

Escaping the Inescapable (Zephaniah 1–2)

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There are some texts in the Bible that provide happy consideration. There are some texts that the poorest of preachers can expound and transport hearers into the heavenly places. The great gospel themes of salvation deserve the attention of faithful preaching. But there is another side of the gospel that is never easy to preach and is often unpopular to pulpit and pew alike. But it is a vital message that highlights and intensifies the beauty of saving grace. God's sovereign love for sinners is understood to be all the more gracious in the light of His just wrath and judgment of sinners. It is on this hard word of judgment that I want to focus our thoughts in this address. We must understand that the way and end of transgressors are hard. Those outside of Christ must heed the warning of determined doom and flee to Christ. Those who know the safe refuge of grace must be ever grateful and increasingly diligent to see others enter the stronghold of grace and to flee the wrath to come.

Our text is from Zephaniah—not a household name among the prophets but one whose recorded pedigree is traced back to the good king Hezekiah. Zephaniah preached during the reign of Josiah, the king of Judah (Zeph. 1:1), in an era of corruption between the forgotten reforms of Hezekiah and the yet-to-come reforms of Josiah that Zephaniah most likely helped to foster. Josiah had a lengthy reign from 640–609 BC, but Zephaniah's ministry most likely did not cover that entire span, which is evident, for instance, from the fact that Nineveh's fall in 612 BC had not yet occurred (2:13). In addition, many of the sins cited in Zephaniah 1:3–13 were common before but not after Josiah's

reforms. Second Chronicles 34 and 35 indicate that Josiah's reforms occurred in two stages, one in his twelfth year (628 BC) and the other in his eighteenth (622–621 BC). So, Zephaniah's preaching would have been between 640 and 621 BC, the first half of Josiah's administration, making him a contemporary with the early days of Jeremiah.¹

Politically, socially, and spiritually, the nation of Judah tottered on the brink of collapse. To this depraved and perverted society, God raised up this prophet and gave him the authority of heaven (1:1) to warn sinners of judgment to come. As a messenger of judgment, Zephaniah announced the terrors of the Lord. He declared impending doom, called sinners to repentance, and unfolded the mercy of God. Zephaniah preached the whole counsel of God, a message of judgment and salvation.

As common for the prophets of his day, some aspects of his message had near fulfillment in the Babylonian captivity. Other points leap forward to that ultimate divine judgment yet to come. It was a hard word to hear—a message of bad news—about the terrors of the Lord to be unleashed in impending doom on the impenitent. But the announcement of bad news opened the way for a call to repentance and for the unfolding of the mercy of God—the good news. The certain judgment of sinners is reason for repentance. Whether we consider God's past or future work of judgment, there are lessons that are timeless and warnings that are universal. The God of *then*, whether the then of the past or future, is the God of *now*. Indeed, Zephaniah's message of judgment and grace assures us that God controls all of time and will vindicate His name in the final victory over sin and the ultimate salvation of His people. Here, I want to consider Zephaniah's timelessly relevant message on how to escape the inescapable.

1. For more background on Zephaniah, see my introductory notes in Joel R. Beeke et al., eds., *The Reformation Heritage KJV Study Bible* (Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 1307–8.

Divine Judgment Is Just

God's judgment of sinners is never capricious; it is always earned and deserved. Nothing is quite as fearful as getting from God what is deserved. Zephaniah gives two reasons for this fearful thought.

First, divine judgment is just *because of who the Lord is*. He is righteous; Zephaniah refers to Him as the “just LORD,” that is, the righteous Lord (3:5). The root word for “righteous” or “righteousness” designates straightness and by extension conformity to a standard of evaluation. It is not necessarily a moral term. For instance, a path of righteousness describes a straight path, one that does not curve or bend; a righteous balance is one that is accurate in regard to the standards for weights. But when the standard is God's law, it refers to moral conformity to that law. When it refers to God, it means that God conforms to Himself; He cannot deviate from who He is. That God is righteous simply means that He can be nothing other than He is. As the psalmist declared, “the righteous LORD loveth righteousness” (Ps. 11:7). This straightness or conformity to the divine self-standard extends to the entirety of God's person and perfections, one of which is His infinite, eternal, and unchanging justice. Because God is inflexibly just—as is evident in His person and expressed in His law—He cannot ignore or tolerate sin, which is so contrary to His character. For sin to go unpunished would mean that God could waiver from Himself. His justice means that judging sin is the right thing for Him to do. Judgment is inescapable.

