

MAJOR ON THE MINORS | HOPE CHAPEL

THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH

The Day of the Lord - Judgment, Invitation, and a Song Over You

Ben Humphrys | Sunday 24 August 2026 | 9AM Gawler

Big Idea: *Zephaniah moves from the most terrifying announcement in all of Scripture to the most tender. The God who judges with full fury is the same God who sings over his people with joy. Both are true. Both are him.*

Introduction - The Book Nobody Reads

Zephaniah sits quietly near the end of the Old Testament, rarely opened and almost never preached. It is only three chapters long. But those three chapters contain some of the most extreme swings in emotional register of any book in the Bible - from the most terrifying language about God's judgment to the most tender description of God's love, all within 53 verses.

Ben opened by asking: when was the last time you heard a sermon from Zephaniah? For most people, the answer is never. And that is a loss - because Zephaniah holds a picture of God that is both more fearful and more intimate than most of us have ever sat with.

Who Was Zephaniah?

Zephaniah was a prophet during the reign of King Josiah of Judah, around 630–625 BC - roughly the same era as Habakkuk and just before Jeremiah. His genealogy goes back four generations to King Hezekiah, making him of royal descent - an unusual background for a prophet. He had access to the palace and the priesthood, and he used it to deliver a message that would have been deeply uncomfortable to both.

Judah was in a state of religious confusion - Baal worship mixed in with the worship of God, the courts corrupt, the prophets dishonest, the priests profaning the temple. Josiah was a good king but had not yet begun his great reforms. Into this, Zephaniah spoke.

The Structure of Zephaniah

Chapter 1 The Day of the Lord announced - judgment on Judah and all the earth

Chapter 2 An invitation to seek the Lord - judgment on surrounding nations

Chapter 3 Judgment on Jerusalem - then the great reversal - then the song

1 | The Day of the Lord - Zephaniah 1

Zephaniah 1:2–3 *I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth, declares the Lord. I will sweep away both man and beast; I will sweep away the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea - and the idols that cause the wicked to stumble. When I destroy all mankind on the face of the earth, declares the Lord.*

The book opens with language that echoes the flood - a sweeping away of creation. God is announcing a Day of the Lord - a day of reckoning - that will fall first on Judah and then on the nations surrounding her.

Zephaniah 1:14–16 *The great day of the Lord is near - near and coming quickly. The cry on the day of the Lord is bitter; the Mighty Warrior shouts his battle cry. That day will be a day of wrath - a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet and battle cry.*

This passage was the source of the medieval Latin hymn Dies Irae - Day of Wrath - which was sung at funerals across Europe for centuries. Its imagery is unsparing. The Day of the Lord is not a gentle correction - it is a day of distress, anguish, trouble, ruin, darkness, and battle.

Ben was honest that this is the hardest kind of passage to sit with in Scripture. But he made the point that Zephaniah is not inventing a God of wrath - he is describing the same God who created the world and called it good, the same God who wept over Jerusalem, the same God who sent his Son to the cross. To understand the cross, you have to understand what the cross was absorbing.

Why Does the Day of the Lord Matter?

The Day of the Lord is a recurring theme across the prophets - Joel, Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Malachi all use it. It is not purely a future event - it has partial fulfilments in historical judgments (Babylon falling on Judah, Judah falling on Assyria) and a final fulfilment in the return of Christ.

For Zephaniah's original audience, it was a warning: the way you are living has consequences. God is not indifferent to what is happening in Judah. He is about to act.

The Day of the Lord is not a surprise to God. And it is not meant to paralyse us - it is meant to reorient us.

Reflect: *Does the language of God's judgment make you uncomfortable? What does it mean that the God who loves you is also a God of absolute holiness and justice? How does sitting with both of those together change the way you see the cross?*

2 | The Invitation - Zephaniah 2:1–3

Right in the middle of the darkness of chapter 1, something remarkable appears at the start of chapter 2. Before the judgment falls, there is a window. An invitation.

Zephaniah 2:1–3 *Gather yourselves together, yes, gather, O shameless nation, before the decree takes effect - before the day passes 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. 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.*

The word translated 'gather' here is used elsewhere of gathering straw or stubble - fragile, easily blown away material. Zephaniah is describing Judah as chaff before the wind of God's judgment. And yet - gather. Come together. There is still time.

The three-fold invitation is:

- Seek the Lord
- Seek righteousness
- Seek humility

Ben noted that the word 'perhaps' in verse 3 is significant - 'perhaps you may be hidden.' It is not a guarantee. It is an invitation held out in grace, not a contract. But it is a genuine invitation. The door is not yet shut.

Between the announcement of judgment and the falling of judgment, God always leaves a door open. The invitation is always mercy first.

The Meek Will Inherit

The phrase 'humble of the land' in Zephaniah 2:3 uses the same Hebrew word - anawim - that Jesus draws on in the Beatitudes: blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Jesus is not inventing a new concept. He is fulfilling a promise that Zephaniah and the prophets had already spoken: the humble, the overlooked, the ones who seek God rather than status - these are the ones who are hidden in the day of trouble.

Reflect: *Are you currently living in the window of invitation? The door is not yet shut. Is there something God has been inviting you toward - a turning, a returning, a seeking - that you have been putting off? What would it look like to respond today?*

3 | The Great Reversal - Zephaniah 3:9–13

After the judgment on Judah and the surrounding nations, something extraordinary happens in chapter 3. The tone shifts completely. The language of sweeping away and destruction gives way to the language of gathering and restoring. God announces a great reversal.

