Zephaniah 1 *He Will Take Great Delight in You: The Day of the LORD*

***Quiet You with His Love***The baby is cranky.

It’s hard to fault any infant for being cranky, really. Every sensation is new.

For months this little girl has lived in the comfort of her mother’s womb. Warm, safe, secure. This gentle existence is all the baby has known.

But suddenly, all that changed. From a world of darkness and quiet into a world of bright lights and noise. From a gentle bath of amniotic fluid to a world where adults are grabbing and poking and carrying her around. Now, everything is a new experience, an unknown. From day to day, hour to hour, this little child is not sure what is going to happen next.

Plus, she doesn’t feel good. She is colicky. She wouldn’t understand that word, but she knows her tummy hurts. She has trouble clearing gas from her system. It’s another new sensation, and she doesn’t like it. So she clenches her fists, she squirms and she fidgets, and she cries. A lot!

Dad is cranky too. It’s 2 in the morning, and the baby is crying, again.

For the last 6 weeks it has been like this. Ever since the baby came home. She cries, and she cries, and she cries. At least three hours a night, without fail. He heard somewhere that one of the ways they prepare Navy SEALs to withstand psychological torture is to play the sound of a screaming infant over loudspeakers all through the night. He can relate to that. It’s hard to see how anybody can stay sane for long with that incessant howling.

So now he’s up again, weary and exhausted, to check on his child. He checks her crib, it’s clear of obstructions. He checks her diaper, it’s dry and clean. He re-wraps her blanket, it’s a nice tight swaddle just like they taught him at the hospital. But still she cries. In frustration, he reaches into the crib and takes her in his arms…

And he looks at her and his heart is filled with love. He would do anything for this little girl. He’d do anything to take away her pain and her fear. He’d do anything to make her feel safe and secure.

He sits in the rocking chair and he holds his crying infant and he starts to sing:

Hush little baby don’t you cry
Papa’s going to sing you a lullaby…

He sings over his baby, late into the night, until together, both daughter and father fall to sleep.

There is a verse in the Bible that describes pretty much this exact scenario. But in the Bible, the Father is God, and we are the crying infant. The verse is **Zephaniah 3:17**:

17The LORD your God is with you,
 he is mighty to save.
 He will take great delight in you,
 he will quiet you with his love,
 he will rejoice over you with singing. (NIV, 1984)

God is pictured here as the love-stuck parent who sings His crying child to sleep. He takes great delight in His children, even when they are colicky and cranky. He quiets his children with His love. He rejoices over them with His singing.

This is one of the warmest, sweetest verses in the Bible. This verse paints such a tender picture of God’s love for us. And it is going to be the focal point of our sermons for the next three weeks.

***Why Zephaniah?***Actually, what we are going to be doing for the next three weeks is looking at the entire book of Zephaniah. We are going to do a three-week series on this little-known book. Let me tell you how I picked Zephaniah:

For one thing, we needed a three-week series. We just finished a 5-week series on making a habit out of attending church; and we’ll be doing a Lenten series in preparation for Easter that will start on March 1st, so we had a three-week hole to fill. For another thing, I’ve been working on the Old Testament for the Firm Foundation class that I am teaching on Monday nights, so I figured I should pick something from the Old Testament, since I’m spending so much time there anyway. And then, third thing, the book of Zephaniah just happens to have three chapters, so it makes sense to fill a three-week hole with a three-chapter Old Testament book.

But, full disclosure: I knew next to nothing about Zephaniah when I picked it. The only verse I was at all familiar with is the one we started with. Zephaniah 3:17. As I said, it’s a great verse. Images of God that I really love. But I didn’t even know, going in, what the context of that great verse is.

And let me tell you: it’s not good.

While that verse is a very positive verse, Zephaniah, by and large, is not a positive book. In fact, one commentator I read said “no hotter book lies in the Old Testament.” (George Adam Smith, quoted by Walter Kaiser in *Mastering the Old Testament,* p. 216) And by “hot,” the author meant angry. Zephaniah is a book of judgment. It’s a book about God’s wrath.

