Zephaniah 2:1-3 *He Takes Great Delight in You: Seek the LORD*

***Josiah***2 Kings 22 and 23 tell the story of King Josiah.

A boy king, he took the throne of Judah when he was only 8 years old. He began to reign about 80 years after Assyria had wiped out the Northern Kingdom of Israel. During those 80 years Judah failed to learn the lesson of their northern brothers, and sank deeper and deeper into sin and rebellion against the law of God. Both Josiah’s father and grandfather were disasters as kings.

In the 18th year of Josiah's reign Hilkiah the priest found in the temple a copy of the book of the law that had been ignored for decades. Most scholars believe it was the book of Deuteronomy. When it was read in the presence of the king, Josiah was broken. He humbled himself before the Lord and rent his clothes and wept “because” he said, “our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book.” (2 Kings 22:11-13)

Over the next 13 years Josiah led an amazing reformation in Judah based on the law of God. He renewed the covenant between God and his people (2 Kings 23:3). He took all the articles intended for the worship of the pagan gods Baal and Asherah out of the temple and burned them in the fields of Kidron (23:4). He deposed the idolatrous priests (23:5). He broke down the quarters of the male shrine prostitutes (23:7). He removed the horses that the kings of Judah had dedicated to the sun (23:11). And he reinstituted the celebration of the Passover that had been ignored since the days of the judges (23:22).

These were also the days of Zephaniah the prophet. According to Zephaniah 1:1, Zephaniah declared the word of the LORD during the reign of Josiah. More than that, we have reason to believe Zephaniah and Josiah may have been second or third cousins.

So when we read Zephaniah’s little book, it isn’t too hard to imagine Zephaniah as a religious advisor to the king. We can read Zephaniah’s words as a part of the call for reformation that Josiah was pursuing. No doubt the prophet and the king teamed up to try to draw the people back to God.

How did Zephaniah preach? What kind of preaching does God inspire when his people are in need of revival and reformation?

As we saw last week, it begins with warning. I quoted a commentator last week who called Zephaniah the hottest little book in the Bible. And by “hot” he means angry. There are dire warnings of approaching judgment in Zephaniah. Zephaniah gives graphic descriptions of the coming “day of the LORD.” **Chapter 1, verses 2 and 3** are representative:

**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.

The great day of the LORD is described as a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin (1:15). There are clear allusions to a coming invasion and battle, and it is clear that the people of Judah will not fair well (1:16-17). But, more than that, Zephaniah talks about the whole world being consumed in the fire of God’s jealousy and a sudden end to all who live on the earth (1:18).

What kindles such a dire warning? As we saw last week, the people are guilty of a number of sins. There is the idol worship, of course (1:4-5). There is also a sense of complacency, wealth and prosperity that are taken for granted and an assumption that God is indifferent (1:12-13). More than that, there is a failure of leadership; the leaders who are supposed to be serving the people are in fact preying upon them (3:3-4). Zephaniah sums up the sin of the people in **chapter 1, verse 6:**

**6**those who turn back from following the LORD
    and neither seek the LORD nor inquire of him.”

In a nutshell, the people have stopped seeking the LORD. They are creating gods of their own invention, they are living as though God were not real, they are making their own rules for life. Instead of looking to the LORD and asking what He would want and how He would them to live, they are ignoring God. They do not seek Him.

And this situation is intolerable. It will not hold. Things cannot go on like this forever. Our key verse last week, the verse we landed on at the end of the sermon, is **Zephaniah 3:5:**

**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.

God is a God of righteousness. He will judge sin. And, as frightening as that can be, we need it to be that way. We would not want to live in a world where evil has no consequences.

***The “Bridge Out” Sign***But what hope do we have? We recognize that God is angry with sin, and we also recognize that we are sinful. We too have been guilty of ignoring God. When Zephaniah warns that God “will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth” (1:18)—well, we all have an address that is located on earth, so that appears to include all of us.

Is that it, then? Is everything hopeless? Are we all headed for a date with God’s wrath?

Well, there’s a reason Zephaniah is giving a warning. When you’re driving down the highway and you see a “Bridge Out” sign in bright orange colors, that doesn’t mean you are destined to keep driving right off the edge of the cliff. The point of the warning is for you to stop and turn around. The point of the warning is to get you to change direction.

And that’s Zephaniah’s point as well. The people of Judah do not have to drive off that cliff—at least not all of them. Those who are willing to heed the warning can still be spared. **Zephaniah 2:1-3** is Zephaniah’s call to repentance. Most commentators agree that these verses are the heart of the book:

Gather together, gather yourselves together,
    you shameful nation,
**2**before the decree takes effect
    and that day passes like windblown chaff,
before the LORD’s fierce anger
    comes upon you,
before the day of the LORD’s wrath
    comes upon you.
**3**Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land,
    you who do what he commands.
Seek righteousness, seek humility;
    perhaps you will be sheltered
    on the day of the LORD’s anger.

They are a shameful nation. The word used to describe Judah here is a word that usually describes other nations, those who are not a part of the chosen people. It’s almost as though God is ready to disown them. They are shameful or undesirable.

But there is something they can do: they can gather themselves together and turn back to the LORD. They can do so before it is too late.

Notice the urgency in verse 2. The word “before” is repeated three times. There is still time. That word hits like a drumbeat:

* “BEFORE the decree takes effect;”
* “BEFORE the LORD’s fierce anger comes;”
* “BEFORE the day of the LORD’s wrath.”

Zephaniah may be an angry little book, but it’s not because Zephaniah takes delight in the punishment he is announcing. God is a God of justice, but it’s not like God wants to destroy His people. Anything but… He’s pleading with them to turn around, turn back, before it is too late!

What should they do? The answer is to “seek the LORD.”

If the basic problem is that they no longer seek the LORD the solution is to turn back to Him. The word translated as “seek” here suggests an active, determined search. Elsewhere in the Bible it is used for a person seeking hidden treasure (Proverbs 2:4) or water (Isaiah 41:17) or a lost sheep (Ezekiel 34:6). A person looking for treasure would seek diligently, because finding treasure would be a life-changing event. A person seeking water would seek diligently, because water is essential to sustaining life. A shepherd looking for a lost sheep would seek diligently, knowing that failure would likely result in the sheep’s death.

So also, for the people of Judah, seeking the LORD has to be a matter of life or death. And the same goes for us. Seeking the LORD has to become as important to us as uncovering buried treasure or finding water in the middle of the desert. It is only by seeking the LORD that anyone can avoid devastation at the hands of the LORD.

In fact, that’s the big idea for today’s sermon, that’s the main lesson we need to learn: **The only way to flee from God is to flee toward God.** The great warning of the book of Zephaniah is that a terrible day of wrath and judgment is coming from God. God is poised to sweep life from the earth, to consume the world in fire.

And yet, in one of the great ironies, the only way to avoid this terrible judgment is to seek shelter in the LORD. The only way to escape the fierce anger of God is to find shelter in God.

In fact, that’s what the name Zephaniah means. Scholars believe Zephaniah is derived from a Hebrew word that means “the Lord hides” or “the LORD is my shelter.” So**, in verse 3,** when it says: “perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the LORD’s anger;” Zephaniah is making a word play on his own name. That’s a clue that this is the key verse. The way to escape the judgment of God is to find shelter in God.

And, by the way, don’t read too much into the word “perhaps.” That word introduces a bit of uncertainty. It seems to imply that if you seek the LORD maaybbee, if it is a good day and God is in a good mood, there’s a chance that possibly the LORD will shelter you. You might read it like if you buy a lottery ticket, perhaps you’ll win. It’s possible to read that word “perhaps” and assume that God is wishy-washy and we would still be taking our chances by turning to Him.

That’s not what it means. Clearly, the weight of this passage is that if you do seek the LORD, you WILL be sheltered in Him. There is no “maybe” or “possibly” about that. The note of uncertainty comes, and the word “perhaps” is used, because there is still a question of whether the people will actually do what God is calling for. The “perhaps” in our lives comes not as a question of God’s graciousness, but as a question of our willingness seek our shelter in Him.

So let’s talk about what God is calling us to do. The only way to flee from God is to flee toward God. We are called to seek the LORD. And then there are two things mentioned: seek righteousness, and seek humility.

