



WHEN YOUR WORLD FALLS APART

SERIES: STUDIES IN THE MINOR PROPHETS

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Zephaniah

Sixth Message

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In July, I always become much more patriotic than usual. Celebrating the Fourth of July reminds me of how grateful I am for the freedoms I enjoy in my country and the principles upon which it was founded. Of course, in late July every four years the Olympic Games are held. Over the past week, from the opening ceremonies to the women's gymnastics team finals, at times my eyes have welled up with tears of joy and pride in my country and in our athletes who have trained so hard and done so well. I love the carefree attitude, independent spirit and unconventional style of Americans—especially us crazy Californians.

Our greatest strengths as a nation, however, may be our greatest weaknesses, too. Filled with pride, we think we are the greatest nation and people the world has ever known. We are rich and smart. We feel we can overcome any obstacle. As Americans, we love to think we are invincible.

But are we? As a nation we can be lulled into complacency before God. A casual look would suggest that God is pleased with us, because he has blessed us with such an abundance of riches. We rest comfortably in the notion that we are a "godly" nation. Our Constitution presupposes a Supreme Being; our Pledge of Allegiance declares that we are "one nation under God"; and our money states that it is "in God we trust." We assume therefore that our nation is free from God's hand of judgment. But nothing could be further from the truth.

Our carefree attitude, unconventional style, independent spirit and the expression of our freedoms without limit have produced in us an arrogance of gargantuan proportions. These things have opened the doors wide open for the acceptance and practice of every kind of sin and evil. Our spiritual and moral decline, however, have not gone unnoticed.

The July 1996, edition of the Focus on the Family Magazine published an article in the form of a letter written by Bob Welch to his late father-in-law, a man of great Christian character, who has been dead for ten years. Welch's letter expresses with deep regret how much the U.S. has changed for the worse even in just the last ten years. He writes:

America isn't the same country it was even ten years ago. Much has changed, Pop. Too much. You're not going to understand this, but you'd be considered, well, "politically incorrect" these days. I remember a man who remained faithful to his wife, taught his children right from wrong and kept his family together despite drought and Depression. I remember a man who got tears in his eyes when singing "Amazing Grace."

But today, Pop, you'd be considered a fool for worshipping some obsolete God when you should be searching for your inner child, winning by intimidation, or awakening the warrior spirit within.

As I said, the country has changed in the ten years since you died. Oh, some of it's been for the better. If not overcoming our prejudices, we're at least confronting some of them, especially against women and minorities. Recycling has caught on. And the Big Hunk folks finally made a wrapper that doesn't stick to the candy bar.

But evil, if possible, has gotten more evil. Last year, a bomb blew up a federal building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people. A mother in South Carolina drowned her two sons so they wouldn't interfere with her relationship with her boyfriend.

And this morning's newspaper told of a St. Louis teacher who died after being punched by a fourth-grader who didn't like his homework assignment.

What's going on, Pop?

Crack cocaine. Drive-by shootings. Assisted suicide. Partial-birth abortions. Video poker. Trashy talk shows. Greedy athletes. Computer pornography. Runaway lawsuits. Shock radio. Sexual abuse. All have mushroomed in the last decade.

The abnormal has become normal. Right and wrong have traded places. Your great-granddaughters need notes from their parents to get their ears pierced. But in Oregon, they could legally have an abortion without parental permission. Schools pass out condoms but ban children from handing out Christmas cards. Crazy isn't it?

What does it take to break through the idolatry, arrogance, and complacency of a nation before God? What does it take to break through the callous hearts of individuals? In our study today in the book of Zephaniah, we will discover how God moves to bring his rebellious people back to himself. Chapter 1 verse 1:

The word of the Lord which came to Zephaniah son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah son of Amon, king of Judah, (Zeph 1:1, NASB)

Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of Josiah, king of Judah, 640-609 BC. The intended audience of his prophecy was the nation of Judah, and in particular the city of Jerusalem, where the religious and political leaders were living. Zephaniah was one of the last minor prophets to perform his duties before the Babylonian captivity. He exercised his office at about the same time as Jeremiah, a mere thirty years before Jerusalem was destroyed.

Almost nothing is known about the prophet except for what is given here in this verse. Notice that his genealogy is carried back to four generations. No other prophet has his pedigree traced back that far. I believe Zephaniah did this to show that he was the great-great-grandson of the godly King Hezekiah. He was of royal lineage, and he would know intimately the activities and moral character of Israel's leaders.

