

## **Zephaniah (Part One): The Day Of The Lord Is Near!**

**A New Axial Period Has Begun**

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**Given 07-Sep-21; Sermon #1615-PM**

I believe that we are living in an axial period of sorts. An axial period is a pivot point in history. It is an axis, like an axle. That is, a turning area, a turning point, and it signals, when it is cultural and historic, a time of great change in the world. It is a pivot in time, a time of great change in the world when events—sometimes sudden, sometimes prolonged—turn or rotate into a new configuration. And once you come out the other side of that new configuration or all the turning and turmoil that goes on to make it that way, things are vastly different. They are not very much like the way they used to be. The empires and the cultures of the past give way to new powers, new ways of doing things, even new ways of thinking about things and approaching things.

I think, looking at modern history, we have been in this axial period for several years already. It is not just starting now. We may have been in this axial period for a few decades even. As the Pax Americana and the free and enlightened democracies fade, it seems new and more restrictive regimes are moving to take their place. Look at what just happened in Afghanistan. It was like we were waving a big red flag to the whole world and telling them we are ready and willing to give up any kind of great power status, so y'all come. I mean, that is basically how I looked at it.

America has shrunk back from its place in the world and I do not know if it is recoverable. We seem to be becoming more insular all the time, fighting the battles that are within and ignoring those that are without. And of course here in the United States, we are going through a very tumultuous time of our own over the issue of social justice and the sexual revolution is still taking place and we are fighting those things amongst ourselves rather than looking toward our place in the world.

Now, the ancient kingdoms of Israel and Judah experienced what I would call the original axial period that began to build in about 800 BC. that would

have been what historians call the Iron Age, and finally ended somewhere around 200 BC, with the beginning of the rise of Rome. By that time the Greek states were beginning to fade from view and Rome was the one that supplanted Greece and actually ended up pretty much dominating the world of the Mediterranean and Europe for another 600 years, until the time when Rome fell to the Barbarians. So they had a very lasting influence on things and the Romans were very different from the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and the Medo- Persians, and even the Greeks, whose language and culture they took as their own.

But they changed things drastically. That is why the fourth beast in Daniel is so different than all the others. By the time you get to the end of the axial period and the time of the Roman empire starting to build, things had changed in the world. That was the axial period that a man named Karl Jaspers, who was a Swiss historian recognized. I should mention before I go into Karl Jaspers anymore, that by the time we get to 200 BC, the way of life for the Israelites in particular had changed drastically. Except for a few that were there in Judea, most of the Jews and the Israelites were gone. They were not even around the place we call Israel, at that time it was Judea and Samaria. There was some there, there had to be some because Christ had to come now to His own. But for the most part, people of Israel had already begun their trek northward and westward into Europe. So they were living a far different life than they had when the axial period had started.

Now back to Karl Jaspers. Karl Jaspers, as I mentioned, was a Swiss historian, and he published in 1849, a book called *The Origin and Goal of History*, published in German but has since been translated. He asserts that this ancient axial period gave birth to the modern era. That is when the seeds were planted. They had to get rid of those Mesopotamian and Middle Eastern cultures and what came out of that was the Roman empire and our modern way of thinking and doing things, because the modern way traces directly back to the way of jurisprudence and government and legal system of Rome, especially in Europe. We have made some changes here in the United States, but a lot of the legal practices and such that it still exists in Europe can trace directly back to Roman law.

So Jasper says that once Rome became an empire, the stage was already being set for our modern way of living. So life as we know it, he says, pretty

much began back in 200s, 300s BC. This sort of thing could not happen without some oversight. He suggests that even though he himself was an agnostic about God, that the axial period was an act of divine intervention. He says on page 18 of his work, "The axial period is in the nature of a miracle insofar as no really adequate explanation of it is possible within the limits of our present knowledge." He is basically saying there it was a supernatural divine act that brought all this to pass so that we can have the culture and the historical background and all those things that we have today brought about modern life, he says.

We know from the Bible itself that God is in charge of history. It is essentially said in so many words in Hebrews 11:3, that the ages were framed or prepared by the word of God for His purposes. So he uses time like a painter uses a canvas and he sketches the things that are necessary so that things come to pass according to His purposes. And that is what He has done. He started way, way back in the 8th or 9th century BC to bring all this to pass that is happening today. And I should throw this in here: It was such a well-structured change, a well-designed turning of the axis, that it left us, through the Bible, the types that we need to understand what we are going through when the end time axis begins to turn.

So what happened to Israel and what happened to Judah leave us a huge library of lessons that we can learn from so that when we face this upcoming axial period or the one that we are just beginning to be in, we know what to do. We could be without excuse, we can see all the signs, and we can follow all the instructions so that we come out the other end with our eternal life intact. So what I see God having done is made this axial period happen to His own people. He gives us two examples with Israel and Judah so that we understand as completely as possible what will happen in the end time when similar things begin to happen and this time it is for real, this time it is for the return of Jesus Christ. It is for the final judgment of man in this period.

We have the spectacular anti-type, which we are just beginning now to go through, and we have the type that happened more than 2,000 years ago, 2,500 years ago, that we can look at. It has all been chronicled for us, all that we need to know is right here in our Bibles to make right decisions and live to tell the tale, if you will.

