and peaceful. I went on a walk with my family that evening and the blue skies, lush green trees, the tranquil breeze, the people calmly enjoying a walk or a game of golf – it was almost hard to believe that the day before everyone was sheltered, in fear of a tornado. The message of Zephaniah takes a similarly striking turn now - the dark storm of judgment against all the earth gives way to the tranquil blue skies of God’s mercies and peace and the joy of people from every nation. Because of the dark and dreadful backdrop of the beginning of Zephaniah’s message, his ending message of hope and joy is a surprising relief. Here we see A Call to Rejoice: God’s Future Conversion of the Nations and His Permanent Restoration of Judah in Christ.

Read with me starting in verse 9 of chapter 3:

<sup>9</sup> **“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.**

<sup>10</sup> **From beyond the rivers of Cush  
my worshipers, the daughter of my dispersed ones,  
shall bring my offering.**

Here God prophesies that a day is coming when he will bring about the change needed for the nations. He will give them a pure speech, he will change their hearts so that they will call upon his name and serve him and worship him!

<sup>11</sup> **“On that day you shall not be put to shame  
because of the deeds by which you have rebelled against me;  
for then I will remove from your midst  
your proudly exultant ones,  
and you shall no longer be haughty  
in my holy mountain.**

<sup>12</sup> **But I will leave in your midst  
a people humble and lowly.  
They shall seek refuge in the name of the LORD,**

<sup>13</sup> **those who are left in Israel;**

they shall do no injustice  
and speak no lies,  
nor shall there be found in their mouth  
a deceitful tongue.  
For they shall graze and lie down,  
and none shall make them afraid.”

God’s holy mountain, the new heavens and new earth, the new Jerusalem – that will be a place where there is no more shame for our rebellion against God. We will forever be at peace with God. On the cross, Jesus took on himself all of our shame. And we will live humbly before our God. No longer will the prideful and arrogant turn their backs against God. The prideful will have no place in heaven. Only those who have taken refuge in the name of the LORD, in the name of Jesus Christ, will have a home with God. We will be like well-fed sheep, living in peace and prosperity and safety.

- <sup>14</sup> Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion;  
shout, O Israel!  
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,  
O daughter of Jerusalem!
- <sup>15</sup> The LORD has taken away the judgments against you;  
he has cleared away your enemies.  
The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;  
you shall never again fear evil.

This couldn’t be more polar opposite from chapter 1. Instead of dread there is a call to rejoice! For those who have sought their refuge in Jesus Christ, they are assured that “**the LORD has taken away**” their judgments against them (v. 15). How has God done that? God didn’t sweep our sins under the rug and show us partiality. No God is a just God who punishes sin AND he is the justifier of those who put their faith in Christ. The Lord took away our judgments against us by placing them upon Jesus. And so our sin was justly punished AND we were forgiven and reconciled to God. It was the perfect solution to our unsolvable problem. And so we shall never again fear evil. Our King, King Jesus, is in us and with us and will forever reign in our midst when we dwell with him in his forever kingdom.

Now as we read the last verses of Zephaniah, we see that not only will we rejoice in God’s salvation – there is Someone else who will be rejoicing too.

- <sup>16</sup> On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:

“Fear not, O Zion;  
 let not your hands grow weak.  
 17 The LORD your God is in your midst,  
 a mighty one who will save;  
 he will rejoice over you with gladness;  
 he will quiet you by his love;  
 he will exult over you with loud singing.  
 18 I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival,  
 so that you will no longer suffer reproach.  
 19 Behold, at that time I will deal  
 with all your oppressors.  
 And I will save the lame  
 and gather the outcast,  
 and I will change their shame into praise  
 and renown in all the earth.  
 20 At that time I will bring you in,  
 at the time when I gather you together;  
 for I will make you renowned and praised  
 among all the peoples of the earth,  
 when I restore your fortunes  
 before your eyes,” says the LORD.

Our rejoicing, our shouts of joy will be outmatched by God himself. God will rejoice over us and will quiet us with his love. Verse 17 even says that **“he will exult over you with loud singing.”** What will that be like? What will it be like to hear God sing and to sing of his love for us? We will just have to wait to find out, but hearing that love song of God, that is worth enduring anything in this life to hear.

### III. How does Zephaniah’s message apply today?

So that’s the message of Zephaniah. Now how does it apply to us today? First, be ready for the Day of the LORD. Do not panic. Have a proper respect for the Day of the Lord, but do not panic. God has provided a shelter for us for on that day, and it isn’t a place, it is a person – the Lord Jesus Christ. In him, we are safe and secure. So do not panic. We must also not ignore the warnings of the day of the Lord. I lived in downtown Minneapolis during seminary and one afternoon we were playing ultimate frisbee and the sirens went off. And we kept playing for some time, ignoring them as the dark clouds came in from the west. Little did I know that a tornado was ripping through north Minneapolis, just a few miles from where I was. That was pretty foolish of me to ignore the warning call. Don’t make an

even worse mistake by ignoring the LORD's warning of the coming day of the LORD. Turn to Christ today. Stay here and talk with me or Pastor Chris or an elder or someone else. Get yourself right with God.

Second, keep yourselves from idols. Idolatry is in each of our hearts. We covet the things of this world and they are idols in our hearts. Our hearts are to be a temple of the Holy Spirit where we offer up sacrifices of praise. And a temple of God is no place for an idol. So what do you covet? What fights for first place in your heart with God? Do you tend toward syncretism, where you want to have your cake and eat it to? You want to worship God and indulge in the pleasures of the world? God is a jealous God and he is not okay with you committing adultery against him. He loves you with a deep and holy love, and so to him alone belongs your soul's devotion.

Third and finally, Zephaniah gives us amazing reasons to rejoice. We exist to glorify God and enjoy him forever, and because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we can have a restored relationship with God and we can fulfill that purpose. That is reason for us to rejoice forever and ever. But not only do we exist to enjoy and glorify God, we also exist to be rejoiced over and loved and enjoyed by God forever. That is the essence of the beauty of the covenant relationship we have with our God. So brothers and sisters, rejoice that God will sing over you, a song that will forever content your heart with his love, never to long for another.