Second, divine judgment is just *because of who sinners are*. Zephaniah sums up the cause of the justly deserved judgment: “because they have sinned against the LORD” (1:17). The word “sinned” is from a root that means “to miss a target” and vividly pictures the sinner's missing the mark of God's perfect standard. This is no trivial matter, as Paul highlights with his all-inclusive assessment that “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Remember that God is righteous and cannot tolerate the slightest deviation from His holy law. Significantly, Paul's conclusion in Romans 3:23 follows a detailed exposé of

specific sins. Similarly, Zephaniah, anticipating the Pauline logic, supports the general statement of Judah's sin with overwhelming and condemning evidence.

The first piece of evidence is that the people of Judah were *idolaters* (1:4-5). They were guilty of breaking the first and greatest commandment. God requires total devotion (Deut. 6:5) and He prohibits having any other god before Him (Ex. 20:3). The people of Judah did not love the Lord, and they replaced Him with gods of their imagination and of the world around them. Their worship was a hellish mixture of Baal worship (a perverse fertility cult), astrology and magic (hence the reference to "the host of heaven") with the professed worship of the one true God: they swore (or pledged their allegiance) to both the LORD and to Malcham (a common designation for Baal). What a clear case of missing the mark of the first commandment as they brought these other gods "before the Lord"! Tragically, they followed religious leaders into these transgressions. The Chemarims were renegade, black-robed priests of foreign gods who worked alongside the Levitical priests (the supposed legitimate clergy) in leading the people in this worship of nature and fate mixed with a bit of orthodoxy. They were attempting to cover all the bases, appealing to whatever god they thought would do them good. Religion was a way of manipulating God (or the gods) to satisfy personal needs; theirs was a religion for profit.

The manifestations of idolatry may look different today than they did then, although there are striking similarities with earth worshipers and cults led by charismatic leaders who appeal to and abuse the Bible for personal gain. But whenever and however God is reduced to nothing more than an instrument to be manipulated for personal satisfaction, His law is violated and those who are guilty are in jeopardy of judgment as violators of the third commandment (Ex. 20:7). God demands love and total allegiance. He will not share His glory with another. Violating those demands is warrant for judgment.

The second piece of evidence is that the people of Judah were spiritually *insensitive*: they “turned back from the LORD; and ... have not sought the LORD, nor enquired for him” (1:6). They recoiled from the Lord, drawing back and shrinking away from Him. Not seeking the Lord equates to spiritual ignorance (Ps. 14:2). Without spiritual perception, they were alienated in their minds, insensitive to gospel grace, and doomed in their ignorance. This ignorance or insensitivity is no excuse; rather, it is another reason for God’s just judgment. To have no bent toward God is to be bent toward hell. To have no heart for the Lord is certain doom. That was true then, and it is true now.

The final piece of evidence proving their sin is that the people of Judah were *unbelieving* (1:12). These on the verge of judgment had no excuse for their ignorance because God had given them His Word of warning. Throughout Israel’s history, God had revealed Himself and His law; His expectations and demands were clear. Perhaps preaching to these same people, Jeremiah had said that the Lord had sent His servants the prophets “daily rising up early and sending them [an idiom expressing earnestness]: yet they hearkened not unto me, nor inclined their ear, but hardened their neck” (Jer. 7:25–26). Likewise, Zephaniah addressed those who refused to believe the Word of God. He refers to God’s searching thoroughly with a light to expose and punish those “that are settled on their lees: that say in their heart, The LORD will not do good, neither will he do evil” (1:12). The picture is of wine that has not been drained from its dregs and has become thick and viscid. The image describes those who are confirmed and hardened in their obstinate denial of God, His Word, and His work. They interpreted the delay of what the prophets had warned as evidence that God was inactive and incapable. Peter encountered skepticism in his day regarding the same issue (2 Peter 3:4–15). There is something about the status quo that lulls unbelievers into complacency and denial of impending doom. But unbelief is a deadly sin that damns the soul.

The evidence is overwhelming. Sinners are justly under the wrath and condemnation of the righteously just and holy God. Zephaniah is a pattern for modern preachers to be bold in exposing sin and faithful in proclaiming the righteousness of God that includes His just wrath “against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (Rom. 1:18). Part of gospel preaching involves warning sinners of impending and inescapable judgment.

