

INTRODUCTION

A guy walks into a bar, I mean a Starbucks. He had his dog with him and he says to the manager, "My dog can talk. If he can answer three questions will you give me a free venti latte?" The manager said, "You're on. Prove it." The man turned to the dog and said, "What is the top of a house called?" The dog said, "Roof!" Then he asked, "How does sandpaper feel?" The dog said, "Rough!" Then the man asked the dog, "What's your favorite book in the Old Testament?" The dog said, "Ruth!" The manager was angry and said, "What a joke! Get out!" He kicked them out into the parking lot. The dog turned to his owner and said, "Maybe I should have said Zephaniah!"

Through the years I've asked a lot of people to name their favorite book of the Bible, and I've yet to have anyone answer, "Zephaniah." Zephaniah has a bad rap because some people confuse him with the other Z-prophet, Zechariah. Chances are most of you have never even heard a message from Zephaniah. But all scripture is inspired of God and this book contains some golden nuggets of truth hidden just below the surface for those who are diligent enough to dig a little deeper. Zephaniah's name means, "The Lord is my secret." And hidden away in this little book is a powerful secret about God. This secret is so powerful that I call it the John 3:16 of the Old Testament.

Zephaniah's theme is like many of the other prophets. He starts out proclaiming that God's judgment will be poured out on a nation that has forsaken Him. But he concludes with a beautiful message of hope. He doesn't waste any time with pleasant platitudes. He digs right in with a message of judgment. Almighty God is pictured with a broom in His hand and He has some Divine sweeping to do.

Zephaniah 1:1-3. "The word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah, during the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah: 'I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth,' declares the Lord. 'I will sweep away both men and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. The wicked will have only heaps of rubble when I cut off man from the face of the earth,' declares the Lord."

When God looks at America, I can imagine He grieves over our spiritual condition. Sins that used to appall us 30 years ago now simply amuse us. We've lost our spiritual equilibrium. If you've been reading the news you know that for over sixty years, Santa Monica, California was known as the "The Nativity City" because of their elaborate nativity scenes picturing the birth of Jesus in their downtown park, but that has come to end because of a few aggressive atheists.

One of the reasons I'm alarmed for our country is because I know how much our Forefathers worked to build our nation upon a foundation of Biblical truth. Humanistic writers have tried to surgically remove any reference to God, the Bible or Jesus from secular textbooks about American History.

Here's more proof. John Quincy Adams was our sixth President, and the son of John Adams our second President. In a speech He gave on July 4, 1837 he made this observation about Christmas: John Quincy Adams: (July 4, 1837): "Why is it that, next to the birth day of the Saviour of the World, your most joyous and most venerated festival returns on this day? ... Is it not that, in the

chain of human events, the birthday of the nation is indissolubly linked with the birth-day of the Saviour? Is it not that the Declaration of Independence first organized the social compact on the foundation of the Redeemer's mission upon earth? That it laid the corner stone of human government upon the first precepts of Christianity, and gave to the world the first irrevocable pledge of the fulfillment of the prophecies, announced directly from Heaven at the birth of the Saviour and predicted by the greatest of the Hebrew prophets six hundred years before?"

All thirteen of the original colonies had constitutions that made reference to God and the Bible. The first colony to form a state constitution was Delaware. This is almost unthinkable today, but Article 22 of the first Delaware Constitution states: "Every person, who shall be chosen a member of either house, or appointed to any office or place of trust...shall...make and subscribe to the following declaration, to wit: 'I do profess faith in God the father, and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, and in the Holy Ghost, one God, blessed forever more, and I do acknowledge the Holy scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be given by divine inspiration.'"

God has blessed America, because, like Israel, we were established with a deep sense of honor and reverence for God. But also like Israel, we have turned away from God. The prophet Zephaniah tells us what happens to nations that forsake God. In this short but powerful prophecy, he first describes the judgment of God; then he describes the hope that people find when they seek God.

I. THE DAY OF THE LORD IS COMING WHEN HE WILL PUNISH SINNERS

The phrase "The Day of the Lord" appears more than thirty times in the Old and New Testament. Zephaniah mentions it seven times in three short chapters. He says, "The great day of the Lord is near—near and coming quickly. Listen! The cry on the day of the Lord will be bitter ... I will bring distress on the people and they will walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the Lord." (Zephaniah 1:14, 17)

Any time God punishes sin, it is a day of the Lord. But the Bible also teaches there will be one final Day (capital D) of the Lord. The Day of the Lord isn't a 24-hour period. It is used like we would say, "We live in a day of jet travel." The Day of the Lord refers to a time when God will dramatically intervene in human history and set in motion the events of the end of the world as we know it.

