

Message Series: The Whole Counsel of God, Message 42  
God's Tough but Tender Love. The Book of Zephaniah  
Pastor Roger Ridley, Gretna Baptist Church – May 4, 2008

---

While in school, did you ever get sent to the principal's office for misbehavior? It didn't happen often, but it did happen to me. And in my day, when you got sent to the principal's office, your parent's got a phone call to come too. And knowing when I saw my dad, I was going to get punished sure made a difference in my behavior.

In our study today, we're going to consider the O.T. book of Zephaniah. It presents a warning, of God coming to His disobedient children with punishment. But the warning is given in the form of invitations to change. Given such an opportunity you would think that His people would have changed their ways, but they did not.

When that was true of me, my dad would spank me, sometimes, it seemed, without mercy, but the same cannot be said of our heavenly Father. For as He came to punish His children, He did so out of love that was both tough and tender.

The interesting thing to me about the book of Zephaniah is that it speaks of a specific time in the past when God punished Judah, but also of a time yet to come, when God will punish the whole world. And so, the message is just as true for us today, as it was back then.

The question is, while there is still time before He comes, will we listen any better to His invitations to change than they did?

Before we look at these invitations, there are two bits of background information that I think will help us in our understanding of its message.

The first is the historical setting which Zephaniah provides. See 1:1...

Zephaniah traces his own ancestry back to King Hezekiah. Such a thing was not done by the other prophets. All they did was mention their fathers. So what was he doing? Boasting about his royal heritage? I don't think so.

He also mentions that he was a prophet in the days of King Josiah. Hezekiah

and Josiah were two of the best kings that Judah had. They were both used by God to bring revival to the land. And I believe Zephaniah uses their names to call the people to revival once again, because, unless there was a complete change in their behavior, God's judgment could not be stopped.

That coming judgment is the second thing we need to know about. Zephaniah called it, "the Day of the Lord." This isn't the first time that we've come across that phrase in our studies, but Zephaniah uses it more than any other O.T. book. And it's because of this phrase, that you and I need to especially listen to its message.

It spoke not only of an immediate judgment coming to Judah, but also, of a future judgment coming to the whole world, which I believe we are right on the doorstep of. Look at Zephaniah's description of it in 1:14-17...

Now, some might wonder, "*How do we know this is yet future?*" or "*How do we know this has not already taken place?*" It's because Jesus also speaks of this coming Day of Judgment, as well as, the rest of the N.T.

In Matthew 24, when Jesus talks about it, He describes it as a time of great tribulation as has not been since the beginning of the world.

In 1 Thessalonians 5, the Apostle Paul assured his readers that the Day of the Lord was still future. And then, in the book of Revelation, we get a full description of this future day which terrifies us when we read it.

The Day of the Lord is yet to come. It will start with the Great Tribulation, and it will end with the Millennium, and we see both of these in the book of Zephaniah.

Some might wonder then, "*If it was promised so long ago and it has not yet come, is it really going to come at all?*" Peter addresses that very question in 2 Peter 3, and answers it in two ways. First, it will come as promised. If it seems like there's any delay, it's only that more might be saved. Second, it is coming, and its certainty should encourage us to change the way we live!

That's what Zephaniah is saying, as he sets forth **three invitations** of the tough but tender love of our heavenly Father.

I. The first invitation is found in chapter one. See 1:7-13...

The simple invitation of these verses is, **Become Silent before God as the Day of the Lord Approaches.**

Have you ever been caught doing something wrong, and instead of shutting up, you kept talking, making excuses, trying to worm out of it? If so, did that ever make things any better? No. If anything, only worst.

Slowly, I have learned in my life that when your caught doing something wrong, it is best to shut up and listen to the person in charge. And that's what Zephaniah was saying to the people of Judah. You see, they had already been caught. God was already on His way with punishment. The best thing they could do was to be humble and still before Him So that, not only would they experience His punishment but also, His tender love at the same time.

And with all my heart, I believe that's exactly what we need to do today. To stop our running around, quit making excuses, be accountable for our actions, and get quiet before God.

Psalm 4:4 says to meditate in our heart, be still, and put our trust in the Lord. Psalm 46:10 says, *“Be still, and know that I am the Lord.”*

How often, I've wished my own children would just be still and listen when I had to confront them about their behavior. How much more that should be true between us and the Lord.