Divine Judgment Is Terrible

It is a “fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31) who is a “consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29) and just in all His ways. Zephaniah highlights three reasons why divine judgment is so terrible.

First, divine judgment is terrible *because of its source*. The judgment is divine. The prophet designates this judgment as the day of the Lord (1:7, 14). The day of the Lord became a frequent theme in prophetic preaching. This expression occurs around twenty times in the Old Testament with corresponding designations occurring around fifty more times (a day belonging to the Lord, a day belonging to the Lord of Hosts, a day of vengeance belonging to the Lord, a day which is coming of the Lord, or simply “that day”). Significantly, some of the most detailed expositions of the day of the Lord are in the first of the writing prophets (Obadiah and Joel in the ninth century, at least if you date the books as I do), and it carries through in both the major and minor prophets. Zephaniah’s description and development of the day is one of the most explicit.

The day of the Lord refers to God’s intervention into time in spectacular fashion to bring retribution against wickedness and deliverance for righteousness. The day of the Lord is when eternity breaks into time. It does not refer to a literal, twenty-four-hour period; rather, it refers to an indefinite period of time when God interrupts human history in an extraordinary way, either for judgment or blessing. It will be a good day or a bad day depending on one’s relationship with the Lord: the same day can be a dread

for sinners but a delight for saints. Indeed, there are components of this day that include punishment, salvation, and the blessings associated with the Messiah and His kingdom. It is true that God providentially governs the events and circumstances of time. Providence is His ordinary work. The day of the Lord, on the other hand, is His extraordinary and unique work. This extraordinary and unique work can be accomplished with or without the use of secondary means. But even when secondary means are employed, it is clear that they are just instruments in God's hand to accomplish His special purpose. For instance, locust plagues happened in regular cycles, but there was something about the locusts in his day that Joel recognized as extraordinary: "Alas for the day! for the day of the LORD is at hand, and as a destruction from the Almighty shall it come" (Joel 1:15). And that was just a precursor of a more devastating one that was imminent, terrible, and irresistible (Joel 2).

It is important to understand that there have been multiple days of the Lord, all of which are typical or picture prophecies of the final, eschatological day that is yet to come. For instance, the day of the Lord against Edom (Obadiah) and Babylon (Isaiah 14) are matters of ancient history, but those past days point to the appointed day when God "will judge the world in righteousness" (Acts 17:31). On one hand, some components of Zephaniah's announcement of the coming day of the Lord were fulfilled in Babylon's destruction of Jerusalem, but even those elements that are past illustrate timeless and universal principles. On the other hand, some components have yet to be fulfilled referring specifically to the eschaton. It is better to view the day of the Lord in these terms rather than in multiple fulfillments. Prophets often juxtaposed near prophecies with distant prophecies, telescoping the events without reference to time intervals that separated the events.

That this day of the Lord is extraordinary divine activity is underscored by all the verbs expressing the divine initiative. Consider the following verses: 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 12, 17. The prerogative and execution of judgment belong to God. It is not surprising

that Nahum asked, “Who can stand before his indignation? and who can abide in the fierceness of his anger?” (Nahum 1:6). It is not surprising that the psalmist answers the question, “the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment” (Ps. 1:5). There is no contest, no appeal, no excuse, no escape. Joel describes the inescapable terrors of this day: “Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision: for the day of the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision” (Joel 3:14). The thought here is not that those in the valley have the opportunity to decide their own fate; on the contrary, they are in the valley of that which has been divinely decreed. They have no hope; they have no way of escape. Amos illustrates this inescapability in almost tragic comedy when he compares trying to escape the day of Lord with a man who flees from a lion only to encounter a bear, then to be bit by a serpent when he thought he was in the safety of his home (Amos 5:19).

Zephaniah, in a most startling expression, puts in the bold the divine source of the judgment when he equates the day of the Lord with the Lord’s sacrifice that He has “prepared,” or more literally, “consecrated” (1:7–8). The sacrifice speaks of satisfaction. Justice must be satisfied. What a statement this is that stands as testimony to God’s inflexible justice that must be appeased! That satisfaction will be made either by the sinner himself in eternal damnation or in Jesus who satisfied God’s infinite justice in His sacrifice for His people. The message of judgment is the occasion for the message of grace.