Zephaniah doesn't just announce God's judgment against sin, he gives the reasons WHY God will bring judgment. In this first chapter, he mentions seven sins Israel and Judah had committed. As I go through this list, think about how these sins are present in our nation as well.

A. Sexual perversion

God said, "I will cut off from this place every remnant of Baal, the names of the pagan and the idolatrous priests" (1:4) Baal worship was a fertility cult. Ancient man tended to worship things he didn't understand. So when a woman gave birth as a result of sexual relations, they began to worship the process itself. Baal worship involved the use of religious prostitutes. America leads the world in the creation and distribution of pornography.

In an article in *Newsweek* magazine in November 2011, it was reported that 40 million Americans a day are logging into porn. Adultery and homosexuality are so popular that they provide the theme for many of the television shows and movies that are made in the U.S. Sexual sin is a personal sin, but when a nation puts its stamp of approval of what God calls sexual sin, then it becomes a national sin.

B. Astrology

God described His displeasure with, "those who bow down on the roofs to worship the starry host." (1:5) Astrology dates back to the Babylonian Empire 1,500 years before Christ. It is the belief that the angle and location of the stars at the date of your birth has an impact on your personality and disposition and that the location of the planets and stars influence your daily life. These are called horoscopes. Americans are fascinated with astrology. Over 1,000 newspapers print a daily or weekly horoscope. And if you want to get your personal horoscope online, it is available for only \$15.95 a month!

I've been amazed through the years at the number of Christians who read these horoscopes. Most of you could probably tell me your astrological sign. Christians shouldn't delve into astrology and if someone asks you about your sign, just say, "I don't have a sign; I have a Savior." We don't worship the stars; we worship the One who made the stars.

C. Religious Ignorance

Like Americans, the Israelites were very religious, but they tended to mix together a variety of different beliefs. God directed His displeasure with, "those who bow down and swear by the Lord and who also swear by Molech" (1:5) They were correct in bowing down to the one true God, Elohim. But just in case Jehovah wasn't strong enough, they would hedge their bets by bowing down the false god Molech. God is a jealous God and says He will have no other gods before Him. He demands to be worshipped alone.

Americans are guilty of the same self-made religious stew. Oh sure, they have a little Jesus here and there, and they throw in a little Buddhism, with a pinch of Islam, and a handful of new age beliefs, and then they stir it up and say, "This is what I believe."

I read a recent interview with Halle Berry. She was asked about her spiritual beliefs. She reported that she really didn't believe just one religion. She was married in a Baptist Church, and gave her daughter a Muslim name. She says she dabbles in Buddhism, and prays to a higher power. She doesn't know if the higher power is God or not. She concluded by saying, "Though I am open to a lot of things, I don't connect on a deep level with any of them." More and more Americans are saying, "Oh, I'm spiritual, I'm just not very religious." Translation: They're lost and confused.

D. Child sacrifice

Worship of the pagan god Molech involved child sacrifice. We learn this from a passage in Leviticus, "Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molech." (Leviticus 18:21) It sounds appalling for us to think that in ancient times parents would take their newborn child and

throw it into the fire just to try to earn the favor of an imaginary god. God calls this the shedding of innocent blood. Through Jeremiah God says, "For they have forsaken me and made this a place of foreign gods...they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent." (Jeremiah 19:4) Killing a newborn is shedding innocent blood.

Certainly, there's no way such an advanced nation like America would kill innocent babies, is there? To me there is no moral distinction between killing a baby in the womb and killing it as soon as it is born. And since 1973, Americans have sacrificed 53 million babies.

In Psalm 139 the Psalmist says, "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb." (Psalm 139:13) Imagine how the Creator must feel when He sees His amazing handiwork of life torn apart.

Originally Roe v. Wade ruled that abortion would be legal only if the health of the mother of the baby was threatened. But the courts soon ruled that the "emotional health" or the "financial health" of the mother could justify an abortion. And today, 83% of all abortions are simply for convenience. Every day, 3,000 American babies have their lives ended by abortion. There's about 3,000 people in this room, imagine the news coverage if all 3,000 of us died. But abortion is a silent killer.

Planned Parenthood, which receives almost \$500 million of our tax dollars annually is the largest abortion provider in the nation. Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood wrote, "The most merciful thing that a family does to one of its infant members is to kill it." "Birth Control must lead ultimately to a cleaner race." How long can this go on before God moves in judgment against our land?

E. Gender confusion

This may be shocking to you, but God points out a particular sin when He says, "I will punish the princes and the king's sons and all those clad in foreign clothes." (literally: "unnatural apparel") (1:8) Now, there's nothing wrong with wearing a London Fog raincoat, even though it's foreign. So what is this sin? Some commentators say the royal family wore the clothing of other nations because they were more fashionable. But I can't see God objecting to that. Many commentators say God is objecting to what we call "cross-dressing." The Hebrew phrase literally means "unnatural clothes." We know from other historical sources that members of royalty sometimes dressed as women. The Emperor Nero was perhaps the most notable. He wore a dress during some of his wild parties.