2 Kings 22-23 give the account of Josiah's reign. While rebuilding the temple, this righteous king uncovered the book of the Law of the Lord given to Moses. Based on that book, Josiah initiated nationwide reforms in accordance with the covenant. It is not clear whether the prophecy of Zephaniah was given to Judah before or after Josiah's reforms. But if Zephaniah preached after the reforms of Josiah, it is clear that these did not completely change the nation, because there was still obvious rebellion against the Lord. This once very privileged and obedient people had now turned their back on the Lord and from following his ways.

The focal point of Zephaniah's message is the "day of the Lord." Zephaniah uses this expression more often than any other prophet. Throughout the scriptures the phrase is used to describe a time of God's intervention in history to bring his people back to himself. Early on in Israel's history this meant that the "day of the Lord" was a day of hope for Israel, because God would bring them to himself by rescuing them from their oppressors. But as we shall see, Zephaniah redefines the "day of the Lord."

1:2-3 gives a glimpse of what this “day of the LORD” is like:

I. The Day of the Lord is a Day of Judgment (1:2-18)

**“I will completely remove all things
From the face of the earth,” declares the Lord.
“I will remove man and beast;
I will remove the birds of the sky
And the fish of the sea,
And the ruins along with the wicked;
And I will cut off man from the face of the earth,” declares
the Lord. (1:2-3)**

The first thing we learn about the “day of the Lord” is that it is a day of judgment. And, as these verses show, the extent of that judgment is total and complete. The images that are used are reminiscent of the Noahic flood, expressing how mad and serious God is and how complete his judgment will be. This judgment upon the wicked carries great weight and force, because it will be done by the Creator of the cosmos.

Verses 4-6 continue with the extent of God’s judgment:

**“So I will stretch out My hand against Judah
And against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem.
And I will cut off the remnant of Baal from this place,
And the names of the idolatrous priests along with the
priests.
And those who bow down and swear to the Lord and yet
swear by Milcom,
And those who have turned back from following the Lord,
And those who have not sought the Lord or inquired of
Him.” (1:4-6)**

And in verse 12:

**“And it will come about at that time
That I will search Jerusalem with lamps,
And I will punish the men
Who are stagnant in spirit,
Who say in their hearts,
“The Lord will not do good or evil.”” (1:12)**

God’s judgment is not only total and complete, it is also thorough and personal. The image of God, lamp in hand, searching through Jerusalem for all who have rebelled against him is like the probing of a doctor looking for cancer. God is very thorough. He leaves no stone unturned. Every nook and cranny of darkness is exposed by his light.

Not only is God’s judgment thorough, it is personal, too. Notice the use of the personal pronoun all through this passage: “I will stretch out my hand against Judah”, “I will cut off the remnant of Baal”, “I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the men who are stagnant in spirit.” God may use other nations and armies to accomplish his will, but make no mistake, it is his hand working through events in history.

This “day of the Lord” is also personal, because it is more than judgment against nations in general, it is judgment upon the sins of individuals in particular. This prophecy began with a broad and sweeping judgment against all the wicked of the earth, but now the focus narrows down from the whole earth to the nation of Judah, to the city of Jerusalem, and finally to individuals. The sword of God’s judgment penetrates to the very hearts and souls of his people.

Your response to the letter I read earlier about the litany of evil we are guilty of as a nation may have been similar to mine. We say, “That’s right. America is going to hell in a hand basket. We need God’s judgment to be swift and severe to rout out all these wicked and perverse people.” We think, “I hope God takes his lamp and searches deep and wide to find and punish every crack dealer, murderer, and pornographer in the country.” Or, in light of recent events you might be thinking, “I hope God’s lamp is burning bright so that he can find the terrorist who brought down TWA flight 800, and the person who bombed Centennial

Olympic Park.”

But as I reflect on these verses, it is obvious that the judgment of God comes not only on the sin around me, but the sin within me. I am forced to admit that even though I may not be a terrorist, or smoke crack cocaine, or participate in drive-by shootings, my arrogance and flippancy with the freedoms that God has blessed me with are just as damaging. I am no less guilty of idolatry, duplicity, and complacency.