Next, divine judgment is terrible *because of its horrors* (1:15–17). In verses 15 and 16, Zephaniah describes “that day” in six different ways linking the word “day” with some dreadful characteristic. I’m not sure how far to take it, but it is reminiscent of the six days of creation when God made everything good. Here it is as though God reverses creation, making everything bad.

1. It will be a day of wrath, referring to God’s rage and fury—His passionate yet controlled outbursts of anger. Significantly, Peter describes the final day in terms of a fire that will engulf

the heavens and the earth (2 Peter 3:7, 10, 12). It is as though the heat of God's anger kindles the flames of destruction.

2. It will be a day of trouble and distress, referring to the effects of God's outpoured wrath. From every side, sinners caught in this judgment will feel pressure and suffocation as they are choked by the fumes of God's anger in the flames of hell.
3. It will be a day of wasteness and desolation, referring to the utter ruin and emptiness of catastrophe.
4. It will be a day of darkness and gloominess—without a ray of hope and with all the fears and anxiety associated with the dark.
5. It will be a day of clouds and thick darkness. The darkness image is repeated but the mention of clouds is suggestive of the clouds engulfing Sinai at the giving of the law, which is the righteous standard that sentences the guilty to the terrible day.
6. It is a day of the trumpet and alarm. The trumpet or ram's horn was the instrument used in the course of battle, either to warn of the approaching enemy or to signal advances or retreats. Here it sounds the alarm of danger, but it is too late to retreat. The battle has been lost; escape is impossible.

Verse 17 vividly sums up the horrors of this judgment: "I will bring distress upon men, that they shall walk like blind... and their blood shall be poured out as dust, and their flesh as the dung." Bringing distress literally has the idea of harassing or pressing hard against something or someone with hostility. Zephaniah's description of the objects of God's hostility as walking like blind men parallels Isaiah's when he pictures sinners as walking in darkness, groping for the wall like the blind, and stumbling at noon as in the night (Isa. 59:9–10). It is a picture of total hopelessness. That their blood is as dust and flesh as dung indicates the worthlessness of life. The point of the comparison is not so much the *quantity* of what is poured out but the *quality*. Blood, and by metonymy the life it represents, is as worthless as the dirt under foot. Their flesh is like dung. Even after employing every bit of my exegetical

skills, there is no way around it: dung is dung. It is not pretty, but it is a vivid statement of what is despised. If the six days of verses 15 and 16 allude to a reversal of creation, verse 17 is the climax of that analogy. In the original creation, man was made in the image of God, the apex of the creation week. But sin has corrupted and marred that image. In the final judgment, that which enjoyed honor in time is forever dishonored in death. The description of judgment is terrible. How much more terrible will be the reality!

Finally, the judgment is terrible *because of its certainty*: “The great day of the LORD is near, it is near, and hasteth greatly” (1:14).² The language expresses both certainty and imminence. This is no idle threat; it is about to happen. This teaches us something important about the predictive words of Scripture. Predictive prophecy tends to use the language of imminence. This means that regardless of how distant the prophecy may be from its actual fulfillment, the prediction is made as though its fulfillment were impending, or about to occur. This intentional temporal ambiguity is one of the most significant features of prophetic language. Since the time of fulfillment is not specified, the application of the prophecy is not limited. For prophecies to be precisely dated would effectively rob a given prophecy of its purpose to affect the present of all the pre-fulfillment generations.

In one sense, the fulfillment of this day of the Lord prophecy against Jerusalem was intended for that specific generation. In another sense, this prophecy—like each of the multiple day of the Lord prophecies throughout the prophetic corpus—project an eschatological day that will signal the end of time as we know it. This does not mean that a single prophecy is fulfilled over and again. Rather, each prophecy finds single fulfillment. Nevertheless, even the past days typify the final eschatological day. Every judgment of the ungodly parallels and points to what God will do on that final day.

2. Compare with verse 7, where “at hand” is the same as the word “near.”

My point of application is this. Just as certain as Jerusalem's destruction occurred in the sixth century BC, so certainly will the climactic day of the Lord occur when God has determined. Do not misinterpret the longsuffering of God that delays its execution to be evidence of divine inactivity. Heed the warnings now while there is time and opportunity so that when the day comes, you may be "found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless" (2 Peter 3:14). Otherwise, the judgment is inescapable.