The Bible says, "A woman must not wear men's clothing, nor a man wear women's clothing, for the Lord your God detests anyone who does this." (Deuteronomy 22:5) Gender confusion is at the forefront of our American culture. The political arm for homosexual rights is officially called, GLBTA, or "The Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgendered Alliance."

A recent ruling by the Houston Independent School Board stated that if a boy wakes up one morning and feels he is actually a girl in a boy's body, than he/she has the right to use the female restroom that day.

We're living in an age where the gender distinction for marriage is being erased. But remember: God created Adam and Eve. He didn't create Adam and Steve.

F. Superstition

God said, "On that day I will punish all who avoid stepping on the threshold." (1:9) Earlier the Philistines had captured the Ark of the Covenant and placed it in a room with their false god, Dagon. The next day the Philistines found their god Dagon fallen over with its head removed. They were so afraid from that time on that they thought it was bad luck to step on the threshold of the temple—or any building for that matter. It was a foreign superstition, and apparently the Israelites copied it.

We also tend to find comfort in superstitions. There's nothing wrong with a childhood game walking down the sidewalk saying, "Step on a crack, break your mother's back." Or to say, "Knock on wood" when you don't want what you just said to happen. But it is possible to become so deeply devoted to superstition that it can interfere with your trust in God. Some people won't have anything to do with the number 13, and most high rise hotels don't even have a 13th floor—they have it, but it's called the 14th floor. And I've known people who refused to stay on the 14th floor because they knew it was really the 13th floor! Superstition can replace God in your life if you aren't careful. If you truly believe that breaking a mirror will give you seven years of bad luck; that can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Superstitious beliefs can influence you to the point where you put a plastic Jesus on your dashboard or wear a cross as a good luck charm. If you ask me if I believe in luck, my reply is that I believe in L.U.C.K. –Living Under Christ's Knowledge.

G. Obsession with wealth

This was a time of economic growth for Judah and they considered their prosperity the result of their own smart business dealings. They refused to accept the idea that their wealth had come from God. Therefore God said, "Their wealth will be plundered, their houses demolished. They will build houses but not live in them; they will plant vineyards but not drink the wine." (1:13) This described an economy in trouble. People build houses but they can't afford to live in them or even sell them. During this past economic recession there have been more home foreclosures than ever before.

In Exodus 32 while Moses is on Mt. Sinai getting the Ten Commandments, the people of Israel grew impatient, so they formed a golden calf and worshipped it. Of course, when Moses returned, he was outraged and had the golden calf destroyed.

If you visit Wall Street in New York, you'll see a huge sculpture of a charging bull; it is there to symbolize the strength of our prosperity. David Wilkerson, who is with the Lord now, founded the Times Square Church in Manhattan. Whenever he gave his guests tours he would always point at the charging bull sculpture and say, "And here is America's Golden Calf." He was right because it seems greed has become our creed and gold has become our god.

I drove past several stores this past week and saw dozens of people camped out so they could be the first in line to buy a new toy or gadget. And Black Friday has now become Black Thursday. Some shoppers rush from the Thanksgiving meal with their family to fight the mob scene when the sales start. Why, they want more and more stuff. They want new stuff to replace their old stuff.

But Zephaniah had a strong warning to people who trusted in their wealth. He said, "Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the Lord's wrath." (Zephaniah 1:18)

God warned Israel that He was going to sweep them away because of their sins. That could be the fate of our nation as well unless we repent and turn to God. But as you move into the last two chapters of Zephaniah you discover a great message of hope.

II. THOSE WHO SEEK GOD FIND HIS FORGIVENESS

There are two sides of God's personality. There is the terrible side we see when He sends judgment. But there is also the tender side we see when He shows mercy. The side we experience depends on the choices we make. Zephaniah promises, "On that day you will not be put to shame for all the wrongs you have done to me...But I will leave within you the meek and humble, who trust in the name of the Lord. The remnant of Israel will do no wrong." (Zephaniah 3:11-12)

God has always had a remnant of faithful people who continue to trust Him and obey Him. How do you know if you're in that remnant? He describes them as meek and humble, those who trust in the name of the Lord. Are you in that number? We have a great advantage over the people living in the time of Zephaniah. For them, the cross was only a promise, and if they believed God's promise, they were saved. For us, the cross has become a reality. Here's what we learn about the cross.