In the next couple of weeks, we are going to read some scorching verses. There’s some angry prophecy in this book. It’s a real “hellfire and brimstone” kind of book. So, why Zephaniah? I’ve got two main reasons:

First, we believe that the Bible is the word of God. **2 Timothy 3:16** says:

**16**All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.

According to that verse, we ought to be able to open the Bible to any part and find something useful for teaching us about God. Whether the book is a happy book or an angry book, there will be something for us to learn. Even though I didn’t know much about Zephaniah going in, I truly believe there is important truth for us to be found here.

Second, it’s because of that verse. **Zephaniah 3:17**. It really is one of the brightest verses in the Bible, and I think it shines even brighter when you realize it is surrounded by so much darkness. “The LORD your God is with you…He will take great delight in you.” That verse is really good news. Great news!

But as I have often said: it’s hard to understand the good news unless you confront the bad news first.

This week, then, we are going to dig into the bad news. I’ve got two parts to my sermon today: First I’m going to give you some background on Zephaniah. Second, we’ll look at Zephaniah’s warning, what he calls “the Great Day of the LORD.”

***The Royal Prophet***First, some background. Let’s look at **Zephaniah 1:1:**

**1**The word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah, during the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah:

There a couple of things to note here, and they are both intriguing.

For one thing, notice Zephaniah’s lineage. It is not unusual for prophets to introduce themselves by naming their fathers. It’s one of the simplest ways to distinguish oneself from somebody else with the same name. I’m Russell the son of Robert. Zephaniah is the son of Cush. But what is interesting about Zephaniah is that he takes his lineage back four generations. He names not only his father, but his grandfather, his great-grandfather, and his great-great-grandfather. He is the only prophet in the Bible to take his lineage that far back.

Why would he do that? Well, the name of his great-great-grandfather might be a clue. Hezekiah was the name of one of the best kings in Judah’s history. Hezekiah had reigned at a time of relative peace and prosperity, and more importantly he was a king who, according to 2 Kings 18:3, “did what was right in the eyes of the LORD.”

We don’t know for a certainty that this is the same Hezekiah, but it seems likely; or otherwise: why mention it? If it is, then that means Zephaniah was a part of the royal family. He’d be something like a second or third cousin to the current king, so he wouldn’t have a claim on the throne. But he would be what we might call a “Jerusalem insider.” He had access. There are things later in the book that indicate he may have been familiar with things going on among the “upper classes” of Judah.

Then, the second intriguing thing is the name of the king. Zephaniah was a prophet of God during the reign of Josiah. That tells us a lot about what was going on in Judah at the time.

Josiah was a great-grandson of Hezekiah. But his father—Amon—and his grandfather—Manasseh—the two kings before him, were disasters. Any good that Hezekiah had done were completely undone by these two wicked kings. They tolerated idol worship in the so-called high places. They allowed pagan altars to be set up in the Temple itself. Witchcraft, immorality under the pretext of religious ritual, and even the horrible rite of child-sacrifice took place during the reigns of Manasseh and Amon. Amon’s name is an indication of how bad things had gotten: his father named him after an Egyptian god. Things were so bad that after 55 years of Manasseh, Amon’s officials couldn’t take it anymore and assassinated him just 2 years into his reign. Josiah, his son, came to the throne at the age of 8.

And Josiah is a bright spot. Honestly, Josiah is the last bright spot before the Babylonian invasion that would lead to Jerusalem’s destruction just 20 or so years after he died. Josiah’s story is told in 2 Kings 22. The gist of it is that, in the 18th year of his reign, some workers doing repair work at the Temple found the Book of the Law. Most scholars believe this was the book of Deuteronomy. They brought it to the king and read it in his presence. When he heard it, he tore his robes because he realized how far the nation had strayed from God. He instituted a huge reformation in Judah that included tearing down the pagan altars and renewing the covenant with God. It is one of the biggest religious revivals in the whole Bible.