Like I said, such a process, such an axial period is occurring today. There is a new pivot of history and we are instructed, we are tasked ourselves with surviving it and for living through it and overcoming it so that when the new civilization that rises up after it, headed by Jesus Christ, when all that occurs, we will be there and have joined it and be movers and shakers in it. That is what we have been called to do. We have been called to live and rule with Jesus Christ forever. That is the new Rome, if you will. I do not know if anybody has ever called the Kingdom of God the new Rome. But using the parallel between the civilization that came out of the original axial period with what will happen in the end time axial period, that is kind of what it is. But Rome only had 600 years, roughly, to dominate. Jesus Christ will look at the Romans and say, "Eternity. That's what I'm going to have. I'm going to dominate the culture and civilization of all things for the rest of time." So the anti-type surely outdoes the type.

During this time, in this axial period that is beginning, traditional ideas and practices are being swept away in a flood of new philosophies and lifestyles, pretty much every one of which is an anti-God. These new ways threaten to overturn the present order, and in short order. How quickly have the traditional strengths of this nation been backpedaling in order to conform to these new ways of thinking. We are losing our freedoms, we are even losing the ability to think rationally and reasonably about things. I mean, men cannot have children! They are the ones out there that are talking to us to "trust the science" and then they tell us that men can be women and women can be men! That is just screwy.

But that tells you the degree with which things are changing. They are looking at things from viewpoints that those of us who grew up in Christian households cannot understand. It is just impossible. I will never be able to think of a man as a woman and a woman as a man. It is just not how I am wired. A man is a man and a woman is a woman and never the twain shall be the other. It is just crazy. But you try to argue with people or even be rational and reasonable, you know, plumbing and whatnot in people, and they tell you, no, that your sex, your gender is in your head. It is the way you think about yourself, not what every cell in your body screams out that you actually are. Your gender is your state of mind. Baloney! Your Creator says your gender is how you were born and what is encoded in your DNA.

While these people with their crazy ideas purport to be an advanced, progressive, improved and new way of the future, it is in reality what Psalm 2 tells us. It is the reality of the rulers of the earth setting themselves against the Lord and against His laws. And if you go on and read Psalm 2, he says the end is that He is going to break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.

Have you ever considered *why* He has to do that? You probably have if you have been in the church for any length of time. God does not say here that He is going to set them all down and give them a pamphlet or two and tell them that this is really the way it is and they should listen to Him because He is God. That is not what He decides He has to do here. And the reason He decides that He has to do this other thing, use His rod of iron and dash them in pieces, is because they will not listen! They are totally and terribly sure, confident, that they are right and they will not change their minds. And so God says, "I'm just going to have to bash you over the head to get you to see that you're wrong, you're dead wrong! We'll start this conversation again in 1,000 years."

But that is what we are facing. We are facing these people who will not change their minds because they think they are right. They have convinced themselves through their horrible lines of reasoning that they are right and God is wrong, Christians are wrong. And God says, "I'm sorry, but I've got to come down in My wrath and destroy you." That is what we are facing. We are facing these people who will not be persuaded unless God comes and destroys them. Scary thought. But that is the way it is.

So in consequence of these people who are out there, the church is also going to go through its own period, not of progressive change, but of testing. God is using the world's turmoil to see who among His people will remain loyal to Him under all this pressure and not give in apathetically to these anti- God ideas. He wants to see if we will stand firm in the faith under the pressure of wholesale change flying around us and the exhausting stresses of cultural and perhaps political revolution, and perhaps war on our own soil. How will the church react to that? How will each member react to that? We have not gotten anywhere near that spot yet. But types are true. We will.

He wants to know: Will we move forward in faith or will we react selfishly to save our skins? So how do we react to things like, let us pull one out of the air, COVID-19? How will we react to lockdowns when we live in the land of the free and the home of the brave? How will we react to shortages perhaps of this and that—and toilet paper? Right? I mean, I hope none of us have duked it out with fellow customer in the store for the last roll of toilet paper.

How will we react to these new ideas that are coming up? How will we react to tyranny from Washington, from Raleigh, Sacramento, or from any of the other state capitals? How will we react to the moral decay around us? How will we react to being fired from a job because we do not fit in? How will we react to our children perhaps being disadvantaged in school? I mean, they are talking buzz out there about giving the vaccine to all these kids. But if your school does not allow your kid in into the classroom because there is no vaccine and the tyranny has taken place to the point where they do not allow religious exemptions. What will you do? How will we react to economic slowdown or what about economic chaos? Because systems are changing so quickly.

That is something you are going to have to ask yourself and that is something God is looking at. How are you going to adjust to change? How are you going to adjust to things happening around you that you thought would *never* happen in your lifetime? You probably remember yourself saying at one point or another, that can never happen here, and it is now happening and you are wondering who took my nation. So those are the things we are facing as this new axial period starts accelerating toward the end.

Now, there is a book in the Old Testament that speaks to these things more than just about any other. I am speaking of the prophecy of Zephaniah. That is way in the back of your Old Testament, about four from the end, if you need help finding it. But it is one of those little books, only three chapters right there at the end, in the Minor Prophets, and it tells us a great deal about this time. Because its main theme is the Day of the Lord and frankly, how bad it is. It is about God's people, using the type of Judah, being caught up in

the turbulent times that lead to the Day of the Lord and it gives some pointers about what they can do about it, what the proper response will lead to, and frankly, what the improper response will lead to.

My plan is to do this in three sermons, one chapter at a time, three sermons. And hopefully, I can give you an idea of this axial period we are going into and what we can do. Now, what we *can do* will not happen in this sermon because we are going to be concentrating on chapter 1. Chapter 1 is pretty dark.