I struggle with pursuing the false and empty idols of wealth, prestige and leisure. I struggle with the desire to spend more money fixing up my house than supporting our church and our missionaries. I know I spend more time watching television than I do in reaching out to my unbelieving neighbors and building up my fellow Christians.

I find it easy to jump up and down and raise my hands in exuberant joy at sporting events, but I often remain listless and lifeless when it comes to worship and praise of my Heavenly Father. I am definitely guilty of spending more time on my knees pulling weeds than I do on my knees in prayer before the Almighty. I do not want to live under the letter of the law, but I know that my spirit, as this passage warns, is often stagnant. So it is not just America that is rebellious against God, I am rebellious, too. If we are honest, we will admit that we are all guilty of rebellion and complacency before God. And we are all therefore deserving of God’s judgment. God’s righteous and purifying judgment comes not just to nations, but to individuals like you and me.

Verses 4-6 and 12 of the first chapter describe the extent of God’s judgment: it is total and complete, thorough and personal.

Let’s move on to verses 14-18 now, which describe in more detail what the three most predominant characteristics of that judgment will be. The first characteristic of God’s judgment is found in the first part of verse 14:

**Near is the great day of the Lord,
Near and coming very quickly; (1:14a)**

God’s judgment is imminent. It is just around the corner. There is no time for the rebellious to delay, for the great day of the Lord is coming quickly.

The second characteristic is found in verses 14b-17:

**Listen, the day of the Lord!
In it the warrior cries out bitterly.
A day of wrath is that day,
A day of trouble and distress,
A day of destruction and desolation,
A day of darkness and gloom,
A day of clouds and thick darkness,
A day of trumpet and battle cry,
Against the fortified cities
And the high corner towers.
And I will bring distress on men,
So that they will walk like the blind,
Because they have sinned against the Lord;
And their blood will be poured out like dust,
And their flesh like dung. (1:14b-17)**

Not only is God judgment imminent, it is also intense. It is a time of extreme distress.

The third characteristic is in verse 18:

**Neither their silver nor their gold
Will be able to deliver them
On the day of the Lord’s wrath;
And all the earth will be devoured
In the fire of His jealousy,
For He will make a complete end,
Indeed a terrifying one,
Of all the inhabitants of the earth. (1:18)**

God’s judgment is not only imminent and intense, it is also inevitable. We cannot thwart it. Though we may have all the riches

in the world, we cannot buy our way out.

So the “day of the Lord,” which at one time stood for God’s intervention in history to rescue his people from their oppressors, has now come to mean a time of judgment. What had once been a word of hope is now a word of dread. The Lord’s wrath against his own people is near, terrible, and certain. This pronouncement of judgment is intended to leave the listener with a sense of both terror and trepidation.

It is a prophecy intended to shock and awaken a people indifferent to their God. It is like the terror you might feel if, after years of being in the sun, and after repeatedly ignoring the advice of your family to put sunscreen on, one day a friend points out that a mole on your skin has changed size and color. You go to the doctor to have tests performed, and he reports back to you that you have melanoma. With that one word, “cancer,” your world falls apart. You wonder when all the treatments are done, and all the cancer is gone, will you survive? After all the darkness and distress, is there any ray of hope?

Just like the pronouncement of a doctor on the seriousness of one’s physical condition, the pronouncement of judgment by Zephaniah on the spiritual condition of God’s people leads his listeners to ask, “How are we to respond?” How am I to respond when I see my world falling apart as a consequence of my rebellion?

In the next few verses we will see that our appropriate response is not complicated, but it is difficult, because it goes against our natural tendencies.

II. The Response to Judgment (1:7; 2:1-3)

The first response to judgment is found in 1:7a,

Be silent before the Lord God! (1:7a)

Our first response to God’s judgment is to be quiet. We are to shut up. The Hebrew word for “be silent” literally means “hush.” Our natural tendency is to try and make excuses for our sin. I know this first-hand, because I recently completed two nights of traffic school. Are you shocked? It was a shock to me, too! It was a shock to all thirty of us in the class. We were eager to tell one another and the teacher that we didn’t belong there. We all had really good reasons for why we got a ticket.

But under the judgment of God, we are to do none of that. As this passage suggests, we are to remain speechless, because we really have no defense. We are guilty as charged, and our silence before the righteous Judge is a recognition of our guilt and acceptance of the consequences.