A. God's terrible judgment is absorbed on the cross

God is holy and He must punish sin. But the good news is if we choose to put our faith in Jesus, then He accepts the punishment we deserve. In Christ, we are sheltered from God's anger. Zephaniah prophesied this 2,700 years ago, "Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord's anger." (Zephaniah 2:3)

God is a God of wrath, but you have a choice. You can choose to stand alone and accept that wrath yourself, or you can choose to stand in Christ, because God's wrath was poured out on the cross.

I love the verse of the song "In Christ Alone" that says, "'Til on that cross where Jesus died; the wrath of God was satisfied; For every sin on Him was laid; Here in the death of Christ, I live!"

My favorite story to illustrate how we can escape God's judgment comes from the lives of the American pioneers who moved west to explore the Great Plains and beyond. A group of them in a wagon train were headed toward a wall of smoke that covered the horizon. They soon realized that it was a prairie wildfire rushing at them at the speed of a train. They couldn't turn around and outrun it, and they couldn't go around it. The children screamed as the wall of flame approached them. Then one of the men did something that saved their lives. He set fire to the grass behind the

wagon train and the same wind that was whipping the wild fire toward them, blew that flame away from the back of the group. After the fire had burned behind them, they circled up on the charred ground. As the huge wall of flame approached them, some thought they would die. But the fire didn't touch them as it roared to either side. Ground that has already been burned can't burn again.

One day the fire of God's judgment will burn hot against sin and unrighteousness. There is only one place to stand on that day. When Jesus died on the cross, God's wrath against sin burned hot. And the only way we can escape His wrath is to stand with Jesus at the cross. He is our shelter from God's judgment.

B. God's tender compassion is revealed at the cross

Zephaniah knew a secret about God not everyone knows. You might not have discovered this secret yet. What's the secret? God loves you. He doesn't just love you, He *delights* in you, He rejoices over you, He even sings over you! That's why I say Zephaniah gives us the Old Testament version of John 3:16. Here it is: "The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing." (Zephaniah 3:17)

Take a moment to appreciate the powerful promises in this secret verse. God is with you, and He is MIGHTY to save you. He delights in you. I love this next promise: He will quiet you with His love. Is your life a series of hectic, chaotic, noisy moments? Shhh. He says, "My love will quiet you." And did you know that God sings? He created singing and music, so, of course, He can sing. And He sings a happy song because it says He REJOICES over you with singing.

Think about it. He sings OVER you. Now sometimes we may sing WITH others, and sometimes people sing a song TO us like, "Happy birthday to you..." But what does it mean to sing OVER someone? If you're a parent or grandparent you've probably done that a few times. I know I have. When my daughters were little we had a little wind-up music box that hung in their crib. It was just a tune with no words. But I heard it so many times that I made up words. I still sing it. Back then when my daughters couldn't sleep, or they were upset and crying I would sing, "Laura Grace, Laura Grace, Laura Grace girl; Laura Grace, Laura Grace, Laura Grace girl, Laura Grace; Laura Grace, Laura Grace girl. I love you Laura Grace, I love you so!" It still works. Not long ago I sang, "Grant David, Grant David, Grant David, boy; Grant David; Grant David; Grant David, boy. Oh Grant David, Grant David, David, boy. I love you Grant David, I love you so." I'm singing over them because they are upset and I want to quiet them.

That's why God sings over us. He loves us and He wants to quiet our frightened hearts.

What does God's voice sound like? Does He sound like Phil Burks? We don't know. But I love John Piper's description of God's voice, and as you leave today, be listening for the voice of our God who delights over you and sings! "When I think of the voice of God singing, I hear the booming of Niagara Falls mingled with the trickle of a mossy mountain stream. I hear the blast of Mt. St. Helens mingled with a kitten's purr. I hear the power of an East Coast hurricane and the barely audible puff of a night snow in the woods. And I hear the unimaginable roar of the sun 865,000 miles thick, one million three hundred thousand times bigger than the earth, and nothing

but fire. But I hear this unimaginable roar mingled with the tender, warm crackling of the living room logs on a cozy winter's night. And when I hear this singing I stand dumbfounded, staggered, speechless that He is singing over me." That's Zephaniah's secret. Have you discovered it?

CONCLUSION

Jesus died so you can be sheltered from God's wrath and find the tender compassion of God. His death gives us peace.

Does America need a clean sweep? As a nation, we need a thorough cleaning. But also, each of us as individuals needs to call upon a Holy God to cleanse us with the blood of Jesus Christ.

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Sins of the nation facing God's judgment (Zephaniah 1:4-13)

- A. Sexual perversion
- B. Astrology
- C. Religious Ignorance
- D. Child sacrifice
- E. Gender confusion
- F. Superstition
- G. Obsession with wealth

"Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the Lord's wrath."
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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes