Safety from Danger
Zephaniah 2:1-15

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Good morning. It's good to be with you. If we haven't met, my name is Penny, and I'm the senior pastor here. And if you are a guest or visitor, we're glad that you're with us this morning, glad that you join us. And if you are new, you are joining us in the second week of a four-week series in the Minor Prophet Zephaniah, so the Prophet Zephaniah. So if you have a Bible, you can turn to Zephaniah. If you don't have a Bible, there are Bibles in the chairs in front of you, and you can find the passage on page 789. So we'll be looking at Zephaniah again this week, and then for the next two weeks. And maybe you're wondering, even after we opened our series last week, maybe you're wondering, like, why are we studying this minor prophet, this obscure prophet? Maybe until last week, you didn't even know there was a book called Zephaniah in the Bible. And I wouldn't blame you for that. The minor prophets are often obscured to us. They're often strange. They're often unfamiliar. And that's one of the reasons why we're spending time in them, right? From time to time, we've said we're going to introduce us to the minor prophets. So a number of months ago, we spent some time in Habakkuk. Now we're in Zephaniah.

In the future, we'll take up Malachi and Zechariah and Jonah and various other minor prophets. But we want to expose ourselves to these books that maybe we don't normally go to, because honestly, when we're in need of comfort in times of sadness, in times of pain, we probably turn to the Psalms, right, or the Gospels. When we're looking for doctrine, we probably turn to Paul in Ephesians or Galatians or Romans. When we're looking for a great story of God, we turn to the Old Testament narratives of 1 Samuel, of David, of Genesis, stories about Abraham and Isaac, right? That's where we go. But the minor prophets, we just kind of forget about sometimes. And yet, they are part of God's Word. They can feel distant, they can feel foreign to us, but they're still the Word that is given to God's people. Not just his people who first heard it, but his people today, to us. You see, the truth is, is that the Bible, though it comprises 66 different books, it's actually a unified story of God's redemptive work in this world. And it culminates in Jesus. And so, what that means is that every book of the Bible is important to that story and is important to us. So, those are some of the reasons why we're looking at Zephaniah. That's some of the reasons why, in months to come, we'll look at another minor prophet.

So, last week, we began Zephaniah, and we heard a very sober word, right? We heard about how the day of the Lord is coming. This day of the Lord that, for those who are hidden and trusting in Jesus, trusting in the Lord, it will be a glorious day. But for those who oppose the Lord, it will be a terrifying day. It's a very sober word, a heavy word. Well, Zephaniah, in this short book, he's going to continue to talk about the day of the Lord this morning. And he's going to talk about it with regard to the nations and with regard to God's people. And so, let's go ahead and read Zephaniah 2, beginning in verse 1. The prophet says:

> “Gather together, yes, gather, O shameless nation,
> 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.

> 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.
> For Gaza shall be deserted, and Ashkelon shall become a desolation, Ashdod's people shall be driven out at noon, and Ekron shall be uprooted.
> Woe to you inhabitants of the seacoast, you nation of the Cherethites. The word of the LORD is against you, O Canaan, land of the Philistines; and I will destroy you until no inhabitant is left.
> And you, O seacoast, shall be pastures, with meadows for shepherds and folds for flocks. The seacoast shall become the possession of the remnant of the house of Judah, on which they shall graze, and in the houses of Ashkelon they shall lie down at evening. For the LORD their God will be mindful of them and restore their fortunes.
> "I have heard the taunts of Moab and the revilings of the Ammonites, how they have taunted my people and made boasts against their territory.
> Therefore, as I live," declares the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, "Moab shall become like Sodom, and the Ammonites like Gomorrah, a land possessed by nettles and salt pits, and a waste forever.
> The remnant of my people shall plunder them, and the survivors of my nation shall possess them."
> This shall be their lot in return for their pride, because they taunted and boasted against the people of the LORD of hosts.
> The LORD will be awesome against them; for he will famish all the gods of the earth, and to him shall bow down, each in its place, all the lands of the nations.
> You also, O Cushites, shall be slain by my sword.
> And he will stretch out his hand against the north and destroy Assyria, and he will make Nineveh a desolation, a dry waste like the desert.
> Herds shall lie down in her midst, all kinds of beasts; even the owl and the hedgehog shall lodge in her capitals; a voice shall hoot in the window; devastation will be on the threshold; for her cedar work will be laid bare.
> This is the exultant city that lived securely, that said in her heart, "I am, and there is no one else." What a desolation she has become, a lair for wild beasts! Everyone who passes by her hisses and shakes his fist." (ESV)

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord.

