

ZEPHANIAH: THE DAY OF THE LORD'S WRATH

by Ray C. Stedman

It was Zephaniah's lot to speak on the most unpleasant subject in the Bible -- the judgment of God. This is not the only place where this theme occurs, of course, but it is the most concentrated treatment of the judgment of God as the whole book is devoted to this one theme.

There are many people who would like to rule this subject of judgment out of the Bible entirely. There are those who tell us that the God of the New Testament, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is the kind of a God who can never move in judgment. His heart is so tender, his love is so gracious, his patience is so infinite that there never will be a time when God will move in vengeance. It is remarkable, though, that in the New Testament the Lord Jesus spoke very frequently about the judgment of God. In the fourth chapter of Luke we are told that the Lord came back to his home town after preaching in Judea for many months. He had done many miracles and the word of his miracles had preceded him, so all the folks in Nazareth were very anxious to see him. He had not behaved like this when he was a boy growing up, and they were keen to see if he was going to do some mighty work when he came home.

Luke tells us that Jesus went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and he was given the book of the prophecy of Isaiah to read. Opening the scroll he found the place (which happens to be the sixty-first chapter of our version of Isaiah) where it read, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." (Lk. 4:10) That passage predicts the ministry of the Messiah. Then he stopped right in the middle of a sentence, right at a comma, and his last word was that he had come to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. But Isaiah goes on to say, "and the day of vengeance of our God." (Is. 61:2) Now the Lord did not read that because it was not the time to proclaim the day of vengeance of God. But the day of vengeance is coming, and it was the Lord himself who described the day of the Lord (recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke), and it is this day particularly that Zephaniah is talking about.

Zephaniah means "hidden of the Lord" and the prophet is speaking as if he were a representative of the remnant of faith -- those relatively few people who will remain true to God and be faithful to his word through the time of trouble that is to come upon the earth. They will be hidden, as it were, by God himself among the nations of the earth and God will watch over them to keep them in faith during this time. And it is about these people that the book of Zephaniah is written, and especially of that coming day, the day of the Lord, which is vividly described by the prophet.

In chapter 1, Zephaniah gives us the character of God's vengeance. It is not a pleasant passage. It begins after the prophet identifies himself as a great-great-grandson of one of the kings of Judah (verses 2-6):

**"I will utterly sweep away everything
from the face of the earth," says the Lord.
"I will sweep away man and beast;
I will sweep away the birds of the air
and the fish of the sea.
I will overthrow the wicked;
I will cut off mankind
from the face of the earth," says the Lord.
"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 [the false god of the peoples around
Israel]
and the name of the idolatrous priests;
those who bow down on the roofs to the host of heavens; [the star worshipers]
those who bow down and swear to the Lord
and yet swear by Milcom; [one of the other gods the surrounding nations]
those who have turned back from following the Lord,**

who do not seek the Lord or inquire of him." {Zeph 1:2-6 RSV}

And Zephaniah says (verse 7):

**Be silent before the Lord God!
For the day of the Lord is at hand; ... {Zeph 1:7 RSV}**

There is a great deal of difference between the day of the Lord and the Lord's day. Sunday is the Lord's day, the day of resurrection, but the day of the Lord is something different and we should never confuse these terms. (It is like the difference between a horse chestnut and a chestnut horse.) The Lord's day was the day when our Lord arose from the dead and that is why we celebrate it on Sunday.

But the day of the Lord is the day of the manifestation of God's hand directly in human affairs. Notice the personal pronoun all through that passage: "I will sweep away everything." "I will sweep away man and beast." "I will cut off mankind." God is working through events in history, working through nations and armies and calamities of various sorts. His hand is hidden in the glove of history, but all the writers of Scripture agree that a day is coming when God will intervene directly in the affairs of men again.

A reference to this time, in the words of Jesus himself, is found in Matthew, where our Lord speaks of a time of great tribulation.

"Then they will deliver you up to tribulation, and put you to death; and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake." {Matt 24:9 RSV}

And the Lord goes on to describe this time. But still, this is not the day of the Lord that Zephaniah is talking about, because this is a time when the nations will still be moving against one another in warfare. Then Jesus says (Matt. 24:21, 22):

"For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been shortened, no human being would be saved; ..." {Matt 24:21-22a RSV}

This is right in line with Zephaniah's prophecy. God says he will sweep everything off the face of the earth, "...but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened." Then Jesus says Matt. 24:24:

"For false Christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect." {Matt 24:24 RSV}

And he says plainly (verse 25):

"Lo, I have told you beforehand." {Matt 24:25 RSV}

In other words, do not get excited about this. Then we come to the description of the day of the Lord (Matt. 24:29-31):

"Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken; then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory: and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." {Matt 24:29-31 RSV}

The Apostle Paul speaks somewhat similarly and he uses the very term "the day of the Lord." In I Thessalonians you will find one of several references that Paul makes to this great event. In chapter 5, verses 1-6, he says:

But as to the times and seasons, brethren, you have no need to have anything written to

you. [Why not? Well, because they already had it in the Old Testament.] **For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When people say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a woman with child, and there will be no escape. But you are not in darkness, brethren, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all sons of light and sons of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. {1 Th 5:1-6 RSV}**

There are many other passages that also refer to the day of the Lord and they all agree that in the time when men are proclaiming peace, but preparing for war; in a time when they are holding to a form of godliness but denying the powers thereof; in a time when they are declaring that the problems of life are being solved. but when actually they are in greater danger than they have ever been before, then the day of the Lord will come.