Let us go to Leviticus 23. I could probably skip this one because David used it and explained it pretty much the same way as he did in the sermonette.

**Leviticus 23:24-25** Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the children of Israel, saying: 'In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall have a sabbath-rest, a memorial of blowing of trumpets, a holy convocation. You shall do no customary work on it; and you shall offer an offering made by fire to the Lord.'"

As David was saying, the Jews are pretty confused about this day. They really do not know a whole lot about what it means, even though the evidence is there. But they lack a few bits of understanding and so they miss it altogether. They can only see that it is a memorial of blowing trumpets or a memorial of the shout of a shofar. So they kind of consider it their New Year's day. It is just a big bash, kind of like our New Year. And they also say, "Well, it's the first day of the ten days of awe that culminate in Atonement." But without the New Testament and the inspired connections that the apostles and Jesus give to the Old Testament, they just have a hard time seeing its fulfillment in the last trump, or the trumpet of God, that signals the Day of the Lord and especially Christ's return. They do not see it that way at all. And so they kind of muddle about their speaking about this particular day.

I want to go to a different scripture. I will not go like David did and talk about *teruah*, but I do want to go to Joel 2 because I am just putting together the idea of the Day of the Lord and this trumpet. It is very clear here in verse 1 that the trumpet announces the Day of the Lord.

**Joel 2:1** Blow the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble; for the day of the Lord is coming, for it is at hand.

This is one of the handful of Old Testament verses where the blowing of a trumpet links directly to the Day of the Lord. I am just trying to give you some some basic information here, some foundation for putting these ideas together that the Day of the Lord and the Day of Trumpets are very closely linked. It uses the same word for trumpet, shofar, as many see in the command to keep the Feast of Trumpets.

Remember I talked about the New Testament supplying some links here. So let us go to I Thessalonians 4. This is the other end of the period that the Feast of Trumpets contemplates.

**I Thessalonians 4:16** For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.

Here Paul links this trumpet with the return of Christ. And so what we have is the bookends of this period that the trumpets are sounded, where there is a cry of warning, where there is a shout of at the one end of it, great fear, terror, and at the other end there is a shout of victory and rejoicing. But all of these events are connected because if you think of it properly as the turning of a wheel or rotation around an axis, they are all part of one process. The Day of the Lord and all the terrors of it *must* lead to the return of Jesus Christ and the glorification of the saints—the resurrection. That is just the whole process and the Day of Trumpets encompasses them all.

Normally in these sermons on the Day of Trumpets, we pick out one little bit to talk about. And because we like happy things, we like to dwell on Jesus Christ's return, when truly the tide will turn and what will come out of that is the Millennium and the Kingdom of God and eternal life for us, and great prosperity and peace for the world and a whole new way of life. And we normally talk about that sort of thing at the Feast because those things take place right afterwards in the Millennium.



But the Day of Trumpets is a wake-up call, and normally on the Day of Trumpets, at least in my experience, we tend to dwell on that warning, that shout, because we need to be woken up to the times and get on the ball. Like my dad said this morning, "When are you going to start to get ready? When are you going to finally say no to the distractions and get prepared for Christ's return?"

Things are happening out there in the world that are telling us, hey, time to get on the ball! He has been saying in the next five years or so. He does not see Christ coming. But it is a time when we have been given a chance to start getting things ready in our own house, putting our own houses in order spiritually.

Having just said that, let us go to Revelation 11. This is the seventh trumpet. Here the seventh angel announces the certainty of the Kingdom of God.

**Revelation 11:15** Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven [there is those loud voices again], saying, "The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!"

This is the final ticks of the clock in which Christ takes over. The process is mostly over here or getting to the end of His return, and the angel is saying here with the sound of a trumpet, "It's happening!"

**Revelation 11:16-19** And the twenty-four elders who sat before God on their thrones fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying, "We give You thanks, O Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was and who is to come, because You have taken Your great power and reigned. The nations were angry, and Your wrath has come [He matches their anger with anger of His own], and the time of the dead, that they should be judged, and that You should reward Your servants the prophets and the saints and those who fear Your name, small and great, and should destroy those who destroy the earth." Then the temple of God was opened in heaven, and the ark of His covenant was seen in His temple. And there were lightnings, noises, thunderings, an earthquake, and great hail.

Now, maybe we understand after David's sermonette why the ark was shown right here, the presence of God. It is sign God is here. God is coming. God is among you. He is taking up His throne, reigning. That is what the Mercy Seat is. That is the seat of His throne.

So the seventh angel announces the certainty of the Kingdom of God here. It is on its way. Now traditionally (and I agree with the traditional way of looking at things), we have understood the seven seals that are there in chapter 6 lead to the seven trumpets, and the seven trumpets lead to the seven bowls or seven vials of God's wrath, and Christ returns with the seventh bowl, all the way there in chapter 16. The seventh bowl, that plague, is a massive earthquake that splits the Mount of Olives in two. You find that in Zechariah 14 when Christ returns and stands on the Mount of Olives.

The seventh trumpet then, which is all the way back here in chapter 11, is shorthand for the entire Day of the Lord and return of Jesus Christ. The trumpet sounds and all of those things that are in the judgments, the bowl judgments, and Christ's return are all in that one grouping, if you will. It is generally thought that the Day of the Lord lasts about a year, and it follows the Great Tribulation. So you have the Great Tribulation and all that terrible stuff that is happening there, and then the Day the Lord begins that lasts about a year and is only terminated by the return of Jesus Christ and the judgment of that great day of His return.

Like I said, I have gone into this because Zephaniah, more than just about any other biblical author except for maybe the apostle John and the prophet Joel, focuses on the Day of the Lord specifically. As I said, it gives us good insight into the times of the Day of the Lord, what it will be like, how the people living at that time should respond to it. And in his last chapter, he writes about what follows it and all the good that it does, all the good that it brings. (That will be my first sermon, after the opening night sermon, during the Feast of Tabernacles.)

I would recommend going back to the book of Zephaniah right now, and if you have a marker or a bookmark or something to put in there. We will be going back and forth a little bit, to and from it. I want just the first verse here.

**Zephaniah 1:1** The word of the Lord which came to Zephaniah, the son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of a Amariah, the son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah.

Just a little bit of background on the prophet and his times. And we just read it. That is all we know about Zephaniah. There is no other mention of him anywhere in Scripture as far as we understand. Although his book is quoted elsewhere, yet we know very little about the man.

We can say that he was probably a Jew because his great grandfather was King Hezekiah, as it says right there in the scripture. So if you do the genealogy, you will find that Zephaniah is the second cousin, once removed of the king of Judah at his time, Josiah. So he and Josiah were second cousins, once removed. Zephaniah was likely a little bit younger than Josiah. He was in that following generation. Josiah was the straight up second cousin of his father Cushi. We can understand a few things about Zephaniah through this relationship here, that he was a great grandson of the king of Judah.

We can conclude or assume that he was a bit of an insider. You know, inside baseball, he knew what was going on in the palace. He had personal relationships with people there, he knew the king, he knew the king's sons, they were cousins, they probably played ball in the back forty and they did a lot of things together. I am being a little facetious, but maybe they did play cards in the evening. I do not know, but they had a familial relationship where that could have been possible, that they could have known each other quite intimately.

Zephaniah, being the great grandson of the king, was probably fairly well-to-do, part of the royal family still, so he had a little money, a little access, prestige, which made him a very good player in what was happening within the kingdom. He was probably privileged in many ways because he was in the royal family, had access to things that other people did not, probably lived quite well, and like I said, he personally knew the main players of the

age. So he knew quite a bit of the details of what was going on. People talked to him, obviously, and he talked to them and so he had access and he had the ability to see what was really going on at the center of government.

Now, the only detail here that stands out other than the fact that he was part of the royal family, even though a little bit removed, is that his father's name was Cushi. And if you think about it, that does not sound like an Israelite name. Notice the names there: Zephaniah, Gedaliah, and Amariah, Hezekiah, the days of Amon. It does not sound so much like an Israelite name and it was not. Actually Cushi was an Egyptian name or perhaps an Ethiopian name. Kind of interesting. It could mean that his father was Israelite but had been given an Egyptian or Ethiopian name because mom liked it or thought it sounded good or something. I do not know. Maybe she was impressed with somebody named Cushi from Egypt. I do not know, but that is the name he had.

Another thing we could think about it is that actually Cushi was Ethiopian or Egyptian, and his mother had married him, but they had brought him up as an Israelite and gave him the name Zephaniah. Perhaps Zephaniah was half Egyptian or half Ethiopian.

Now I do want to stress something right here. Both of these things, one way of looking at it or the other, I cannot say with any certainty. Both are unverifiable. But it is just interesting to think about because Zephaniah does have a father whose name is Egyptian or Ethiopian. So just adds a little bit of "hmmm" factor.

He was probably born during Manasseh's very long reign. It lasted 55 years and then Amon, who succeeded him, most likely succeeded him as an old man and he only lasted a couple years. And so then Josiah came on after that. So he was more than likely born during the time of Manasseh and Manasseh's time was the time of apostasy. That apostasy essentially continued until Josiah was several years on the throne and started making reforms. Even though Manasseh himself repented at the end of his life, it is very clear that his son Amon took his place and ran things just the same. So generally over the whole kingdom of Judah, it was still a time of apostasy and it only got worse as things like that normally do.

So the turmoil of the time and perhaps even some sort of persecution of those who worshipped the true God may account for his name, Zephaniah, because Zephaniah means "the Lord has hidden." Anybody who was a true believer in the God of Israel would want a son to be hidden from the perils of the day, from persecution, perhaps from death, who knows all the things that were going on there. There is a tradition that Manasseh cut the prophet Isaiah, who was hiding in a log or a tree, and he just sawed him in two. That was the violence and the virulence of the time. And Zephaniah, being born in a time of persecution like that, I can understand the mom and dad wanting to remind God in the name of their son what they would like for that child—that he would be hidden in the time of danger.

As chapter 2, verse 3 suggests, his name may be prophetic. That we are supposed to understand this theme and perhaps his name is actually the theme of the whole prophecy: The Lord has hidden. That if you want to be hidden in the Day of the Lord, then you better have a relationship with Him.

One more little bit of background information. Most conservative scholars believe Zephaniah wrote his prophecy sometime between 627 and 621 BC. 627, I believe, I am not exactly sure about that, but I think that was right about the time when the Book of the Law was found. And 621 would be the time when Josiah really got his reforms going. Perhaps not. The finding of the Book of Law might have been much closer to 621, but it was in that 5-6 year period right before the reforms of Josiah really got going.

