

Zephaniah the Prophet

The Book of Zephaniah

The end is near! The end is near! The end of what, you ask? Depends on who you talk to. The streets full of people moving into and out of apartments point to the end of summer and the end of the peace and quiet of Ames while the students are gone. Others will point to the heat wave we've had this week, and use it to point to the end of the world coming due to climate change. The continuing conflict in Ukraine caused the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists to move their Doomsday Clock to 90 seconds before midnight, closer than it's been before. Still others will look at a loved one suffering from cancer, or disabled by an accident, and know that this is the end of their normal life.

The ultimate end we look to is the day of the Lord, when God returns to judge everyone and set everything right. And that's what Zephaniah is writing about. His name means "God protects," and he knew all that God needed to protect his people from, especially themselves. And so he spends his book warning the people of Judah to turn back to God, because the day of the Lord, the day of God's judgment, was coming.

Zephaniah certainly knew a thing or two about anger, sorrow, bitterness, and fear. His entire book of prophecy is nothing but doom and gloom—until the end. Up until the middle of chapter 3, Zephaniah prophesies nothing but judgment on faithless Israel and the pagan nations around her. Words like "wail," "waste," and "woe" carry the day. The future looks bleak!

Reading the whole book of Zephaniah, well, it's full of dead bodies. Zephaniah's vision of divine destruction is devastating. The dead are

scattered everywhere. The book opens with the grand sweep of God's judgment. God says, "I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth. I will sweep away man and beast, I will sweep away the birds of the heaven and the fish of the sea . . . I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth." The book opens with that grand sweep and then it continues with the particulars. God judges all, the priests and the people, the rulers and the merchants, the warriors and the laborers, and like a nightmare God continues to judge late into the night. Zephaniah sees him, wandering around with a lantern, seeking yet more people to destroy. The dead are scattered everywhere. Perhaps the most horrifying vision is when God prepares a sacrifice in the midst of the nations. Since his people have abused the sacrificial system he gave them, God enacts his own sacrifice in judgment. Only this time, the victim sacrificed on the altar is not a bull; it is his very own people. He places them upon the altar and sacrifices them, as the nations gather and watch in horror at this spectacle of judgment.

Then, at the end, we have this one small picture of joy. Yet Zephaniah's joy is not joy without sorrow, it is joy in the presence of one who comes to us in the midst of our sorrow. What do we learn about God from the wounds he has inflicted? First, we learn that God rules over all nations. His judgment extends to all social classes, throughout all nations, and lasts for all time. You cannot get away from it. Second, we learn that God's power is overwhelming. No one can resist him. He is the one who creates and he is the one who destroys. But, third . . . and here is where I would encourage you to trust that God can use your imagination . . . third, God is present with his people in the midst of judgment. In that most horrifying

vision of the sacrifice of his very own people, I believe we get a glimpse of God with us in Christ. God is most fully present with us in the midst of his judgment. Jesus is Israel reduced to one. He is that one body sacrificed on the altar, bearing the eternal punishment of our sin. Here, we see that God will not leave his people alone in his judgment, but rather comes for them in the midst of his judgment.

Jesus is the one who bears the Father's wrath for us. He becomes the sacrifice that takes away our sin and he is the presence of God in the midst of our sorrow. This death is not the reluctant death of someone who begrudgingly gave his life. It is not, as some theologians wrongly say, a strange form of divine child abuse. The Father killing his Son. It is the mystery of joy and sorrow joined for eternity in the relationship of the Father and the Son. The Son in joyful sorrow offers his life for you. The Father in sorrowful joy receives you on the arms of his dying Son. And when that Son rises and ascends into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father, he still bears on his body those wounds. Father and Son in joy and sorrow joined together forever for you. And now the Spirit works through this word to bring this presence of God to you.

That is what Zephaniah is singing about at the end of his book. That is the joy that Zephaniah utters in amazement, the joy of the presence of God with his people in the midst of their suffering. God in the midst of his people runs like a refrain throughout this text. Zephaniah proclaims, "The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty hero who will save. He will rejoice over you with gladness. He will quiet you with his love." God will rejoice over you with gladness because all judgment is taken away. God will quiet you with his love because nothing can separate you from him. Zephaniah

invites us here to see joy and sorrow together in the eternal love of God.

Why should Israel rejoice? Because the day would come when God would take away his judgments against them. In other words, he would forgive her sins. The LORD, the true King of Israel, would stand in the midst of his people, not to destroy, but to heal and save. His forgiveness of sin and removal of guilt would be cause for great rejoicing, and instead of stunning them into silence by devastating destruction, God would quiet them with his love. In fact, the very God who previously threatened doom and gloom would quiet himself and rejoice over them with gladness.

What was true for Israel is true for you too. God has taken away his judgments against you, for the LORD, the King of Israel, has indeed come into our midst by the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us..., full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Christ came on Christmas to "save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). Christ came to save you from your sins and me from my sins. He came to speak his Word to us so that we may have his joy in us—and that our joy may be full and complete (John 15:11). Jesus doesn't want you to be cynical, depressed, or dogged by a guilty conscience. He wants you to experience the joy of a free spirit and forgiven heart—a conscience unburdened by the circumstances of life in this world, which is passing away.

It is for people like her that God comes to us. He comes to prepare a place of worship. A place where there is joy in the presence of one who comes to us in the midst of our sorrow. As God gathers us, there are joys we celebrate. The birth of a child. A positive response to chemotherapy. And there are sorrows we mourn. A divorce. A grandmother developing

dementia. These joys and these sorrows are brought before God in prayer. But in his word, God brings us Jesus Christ. He has come to create a place where all people and all nations gather before him. Why? Because he has taken away divine judgment and now rejoices over you with gladness and quiets you with his love. This is God's gift of joy. Not joy in the absence of sorrow but joy in the presence of Jesus who comes to you in the midst of your sorrow. And the joy that he brings, like the wounds he still carries, is a joy that will never end.

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