We’re not exactly sure when in Josiah’s reign Zephaniah wrote his book, but it is tempting to see a connection between Zephaniah and Josiah’s reformation. Especially if Zephaniah and Josiah were some sort of cousins, it is not too hard to imagine Zephaniah as one of the king’s closest advisors, helping to spark a renewal of the covenant. Many of the things Zephaniah prophesies against in his book are things that Josiah is said to have addressed in 2 Kings.

That then is the background for Zephaniah. He’s a prophet with access to the king at a time when Judah was at a serious religious crossroads. And his message is one of serious warning.

***Day of Wrath***Let’s look at that message. Let’s look at what Zephaniah called “the great day of the LORD.”

Zephaniah gets right into the predictions of disaster **in verses 2 and 3:**

**2**“I will sweep away everything
    from the face of the earth,”
declares the Lord.
**3**“I will sweep away both man and beast;
    I will sweep away the birds in the sky
    and the fish in the sea—
    and the idols that cause the wicked to stumble.”

“When I destroy all mankind
    on the face of the earth,”
declares the Lord,

Basically, Zephaniah says that God is going to come and clean house.

God is pictured with a giant broom, and He is sweeping the earth clean. It is a comprehensive sort of house cleaning: “everything”, “both man and beast,” “birds in the sky and the fish in the sea,” “all of mankind.”

In the New Testament, Jesus tells a story about a wheat farmer whose enemies sow his field with weeds. At harvest time, Jesus compares the workers in the fields to angels who will come and clear away both the wheat and the weeds. The language He uses in that story is borrowed from these verses. He says: “The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matthew 13:41-42)

That’s the kind of picture Zephaniah is painting here. That’s the kind of book this is.

There is a further description in **verses 7-9:**

**7**Be silent before the Sovereign Lord,
    for the day of the LORD is near.
The Lord has prepared a sacrifice;
    he has consecrated those he has invited.

**8**“On the day of the LORD’s sacrifice
    I will punish the officials
    and the king’s sons
and all those clad
    in foreign clothes.
**9**On that day I will punish
    all who avoid stepping on the threshold,
who fill the temple of their gods
    with violence and deceit.

The phrase: “the day of the LORD” is prophet-speak for the day of judgment. Zephaniah is one of many prophets who talk about “the day of the LORD.” In the nature of Biblical prophecy it refers both to the coming invasion by the Babylonians, as well as the fuller, more complete day of judgment that will surround the Second-Coming of the Messiah. When the book of Revelation describes the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and the battle of Armageddon, it borrows language from prophets like Zephaniah.

In these verses, “the day of the LORD” is described almost like a feast-day; a day of celebration where the LORD is the host and He has invited all sorts of officials and princes. Only, in this case, the sacrifice the LORD has prepared are His guests themselves. They are the ones who will be offered up. “The day of the LORD” will be the day of destruction for those who have turned away from the following God.

There’s an interesting reference in verse 9. The phrase “all who avoid stepping on the threshold” is a call-back to a story in 1 Samuel 5. There the Philistines have captured the Holy Ark, the container for the 10 Commandments that is the physical representation of God’s presence in the Old Testament. The Philistines take their prize and they put it in the temple of their god: Dagon. But the next morning, when they enter the temple, they find that the statue of Dagon has fallen on his face in front of the Ark. This bothers them; but they prop him back up and carry about their business. But the next morning, he’s back on the ground, but this time his head and hands have broken off! Obviously, this is the LORD’s doing; but the Philistines can’t admit that. They conclude, in their superstition, that it is because they stepped on the threshold; sort of like the childhood superstition of avoiding cracks in a sidewalk. (1 Samuel 5:1-5) And so, “those who avoid stepping on the threshold” is a reference to those who worship idols. It’s a pagan practice.