It is not an unrealistic assumption to think that Zephaniah assisted Josiah in preaching repentance and a return to God during those days. Remember they were cousins. They probably knew that the other was a true believer in the God of Israel. They probably got together and talked about these things as soon as it became apparent, and maybe before, that Zephaniah was a true prophet of God. So you have two mouthpieces in the royal family, in the center of government. You have the king himself and you have a true prophet like Zephaniah.

Added to that, Nahum and Jeremiah were also preaching at the time. So God had raised up at least three prophets at this time. Nahum prophesied against Syria and Nineveh, Jeremiah of course had a very broad a ministry, and Zephaniah it seems, just from the book here that were given of his

prophecies, that he had probably a very public ministry of reformation and of warning.

I should mention that God raised up Habakkuk to do his work, which is against Babylon. And remember Habakkuk's big question is, "Why God? Why did you raise up the Babylonians to come in and kill us and invade our land?" So that was just a little bit later by the time you get into about 609, 608, 607 when the sons of Josiah were on the throne. So these four prophets, Zephaniah, Nahum, Jeremiah, and Habakkuk were all close contemporaries. So God was really working in this time of the axial period and when it came and fell on Judah.

Verses 2-6 of Zephaniah 1. Just listen to this. This is the opening salvo. This is why I say, I think Zephaniah had a very public ministry of warning and reformation. Quoting God here:

**Zephaniah 1:2-6** "I will utterly consume all things from the face of the land," says the Lord; "I will consume man and beast; I will consume the birds of the heavens, the fish of the sea, and the stumbling blocks [a euphemism for idols] along with the wicked [idolaters]. I will cut off man from the face of the land," says the Lord. I will stretch out My hand against Judah, and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. I will cut off every trace of Baal from this place, the names of the idolatrous priests with the pagan priests—those who worship the host of heaven on the housetops; those who worship and swear oaths by the Lord, but who also swear by Milcom; those who have turned back from following the Lord, and have not sought the Lord, nor inquired of Him."

Wow! A guy gets up behind the pulpit and starts with that, that is going to get your attention. "Hey guys, this is what God told me. Ah! This is terrible. This is what's coming!"

So he begins with a bang here. His prophecy is one of judgment against the whole world! He says all things—man and beast and birds and fish. It is universal. And what makes it worse is that it is focused on Judah and Jerusalem. They are going to get the brunt of it. David gave us the answer in his sermonette why. They were held accountable because they knew so

much, they were His people. The terrors of the Day of the Lord would come upon the whole world, but Judah was the focus of it—right in the middle of it. That should have raised some hackles on people's necks there. (I guess that is where the hackles are.) But it should have gotten their attention.

What is happening here? This idea that it is focused on Judah and Jerusalem is very similar to what Peter says later in the New Testament in I Peter 4:17, "Judgment must begin at the house of God." We are to understand that God is furious! He is not just a little irked. He is what we would call mad, angry. He has entered a time of such great wrath against idolaters in particular that He is willing to wipe off the whole land, sweep them with the back of His hand. Not only idolaters, but He includes people who have a syncretic religion. The apostates, the skeptics, and even the apathetic. That eliminates just about everyone but the loyal and the faithful believers in Him. That shows you the level of His anger.

His language here has a sense of finality. He says He will *utterly consume*, not just consume. He will *utterly consume*. That is, He will make a complete end of all things. Does that sound like an axial period, or what? Where everything is destroyed and something new has to begin after that. Some translations render this in verse 2, that He will just sweep it all away. The word *utterly consuming* implies gathering in or collecting things to a place and then *completely* removing them. Like taking out the trash. You get all the trash in one place and you throw it away, destroy it, you put it in a fire. In this context, it indicates the total extermination of idols and all the people who worship them—all the idolaters. Which makes you understand that this is suggesting not the time of Judah when they fell to the Babylonians, but the end time when he makes a complete end of all of these things. So it is looking forward to our day.

He also uses the well known euphemism cut off, which means death. It means He is going to kill, He is going to destroy them completely. It means destroy or eliminate or exterminate, like you do rats and cockroaches.

So this opening, this five verses here, is designed to get a reader's attention, make him sit up straight, eyes wide and asking questions. "What's going on? How can I avoid this?"

**Zephaniah 1:7-11** Be silent in the presence of the Lord God; for the day of the Lord is at hand, for the Lord has prepared a sacrifice; He has invited [or consecrated] His guests. And it shall be, in the day of the Lord's sacrifice, that I will punish the princes and the king's children, and all such as are clothed with foreign apparel. In the same day I will punish all those who leap over the threshold, who fill their master's houses with violence and deceit. "And there shall be on that day," says the Lord, "the sound of a mournful cry from the Fish Gate, a wailing from the Second Quarter, and a loud crashing from the hills. Wail, you inhabitants of Maktesh! For all the merchant people are cut down; all those who handle money are cut off."

This is a very interesting section. Now if Zephaniah were speaking this to a crowd of people who were gathered around him, the opening salvo would have probably spurred a great deal of grumbling and conversation. "What do you think?" "What's going on?" And it would start to get a little bit loud in the lecture hall, if you will. And so he calls for silence. He says, "Be silent in the presence of the Lord God." I just found this out. It is the first time I had seen this in studying God's Word, that the word he used there: hush! It is almost exactly that in Hebrew. It is transliterated as *has*. It means hush, be silent. It is like a southern mama says to her boy who has just put Sally in the mud and she says, "Hush boy!" and she is walking to get something off the willow tree.