Now let us return to Zephaniah and see what he has to say about this (chapter 1. verses 7-9):

**Be silent before the Lord God!
For the day of the Lord is at hand;
the Lord has prepared a sacrifice
and consecrated his guests.
And on the day of the Lord's sacrifice --
"I will punish the officials and the king's sons
and all who array themselves in foreign attire ...
every one who leaps over the threshold,
and those who fill their master's house
with violence and fraud." {Zeph 1:7-9 RSV}**

Now what is this feast and who are these guests that are invited to the day of the Lord? Well, this is the great supper of God that is also described in Revelation 19, verses 17-20, where John says:

Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly in midheaven, "Come, gather for the great supper of God, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great." And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who sits upon the horse and against his army. And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had worked the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast... {Rev 19:17-20a RSV}

This is the great supper of God. It is the birds and the vultures that are invited, to feast upon the bodies of men. There is another description of this in Ezekiel 39. The guests are the buzzards, the vultures, and the eagles called to feed upon the dead, the millions that are slain in this terrible day when God again moves directly in human affairs.

"Well, now," you say, "How can this be? How can the God of love -- the God of the New Testament -- do a thing like this? How can God, who loves mercy and is slow to anger, ever come to this place?" And there are many who tell us that we should eliminate these passages from the Bible. They say we should read our Bibles in much the same way that we read literature. For instance, we read in Robert Louis Stevenson's novel *Treasure Island* of a character named Long John Silver. We read that he is a cruel, rapacious, untrustworthy individual. Now if, after reading that, somebody tells us that Long John Silver is really a great guy, that he is kind to his mother, and is a nice fellow once you get to know him, we do not believe this because we know Long John Silver and we know that he is not that kind of a man. Therefore, if anybody tells us that, we will not believe him. Someone with this attitude might go on to say, "I have come to know God as the God of love and the God of grace. Therefore, when I read in the Bible something that says he is a God of vengeance, and that he is going to destroy people, I just don't believe it. I just wipe that out. I say that someone else has insinuated that, because that is not the kind of God I know."

It is this kind of reasoning that suggests we should go through our Bibles and tear out every part that does not agree with our concepts of God. But what we have left, of course, is nothing more than what we like, what

we think God ought to be like.

You can see how such an argument defeats itself. The very book that tells us that God is a God of love also says he is a God of vengeance. And any one who thinks carefully about himself and about love will understand why a God of love has to be a God of vengeance. For if we love someone, we hate everything that injures that person. We are against whatever threatens or destroys what we love. And the very love that moves the heart of God to pour himself out over the centuries in an unceasing effort to awaken man to his need and to hear the call of grace, is the same love that at last prompts him to eliminate those who refuse all the province of his grace, and identify themselves with that which is opposed to his will and to his work among men. Then he has nothing left to do but to destroy them. And that is why the prophet speaks so plainly about this.

Continuing in Zephaniah now, we read (chapter 1, verses 14-18):

**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.
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,
a day of trumpet blast and battle cry
against the fortified cities
and against the lofty battlements. {Zeph 1:14-16 RSV}**

And God says in stark frankness,

**I will bring distress on men,
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.
Neither their silver nor their gold
shall be able to deliver them
on the day of the wrath of the Lord. {Zeph 1:17-18a RSV}**

Now it is not easy for God to speak this way. He himself says that he takes no delight in the death of men. He says that he does not delight in judgment. Judgment, the prophet says, is his strange work. His heart delights in mercy. But eventually, if his will is to be done, if earth at last is to break out into the glorious freedom of the promises of the prophets concerning man, if the dreams that lie hidden away in the hearts of men of a warless world, a time of prosperity. a time when joy floods the earth, when men live together in glorious harmony, when even the animals lose their enmity toward one another and peace shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea -- if that is ever to come, then God must deal with the entrenched evil of men. This is why the coming of the day of vengeance of our God is absolutely certain. The prophets warn of this and the word speaks very clearly. all through the New Testament as well, that when God's grace is turned aside, God's judgment awaits.

In chapter 2 we trace the extent of God's vengeance. Certain nations are named (verses 8, 9):

**"I have heard the taunts of Moab
and the revilings of the Ammonites, ... {Zeph 2:8a RSV}**

**"Moab shall become like Sodom,
and the Ammonites like Gomorrah, ... {Zeph 2:9b RSV}**

The Ethiopians are mentioned in verse 12 and the Assyrians in verse 13. The interesting thing is that although all these nations are long since lost in the dust of history, the promise of this day of the Lord is in the future.