The people of Judah did not become still and silent. In verse 6, they continued to turn their back on the Lord. In verse 12, they saw no reason to change. They just settled into complacency and said, *“God isn't going to do anything. He hasn't in the past, why should we think He will now?”*

What frightens me most about the day in which we live, is that very attitude. Our society doesn't seem to care what God thinks. And our society doesn't seem to expect Him to do anything, anyway. But a day of wrath, a day of trouble, a day of devastation, and darkness, and alarm is coming, and if we're going to stop and listen, now would seem the time to do so.

II. A second invitation is provided in chapter two. Look at 2:1-3...

The invitation of these verses is to **Become Sheltered Before God as the**

## **Day of the Lord Approaches.**

In Revelation chapter six, we are told that when the day of the Lord comes, people will hide themselves in the rocks to seek shelter from God. But it will be too late, and it will be the wrong kind of shelter to seek.

Here, we are being told to seek shelter with God, before He comes in judgment.

Again, when I was a child and would seek to escape my father's punishment by hiding, I only made it worst because he always found me. So stop and think about it. There is certainly no way for any of us to hide from God. Listen to the words of Psalm 139:7-12...

God knows us, God sees us, and we can not hide from Him.

In Zephaniah chapter two, God not only speaks to His people, but names nation after nation in the world of that day. It wasn't just Judah, but **all** the nations, **all** the people of the world, who sought to live a part from Him, and sought to hide from God, that were going to experience His wrath. But there was still another option available, and it's available for us as well.

As a child, instead of hiding from my father, if I would go him, and humble myself before him, **before** his punishment came, **before** his anger was raised to a higher level, and confessed my wrong, I would still be punished, but I would also experience his tender love.

Dads, have you ever hugged your kids, sheltered them in your arms upon punishing them, so that they would know that you still loved them? That's what I believe is the encouragement of these verses. As the day of the Lord approaches, the worst thing for us to do is to continue in our sin and then try to hide when it's too late. The best thing for us to do, is to seek shelter with Him now, while there's still time.

III. And then, in chapter three, we find a final invitation.

**Become Song-ful Before God as the Day of the Lord Approaches.** See 3:14-20...

These verses refer to a day that has not yet been experienced by Israel. This day is known to us as the Millennium; the 1000 year Reign of Christ upon

the earth described in Revelation chapter twenty. Seven blessings of that day are mentioned in our passage:

# 1 – It will be a day of tremendous joy (14).

# 2 – It will be a day when the Lord’s judgments against Israel are finished (15a).

# 3 – It will be favored with the personal presence of the Lord (15b).

# 4 – It will be a time when Israel will not experience evil or fear (15c-16).

# 5 – It will be a time when the Lord will rejoice over Israel as the special object of His love (17).

# 6 – It will be a time when the saved remnant are gathered together (18).

# 7 – It will be preceded by the Lord’s judgment of Israel’s enemies and the exaltation of the saved remnant (19-20).

What do you think the very mentioning of those promises was meant to do for those who heard them? At the very least, put a smile on their face and a song in their heart. Why? Because, even though God was coming to punish them; He was not going to forsake them.

In Romans chapter eleven, Paul asks the question, “*Has God cast away His people?*” Then he answers, “*Certainly not!*” And then he goes on to explain that God keeps His promises.

I like what it says here in Zephaniah 3:5...

Even when we have turned away from God, even when we have not listened to Him, He is still in our midst. He is still faithful to us. He will still do what is best for us. And, He will not fail us.

When you’re going to get punished, but you know that your dad still loves you, and you know that he isn’t going to cast you away, doesn’t it make you feel a little bit better?

We shouldn't continue to run from a father like that. We should run to him and rejoice in him.

I can't help but think of Jesus' parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15...

He still would experience all the consequences of his actions, but that was okay, because he knew his dad still loved him, and rejoiced over him.

That's where this book leaves all who know the Lord.

Verse 17,

*“He will rejoice over you with gladness,  
He will quiet you in His love,  
He will rejoice over you with singing.”*

God is going to rejoice over us, and wants us to rejoice with Him.

If you've wandered away and are now in need of coming home to restore your relationship with your heavenly Father, won't you do it today, while you still have the opportunity?

He's waiting, with arms open wide!

His love can be tough, but it can also be tender.