That is the sense of it. "Be quiet, you're in trouble. God is here. Be silent in the presence of the Lord. Don't you realize how deep into all of this we are?" It is not the first time that people have sinned. This has been building. Zephaniah could say, "Look, Manasseh started ruling 60 years ago, 65 years ago. It has been happening since then. So, be quiet. Listen," he says. It is very much like Habakkuk 2:20. I will just flip back there, where Habakkuk says, "But the Lord is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him." Take your medicine.

So Zephaniah's intent here in verse 7 is to convey the Day of the Lord's proximity. It is so close. God is so close to acting that He is on His way already. He is here. He has started to come to His people in wrath. It is that near. He has already made up His mind and He is coming! And it says, He



has already laid the table, as it were. The Lord has prepared a sacrifice. Who is the sacrifice? His own people, the people of Judah. And He has already invited or consecrated, set apart, His guests. Guess who that might be? Chaldeans and Nebuchadnezzar. God has already made arrangements. This is happening. It is a dinner party and the guests are beginning to arrive. That is how close it is.

Isaiah 13:3 calls the Babylonians "sanctified ones" and "mighty ones" called in God's anger to do their dirty work. In Isaiah 13:5, God calls them "His weapons of indignation for the day of the Lord." He had already set them apart for that purpose. This is where you go to Habakkuk and see the reaction there to the fact that the prophets knew that the Babylonians were on their way.

Now, verses 8-11 here in Zephaniah 1 are a list of all those who make up God's sacrifice. Guess where he starts? He begins with Zephaniah's own family, his cousins, third cousins, the royal house of Judah, Josiah sons. He speaks of Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, and Mattaniah, who became Zedekiah. Those are the three princes that He points out here. "I will punish the princes and the king's children." Not Josiah. Josiah was a righteous man. Josiah did right. He was one of the best kings ever. But his sons, oh were they pieces of work, and it was already known. God knew it and let Zephaniah know it, that those three would bring the house of David down.

I do not know how young Mattaniah was or Zedekiah was at the time, but he would obviously follow his brothers in the way that they conducted themselves. But they seem to have already been showing their apostasy even while their father was reforming the rest of the country. And this was evident by what they wore. They were wearing "foreign apparel." Whether it was the style of the Egyptians or whether it was the style of the Babylonians or the style of the Assyrians, I do not know, he does not say. He just uses the word foreign here.

But where was Judean style? Where was their loyalty to their own nation and to their own traditions and to their own God? He could see by the clothes that these three princes were wearing, that they were not loyal, either to the nation or to God. He said those three are going to drag this nation down, so He starts with them. That He is going to punish them first. I should just

mention that the wearing of foreign apparel, just to say it plainly, is a likely metaphor for adopting foreign customs and especially the adopting of foreign gods. And because the princes did this, you can be sure that many people followed their examples and they were dragging other people down.

Verse 9 goes a little further. It speaks of "those who leap over thresholds." This is a reference to demonic superstitions inspired by the worship of false gods. It is another indication of foreign influence. You know, these silly little customs that we take up contrary to the worship of the true God. We use them mindlessly just because we see other people doing them. Things like crossing themselves. People do that all the time or they simply wear a cross thinking they are honoring God, or they say "God bless you" after you sneeze. That is an old Catholic custom to ward off the demon that is inside you because they thought that demons were the ones that inspired sneezes. Really weird, silly superstition. You got dust up your nose, but they made it into a demon.

This is the one that I hate the most, at least these days. It is people in the church using OMG. Do you not understand what that means? You are saying, "Oh my God." You are swearing. I will leave that as it is. People use other euphemistic swear words, too. This is the kind of thing that Zephaniah is talking about. "Step on a crack, break your mother's back." That is another one that comes directly from here. People not wanting to step on a threshold because they thought it was where the god was as they entered a temple or into a house. It is stupid, but people pick this up and do it without thinking. And that little unthinking bit moves people away from God, slowly but surely. It becomes a syncretistic thing and pretty soon you find yourself in the outs with God.

Now he is saying that these people who do such things, they pretend to be religious by doing them. They think that people will pick up that they actually are Christian or they believe in God or they really do want the demon to come out of your nose or something. But he says that these same people are on the front lines of making heaps of money for their employers through cruelty, violence, and deceit. He puts them in the same package. These people are so careless about the way to follow God that they are not going to treat their customers right. They are going to cheat them and deceive them however they can in order to make money. If they are not

going to be faithful in the little things, they are not going to be faithful in the big things and they are going to end up sinning in big ways against their fellow man.

What he is talking about here are plain and simple hypocrites. They pretend to be one thing while they are actually another.

Now look at verses 10-11. He gets off of the ways people act and he gets to where they live. Remember Babylon, in the normal course of things, would come up out of Mesopotamia and they would have to go up up through the Fertile Crescent over the desert so they could get to places like Lebanon and Israel and Judah. So they would most likely attack from the north. Right? Because they have to do that big crescent to come over from the area of Babylon. He says there would be a "sound of a mournful cry from the Fish Gate." The Fish Gate in Jerusalem is in the north. It would be the first place that they would experience the attack of the Babylonians. They would be the first ones to come under God's judgment. And this was a commercial area, as caravans and such came into the city from the north or left the city in the north where there could be a lot of exchange of things.

But he says, there is a cry, a mournful cry at the Fish Gate. This is a cry for help. The watchman sees the Babylonians coming and cries, and people take up the cry, "We're under attack, we're under attack! Help us! Send the guard, send the army, we need help down here on the north wall, we need to close these gates!"

