

Repentance and restoration are fueled by the love of God.

Zephaniah 1:1–7 “The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah the son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah.

[2] “I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD. [3] “I will sweep away man and beast; I will sweep away the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, and the rubble with the wicked. I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD. [4] “I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I will cut off from this place the remnant of Baal and the name of the idolatrous priests along with the priests, [5] those who bow down on the roofs to the host of the heavens, those who bow down and swear to the LORD and yet swear by Milcom, [6] those who have turned back from following the LORD, who do not seek the LORD or inquire of him.”

[7] Be silent before the Lord GOD! For the day of the LORD is near; the LORD has prepared a sacrifice and consecrated his guests.” (ESV)

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Have you seen any of the MyHeritage nostalgia AI pictures floating around the internet this week? The old pictures brought to life... As I watched a few I wondered what it would be like to bring images of OT prophets under the sway of AI and see their faces alive... I know, I need hobbies.

One image seemed to capture what I think the face of a prophet would look like. Charles Dickens. Tired eyes, stern look, crazy hair.

And as I turned the page in our study of the minor prophets to Zephaniah, among the most devastating and at the same time beautiful prophets, I couldn't stop thinking of *The Tale of Two Cities*.

The Dickens novel tells of life in London and Paris before and during the French Revolution. Following the stories of two seemingly unconnected characters that turn out, despite continent and experience, interconnected in profound ways. It is

a story of an unlikely hero, abiding love, retribution, forgiveness, and resurrection. The penultimate scene even has the hero giving his life for his friend, ensuring new life and freedom for the one who is saved, and his love.

All through the story, there is a dim shadow over the tale, gravel in the storyline that makes it real.

Zephaniah tells a similar story. The violence of the age, trickery, conspiracy. A hero arriving and giving up for another. A day of deep darkness, and a day of brilliant light, interconnected.

We have some good background on Zephaniah, his lineage. Son of Cushi, and descendent of Amariah and Hezekiah. He prophesied during the reign of Josiah in Judah.

We know the time, Amon and his father were unjust kings forsaking the law of the Lord. And when his father is assassinated Josiah becomes king at eight. The nation carries on as usual, in idolatry, reckless disregard for God and their neighbors.

At sixteen Josiah discovers the law in the temple and determines to reclaim faithfulness to Yahweh. Zephaniah is delivering his message early in Josiah's reign so it is likely that this stark word was part of the reform effort in Jerusalem.

He is the last prophet before the exile of Judah to Babylon. He doesn't seem all that creative using similar language and imagery as other prophets but it is delivered at an important time.

Zephaniah is still timely for us - it begs for fulfillment. It has certainly been partially fulfilled through history with the return of the Jews from exile, but finds its full and eventually final fulfillment in Jesus.

The tension or bright contrast in this book is between the sweep and the song. Two days, two ways. It is the eschatological unfolding of history under God.

The first is the dramatic Day of the Lord. Zephaniah gives vivid detail to the coming judgment, the final verdict sentenced and carried out. And it is destruction. "I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth!"

Those who have rejected God will fall under his wrath. Judah, disobedient and shameful will be struck down. Those that presume upon their relationship with God will be surprised to death... and all of the enemies of God's people, every other nation will meet the burning anger of the Lord.

Zephaniah 1:14–17

[14] The great day of the LORD is near,
near and hastening fast;
the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter;
the mighty man cries aloud there.

[15] A day of wrath is that day,
a day of distress and anguish,
a day of ruin and devastation,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness,

[16] a day of trumpet blast and battle cry
against the fortified cities
and against the lofty battlements.

[17] I will bring distress on mankind,
so that they shall walk like the blind,
because they have sinned against the LORD;
their blood shall be poured out like dust,
and their flesh like dung." (ESV)

This should not make it on a coffee mug anytime soon... Devastating. If this day had music, its sound is bitter.

The consequences of a life lived without guardrails, following the "heart" instead of God's revealed plan, idolatry, self-glory, intertwines here with the collective sin of humanity and falls under judgment.

