

A Day of Conquest

Zephaniah 2:4-3:8

Studies in Zephaniah #2

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“**T**herefore, wait for me, declares the LORD” (3:8). This verse stands out amidst Zephaniah’s prophecy as he called upon the faithful remnant of Judah to wait for the coming of their Lord to set the world right. The world isn’t upright, you know; it’s upside down. This past week’s act of war in San Bernardino is just one example.

It’s the coming, or, advent, of the Lord that is Zephaniah’s one great theme. It’s what the Christian season of Advent is all about as well. And generation after generation of Christians have used the four Sunday’s before Christmas to look back in faithful participation with our forefathers and foremothers, who waited for the coming of the Lord in our flesh; and we also join them in looking forward in hopeful anticipation for his coming again in glory. The world calls this the “Holiday Season;” we Christians call it advent.

We saw last Lord’s Day in chapter 1 through 2:3 that the advent of the Lord would be a day of judgment on the whole world, including the hypocrites within the church. And as we take up the rest of chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3 this morning, the Holy Spirit shows us that the Lord’s advent will also be *a Day of Conquest*. Notice how these two sections are connected, as in 2:3 he says if we repent and turn to the Lord he will hide us from “the day of the anger of the LORD.” Now he goes on to explain in more detail that worldwide judgment with the little word **for** in 2:4.

Exit of the Enemies

Zephaniah proclaims that the day of the Lord will be like a new conquest of the Promised Land by a new Joshua—the Lord himself. And the first way we see this is in the *exit of the enemies* from the land.

He speaks of the *exit of the ungodly nations* from the Promised Land. Children, if you have a Bible in front of you with a map, find Israel. If you don't, just draw a tall rectangle and image that's Israel. And on a map there's always a little compass that tells you direction. What are the four points on a compass? North, south, east, and west. The prophet Zephaniah describes how the Lord is going to clean up the Promised Land so he describes all the nations that were around Israel in his day.

He looks west and says that the Philistines will exit the land in verses 4-7. Zephaniah speaks of **desert[ion]** and **desolation**, being **driven out** and **uprooted** (2:4) **until no inhabitant is left** (2:5). And this judgment would be sudden as verses 4 and 7 say **Ashdod's people shall be driven out at noon** and then by the evening of the same day **the seacoast shall become the possession of the remnant of the house of Judah**. By contrast, the ancient Greek historian, Herodotus, recounted that it took the mighty Egyptian Pharaoh twenty-nine years to besiege Philistia!¹ The Lord would do it in a day! This is that swift judgment Paul describes when he says, "While people are saying, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them...and they will not escape" (1 Thess. 5:3).

¹ Cited in J. Alec Motyer, "Zephaniah," in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, third printing, 2003), 3: 932.

He looks east and says the Moabites and the Ammonites will exit the land in verses 8–11. The Moabites who **taunt**[ed] and the Ammonites who **revil**[ed] and **made boasts against their territory** (2:8 cf. 2:10) would **become like Sodom and like Gomorrah** (v. 9). What does that mean? It would be as **a land possessed by nettles and salt pits, and a waste forever** (2:9). I remember once driving through South Dakota and its miles and miles and miles of beautiful rolling hills with green grass, flowers, and lush farms. Then all of a sudden you come to the Badlands. If you thought Death Valley was desolate! And the Lord was so serious about this that he swears an oath: **“Therefore, as I live,” declares the Lord of hosts** (2:9). And he says, **The Lord will be awesome against them; for he will famish all the gods of the earth, and to him shall bow down, each in its place, all the lands of the nations** (2:11).

He looks south and says Cush, or Egypt, will exit the land in verse 12. He says that it would **be slain by my sword**.

He looks north and says Assyria that had already taken Israel captive will exit the land in verses 13–15. Notice again as we saw in chapter 1 the language of the plagues and the Exodus in verse 13: **he will stretch out his hand against the north**. This meant he would **destroy Assyria and make its capital of Nineveh a desolation, a dry waste like the desert**. Have you ever taken a trip and pulled off the freeway only to come into what felt like a ghost town? That’s how Zephaniah graphically depicts Ninevah. Notice there would be no human left, but only animals: **herds shall lie down in her midst, all kinds of beasts; even the owl and the hedgehog shall lodge in her capitals; a voice shall hoot in the window** (2:14). And the Lord mocks the great and powerful kingdom of that

day: **This is the exultant city that lived securely, that said in her heart, “I am, and there is no one else.” What a desolation she has become, a lair for wild beasts! Everyone who passes by her hisses and shakes his fist (2:15).**

My friend, if you are here today and you do not trust in Jesus yet, what the prophet is describing in his own terms of his own day is the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. He has promised a day on which he will come to judge the living and the dead. That day is certain. That day is coming. That day is serious. That day is terrible. You will stand before the Holy God of the universe and what will you say? You're humor will not change the subject. Your debating skills will not sway the Judge. Your money and possessions will not buy you out. Your power and influence will not help you. What will you say?

