

God's Severity & Salvation

Zephaniah 1:1 - 2:3

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Introduction: Have you ever sung a hymn about the future judgment of world, often described as the “*Day of the Lord*”? Our modern day hymnals, including the one we use (*Majesty Hymns*), don't have songs concerning the “*Day of the Lord*.” You will not find this phrase in your daily newspaper or news magazine. But there was a day when believers took seriously the coming judgment of the world & even sang songs about it. You would have to go back to 1250 when Thomas of Celano wrote a judgment hymn based on Zephaniah 1:15, “*that day is a day of wrath*.” The first 2 verses say:

“Day of wrath! O day of mourning! See fulfilled the prophets warning, Heav'n & earth in ashes burning! // O what fear man's bosom rendeth, When from Heav'n the Judge descendeth, On whose sentence all dependeth!”

Such a hymn would not be popular in most churches today. But the theme upon which that hymn was based is found more times in Zephaniah than in any other book of the Bible (the “*Day of the LORD*” is referenced some 20 times). In our study of the Book of Joel we noted that this phrase is used of different times in which God sent judgment on His people but the main emphasis is upon a future “*Day of the LORD*.” That day will be when God judges the nations of the world & Christ returns to set up His Kingdom. But whenever this topic is mentioned in Scripture, which speaks of God's severity, there is also mention of God's salvation. Zephaniah could be outlined as: the reckoning of judgment (1:1-18 & 2:4-15); the repentance to avert judgment (2:1-3); the reasons for judgment (3:1-8); & the restoration after judgment (3:9-20). By way of introduction to our study, note verse one. This morning we will look briefly at the reckoning of judgment & then the repentance to avert judgment.

I. The reckoning of judgment (1:2-18 & 2:4-15) > God's **severity**

A. Judgment prophesied against the world (1:2-3).

B. Judgment prophesied against Judah (1:4-18).

1. Note particularly verses 4-6:

- a. Judgment coming because of their **immorality** (:4b) – Baal worship > “Baal worship was licentious in the extreme. The religion of Baal was a fertility cult & its adherents climaxed their worship with temple prostitutes” (Phillips). Compare the immorality of our day, enhanced by free access to abortion?
- b. Judgment because of their **astrology** (:5, “*worship the host of heaven*”) > “Those who rely on horoscopes for guidance foolishly imagine that the stars influence or determine our destiny” (Phillips). Worship of the creation rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25). Any evidence of this today?
- c. Judgment upon their **insincerity** (:5, “*swear by the LORD, & that swear by Malcham*”) > *Malcham* was also referred to as *Milcom* & *Moloch* (an Ammonite god).
- d. Judgment because of their **cruelty** (:5, “*Malcham*”) > worship of this Ammonite god included the sacrifice of little children. Public then, private now (abortion)?
- e. Judgment because of their **apostasy** (:6a, “*turned back from the LORD*”) > They once knew God but have now deliberately turned their backs on Him. Some modern denominations have embraced that which is contrary to God's Word – LGBT+? Deny inspiration?
- f. Judgment because of their **infidelity** (:6b, “*have not sought the LORD, nor enquired for Him*”) > These are unbelievers with no interest in God or His Word.

2. Note also verse 12:
 - a. The Lord is searching Jerusalem minutely, as one searches a house with candles (or lamps).
 - b. The people are “*settled on their lees*” – wine at the bottom of the vat, congealed & thickened with impurities; speaks of their indifference & slothfulness.
 - c. The people say, “*The LORD will not do good, neither will He do evil*” – “Thus settled in their carelessness, they deny God’s governing providence in the universe, His activity & agency in the world, as though He brought about neither good nor calamity” (Feinberg).
Application: Consider the indifference of many today – practical atheists?

[C. Judgment prophesied against the Gentile nations (2:4-15).]

II. The repentance to avert judgment (2:1-3) > God’s salvation

A. Judah is warned (:1-2).

1. “*Gather yourselves together...*” (repeated twice):
 - a. “*Gather*” was the word used commonly to gather sticks or fuel for a fire.
 - b. Here it suggests to “crowd together... to come together to a religious assembly to entreat the favor of the Lord in order that by prayer He may turn away His judgment” (Feinberg).
2. “*O nation not desired*”:
 - a. “*Not desired*” is translated in the Septuagint as “unchastened.”
 - b. It suggests they had no desire to repent, even dead to shame.
3. “*Before the decree bring forth...*”:
 - a. The decree of judgment is hastening on to fulfillment.
 - b. The day (or time) of repentance is quickly passing – then comes certain judgment, “*the day of the LORD’s anger.*” (cf. II Corinthians 6:2)

B. Judah is “wooded” (:3).

1. “*Seek ye the LORD...*” – those who are “*meek*” – those who had humbled themselves before the Lord & seeking to keep His Word.
2. “*Seek righteousness*” – they are challenged to pursue righteous living.
3. “*Seek meekness*” – they are challenged to continue submitting to the Lord & His Word.

Summary: “*It may be ye shall be hid in the day of the LORD’s anger.*” This appears to be a play on the prophet’s name: “*Zephaniah*” means “the Lord hides.” They can find refuge in the Lord if they seek Him & repent. See II Chronicles 7:14.

Conclusion: I began by calling this a message on God’s severity & His salvation. Salvation is needed because of the just judgment upon sin (Romans 3:23; 6:23). “God’s sovereign love for sinners is understood to be all the more gracious in the light of His just wrath & condemnation of sinners” (RSB). Zephaniah presents the just judgment of God because of the depravity of man’s sin (1:4-13). And that judgment is inevitable (1:18) unless man repents (2:1-3). Before dealing with God’s judgment upon the surrounding nations (2:4-15), Zephaniah pronounces judgment upon Judah. As Peter later declares, “...*judgment must begin at the house of God*” (I Peter 4:18). Judah had a position of spiritual advantage, but they strayed from what they knew of God & His Word. “There is a danger that those who have been long in the church can be in heart insensitive to the reality of God & truth. The high level of spiritual advantage increases the responsibility, & it is impossible to fool God who knows infallibly the heart of everyone” (RSB). The invitation of the Gospel is there, but judgment awaits those who reject it. Consider the invitation song, “God’s Final Call.” It is not too late today to “*be hid in the day of the LORD’s anger.*” Have you found refuge in Christ, the Rock of Ages?