***Turn From Your Wicked Ways***First, we are called to **seek righteousness**. Part of fleeing toward God is seeking righteousness.

A number of commentators and preachers I looked at this week made a connection between this verse in Zephaniah and **2 Chronicles 7:14**. 2 Chronicles 7:14 is one of the more well-known verses in the Old Testament, because it gives the road map for God’s people:

**14**if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

This important verse is part of God’s response to Solomon, on the day Solomon led the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem. In a sense, it serves as the charter for God’s people going forward. As they follow God these are the things they are called to do: “humble themselves,” “pray and seek God’s face,” and “turn from their wicked ways.”

And the reason commentators refer to it in relation to **Zephaniah 2:3** is because the things Zephaniah is calling for seem to echo the things called for 2 Chronicles. “Seek humility” lines up with “humble themselves.” “Seek the LORD” lines up with “pray and seek my face.” And “seek righteousness” then lines up with “turn from their wicked ways.”

And I mention it because I think that is a big clue as to what it means to seek righteousness. Zephaniah is calling for a recognition of God’s right to judge, for a righteous sorrow over sin, and a change of direction from wrong to right. In other words, Zephaniah is calling for repentance.

It begins with a recognition of God’s right to judge. One of the great errors of the human heart is the tendency to believe that we are laws unto ourselves. We tell ourselves that we make our own rules; that no one else can judge us; that we live by our own code. But the Bible tells us that “no one is righteous, no not one” (Psalm 14:3). Only God has the right to set standards of behavior in the world He has made. God is the righteous judge, and righteousness begins by admitting He is the One True Judge.

Which leads to righteous sorrow over sin. Seeking righteousness means regret for where we fall short. It means feeling bad.

Nobody likes the feeling of regret. Nobody enjoys being told that they are in the wrong and the feelings of sorrow that come from that. This is sort of like saying that physical pain is a good thing. That you are glad that your arm hurts.

But that’s just the thing, there are circumstances where pain *is* a good thing. In a world where you can bleed to death, it is a good thing to feel pain when you are cut. Pain which alerts you to a tumor before it becomes inoperable is a blessing. It’s good to feel pain before an infection leads to gangrene.

In the same way, then, the pain of Godly sorrow can point us to much larger issues that must be dealt with. John Piper writes this:

Godly regret is to sin what pain is to disease. A sensitive conscience is a gift of God, just like nerve endings that recoil from scalding water. Yet it is amazing how many people today teach and counsel that guilt feelings are unhealthy and harmful…[Opposition to guilt] is a rejection of sin and its horrendous proportions in relation to God. Real guilt, real regret, is good and should not be avoided. Frontier doctors used to use whiskey to dull the pain before an amputation. That's o.k. The tragedy is when people try to use whiskey or other artificial means to dull the moral pain of regret and fear. Physical pain and moral regret always point beyond themselves to other problems to be solved. The pain and regret are only symptoms and they are good for that purpose. Instead of running from them, we should face them head on and admit the disease and seek a deeper cure in Christ. (*The Good End of Godly Regret*, Dec. 30, 1984)

Which leads to the final step in seeking righteousness: a change of direction. Or, as it says in 2 Chronicles, turning from our wicked ways.

This is the difference between worldly regret and godly regret. Worldly regret feels bad when we get caught, it feels bad about the embarrassment or consequences caused by our actions, but it doesn’t necessarily feel bad about our sin. Godly regret, on the other hand, is genuine sorrow over the wrongness of our behavior and a desire to change.

You might say that worldly regret is a stop sign. When your wrongdoing gets exposed and the consequences start coming your way, you feel bad, and you’ll probably stop doing whatever it is that you were doing. But if you only feel worldly regret, then you haven’t really changed. And once the consequences wear off you’ll go back to your wrongdoing, or manifest it in some other way. Worldly sorrow is just a stop sign.

But Godly regret is a U-turn sign. Once your conscience is pricked and you realize how much you have hurt God and others, that bad feeling of guilt you have will lead you not just to feel bad, but to actually change your ways. You’ll actually change direction.

This is seeking righteousness. This is turning away from the cliff’s edge and seeking after God. This is a conviction that God’s ways are best, a genuine regret for the ways we have violated His laws, and a heartfelt desire to follow after Him.