And then he says, there is "a wailing from the Second Quarter." Things are beginning to amp up because the Second Quarter, or the New Quarter, was a residential area just below the Fish Gate. The enemy is inside the city, they are attacking women and children and old people in their houses. They are going through the city and slaying. So you have this wailing. The commentators say it is a wailing in pain because people are being hurt and dying as the Babylonians come south through the city.

And then it says, "and a loud crashing from the hills." We are moving into the center of the city. The hills are the place where the Temple was built on Mount Mariah and the City of David was on that same spur. This is where the influential people lived. This is where the governmental offices were in

the city of Jerusalem and they are hearing loud crashing noises from there. These are walls that are being pushed down, walls and buildings crumbling and screams of those who are caught in the rubble as the city falls to what God calls "the weapons of His indignation."

Maktesh, or the Mortar as it is also called, was another commercial sector. It was west of the Temple in the little dip between the hills there, and it was likely there that there was a very large bazaar. It was a place where people gathered to buy and sell, perhaps more high value items than that were available in the north there at the Fish Gate. And you also find there wailing. The enemy is among the merchants at the bazaar and they are slashing and burning and killing. But all the merchant people are cut down, those who handle money are cut off.

By this time, the whole city is fighting, is dying. Everyone is in distress. The economy is absolutely in tatters, in ruins. In the aftermath, you cannot find food, water is scarce. Many die, not just from the wounds or from disease, and there is just absolute, total destruction everywhere. This is Zephaniah's picture of complete destruction at the hands of the Babylonians, God's soldiers.

**Zephaniah 1:12-13** "And it shall come to pass at that time that I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and punish the men who are settled in complacency, who say in their heart, 'The Lord will not do good, nor will He do evil.' Therefore their goods shall become booty, and their houses desolation; they shall build houses, but not inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards, but not drink their wine."

The illustration here of searching Jerusalem with lamps is reminiscent of Ezekiel 9. Let us go back there. Ezekiel was speaking about the same thing, although he was quite a bit closer to the actual fall of Jerusalem than Zephaniah was. God gave him visions of the kind of thing that was happening in Jerusalem.

**Ezekiel 9:1-11** Then He called out in my hearing with a loud voice, saying, "Let those who have charge over the city draw near, each with a deadly weapon in his hand." And suddenly six men came from the direction of the upper gate which faces north [Could that

have been the Fish Gate? Perhaps.], each one with the battle-ax in his hand. One man among them was clothed with linen and had a writer's inkhorn at his side. They went in and stood beside the bronze altar. Now the glory of the God of Israel had gone up from the cherub, where it had been, to the threshold of the temple. And he called to the man clothed with linen, who had the writer's inkhorn at his side; and the Lord said to him, "Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and cry over all the abominations that are done within it."

To the others He said in my hearing, "Go after him through the city and kill; do not let your eyes spare, nor have any pity. Utterly slay old and young men, maidens and the little children and women; but do not come near anyone on whom is the mark; and begin at My sanctuary." So they began with the elders who were before the temple. Then He said to them, "Defile the temple, and fill the courts with the slain. Go out!" And they went out and killed in the city. So it was, that while they were killing them, I was left alone; and I fell on my face and cried out, and said, "Ah, Lord God! Will you destroy all the remnant of Israel in pouring out Your fury on Jerusalem?" Then He said to me, "The iniquity of the house of Israel and Judah is exceedingly great, and the land is full of bloodshed, and the city full of perversity; for they say, 'The Lord has forsaken the land, and the Lord does not see!' And as for Me also, My eye will neither spare, nor will I have pity, but I will recompense their deeds on their own head." Just then, the man clothed with linen, who had the inkhorn at his side, reported back and said, "I have done as You commanded me."

So, there, an angel looked for those people who sigh and cry over the abominations of the land. That is, they really cared about what happened and they sought God's intervention to turn the nation around. But as far as we can tell, neither Zephaniah 1 or Ezekiel 9 mentions that they found any of these people. Having found none, the angel's companions slew all without pity.

The idea of searching with lamps in Zephaniah 1:12 suggests a rigorous and thorough investigation. They cast God's light into every crack and crevice

and corner and still came up nothing. No one could hide from God's light. Yet they did not find any who sigh and cry, except for maybe Ezekiel and he was several hundred miles away in captivity. Is that not awful?

Those who are settled on their lees, or those who are settled in complacency, depending on your translation, are those who live as if God has no power. He does not intervene. He is not interested. They do not care about God because they believe He is inactive. They are deists, if you will. At best, they do not think that He will come into the affairs of men, come into the affairs of the earth, and do either good or evil. They just think He will not do anything at all.

It is interesting, just as a side note, that the word men here, "And punish the men who are settled in complacency." This word is *enosh*. It is always used in a negative sense. It means immoral men, proud men. The immoral and proud men who are settled in complacency, who do not care. This is kind of their attitude. Let us go to Psalm 10. My dad calls this practical atheism, saying that God exists, but living as though He does not.

**Psalm 10:1-4** [he says] Why do you stand afar off, O Lord? Why do You hide Yourself in times of trouble? The wicked in his pride persecutes the poor; let them be caught in the plots which they have devised. For the wicked boasts of his heart's desire; he blesses the greedy and renounces the Lord. The wicked in his proud countenance does not seek God; God is in none of his thoughts.