Let me pray for us. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your Word and ask that you would help us. For we know, Lord, that apart from the work of your Spirit, we would be deaf to your truth. Our hearts would be hardened to your grace. And so we ask for your Spirit to help us, to meet with us, to soften our hearts, to unplug our ears, and to allow my words to glorify you. And so we pray, Father, meet with us now, and we pray in Christ's name, Amen.

So with the leaves starting to fall from the trees, filling our lawns with debris, I know that there are many things that we have to do during the fall, right? We have to clean up those leaves, we bag them, we stick them out on the edge of the street. If, you know, if you're smart, you know, you can compost them, and then you have dirt in the spring, which will be wonderful, right? Your plants will love you for that. But there's lots of tasks we have to do, and one of the tasks related to this is cleaning out the gutters, right? I know everyone loves doing that. I remember when we lived in St. Louis, we lived in a single-story ranch, and on a day in the fall, the rain started to come, and I had forgotten to clean out the gutters. The water was running over, it was falling onto the ground, right? And we know what that does, right?

It creates a giant mess. It also is dangerous for the foundations of our homes. And so I resolved, as soon as the rain stopped, once it dried out, I would go up there, and I would clean out those gutters. But I forgot. And so about a week or so later, the storm was coming, and I remembered the gutters were still packed full of leaves. And so I grabbed the stepladder. It was a single-story ranch, so the stepladder was high enough. I grabbed the stepladder, and I grabbed one of my children, who were younger at the time, to hold the ladder in place. And I go up on the roof, and I'm cleaning out the gutter. And as I'm cleaning out the gutter, the sky gets darker, the winds start picking up, and before I can finish, there is this terrifying clap of thunder. One of those claps that shakes the house. Y'all know what I'm talking about. You've felt it before. And as the clap of thunder happened, my child, who is holding the ladder for me, lets go, jumps in the air, yelps, and runs into the house.

Now, I'm not going to tell you which child. I will protect the guilty here. But I don't blame my child for doing this, right? I mean, after all, we lived in St. Louis. We lived in St. Louis, where tornadoes are a regular occurrence. Tornado sirens. And so my child had heard the sirens before. They had seen the storms come, and they knew that the sound of a siren or the clap of thunder meant that danger was approaching. I don't blame my child for seeking safety. I don't blame my child for running into the house. I just wish they would have maybe held the ladder before they saved themselves. But regardless, my child knew what the sound meant. They knew it was the sound of danger, and so they needed to flee. They needed to run. They needed to find safety. And in our passage, we're hearing the siren. It's not the sound of a clap, and it's not a tornado siren. No, it's the sound of danger coming from the Lord himself. For the prophet Zephaniah, who is the voice of the Lord, speaking God's word, is declaring that danger is coming, and it's coming in the form of God's judgment.

The Sounding of Danger

The danger is coming. The sound of danger is being declared, and it's being declared in the form of the day of the Lord. That in the day of the Lord, God's judgment is going to come. And the prophet is focused primarily on the nations here. Not exclusively, but primarily. We hear this when he talks about the inhabitants of the seacoast, and the people of Moab, and the Ammonites, and Cushites, and Assyria, and Nineveh. Now, I imagine that most of us didn't have ancient Near Eastern geography in school, so I don't blame you if you don't know that these are the nations that surrounded Israel. It's as though the Lord is going around the compass, north and east, the nations of the south and the west. It's all these nations who have troubled Israel in the past, like Moab, and the Ammonites, and the nations who are going to threaten them in the future, like Assyria.

Remember, Babylonian exile is coming. And what God says of all of these nations who have surrounded Israel, who have mocked his people, is that in verse 4, they will be deserted. There will be desolation. They will be driven out. He goes on in verse 13 to use other D words to describe what's going to happen. They will be destroyed. It will become like desolation. They will be like a desert. In verse 9, these nations will be like Sodom and like Gomorrah. Destruction is coming. That all who oppose God, his justice, his goodness, his ways, his judgment will come. But why? Well, God doesn't bring judgment willy-nilly. He's not impetuous. He's not rash. He's not reckless. God isn't standing in heaven with his arms crossed, looking down upon the nations, looking for one to smite on a whim. No, God's judgment comes because of sin. We hear that the nations, what were they doing? They were taunting, and boasting, and mocking God's people.

