



The Round Church at  
**St Andrew the Great**  
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached  
on Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> December 2007  
by Mark Ashton

10p

Zephaniah 2:1 – 3:8

**A Day to Dread**

**Heed the Warning**

On 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2001 a rugby league player called David Nelson was shot dead by a masked gunman while he was playing snooker in a pub in Leeds. A friend, David Montgomery, who tried to protect him, was shot dead in the same incident. And the extraordinary thing about that tragedy was that three days earlier an identical attempt had been made on David Nelson's life: at the same pub, probably the same gunman, and a bullet had actually parted David Nelson's hair and grazed his scalp. But it emerged that David Nelson had done absolutely nothing in response to that first attack. He had not reported it to the police. He had not moved away from Leeds with his seven-year-old daughter. He had not even changed his habits. And so three days later in the same spot, he was shot again and lost his life, his friend died trying to save him, and his seven-year-old daughter was orphaned; all because David Nelson did not heed a warning, even though a bullet had grazed his scalp.

The prophet Zephaniah has just fired a bullet through our hair and it has grazed our scalp. Forgive me if you were not with us last week, when we started on this short prophetic book in the Old Testament, but you can get the gist of the message from how last week's passage began: *"I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth," declares the LORD* (1:2); and from how it ended: *In the fire of his jealousy the whole world will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth* (1:18); And from how this week's passage ends: *"Therefore wait for me," declares the LORD, "for the day I will stand up to testify. I have decided to assemble the nations, to gather the kingdoms and to pour out my wrath on them—all my fierce anger. The*

*whole world will be consumed by the fire of my jealous anger* (3:8). And we think, "Whoa! That's not the God they taught about in Sunday School" It's not PC, not the sort of thing we expect to hear these days. But it is the God of the Bible. And we saw last week that the real God has a right to do that—the Creator can dispense with what He has created, if He chooses to. He has the right, if there is a God at all. And so we must heed the warning.

Now, speaking about God's judgement is not popular (I'd expected a drop in our numbers at the service this week!) But, if there is a just and holy God, it is not unloving to speak about His judgement of us. During the week a young man asked me why he should not sleep with his girlfriend, and I do not think I was being unloving in telling him that God made sexual intercourse for marriage, that he would actually enjoy more and better sex within marriage if he came to his marriage as a virgin, and that he would be liable to God's judgement of he did not listen to God in matters of how we humans should behave. (In fact, I am not sure I stressed sufficiently that last consideration). It is not unloving to say such things, if they are true.

So, I hope we have all been alarmed by Zephaniah's warning of God's judgement on human sin. In fact, if we have not been alarmed, we need to be. (Last week's sermon failed, if it did not cause us some alarm), But, if we are alarmed, we need not be. And that is where we begin this week at the start of chapter 2, because in the first three verses Zephaniah tells us how we can heed the warning (the bullet through our hair), and respond.

### 1. Response: Gather and Seek (2:1-3)

We are to gather together, and to seek the Lord (That was what Zephaniah urged his hearers to do.) Notice: it is collective, corporate; we do it together—*Gather together, gather together, O shameful nation* (2:1). Change is very hard. We need each other's help to face our sin and change our lives. And that is what church is all about. It is a change-enabling community; not the gathering of the righteous, but a gathering of sinners called by God to change—with His, and one another's help. (I hope your homegroup or hublet is like that. That is why we need to belong to one).

*Gather together, gather together, O shameful nation, before the appointed time arrives and that day sweeps on like chaff, before the fierce anger of the LORD comes upon you, before the day of the LORD's wrath comes upon you* (2:1-2). That day cannot be averted, but it can be prepared for. *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* (2:3). The humble of the land are not a closed group. We are invited to seek humility and join their number. We are to throw ourselves on the mercy of the Judge, whose anger burns against us and threatens to sweep us away. It is like a skier trying to turn and ski down with the avalanche.