Our silence before God also allows us to hear him speak to us. If we are always moving and talking we are never attentive to the voice of God. Brennan Manning, in his book “Abba’s Child,” tells the story of a busy executive who went to a wise old hermit in the desert,

and complained about his frustration in prayer, his flawed virtue, and his failed relationships. The hermit listened closely to his visitor’s rehearsal of the struggle and disappointments in trying to lead a Christian life. He then went into the dark recesses of his cave and came out with a basin and a pitcher of water. ‘Now watch the water as I pour it into the basin,’ he said. The water splashed on the bottom and against the sides of the container. It was agitated and turbulent. At first the stirred-up water swirled around the inside of the basin; then it gradually began to settle, until finally the small fast ripples evolved into larger swells that oscillated back and forth. Eventually, the surface became so smooth that the visitor could see his face reflected in the placid water. ‘That is the way it is when you live constantly in the midst of others,’ said the hermit. ‘You do not see yourself as you really are because of all the confusion.’

Our solitary silence before God not only enables him to convict us of our sin but, as Manning also notes, allows us to “listen

with great attentiveness to the voice that calls us the beloved. God speaks to the deepest strata of our souls, into our self-hatred and shame, our narcissism, and takes us through the night into the daylight of His truth.”

So our first response to God’s judgment is to be silent, to shut up and be still in the presence of our Lord.

The second response is found in 2:1-2,

**Gather yourselves together, yes, gather,
O nation without shame,
Before the decree takes effect—
The day passes like the chaff—
Before the burning anger of the Lord comes upon you,
Before the day of the Lord’s anger comes upon you. (2:1-2)**

In response to God’s judgment we are not only to shut up, we are also to show up. Our natural tendency is to try and hide and solve our problems on our own. But in addition to spending time in solitary silence before God, we are called to gather together with other members of God’s family. We cannot be healed in isolation.

The third response to God’s judgment is found in 2:3,

**Seek the Lord,
All you humble of the earth
Who have carried out His ordinances;
Seek righteousness, seek humility.
Perhaps you will be hidden in the day of the Lord’s anger. (2:3)**

We are not only to shut up, and show up, we are to repent, too. We are to gather together with the purpose of identifying ourselves as sinners, praying for deliverance, and falling before the Lord in humble worship and service. We repent by turning our back on the ways of this world and seeking after the Lord.

How do we seek God? This passage says that we are to seek the very character of God. We are to seek righteousness and humility, to seek to do the right thing, in the right spirit.

The parable told by Jesus of the Pharisee and the tax collector illustrates what this spirit of humility is like:

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men — robbers, evildoers, adulterers — or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:9-14, NIV)

But before we think we have a secret recipe for earning God’s grace, notice that at the end of this verse it says, “perhaps you will be hidden.” This “perhaps” reminds us that there is no magic formula. There is no way to earn salvation. We cannot presume upon God. We must lay ourselves completely on his mercy. Our deliverance and protection come only by God’s extraordinary grace.

So, what is our response to the judgment of God? What is our response when our world falls apart because of our rebellion? When our sins are exposed, when our false securities are demolished, when we finally realize that we are nothing and have nothing without God, what are we to do? We are to throw ourselves on the mercy of God; we are to be silent; we are to gather together, and we are to seek the Lord. We are to shut up, show up, and repent.

Fortunately, that is not all there is to the “day of the Lord.” That is not the last word. There is something more, something

new. As God intervenes in judgment against sin in our lives, there is also hope that by his grace he will not totally destroy us. As we shall see in the second half of chapter 3, the purpose of God's judgment, as it was in the days of Noah, is not primarily to punish the wicked, but to purify, protect, and restore his people. Judgment is transformed into joy. What begins in darkness and distress ends in gladness and singing.

III. The Transformation of Judgment (3:9-20)

After God's judgment, he says, beginning in verse 9:

**I will give to the peoples purified lips,
That all of them may call on the name of the Lord,
To serve Him shoulder to shoulder.
From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia
My worshippers, my dispersed ones,
Will bring my offerings. (3:9-10)**

The restoration process begins with the cleansing from sin. Just as the sins of Isaiah were forgiven by the symbolic cleansing of his lips, so too the people of God will have clean hearts and pure lips. No longer will their worship be idolatrous and deceitful. It will be transformed into something pure and holy. Every believer will be like a prophet, a holy spokesperson, able to call on the name of the Lord for the purpose of serving him "shoulder to shoulder."