And in mocking God's people, they were mocking God himself. God's judgment is going to come. Now, I realize that this might not sit very well with us, right? Because when we think of God's judgment, maybe what runs through our mind is images of fire and brimstone tele-evangelists, or street preachers who are yelling out at passerbys, and we have the image of wagging fingers and angry faces, and we don't want to be like that. I don't want to be like that. And so maybe it doesn't sit well with us because of those images that we have. Or maybe God's judgment doesn't sit well with us because we have a conception of God that is though he's grandfatherly, right? Wanting to dispense wisdom, and shower us with gifts, and answer every prayer, and every request in the exact way we want him to. And so we become dismissive of passages of God's judgment, and think, well, that was just Old Testament, and we're New Testament people now. But actually, Jesus spoke of God's judgment. Jesus said that those who oppose God and don't trust in him, that they will experience separation from God, and they will be resigned to a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

This is in stark contrast to the new heavens and the new earth that God will usher in, right? Where there won't be gnashing of teeth, where there won't be weeping, where there won't be death, but some will experience that judgment. You know, I get why it doesn't sit well with us. I understand that. And yet the truth is, is that we need a God who will judge. We want a God who will judge sin, and evil, and wickedness. I mean, think about every single time something horrible happens in our world. A mass shooting, terrible violence, murder, rape, death, right? These sorts of things, when they happen in our world, what is it that we are looking for? There is a public outcry for justice, rightfully so. We long for that day when evil will be no more, when wickedness will be put away, when terror will give way to joy. We long for judgment and justice, but we need the one that will only come through the Lord. Because the Lord is the one who will ultimately bring an end to evil, and to immorality, and sin. You see, friends, the truth is, is we want a God who judges evil. We just don't want a God who judges our evil.

And yet God, though he focuses in this passage on the nations, he's not exclusively looking at them. He sees his own people's sins as well. Did you see how our passage began? “Gather together. Yes, gather, oh shameless nation.” Now, who is the shameless nation? It's Judah. Remember, Israel at this time, they're separated into the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom. The northern kingdom is called Israel, the southern kingdom is called Judah, and Zephaniah is ministering to the southern kingdom. And he's calling them a shameless nation, and they're shameless because they are acting like the nations. They're not acknowledging God, they're not trusting in his ways, they're exalting themselves and not humbling themselves before the Lord. And what the prophet is saying is judgment will come to any and to all who oppose him, regardless of nationality or ethnicity, regardless of religious tradition. And I think one of the reasons that the televangelists and the street preacher, why their message doesn't sit well with us, is because they're only telling part of the story. Yes, God will judge evil and wickedness, and the threat of his judgment is the sound of danger that warns us to pursue mercy, to find mercy, to seek safety.

The Seeking of Safety

And that's what the prophet is telling us. We hear it in verses 1-3: “Gather together, yes, gather, oh shameless nation, 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, seek the Lord, all you humble of the land who do his just command, seek righteousness, seek humility, perhaps you may be hidden in the day of

the anger of the Lord." So you hear what he's saying. The prophet is saying, *yes, the day of the Lord, the day of the anger of the Lord, it is coming. And before that day comes, seek the safety of the Lord.* Three times, did you see that the prophet says seek in verse three, seek the Lord, seek righteousness, seek humility, seek humility, right? Recognizing our weakness, recognizing our frailty, recognizing that we do not rely upon ourselves, but instead we have no reason for pride or arrogance before others or the Lord, that we rely on him, that we are a humble people. I've said it before from this pulpit that we Reform Presbyterians who believe in depravity, who believe in salvation by grace alone, by faith alone, who believe that we bring nothing to the table. We should be the humblest of all people in the world because we recognize there is nothing that we bring before the Lord, that there is nothing that we can claim, right? That we come before the Lord not in our own work, not with our own merits, but God is gracious. He shows favor simply because he is a gracious God. That we are to be a humble people. Seek humility. He also says seek righteousness, not our own. We have no righteousness to bring, no, but the righteousness of God.