How can this be? Why are these nations mentioned here when they have long been buried in antiquity? How can they yet be destroyed in a day to come?

The answer is, of course, that these nations are used symbolically throughout the Scriptures as well as literally. They were literally destroyed in the course of history, but they are used symbolically with reference to the full and final meaning of the day of the Lord. Moab, for instance, is always a picture of the flesh of man -- his dependence upon his own resources. The Ammonites picture the same thing. Ethiopia is a picture of the stubbornness, or the intransigence of man. "Can the Ethiopian change his color?" the Scriptures say. And Assyria is man in his arrogance and his pride. Now God says he is against all these things, and as he moves at last in judgment on the human race, these are to be eliminated. In chapter 3 you will notice how extensive God's wrath is (verses 1, 2):

**Woe to her that is rebellious and defiled,
the oppressing city!
She listens to no voice,
she accepts no correction.
She does not trust in the Lord,
she does not draw near to her God. {Zeph 3:1-2 RSV}**

This could be said of almost all the cities of the earth. As you read on you see that this is a world-wide matter (verse 8):

**"Therefore wait for me," says the Lord,
"for the day when I arise as a witness.
For my decision is to gather nations,
to assemble kingdoms,
to pour out upon them my indignation,
all the heat of my anger;
for in the fire of my jealous wrath
all the earth shall be consumed." {Zeph 3:8 RSV}**

What for? What is God after? Is he just interested in getting even, wreaking his vengeance at last upon the stubbornness and willfulness of men? Is he visiting the earth with this terrible hurricane of destruction in order to leave it nothing but a smoking ruin, barren and desolate, without inhabitants? No, that is what men would do if there were another world war. We would leave the earth desolate, but God will never leave it that way.

After you read the description of all the darkness, gloom, and slaughter -- after the desolation and the destruction, what is the next word? Verse 14:

**Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter of Jerusalem! {Zeph 3:14 RSV}**

Why? You see, this is the new order that is to follow. This is why God is dealing with men, so that he might bring out songs instead of sorrow, service instead of selfishness, security instead of slavery. This will be the consequence of God's judgment. And we are told that the Lord God is in the midst of the people, not for judgment, as he is in chapter 3, verse 5:

**The Lord within her is righteous,
he does no wrong; ... {Zeph 3:5a RSV}**

But here in verse 17:

**The Lord, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;**

**he will exult over you with loud singing
as on a day of festival. {Zeph 3:17-18a RSV}**

Furthermore, the Lord says (verses 18-20):

**"I will remove disaster from you, ... {Zeph 3:18b RSV}
deal with all your oppressors.
And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast, ... {Zeph 3:19b RSV}
... change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth. {Zeph 3:19c RSV}
At that time I will bring you home, {Zeph 3:20a RSV}**

What a picture this is! Specifically, of course, it has to do with the remnant of Israel, but it is a picture of God's loving care during any time of despair or darkness. It is my personal belief that this is something that the church does not see. The church is caught away before these events occur but, in the time that follows, God calls back the remnant of Israel to himself and they will at last break out into the song of the redeemed. Now the singing here is led by the Lord himself in a marvelous, glorious melody of joy. It reminds me of that beautiful passage in the Song of Songs:

**For lo, the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth,
the time of singing has come. {Song 2:11-12a RSV}**

That is what follows the time of judgment. But no one but the redeemed can join in that song. Elizabeth Browning, in her poem, the Seraphim, describes the angels watching the work of the Son of God on earth and at last, seeing with stupefied amazement the incarnation and ultimately the cross, one angel looks at this host of ransomed souls and he says to the other, "Hereafter shall the blood bought captives raise their passion song of blood." And the other one replies, "And we extend our holy vacant hands toward the throne and cry, 'We have no music.'" You see, only the redeemed can sing like this. After the darkness, after the slaughter, after the terrible destruction comes the time of the singing. That is what God is after in your life. That is possible on the level of the Spirit right now when God deals death's stroke against the flesh within us and brings us through that painful experience of saying no to the ego and the self-life. There follows the time of the singing, the time that he is after, the reason he takes us through the pain and the darkness. What you see to be true of the individual life will also be true on the whole wide canvas of history as God brings human history to an end.

That is what Zephaniah tells us about. Although it is a painful scene, one that begins in darkness and gloom, it ends in joy and gladness and singing.

Prayer:

Our Father, we know that these words are true, and how they make us tremble, how they make us solemn and quiet before you. What a God -- a God who sees everything, who deals in righteousness, a God who loves but who cannot be turned aside, who will not water down his precepts, who will not cater to our weakness though he supplies us with fullness of strength. Lord, help us to walk softly before you and to love you with all our heart and mind and strength. We pray that in our own lives we may come to the day of singing when our hearts are filled with gladness as we anticipate this coming day when the earth shall break forth into beauty and glory. We thank you in Christ's name. Amen.

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