"Shoulder to shoulder" is a beautiful picture of unity and common purpose. No longer would their service before God be complacent and stagnant, it is transformed into being diligent and united. It says here that even those "from beyond Ethiopia" will worship God as one. This occurred on the day of Pentecost, when the Lord brought together a diverse multitude in worship by pouring out his Spirit upon men of many nations.

This restoration process continues. Verses 11-13:

**In that day you will feel no shame
Because of all your deeds
By which you rebelled against Me;
For then I will remove from your midst
Your proud, exulting ones,
And you will never again be haughty
On my holy mountain.
But I will leave among you
A humble and lowly people,
And they will take refuge in the name of the Lord.
The remnant of Israel will do no wrong
And tell no lies,
Nor will a deceitful tongue
Be found in their mouths;
For they shall feed and lie down
With no one to make them tremble. (3:11-13)**

After God's purifying judgment only a righteous remnant remains. No longer will his people live in fear and shame because of their rebellious pride and deceitful speech. There will only be words of truth and a spirit of humility.

Verses 14-17 give a most glorious look at this restoration:

**Shout for joy, O daughter of Zion!
Shout in triumph, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter of Jerusalem!
The Lord has taken away His judgments against you,
He has cleared away your enemies.
The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;
You will fear disaster no more.
In that day it will be said to Jerusalem:
"Do not be afraid, O Zion;
Do not let your hands fall limp.**

**The Lord your God is in your midst,
A victorious warrior.
He will exult over you with joy,
He will be quiet in His love,
He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy. (3:14-17)**

What an amazing transformation! What once were cries of wailing at the terror of God's judgment become shouts of joy that the Lord has taken away his judgments. What was once a time of darkness and distress is transformed into a time for rejoicing and exultation. The Lord is no longer in the midst of his people to pour out his angry wrath, but to rejoice over us and calm us with his love.

The word of God as prophesied by Zephaniah is a word concerning the coming "day of the Lord." It is a prophecy intended to awaken God's people to their own rebellion and arrogance, and to turn them to him in righteous obedience and humble adoration.

The "day of the Lord" is not just a one-time event, when Christ comes again in glory and judgment to reclaim his people once and for all. We have seen from history that the "day of the Lord" continually repeats itself. Zephaniah's prophecy came true. The "day of the Lord" came for the city of Jerusalem, in 587 BC, when the city fell at the hand of the Babylonians, leaving behind only a remnant of the Jews.

In the first century, Jesus himself warned Jerusalem of coming judgment. The "day of the Lord" came for them in AD 70, this time at the hands of the Romans, leaving behind only the remnant of Christ's Church.

So, what is the "day of the Lord" for you and me? The "day of the Lord" can be seen each and every day and in many different ways when we are forced to rely on the mercies of God. Those are the times when the God's thorough and intense judgment strips us of our self-righteousness and brings us face to face with our own inadequacy and dependence upon God. It is those painful times when his righteous judgment burns away the sinful chaff in our lives, and what remains is a heart that is being made pure in loving devotion.

I admit that it takes the "day of the Lord" to break me and bring me to my knees in quiet repentance and humble obedience. It takes "the day of the Lord" to remind me that my true and primary citizenship is not in the USA, but in the Kingdom of God; and that my primary identity and source of pride is not as an American, but as a beloved child of God.

Zephaniah reminds us that our God is a righteous God. In his jealous love he will go to great lengths to purify and protect his people. He is ruthless and relentless in carving out and destroying anything that threatens our ultimate well-being. The "day of the Lord" is a time of pain and distress, but it ends with shouts of joy.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the message you have given to us through your servant Zephaniah. Thank you for being here in our midst. We give praise that in this present age there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. How gracious of you to send us your Son that our "perhaps" might be transformed into the blessed assurance that we are sealed with your Holy Spirit. Help us to come to you with humble and repentant hearts and to seek after you in solitude and in community. Purify our lips, Lord, and help us to love you with all our heart, mind, and strength. May we rejoice in knowing that through times of darkness and distress you are here in our midst, conforming us into your image and rejoicing over us with shouts of joy. Amen.

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