And finally, before humility and righteousness, he says seek the Lord. "Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land who do his just commands." Seek the Lord, not our righteousness, not our own works, not our own ways, but we seek him. And you can hear as the prophet is saying this, that there's this sense of urgency, right? We hear it in verse 2, before he says seek righteousness, seek humility, seek the Lord, he says before the decree takes effect, before the day passes away, before there comes upon you. Before, before, before. There's urgency, isn't there? He's saying respond quickly, don't wait. Because these days, these days between now and the day of the Lord, they are passing away like chaff. They blow away in the wind. Here today and gone tomorrow. We don't know when the day of the Lord will come. And so he's saying respond. Don't wait.

I had a friend in college, he grew up in the church. He grew up attending church on most Sundays with his parents. He grew up hearing the Bible preached and the gospel being proclaimed. And he got to college and and he stopped going to church. He stopped reading his Bible. And I remember talking to him, and I wasn't a Christian at the time, but I distinctly remember him saying to me that, that you know, one day I'll get serious about church again. One day I'll get serious about God. You know, once I have kids, once I get married, that's when I'll get serious. And maybe some of us have thought that. Maybe even this morning some of us are thinking that, like I'm here because, you know, my spouse drugged me here, because my parents made me come. And one day maybe I'll get serious. But what if we don't have years, or months, or weeks, or even days? I mean, Jesus in Matthew 24 said the day of the Lord is coming at an hour you do not expect. And so he said be ready. Not be ready in the future, be ready now. The apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5 said the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night, so be awake. You see the prophet Zephaniah and the apostle Paul and Jesus himself is telling us don't wait for tomorrow.

Don't wait for when your career is built. Don't wait to establish your family. Don't wait. No, today seek the Lord. Seek the Lord today so that on that day we will be hidden in the Lord. That's what he says in verse 3. Seek the Lord. Seek righteousness. Seek humility. Perhaps you may be hidden in the day of the anger of the Lord. And we would be hidden. If you were with us last week, then maybe you remember that Tobias told us what the name of Zephaniah means. Y'all remember? The Lord has hidden. What a wonderful name. The Lord has hidden. Hidden, it has the implication of sheltered. Of sheltered. That we would be sheltered from God's anger. That we would be sheltered from God's judgment. That we would be hidden in his grace because we are hidden in Christ. That's what we hear throughout the New

Testament, like in 2 Thessalonians 3, that the Lord is faithful. He will guard you. In Jude 24, that he keeps our feet from stumbling. And in Colossians 3, you have died and your life is hidden with Christ. So that when God, when Christ who is your life appears, you will appear with him in glory.

Friends, that is the grace that is being offered to us. That is the response to this warning. Yes, judgment is coming, but for his people, for God's people, for those who are hidden in him and trusting in Christ. That judgment doesn't come upon us, it came upon God's Son. That is his grace. So that God isn't judging and destroying all things in all people's. No, he actually says in verse 9 that there is a remnant. A remnant that he preserves. A remnant that he holds on to. A remnant that he guards and that is hidden in him. So that on the day of the Lord, on that day, we will appear with God in glory. That is the promise. That is God's grace. That is the response to that sound of danger. When my child heard that sound of danger, that clap of thunder, they knew exactly what it meant. That the storm was coming and they knew exactly what to do. They ran to safety and they looked for shelter. What about us? I mean, we've heard the prophet's warning. We've heard that for all who oppose the Lord, there is danger. So where will we turn? Will we heed the warning of the prophet? Friends, seek the safety of the Lord. Run to him. Find shelter in Christ. For he is the one that we are hidden in. He is the one who has taken the judgment we deserve upon himself. He is our shelter. He is our safety. Amen. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have provided a way of life. That you have provided safety for those who heed your warning. We thank you that Jesus has taken on flesh. That he has lived amongst us and he has taken your judgment upon himself. So that it would not fall upon your people. It would not fall upon those who trust in Christ. It would not fall upon those who seek after you. And so we pray, Father, help us to seek you. Help us to cling to you. Help us to be hidden in Christ so that when he appears, this one who is our life, we would appear with him in glory. We pray that you would do this in the mighty name of Jesus. And we pray all this in Christ's name. And God's people said together, Amen.