Divine Judgment Is Discriminating

Zephaniah gives a glimmer of hope in what is mostly a hopeless message. Two thoughts set the tension.

First, judgment is *inescapable to unrepentant sinners*. This is true because of its extent. God's ultimate judgment is universal. Verses 2 and 3 reveal that no part of the world is exempt. The prophet depicts a destruction of man and beast that is as wide and sweeping as the flood that destroyed the world in the days of Noah. Note Peter's link between the flood and fire of judgment (2 Peter 3:5–7). There will be no place to hide in that day (see Amos 5; Revelation 6). The judgment is also particular in that it extends to every class of man from royalty to servants (1:8–9). This contrast is an example of merismus, a literary device that uses opposites to designate totality. Referring to the extremes of royalty and servants includes all classes in between. God is no respecter of persons—not in salvation, not in judgment.

This judgment is also inescapable because of the futility of human efforts. Verse 17 pictures the helplessness of sinners who walk around as blind men groping and grabbing what they can but to no avail. Verse 18 describes the absolute inability: "Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the LORD's wrath." All buying power is deflated; they cannot buy or bribe their way out of judgment. Psalm 49 makes it clear that self-redemption is impossible because the cost of the soul is more expensive than any can afford; every attempt is futile (Ps. 49:8). This is why Peter says we are not redeemed with corruptible

things like silver and gold (1 Peter 1:18). Man has no currency recognized by God. Self-salvation is impossible.

Second, judgment is *escapable to repentant sinners*. There is a message of hope after all. There is a way to escape judgment that defies or at least is contrary to human reasoning. At the sight of danger, common sense says to flee the potential destruction: go as far and as fast possible in the opposite direction. But when the danger is divine wrath, faith demands that we run to the source of the destruction for mercy.

Zephaniah gives the invitation to those in jeopardy under the sentence of destruction: “Gather yourselves together, yea, gather together, O nation not desired” (2:1) and then “Seek ye the LORD, all ye meek of the earth” (2:3). The invitations are instructive. The word “gather” comes from a root meaning “to pick up stubble.” It pictures one who is stooping down; it is a picture of humiliation. The expression “not desired” literally has the idea of turning pale, depicting the shame resulting from the consciousness of sin. It is an image showing the contrition and confession that are such essential components of repentance. Seeking the Lord is a form of the verb (*piel*) that functions as an iterative—a repeated and habitual seeking. The meek are not those who are humble as a character trait, but rather those who are poor and needy who are helpless in themselves; those without any resources to care for themselves. To so seek the Lord is to find Him for His promise is that He allows Himself to be found of those who seek Him with all of their heart (see 2 Chronicles 15:2; “if ye seek him, he will be found of you”—tolerative *niphal*). Rather than trying to outrun judgment, running to the Judge is the only hope. It is those who acknowledge they are helpless who find help in Him.

Zephaniah offers the hope of safety for those who repent: “it may be ye shall be hid in the day of the LORD’s anger” (2:3). This is not an expression of doubt but of hope. It is not presumption but faith that God will be found of those who seek Him. The unbreakable promise is that those who come unto Him He will in no wise cast out (John 6:37).

But the prophet as a preacher of the gospel presses the urgency of this invitation to repent. Verse 2 iterates the urgency: “Before the decree bring forth, before the day pass as the chaff, before the fierce anger of the LORD come upon you, before the day of the LORD’s anger come upon you.” Once the day of the Lord comes, it will be too late: escape will be impossible. Do not find yourself in the valley of decision; flee to God against the coming day. And the day is coming; like the chaff blowing in the wind, the day is rushing ever near. It is both foolish and impossible to speculate or set dates for the coming of the day of the Lord. But one thing is absolutely certain: today it is nearer than it has ever been before. Today is the day of salvation; tomorrow is the day of destruction. Be certain that justice will be served—either in self forever or in Christ.

The paths to eternity may differ—either through death or Christ’s return, but the destination is the same. Outside of Christ, there is nothing “but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation” (Heb. 10:27). There is no escape. In Christ, we have the hope of glory (Col. 1:27). The only way to escape the inescapable is through Jesus, the only way, truth, and life.