

“MAJOR THEMES FROM THE MINOR PROPHETS: ZEPHANIAH.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Sermon Texts: Zephaniah 1:1-6; 3:9-20

Introduction.

Zephaniah begins with the longest genealogy of any prophet in the Bible. He traces his ancestry back to his great-great-grandfather, Hezekiah, king of Judah. So finally we have a prophet who is a somebody, a descendent of royalty, a true blue blood.

Zephaniah prophesied during the time of the good king Josiah (640-609BC). He seems to be writing from Jerusalem, he has intimate knowledge of the city (1:4, 10-11).

I wonder if people were expecting more of a party line from him, something more favorable to those in leadership, something that would tickle the ears of the political and religious powers.

The first sentence out of his mouth dispelled every such foolish notion. “I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth.” And then as if that wasn’t enough, he ups the ante in verse 8, “I will punish the officials and the king’s sons.”

Zephaniah was a contemporary of Habakkuk and Jeremiah, maybe just before Jeremiah. That means that they had the saddest of all the prophecies. Zephaniah and Jeremiah were called upon by God to announce the last warnings and final appeals to His remnant people in Judah, the southern kingdom, before God’s judgment came upon them.

Zephaniah and Jeremiah both lived to see the fall of Jerusalem and the fall of the temple of God, the great temple that Solomon built. They saw the great and terrible day of the Lord in their own time and land.

This book of Zephaniah has been called the whole OT in miniature. The OT is pregnant with the gospel, the OT is great with gospel. And the prophets are toward the end of the pregnancy. In the prophets things start getting clearer, both the bad news and the good news.

Zephaniah is especially full of gospel.

It begins with the most sober announcement of our sin against God.

Then comes the announcement of judgment on our sin.

Then finally comes the good news of mercy, hope for sinners.

Zephaniah begins with no hope, then a glimmer of hope and finally a full display of a glorious hope. Zephaniah is the *tale of two days*, two days of the Lord, a day of judgment and a day of jubilee.

The Day of Judgment.

How great will the judgment be? The judgment will be *universal in scope*. In poetic fashion 1:3 describes a reverse creation, where everything God created will be wiped from the face of the earth in reverse order.

Every nation will fall, every person will face judgment (3:8). On this day God will exercise His absolute sovereignty over all the earth.

The day will not only be universal in scope but *comprehensive in severity*, 1:14-16.

Why? Many reasons.

Idolatry, 1:4-6.

They bowed down and worshipped idols, lots of them. They bowed to Baal, the god of the Canaanites, to Milcom, the Ammonite god, to the hosts of the heavens, to the moon god, the sun god. They tried not to offend any god and in the process offended the one true God (1:6). They felt peer pressure, cultural pressure, to bow to the gods of the age, they became religious pluralist.

Worshipping God and something else is not worshipping God at all. It's patronizing God and marginalizing God.

Complacency, 1:12.

A nation that says, "*The Lord will not do good, nor will he do ill*" (1:12) is a nation of practical atheists. "God hasn't done anything for so long, either everything is fine or there's no God."

This is breathtaking arrogance. And it is the view of many in our world today.

Atheists who deny the existence of God.

Materialists who say matter is all that counts, there's no spiritual realm.

Existentialist who say that only this life holds any significance.

Secular humanists who reject the supernatural.

Universalists who say all will go to heaven.

They all say good and evil are of no consequence, right and wrong don't matter in the end, we can eat, drink and be merry.

Shamelessness, 2:1.

What is a shameless nation? A nation without shame is a nation without repentance. A nation without shame is a nation deep in sin and not only are they not concerned about it, they are proud of it and even flaunt it and feel no shame for doing so.

3:2-4, 5c, 7.

Judgment for Judah came from the hands of the Babylonians in 586BC when Judah was exiled, Jerusalem was sacked and Solomon's temple was destroyed.

What is a shameless nation?

A nation that has gay pride parades is a nation without shame.

A nation that spews forth billions of dollars a year worth of pornography is a nation without shame.

A nation that slaughters a million of its innocent sons and daughters a year is a nation without shame.

A nation that sends its wives and mothers and daughters off to fight our wars is a nation without shame.

A nation that displays the desecration of the marriage bed on big screens and little screens is a nation without shame.

A nation that kills it's elderly and calls it mercy killing, a nation that funds its education with gambling, that's a nation without shame.

A nation without shame has leaders and judges who don't stand up or don't say anything about any of this, and even condone it.

A nation without shame has churches that wink at it or remain silent to it.

A nation whose national heroes and role models in politics, sports and entertainment lie, cheat, do sex tapes, sleep around and have serial marriages, say one thing and do another, call good evil and evil good, is a nation without shame.

A nation without shame is a nation that mocks and ridicules and makes fun of those who preach warning and judgment. A nation without shame calls the gospel intolerant and a call to repentance hate speech.

A nation without shame for its sin must do one thing. There is only one thing that can be done.