"We live in a vast world of interconnectedness, and the connections have consequences, either in things or in people - and all the consequences come together in God. The biblical phrase for the coming together of the consequences is Judgment Day." EP

A global reckoning before the holy, Creator of all things, the only One worthy of honor and glory.

Zephaniah 1:18 “Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them on the day of the wrath of the LORD. In the fire of his jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed; for a full and sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.” (ESV)

The Day of the Lord held out as a first act, a warning with the hope that you can see the second act.

It is the New Day. The conversion of the nations, the remnant, those who have stayed faithful to God and his way, made diverse with the addition of faithful from across the globe coming home. Worshipers joined in harmony bringing an offering of praise before the Lord.

A transformed people made new, finding their refuge in the same God destined to judge. No lies in their mouths, no injustice, no fear.

The day of great comfort for God’s people, the keeping and cherishing accomplished by a gleeful God.

Through the lens of Zephaniah, we learn of God. That he desires repentance and brings restoration.

God desires repentance

Repentance doesn’t get a lot of air time these days - and I don’t think it got much in seventh century BC Jerusalem. After all, if repentance is needed, that means something is wrong, that something has been violated and a return to what is right is necessary. If I want to live “my truth” I can’t accept the need for repentance, the need for forgiveness because I have never done anything needing forgiveness. There is no sin.

But the arc of God’s revelation in Scripture says something different.

This prophetic message is meant to bring the wayward back. To godliness, to seeking the Lord for help.

The people are versed in redemptive history. How God brought them out of slavery and to this land they call their own. They know of the law and how life after rescue is supposed to happen. And this vivid warning is meant to shake them out of the slumber of sin and awaken them to faithfulness before God.

"The gospel of forgiveness, of cleansing and healing, is a gospel that turns us from a people who shake our fist in the face of God to those who seek the face of God."

Justice against sin will come, but God desires people to turn from it in all its forms and surrender to him.

Zephaniah 2:1–3 “Gather together, yes, gather, O shameless nation, [2] before the decree takes effect —before the day passes away like chaff— before there comes upon you the burning anger of the LORD, before there comes upon you the day of the anger of the LORD. [3] Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, who do his just commands; seek righteousness; seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the LORD.” (ESV)

The plea is urgent, the time is short, tomorrow is not promised, seek the Lord, humble and in need, seek righteousness, that you would be kept safe on the day of the Lord.

"Zephaniah teaches us fundamental truths about a true relationship with the Lord. Having the benefits of his provision and blessing requires becoming "a people humble and lowly," who do not proudly seek to distinguish themselves but find their identity and security "in the name of the LORD." GTB

We have nothing before him but our need. Like needing money and having none... and incapable of earning any. Desperate, asking your parent for resources...

Repentant. Under his care and plan. Finding favor with God by turning to him. It is God's desire for everyone.

2 Peter 3:9 “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” (ESV)

God's desire is that none would remain idolaters, confused, manipulated. That none would remain under the rule of sin. He wants to grant mercy. And invites us to repentance. Owning it, saying "God, before you I have sinned, I am in need of mercy and life. Save me."

Fueled by his love... his loving kindness brings us to the place of seeking him, turning to him.

Repentance rescues and in a beautiful interconnectedness of our will and God's, we are made able to repent and cling to him.

Zephaniah 3:9 "For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord." (ESV)

This is the good news of his grace in Zephaniah.

"The gospel of forgiveness, of cleansing and healing, is a gospel that turns us from a people who shake our fist in the face of God to those who seek the face of God."

This is hope for Judah but it is also hope for those we would never expect, those far off, foreigners, freaks and everyone in between. This is hope for us!

Repentance unleashes the new day.

God brings restoration

After the call to repentance, and the full warning of the Day of the Lord, comes this promise of salvation and a flourish of language that settles us and spurs us on to live.

Zephaniah closes with an image of the Kingdom of God fully realized.