But this judgment is not just for those “out there,” brothers and sisters. Notice how the Lord also speaks here of the *exit from the Promised Land of the ungodly from amidst the covenant people*. He saves his most powerful words for those, to put it in our terms, who are merely members of the church, who are attenders of the church, who are visitors to the church. In other words, he's writing to those in the realm of the church who have no true, living, saving faith. As he continues, **Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled, the oppressing city! (3:1)**, everyone is shaking their heads and pumping their fists against the ungodly out there. But we quickly realized that he's speaking against his own people. And notice how he describes the southern kingdom of Judah: **she listens to no one; she accepts no correction**. I couldn't have said it more pointedly myself after sixteen years as a pastor, dealing with members who then sin and whom we try to speak

with and bring back. **She does not trust in the LORD; she does not draw near to her God (3:2).** He's even more specific about Judah's leaders in verses 3-4.

Children, how many times have you heard from a parent or teacher, "Did you see the discipline your sister or classmate received? Do you want the same?" Have you ever been warned that way? What was your response? The Lord is warning his covenant people and saying to them, "Do you see my judgment on the nations?" So how does Judah respond? The Lord says he is **righteous and does no injustice...every morning he shows forth his justice and each dawn he does not fail.** But how did that affect Judah? **But the unjust knows no shame (3:5).** Then he says, "**I have cut off nations; their battlements are in ruins; I have laid waste their streets so that no one walks in them; their cities have been made desolate, without a man, without an inhabitant**" (3:6). He did this to teach his children and warn them: "**I said, 'Surely you will fear me; you will accept correction. Then your dwelling would not be cut off according to all that I have appointed against you'**" (3:7). Again, how did Judah react? **But all the more they were eager to make all their deeds corrupt**" (3:7).

Is this you today, mere member of OURC? Repent! Believe!

Entrance of the Elect

There is a heavy word of law today. But there's also a liberating word of gospel here. Just as the Lord would enter the land and cleanse it of his enemies so too would his elect remnant follow him in and possess it. Look at 3:8: "**Therefore wait for me,**" declares the LORD, "**for the day when I rise up to seize the prey.**" Now I hope you're

saying, “Okay, this is cool and all, but what does this have to do with me?” The prophet is speaking to his people in their terms, but what he says was not merely for them.

Remember 1 Peter 1:12: “It was revealed to [the prophets] that they were serving not themselves but you.” And we can see a hint of that in 3:8 where his vision of the Lord’s coming is not just to cleanse the particular land in Israel and Judah, but of cleansing the whole earth: **“For my decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out upon them my indignation, all my burning anger; for in the fire of my jealousy *all the earth* shall be consumed.”**

In the place of all the enemies would enter the Lord’s remnant: **The seacoast shall become the possession of the remnant of the house of Judah, on which they shall graze, and in the houses of Ashkelon they shall lie down at evening. For the LORD their God will be mindful of them and restore their fortunes (2:7); “The remnant of my people shall plunder them, and the survivors of my nation shall possess them” (2:9).** Why is this so important? Because the Lord’s promises of the land to Abraham (Gen. 13:14–15) and Israel (Deut. 34:1–4) were never completed. We learned back in our sermons through 1–2 Samuel that the Philistines remained in the land. But one day it would be cleansed; one day they would possess it. But these were all just small previews of God’s ultimate promise to give his people the world. Abraham was not the heir of a small patch of land, but of the entire cosmos Romans 4:17 says!

That’s what we wait for. We wait for “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13). And Zephaniah says to us who feel disheartened in the meantime because we don’t see it, but see the constant persecution of the church

worldwide, and who see our small size here this morning, that just as there was a remnant in ancient Judah like a “seed from which God would raise up a new church,” so too each and everyone one of us is a miraculous new creation in Christ from whom the Lord can miraculously work to give new life to another and then another!² Zephaniah also says to the depressed, to the despondent, to the struggling sinner who cannot shake the same temptation that in your “times of greatest trouble” just as the remnant of Judah had the Lord so too you “have a [firm confidence] of present dependence upon God for strength” and a [firm confidence] for future hope that there will be an end.”³

Wait for the Lord! Amen.

² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets: Volume Fourth, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai*, trans. John Owen, 22 vols. (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 15:243.

³ George Hutcheson, *Exposition of the Minor Prophets* (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace Publishers, Inc., 2001), 320–321.