**Psalm 10:6** He said in his heart, "I shall not be moved; I shall never be in adversity."

**Psalm 10:11-13** He has said in his heart, "God has forgotten; He hides His face; He will never see." [all the evil that he does. The psalmist says] Arise, O Lord! O God, lift up Your hand! Do not forget the humble. Why do the wicked renounce God? He has said in his heart, "You will not require an account."

I am never going to be judged for these things, these evil actions, so why not do them? Why not make myself a killing? Why not put myself at the top of

the heap? Why not climb over all these people, ruin their lives if I can be number one?

Those are the people Zephaniah is talking about, those people who were settled on their lees thinking they have it made, that they will never be judged.

He promises that the evil people who think like this will get their due. All they have gained in their wickedness and their practical atheism will be stripped from them in this day. Most of them will die. They will get a firsthand lesson in God's true, active activity and power as He intervenes in judgment in human affairs. They are finally going to be woken up and say, "I guess I *will* be judged for this."

**Zephaniah 1:14-16** The great day of the Lord is near; it is near and hastens quickly. The noise of the day of the Lord is bitter; there the mighty men shall cry out. That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of devastation and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet and alarm against the fortified cities and against the high towers.

The people who know Hebrew says that this section here is a masterpiece of Hebrew poetry and it vibrates with urgency and warning. It is near! It is rushing at us! There is no time to waste! The last half of verse 14 can read—just listen to this. He says, "Listen! The day of the Lord! How bitter! A warrior shouts out there!" You get the idea that they are seeing this, like from a wall. "Listen everybody, God has come! It's terrible! The army is already at the gate." In other words, he is saying the terrible Day of the Lord is so close you can *hear the soldiers shouting* as they attack.

It is the impression Zephaniah and God wants to leave with the people. There is no time to waste! Come on! He says, "It is bitter." It reminds me of gall and wormwood. It is not just distasteful, but it is horrible to the point you want to vomit. It is cruel. It is miserable. It is wretched. It is absolutely devastating.

Verse 15 expands on this in its descriptors. It is talking about emotional devastation as well as physical destruction. It is a day of trouble and distress. A day of devastation and desolation. And then he talks about darkness and gloominess and clouds. What he is describing here is what is called theologically a theophany. **God is here.** His presence is here and it is not the happy God that was in the cloud and light shone on the Israelites. This is the other side of the cloud that He turned toward the Egyptians all night at the Red Sea. Also you could take the terrible darkness and sound, the fear that the Israelites had when God came down on Mount Sinai. He was there! God said, "Don't even touch the mountain."

Verse 16 then makes it clear the Day of the Lord includes widespread and devastating warfare. We have never seen the like. The armies of mankind sweep over the earth and destroy like never before. Jesus says in Matthew 24: 22, "That unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved." Revelation speaks of great armies massing to do battle with God. Let us just look at Revelation 16.

**Revelation 16:12-16** Then the sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates [This is just before Christ's return.], and its water was dried up, so the way of the kings from the east might be prepared. And I saw three unclean spirits like frogs coming out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet. For they are spirits of demons, performing signs, which go out to the kings of the earth and of the whole world, to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty. "Behold, I am coming as a thief. Blessed is he who watches, and keeps his garments, lest he walk naked and they see his shame." And they gathered them together to the place called in Hebrew, Armageddon.

This is what Zephaniah 1:16 refers to.

**Zephaniah 1:17-18** "I will bring distress upon men, and they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the Lord. Their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like



refuse." Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the Lord's wrath; but the whole land shall be devoured by the fire of His jealousy, for He will make speedy riddance of all those who dwell in the land.

God owns this. He makes no bones that He is the cause of all this destruction and death. But He says He has only done it because of men's sins against Him. He was forced into it. So it is their just recompense—they deserve it. This sounds a lot like Zechariah 14:12, where he says that their flesh just melts off them in whatever God does as He appears to put this great army down.

Verse 18 just warns us that the normal avenues of security will no longer avail during the Day of the Lord. Oftentimes wealth is a refuge, people can buy their way to some sort of safety, but it will not work here. God is the one that is holding that lamp and He is searching everybody out. And if you deserve the punishment, you are going to get it. You cannot hide from Him.

It is interesting. Proverbs 18 says, "The rich man's wealth is his strong city, and like a high wall in his own esteem." but that is not going to work. What works? What is the only way to be safe during this time? The answer is in verse 10, "The name of the Lord is a strong tower, the righteous run to it and are safe." That is the cure. That is the way out. That is the place of safety. I do not want you to think of this in terms of the teaching about the place of safety. But this is the only safe route to take. God is our place of safety.

What will deliver us from God's wrath if wealth cannot? People must run to God and live righteously. Only then will they find safety and deliverance. Repent, return, recycle, and reuse, right? No. Listen to God and do what He says. And we can be thankful that God promises here a speedy or a full and sudden end of all the earth's sinners. His wrath burns hot! But it is very quick. He soon moves to bless. Otherwise the earth would melt completely and no life would remain. He has very tight control on His wrathful judgment.

As you can see from this hour and a half that I have used here, the Day of the Lord is very sobering to consider, but it is coming and God warns us that it is near. And how do we know it is coming? Because we see the same attitudes

in this and other nations, the same attitudes that brought on the destruction of Israel and Judah during the axial period of their day.

So what can we do? The answer is in chapter 2, but we have already seen part of it. Turn your sighing and your crying for the evils of the earth into seeking the Lord, running to Him, and living His way of life diligently and faithfully. And it will be a good end.