The book’s fullest description of what the day of the LORD will look like **starts at verse 14:**

**14**The great day of the Lord is near—
    near and coming quickly.
The cry on the day of the Lord is bitter;
    the Mighty Warrior shouts his battle cry.
**15**That day will be a day of wrath—
    a day of distress and anguish,
        a day of trouble and ruin,
    a day of darkness and gloom,
        a day of clouds and blackness—
**16**    a day of trumpet and battle cry
against the fortified cities
    and against the corner towers.

The day of the Lord will be a day of wrath. Wrath is a biblical trait of God. We don’t like to think of God as angry, and generally when we do it brings up images of stereotypically angry pastors and unpleasant churches that are always railing against the way the world is. We love God, and so we naturally get a little defensive when somebody tries to portray Him as angry or violent.

And yet, there are plenty of passages in the Bible which describe God’s wrath. It’s His justifiable and righteous response to evil. God’s wrath is the response of a Holy God to people who are in rebellion against Him. And God’s wrath is vividly described and objectively terrible.

There is a list of pairs here capturing the comprehensive effect that day will have on humanity: emotionally it will be a day “of distress and anguish;” physically it will be a day of “trouble and pain;” psychologically it will be a day of “darkness and gloom;” cosmically it will be a day of “clouds and blackness;” militarily it will be a day of “trumpet and battle cry.” God’s judgment on that last day will exceed anything the world has ever experienced or imagined! **Verses 17-18:**

**17**“I will bring such distress on all people
    that they will grope about like those who are blind,
    because they have sinned against the Lord.
Their blood will be poured out like dust
    and their entrails like dung.
**18**Neither their silver nor their gold
    will be able to save them
    on the day of the Lord’s wrath.”

In the fire of his jealousy
    the whole earth will be consumed,
for he will make a sudden end
    of all who live on the earth.

This is a terrible picture, with blood soaking the streets and corpses stacked in piles. In the fire of God’s zealousness for His holiness, the whole earth will be consumed. Commentator Walter Kaiser writes:

He will step in and all that rivals His person and work will be smashed and brought up short. The Lord is angry with the wicked every day, but only on one day will He manifest just how angry He really is!.. It is foolish and senseless to offend God’s moral laws and His holiness. For there is coming a day when all the ungodly will face intense wrath directly from the hand of God. (p. 222)

***Catalogue of Sins***It’s a terrible description of coming judgment. What triggers such a vivid warning? We find a catalogue of sins sprinkled throughout the book. **Verses 4-6:**

**4**“I will stretch out my hand against Judah
    and against all who live in Jerusalem.
I will destroy every remnant of Baal worship in this place,
    the very names of the idolatrous priests—
**5**those who bow down on the roofs
    to worship the starry host,
those who bow down and swear by the LORD
    and who also swear by Molek,
**6**those who turn back from following the LORD
    and neither seek the LORD nor inquire of him.”

The big sin is idolatry. They have followed the ways of King Manasseh. Baal worship, pagan priests, astrology and star charts, mixing worship of the LORD with worship of false gods like Molek. Verse 6 might be the summary statement of Judah’s sinful condition: “they neither seek the LORD nor inquire of him.” They’ve abandoned God for lesser gods of their own invention.

And then there’s this, **verses 12-13:**

**12**At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps
    and punish those who are complacent,
    who are like wine left on its dregs,
who think, ‘The Lord will do nothing,
    either good or bad.’
**13**Their wealth will be plundered,
    their houses demolished.
Though they build houses,
    they will not live in them;
though they plant vineyards,
    they will not drink the wine.”

The sin here is complacency. People have assumed that because God has not brought judgment yet, He never will. They mistake God’s patience for indifference. And so they go about their business as though they were in charge of their own destinies.

The phrase “like wine left on its dregs” is an image of casks of wine that are not turned. Left alone long enough, wine will thicken and its flavor amplify. For a cask of wine to sit for so long undisturbed implies prosperity and affluence. As a result, good wine becomes great and bad wine simply becomes worse.