Or those weather survey planes whose job it is to fly right into a hurricane or a typhoon, in order to locate the 'eye', that spot of calm at the very centre of the storm (so they can calculate which direction it is heading, and how fast it is moving). So we are to respond to the God who threatens us with judgement, by seeking His presence. We go towards what threatens us. Eddie Izzard has said that if someone is trying to attack you with a rocket launcher, don't run away from him—you need to hug him! David Brainerd, that great Scottish missionary to the South Sea Islands (who, when his wife died, had to sleep for a fortnight on her grave to prevent the islanders digging up her body and eating her), used to say that when an angry chief came to visit him, wielding a spear or musket, he would stand right up close to the chief, so the man could not bring his weapon to bear on the missionary.

The only safe place for a sinful human being (like you or me) with a perfectly holy and just God is right up close, face to face with the Judge we most dread: *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* (2:3). Notice that 'perhaps'. It tells us that our shelter from God's anger depends entirely on His will and not ours. God is not governed by any laws external to Himself. We cannot find some way of behaving that forces God to forgive us. All we contribute is our sin, and all the grace lies in God's own choice.

### 2. A Glance at the Other Nations (2:4-15)

It is a devastating verdict; and, faced with such a humiliating proposition, human beings will search for an alternative viewpoint. So Zephaniah does what we love to do—he takes a look round at other nations and other cultures and other religious groups.

Ever since Sir James Fraser published the first volume of '**The Golden Bough**' in 1890, it has been popular to try to fit the Christian faith just into one slot on the shelf of Comparative Religion—with its own striking spiritual insights admittedly, but nevertheless only one aspect of the many fascinating religious phenomena in our world. (That is what they teach us all at school now in R.E.) But when Zephaniah looked around, he saw things differently.

He looked West, he looked East, he looked South and he looked North, and everywhere he saw God's judgement: West, to the Philistines: *Gaza will be abandoned and Ashkelon left in ruins. At midday Ashdod will be emptied and Ekron uprooted. Woe to you who live by the sea, O Kerethite people; the word of the LORD is against you, O Canaan, land of the Philistines. "I will destroy you, and none will be left." The land by the sea, where the Kerethites dwell, will be a place for shepherds and sheep pens* (2:4-6). East, to Moab and Ammon: *"I have heard the insults of Moab and the taunts of the Ammonites, who insulted my people and made threats against their land. Therefore, as surely as I live," declares the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, "surely Moab will become like Sodom, the Ammonites like Gomorrah—a place of weeds and salt pits, a wasteland forever. The remnant of my people will plunder them; the survivors of my nation will*

*inherit their land.” This is what they will get in return for their pride, for insulting and mocking the people of the LORD Almighty (2:8-10). Far to the South, to Cush (approximately Ethiopia): “You too, O Cushites, will be slain by my sword.” (2:12). And North, to Assyria, the superpower of the day: **He will stretch out his hand against the north and destroy Assyria, leaving Nineveh utterly desolate and dry as the desert. Flocks and herds will lie down there, creatures of every kind. The desert owl and the screech owl will roost on her columns. Their calls will echo through the windows, rubble will be in the doorways, the beams of cedar will be exposed. This is the carefree city that lived in safety. She said to herself, “I am, and there is none besides me.” What a ruin she has become, a lair for wild beasts! All who pass by her scoff and shake their fists (2:13-15).***

The whole human race has the evidence of creation, and the moral light of the human conscience. So, they are all answerable to their Creator, and they all come under His judgement for their arrogant self-sufficiency. (See Nineveh’s “**I am and there is none besides me**”), and for their scorn for God’s purposes (see verse 8 and verse 10). The perfectly just God demands social justice on this earth, but where do we find it outside of the Christian tradition? The other belief systems of the human race are not guiltless in their moral failure. (We, as we shall see, cannot despise them because of our own moral failure; but they are not guiltless before their Creator).

But in the middle of this picture of universal judgement for every point of the compass, there are sudden unexpected gleams of hope. References to a remnant of God’s people begin to appear: **It will belong to the remnant of the house of Judah; there they will find pasture. In the evening they will lie down in the houses of Ashkelon. The LORD their God will care for them; he will restore their fortunes (2:7).** And to a universal purpose of God for all people: **The LORD will be awesome to them when he destroys all the gods of the land. The nations on every shore will worship him, every one in its own land (2:11).**

So the tension mounts as this little book draws to its close: does unmitigated disaster await the human race? And will we get what we deserve for our obsessive pursuit of our own comfort, our unjust oppression of one another, and our

disdainful pillaging of a wonderful environment as we ignore and exclude the God who gave it all to us? Or could there just be hope, like a tiny gleam of sunshine glimpsed on the far horizon as the thunderclouds gather over our heads?