Zephaniah 3:11–13 "On that day you shall not be put to shame because of the deeds by which you have rebelled against me; for then I will remove from your midst your proudly exultant ones, and you shall no longer be haughty in my holy mountain. [12] But I will leave in your midst a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the LORD, [13] those who are left in Israel; they

shall do no injustice and speak no lies, nor shall there be found in their mouth a deceitful tongue. For they shall graze and lie down, and none shall make them afraid.” (ESV)

There is restoration, an undoing of evil.

Zephaniah 3:18–20 “I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival, so that you will no longer suffer reproach. [19] Behold, at that time I will deal with all your oppressors. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. [20] At that time I will bring you in, at the time when I gather you together; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes,” says the LORD.” (ESV)

The repentant remnant sings aloud, rejoices, exults with all of their hearts in the Lord.

It is a picture of life perfectly restored, the New Day, and it is done by the love of God for us. The who...

Zephaniah 3:17 “The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.” (ESV)

Quieted, like a crying infant cradled by his mother...

The I AM dancing over you, celebrating you, glad that you are his. This is the love of all loves. That gives us peace, and stirs us to love.

And notice, this is the Lord “in your midst.” The One that comes to us.

A description of God’s heart, realized in Jesus. The hopeful new day has already dawned with the first coming of Jesus Christ.

Preaching the Kingdom, giving of himself to extend mercy and grace. And bringing the work of restoration to everything he has created.

Colossians 1:15–20 “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. [16] For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. [17] And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. [18] And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. [19] For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, [20] and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.” (ESV)

Reconciliation of relationship with God, with each other, with our enemies, all for his glory. A return to the created order. Restoration.

This is for you. For those weak and in need, who repent and seek the Lord.

"The issue isn't one of who you are or what you've done. It's strictly a matter of the character of God and His determination to love you as revealed in the immeasurable sacrifice that He made on your behalf when He sent His only begotten Son to suffer in your place on the cross. Nothing else matters." Sam Storms

And those united with him in faith are the humble and lowly, workers of restoration as we wait for the final day, the turning of the page to forever with the Singing God.

Humbled by the severity of the Day of the Lord, comforted, and empowered by the cross and the unleashing of the New Day. Tasting the first fruits of it in the redemption Jesus works for us, the transformation his Spirit is bringing in us. Eager for the eternal experience of it.

Do you hear what good news this is? In Christ, God is so excited about you he bursts out in song. He loves you with a deep affection we can't fully express but can see in his sacrifice of his very life for you.

"Despite what you have been told in the past, despite what you may feel in the present, when God thinks about you, feels for you, and sees you, He opens His mouth and with joy inexpressible He sings! God's love for you is so infinitely intense that He quite literally sings for joy. Such is the depth of His affection that

mere words prove paltry and inadequate. So profoundly intimate is God's devotion to you that He bursts forth in sacred song." Storms

And this love of God for us, that which fuels repentance and restoration, keeps us going.

Zephaniah 3:14–15 “Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! [15] The LORD has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil.” (ESV)

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Now we get to live fueled by this love.

Pretty clear from the text how we apply this. We see the reality of sin, of missing the mark before God, and recognize our need for something more.

Repent. Seek the Lord, surrender to him and his way. Do his just commands, seek righteousness, seek humility. All of this is found in Christ who lived the life of obedience for you and gave his body and blood to meet the wrath of God against sin for you. Freeing you with forgiveness to live new under his reign. Take up the way of repentance in your life. For all of life.

Rejoice as you work Restoration. This love is for you and as you worship, as you exult with all your heart, invite others to celebrate with you. To experience the new day in Christ, new life, settled identity, a home in the Kingdom of Christ as we bring the Shalom of Christ to our neighborhoods.

Zephaniah tells the tale of two days interconnected and in contrast with each other. And it highlights the better tale of Christ. Giving himself in love, in our midst. Meeting judgment for us. Real resurrection and restoration of relationship and the working of redemption of all things for his glory.

This is our story, those sung over by God. May we be the humble and lowly, who seek refuge in the name of the Lord. Who do no injustice, who speak no lies. Who are consumed with the One who loves us, who rejoices over us with gladness.