We might talk about “fat cats” or the “filthy” rich. At any rate, Zephaniah is saying that these people who live so high on the hog and who are so busy patting themselves on the back for their great success—believing that God is a non-factor—are going to be in for a rude awakening.

And then, one more listing of sins, from early in **chapter 3:**

1Woe to the city of oppressors,
    rebellious and defiled!
**2**She obeys no one,
    she accepts no correction.
She does not trust in the LORD,
    she does not draw near to her God.
**3**Her officials within her
    are roaring lions;
her rulers are evening wolves,
    who leave nothing for the morning.
**4**Her prophets are unprincipled;
    they are treacherous people.
Her priests profane the sanctuary
    and do violence to the law.

Here’s another clue that Zephaniah was a Jerusalem insider. He calls out the ruling classes, the leaders who are supposed to be serving the people and leading them to righteousness. But instead of protecting the people, they are preying on them. Roaring lions and evening wolves. Those who should be helping are actually hurting. Officials, rulers, prophets, priests. They have all failed. Instead of leading back to the LORD, they are actually pushing the nation farther away.

***Morning by Morning***
These are the kinds of sins that bring God’s wrath. This is the kind of drift away from God that demands justice. In fact, **the next verse says as much**:

**5**The Lord within her is righteous;
    he does no wrong.
Morning by morning he dispenses his justice,
    and every new day he does not fail,
    yet the unrighteous know no shame.

The people assume they can continue to sin with impunity. God hasn’t done anything about it yet, why should they be concerned that will ever change? They chase after idols and money and power, they believe they are in charge, not God.

But they are wrong. God is a God of righteousness. He is a God of justice. He does no wrong, He does not approve of evil, and that does not change.

If my sermon today has a Big Idea, if there is one big thought we should come away with, I want it to be this verse.

Zephaniah is a hot little book. An angry book. There are pictures of God’s wrath and predictions of destruction that are terrible here. But we have to understand that is part of who God is. If He were not a God of justice, then what kind of God would he be? If He tolerated evil, if He turned a blind eye to corruption and greed, would He be a God worth following? Would you want to worship a God that was O.K. with evil?

There is good news in this verse, and important truth: God is consistently righteous. Day by day, morning by morning, His definition of right and wrong does not waver or change.

Does that mean that we sometimes fall on the bad side of that definition? It sure does. More often that we want to admit. Much of the wickedness Zephaniah is calling out can be found in us. We need to hear these warnings. We need to remember that we cannot be complacent about God.

But we also need to know that the wickedness we see all around us, the godlessness and greed, will not go un-checked forever. There is a day of reckoning coming. The great and terrible day of the LORD. God does not fail. He will not fail.

***Justice and Mercy***One more thing as I wrap up. The phrase that stands out to me in Zephaniah 3:5 is the phrase “morning by morning.” It makes me think of that classic hymn, *Great is Thy Faithfulness*.

That hymn is based on a verse from Lamentations. **Lamentations 3:22-23**:

**22**Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed,
    for his compassions never fail.
**23**They are new every morning;
    great is your faithfulness.

In the original Hebrew, the phrase “new every morning” is actually written the same way as “morning by morning.” In Hebrew, it’s the word for morning, written twice. And I can’t help but notice other parallels between these two verses.

Lamentations was written by the prophet Jeremiah, who was a contemporary of Zephaniah. I wonder if the similarities between these verses might not be because those phrases and idioms were common in the day. What’s striking is that these verses are so similar, but where one celebrates God’s compassion, the other celebrates His justice.

I don’t think that’s by accident, and I don’t think it is a contradiction. We cannot celebrate God’s mercy to us without also recognizing His righteousness. As I said, we need to reckon with the bad news—our sin and God’s righteous judgment against it—if we are going to fully appreciate the good news—God’s love and grace to us in the face of our sin.

The God who delights in us, the God who quiets us in His love and rejoices over us with singing, is the same God who dispenses justice morning by morning.

The Day of the LORD is coming, and it is only those who throw themselves on God’s mercy who will be spared.