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.*

This is a direct reversal of the Tower of Babel - where God confused the languages of the nations as an act of judgment. Now he promises to purify the speech of the peoples so they can all call on his name together. Judgment does not have the final word. Restoration does.

Zephaniah 3:12–13 *But I will leave in your midst a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord - 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.*

The remnant - those who sought the Lord, sought righteousness, sought humility - are gathered in. They are described in pastoral terms: grazing, lying down, unafraid. The chaos of the Day of the Lord gives way to a quiet, safe, restored community.

Ben connected this to the New Testament picture of the church as the gathered community of the humble - not the powerful, not the famous, but the ones who have found refuge in the name of the Lord. This is the community Zephaniah was pointing toward.

Reflect: *The reversal that Zephaniah describes - pure speech, no injustice, no lies, none to make them afraid - is also the picture of the kingdom. What part of that reversal do you most long to see in your own life, your family, or your community?*

4 | The Song - Zephaniah 3:14–17

And then, at the end of a book that began with sweeping away all flesh from the face of the earth, comes one of the most extraordinary passages in all of Scripture.

Zephaniah 3:14–17 *Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! 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. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Fear not, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak. 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.*

The God who announced the Day of Wrath is the same God who sings over you with joy.

Ben paused at this verse for a long time. The image is almost overwhelming in its tenderness. The Lord - the same Lord who announced the day of distress and anguish and ruin - is now described as a mighty warrior in the middle of his people, rejoicing over them, quieting them with his love, exulting over them with singing.

Three Movements in the Song

- He rejoices over you with gladness - the joy of God at the return of his people

- He quiets you by his love - a silence that is not absence but peace; being stilled by the presence of someone who loves you completely
- He exults over you with loud singing - the celebration of heaven over a people restored

Ben used the picture of a parent with a newborn child - the way a parent gazes at their baby with a joy that has no words, the way they sing softly over them, the way they hold them until the crying stops and peace comes. That is the image Zephaniah is reaching for when he describes God's relationship with his restored people.

And this is the same God who opened the book by announcing the sweeping away of all flesh. Both are fully true. The one who holds the right to judge is the one who chooses to sing. The wrath and the song come from the same heart - a heart that is utterly holy and utterly in love with his people.

The New Testament Echoes

Ben drew two direct New Testament connections:

- Luke 1:28 - the angel greets Mary with 'Rejoice, O highly favoured one, the Lord is with you' - almost word for word from Zephaniah 3:14. The angel was announcing the fulfilment of Zephaniah's song.
- Revelation 21:3-4 - 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them... he will wipe away every tear.' The great reversal of Zephaniah reaches its completion in the new creation.

The song that Zephaniah heard at the end of a book of judgment is still being sung. It will reach its fullest expression when every tear is wiped away and God dwells in the middle of his people for eternity.

Reflect: *Can you receive this - that God sings over you? Not over a perfected, finally-sorted version of you, but over you as you are right now, known fully and loved completely? What makes it hard to receive? And what would change if you let it in?*

Conclusion - From Wrath to Song

CHAPTER 1 JUDGMENT <i>The Day of the Lord announced over all the earth</i>	CHAPTER 2 INVITATION <i>Seek the Lord - the door is still open</i>	CHAPTER 3 THE SONG <i>He will exult over you with loud singing</i>
---	---	---

Zephaniah is a book that takes the full weight of both God's holiness and God's love seriously. It does not soften the judgment to make the love easier to receive. It holds them together - because they are both fully true of the same God.

The God who will not ignore evil is the God who sings over his people. The God of the Day of Wrath is the God who quiets you by his love. And the cross is where both of those truths landed at the same moment - where the full weight of judgment fell on the Son so the full warmth of the song could rest on us.

You are the one he is singing over. Let that in.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

Use these on your own during the week, or with your LifeGroup.

1. Zephaniah opens with some of the most extreme judgment language in the Bible. Does the concept of God's wrath make you uncomfortable, or does it make sense to you as part of who he is? How has your understanding of it changed over time?
2. Ben made the point that to understand the cross, you have to understand what the cross was absorbing. How does reading Zephaniah 1 deepen your understanding of what Jesus took on at Calvary?
3. In the middle of the judgment announcement, God gives an invitation: seek the Lord, seek righteousness, seek humility. Is there something in that three-fold invitation that feels personally directed at you right now?
4. The word 'perhaps' in Zephaniah 2:3 means the invitation is genuine but not automatic. Is there a step of response you have been putting off, telling yourself there is still time? What would it look like to respond today?
5. The song in Zephaniah 3:17 says God rejoices over you, quiets you by his love, and sings over you. Which of those three is hardest for you to receive personally - and why?
6. Ben connected Zephaniah's song to the angel's greeting to Mary (Luke 1:28) and to Revelation 21:3-4. How does seeing the thread from Zephaniah through to the new creation change the way you read these familiar New Testament passages?

Key Scriptures This Week

- Zephaniah 1:2-3 - I will sweep away everything - the Day of the Lord announced
- Zephaniah 1:14-16 - The great day of the Lord is near; a day of wrath and darkness
- Zephaniah 2:1-3 - Gather; seek the Lord, seek righteousness, seek humility
- Zephaniah 3:9 - Pure speech restored; all nations calling on the Lord together
- Zephaniah 3:12-13 - A humble remnant; grazing in peace, none to make them afraid
- Zephaniah 3:14-17 - Sing aloud; the Lord your God is in your midst; he will sing over you
- Luke 1:28 - Rejoice, O favoured one; the Lord is with you
- Revelation 21:3-4 - The dwelling of God with man; every tear wiped away
- Matthew 5:5 - Blessed are the meek; they shall inherit the earth