2:3, it must repent. The great day of the Lord is hastening near (1:14). Seek the Lord, seek righteousness, seek humility, and perhaps God will relent.

And this day is only a shadow of the great and final day of the Lord. No nation, no city will stand. In His perfect holiness He will bring justice and set things right.

That judgment foreshadowed another judgment, the final day of the Lord. John the Baptist warned of this day and the repentance necessary to escape "the coming wrath" (Matt. 3:7).

John 3:36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him. (ESV)

The Day of Jubilee.

The glimmer of hope in 2:3 turns to the glory of God's grace in 3:9-20. This is the rest of the gospel and here it is in the OT.

There are some portions of the Bible that are written to overwhelm us with God's grace, mercy and love. There are some passages that are meant to flood our souls with indescribable joy.

John 3:16

Philippians 2:5-11

Ephesians 1:3-10 and 3:14-21

I Corinthians 15

I Peter 1:3-9

The Prodigal Son Luke 15:11-32

God's forgiveness of David's sins.

The cross

And Zephaniah 3:9-20. This passage has been called the John 3:16 of the OT.

The prophecy ends with an incredible promise of restoration and hope. Here is the unspeakable, breathtaking news that the holy, just, righteous God of the universe takes such thought of us that He exalts over us with enthusiastic singing.

What a contrast. There's no more terrifying word than 1:18 and there's no more gloriously loving and hopeful word than 3:17.

This announces a time when they will be humble and lowly, they will seek and take refuge in the Lord and judgment will be taken away and they will not be put to shame (3:11).

The reason for no shame is not because there is no sin but because their sin is removed.

3:14-15, the judgment is taken away, there's no judgment, none. This is heart of the gospel. No judgment, just justification. When Jesus endured the wrath of God's judgment, He took it all, all of it for us. Jesus' blood hides all our transgressions.

But there is more.

3:17. Can you imagine God rejoicing over us?

When God looks out over heaven and sees ten thousand upon ten thousand saints, when He looks out over all who are saved, what will He think?

Will He think, "what a motley crew, what a wretched bunch of sinners, what a bunch of miserable betrayers? Will He be disappointed? Will He think, well they fell and sinner and made a horrible mess of things, but here they are now? None of them are perfect, all broken, but well they believed Jesus so here they are? Given what I had to work with, it is what it is."

He will rejoice. He will exalt with loud singing.

He will see the fruit of Jesus' sacrifice.

He will see the glory of Jesus in our hearts.

He will see us without spot or blemish, made pure and white in the blood of Jesus.

He will see the good work begun on earth, now brought to glorious perfect completion.

There's no holding back, as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride so will God rejoice (Isaiah). Get this, as great as your joy will be in heaven, God's joy will be greater.

Spurgeon once said, "Believer, you are happy when God blesses you, but not as happy as God is."

Remember the prodigal son, who was happier when he came home the son or the father? God's heart is larger than our heart, His joy will be larger than our joy.

God rejoices over us with singing. "I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in my people" (Isaiah 65:19). God loves us so much that He breaks out into singing.

Do you believe this? Do you believe God absolutely delights in you and breaks out into exuberant song over you when He thinks of you? Do you believe that?

Or do you think He's so displeased with you? Do you think you aren't worthy? Do you think God could never sing over you?

But God knows your thoughts, He knows what you are thinking. So He cuts you off at the pass in 3:15, "I have taken away all your judgment."

Yes, He knows you have sinned, He knows all your sins better than you do. But do you understand, He has taken away all your judgments, there's no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

No, you say, there are too many reminders all around you every day of your failures, your shortcomings, other people who are only too happy to beat you down or steal your joy, people who remind you that you are a worthless nobody.

God knows what you are thinking. He answers that too, 3:17, He is the mighty one who saves you and redeems you and rescues your life from the pit. He is the mighty warrior who defends and protects you and delivers you.

No, you say, you have too much shame, you never live up to His standards. You are a Calvinist after all, you are totally depraved, you are chief among sinners, you just aren't good enough. God is always a distant God to you, He keeps His distance, you have never felt very close to Him.

God knows what you are thinking and He answers that too, 3:15 and 17, "I am the Lord your God in your midst. I am your very own God, and I am with you, close beside you. I am the king of Israel and I am in your midst, you never need fear again or feel shame again."

All your shame and guilt and sin and judgment and condemnation have been taken away.

Zephaniah 3:19 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. (ESV)

Application and conclusion.

Do you think about the Lord's return? Do you look forward to it or do you fear it? Why? Do you want to be free for all your sin or do you want to hang on to it for a little longer? Do you long for the Lord's return? Do you think about it and even plan for it? Are you prepared and preparing?

All who trust in Jesus for their salvation and for their deliverance from judgment, for them there's a coming day of jubilee and no one will be more jubilant than our God. The fullness of His joy will be our lasting joy.

Yes we will sing (3:14) but I think our heavenly anthem will be drowned out by our heavenly Father's singing (3:17).