***Humble Yourself***The other thing Zephaniah calls for **is humility.** The only way to flee from God is to flee toward God, and that means seeking humility.

Humility is obviously important, since it is mentioned twice in the verse. Zephaniah is actually calling the humble in the land to stay humble. I think what he means is that only those who are humble enough to submit to God’s commands and seek after Him are those who will be able to find shelter in the midst of the storm.

So why is humility so important? I think this is where we see the gospel of Jesus. This is the gracious invitation from God to take our hope off of ourselves and put it in Him. It takes humility to recognize that we have a problem only God can solve.

John Piper shares this illustration: Imagine that you are exploring an unknown glacier in the north of Greenland in the dead of winter. Just as you reach a sheer cliff with a spectacular view of miles and miles jagged ice and mountains of snow, a terrible storm breaks out. The wind is so strong that the fear rises in your heart that it might just blow you over the cliff. But, in the midst of the storm, you discover a small cleft in the ice where you can hide. If you tuck yourself into this small opening, it will shelter you from the storm.

Now, for the purposes of our illustration, you need to imagine that God is both the storm, and the rock. The storm is the violence of His wrath. The rock is the shelter of His name. The only way to flee from God is to flee towards God.

But imagine, if you will, that as you begin to wedge yourself into the cleft, you hear the voice of God. God says: “I will save you, I will protect you in the storm. But there is a condition.”

When you hear this, your heart sinks. Your fingernails are dug in. You can feel yourself giving way. Your position is so precarious that even if you inhale too deeply, your weight will shift and you will plunge to your destruction. You know that if you don’t get into that gap, you are doomed. There is nothing at this moment you can do for God!

Then [God] speaks the gospel command: “My requirement,” he says, “is that you hope in me.”

That’s it, that’s the one thing we must do. We must have the humility to recognize we cannot cling to that cliff-face on our own. We must have the humility to recognize we cannot fix things ourselves. We must have the humility to recognize that the shelter God provides is the only salvation we have. Piper writes:

Now I ask, Is this not good news? What could be easier to hope in God when all else is giving way? And that is all he requires. That’s the gospel.

But it is not only good news for us sinners. It is also the glory of God to make only this demand upon us. Why? Because when you hope in God you show that he is strong and you are weak; that he is rich and you are poor; that he is full and you are empty. When you hope in God you show that you are the one who has needs, not God. You are the patient, he is the doctor. You are the thirsty deer in the forest, he is the overflowing spring. You are the lost sheep, he is the good shepherd. (*Future Grace*, p. 200)

Seek humility. Humble yourself before God. Stop trying to be a god unto yourself, stop trying to fix the problems in your life on your own, and admit that God alone can protect you. God alone is salvation from the predicament our own sins have put us in.

God is not impressed with those who try to do it on their own. He is not impressed with our proud posturing or our sinful self-reliance.

The call of Zephaniah is to humbly admit that we cannot save ourselves; and to take shelter in the mercy of the LORD.

***Where We are Headed***One last thing as we wrap up. The name I chose for this little series of sermons is “He Takes Great Delight in You.” But so far, the things we’ve seen in this book haven’t had a lot to do with God’s delight, and a lot more with God’s anger.

I need to remind you of the verse we started with last week, the verse we are moving towards. It’s **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)

I told you last week this is one of the best verses in the Old Testament, it’s one of the most vivid pictures of God’s love you can find. Like a father singing over His colicky daughter, our God delights over us, His children.

Next week we are going to focus in on this verse, and the verses surrounding it. We are really going to soak in God’s love. I’m really looking forward to it. I’d much rather talk about God’s love than God’s judgment; and I’m sure you’d rather listen to a sermon about God’s delight than God’s anger.

But we need to see that this verse shines so much brighter when we encounter the darkness around it. We need to reckon with the bad news if we are going to appreciate the good news.

And the good news is that those whom God sings over in this verse are those who have humbled themselves and sought after His face and turned from their wicked ways.

If we want to be those that are talked about in Zephaniah 3:17, then we need to be the ones who answer the call of Zephaniah 2:3. Seek the Lord. Seek righteousness. Seek humility.

And you will be sheltered on the day of the LORD’s anger.