### **3. Tension in Jerusalem (3:1-8)**

That tension focuses in Jerusalem.

As chapter three starts, the reader might think the prophet was still discussing Assyrian Nineveh: **Woe to the city of oppressors, rebellious and defiled! She obeys no one, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the LORD, she does not draw near to her God. Her officials are roaring lions, her rulers are evening wolves, who leave nothing for the morning (3:1-3).** But this is God’s own city, Jerusalem, with prophets . . . and priests . . . and God Himself: **Her prophets are arrogant; they are treacherous men. Her priests profane the sanctuary and do violence to the law. The LORD within her is righteous; he does no wrong. Morning by morning he dispenses his justice, and every new day he does not fail, yet the unrighteous know no shame (3:4-5).** Or it could be London, or Cambridge, because we too have had God’s word in our culture for 1500 years, and so the same verdict falls on us: **She obeys no one, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the LORD, she does not draw near to her God (3:2).**

We make laws nowadays in the UK by popular consensus according to whatever view is politically correct, as if there is no God and no moral framework for human life in His world. So for example, we have decided that paedophilia is the worst of all possible sins, and homosexuality a perfectly acceptable (and even rather praiseworthy) personal lifestyle choice. But there is no rhyme or reason behind that evaluation of human sexual behaviour. It is just current human taste . . . and a deliberate rejection of God: **She obeys no one, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the LORD, she does not draw near to her God (3:2).** Instead we draw near to the gods of our own devising, but they are actually the same pagan deities which have always stalked our world . . . under different names. Those Ammonites (back in chapter 2) worshipped Molech, that abominable deity who demanded child sacrifice as part of his

worship. We now call him: ‘a woman’s right to choose’: but it’s the same god . . . and the same result.

And all the time there is God: a speaking, loving, holy, consistent God, right at our elbows: ***The LORD within her is righteous; he does no wrong. Morning by morning he dispenses his justice, and every new day he does not fail, yet the unrighteous know no shame*** (3:5). See how our passage ends in verses 6-8. ***“I have cut off nations; their strongholds are demolished. I have left their streets deserted, with no one passing through. Their cities are destroyed; no one will be left—no one at all. I said to the city, ‘Surely you will fear me and accept correction!’ Then her dwelling would not be cut off, nor all my punishments come upon her. But they were still eager to act corruptly in all they did. Therefore wait for me,” declares the LORD, “for the day I will stand up to testify. I have decided to assemble the nations, to gather the kingdoms and to pour out my wrath on them—all my fierce anger. The whole world will be consumed by the fire of my jealous anger”***.

God has addressed us through human history. There are lessons to be learnt from the decline and fall of earth’s empires and civilisations:

The glories of our blood and state  
 Are shadows, not substantial things.  
 There is no armour against fate,  
 Death lies his icy hand on Kings.  
 Sceptre and crown must tumble down,  
 And in the dust be equal made.  
 With the poor crooked scythe and spade.  
 (James Shirley)

God speaks through history. God also speaks through His prophets: ***I said to the city, ‘Surely you will fear me and accept correction!’ Then her dwelling would not be cut off, nor all my punishments come upon her. But they were still eager to act corruptly in all they did*** (3:7). And we know what is going to follow that, don’t we? God has spoken: They’ve ignored it. So Kerboom! → Judgement.

But no!—look at the beginning of verse 8, ***“Therefore wait for me,” declares the LORD—*** not because waiting will avert judgement for us: see how the verse goes on: ***“Therefore wait for me,” declares the LORD, “for the day I will stand***

***up to testify. I have decided to assemble the nations, to gather the kingdoms and to pour out my wrath on them—all my fierce anger. The whole world will be consumed by the fire of my jealous anger”*** (3:8). But we are to wait, because we must let God be God.

As the warning of His judgement parts our hair and grazes our scalp, we still know our only hope lies in Him. We wait because we cannot do anything ourselves about our predicament. If we are going to escape God, God has got to do it . . . He did it in Jesus. That was worth waiting for.

So you must come back next week to hear the whole story. It is to die for.

*(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)*