

Zephaniah 2:1-3

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Zephaniah exhorts the people of Judah to repent to avoid the judgment of God upon Judah. He also exhorts the righteous within Judah to seek God, for perhaps He might hide them from suffering when Judah is judged.

After describing the day of the LORD's judgment upon the earth in Chapter 1, Zephaniah now urges the people of Judah to repent quickly and genuinely. In the first two verses, he addresses the sinful people of Judah who practiced pagan rituals, and accordingly adopted the pagan practices of deception and exploitation (Zephaniah 1:9, 11). After addressing the rebellious Judahites, he addresses the faithful followers within the nation, those who sought to please the LORD with their humble hearts.

In addressing the first group, the sinful, the prophet stated, *Gather yourselves together, yes, gather, O nation without shame* (vs 1). The verb translated as *gather* is typically used to describe the gathering of straw. It was a common practice in ancient Israel for the people to collect worthless and sharp ends of the corn stalks and cast them into the fire at the end of the harvest. In the days of Moses, for instance, the people of Israel "scattered all over Egypt to gather stubble to use for straw" to use in the making of mud bricks (Exodus 5:12). Here in Zephaniah, the prophet utilized the verb to call the Judahites to come together and change their wicked ways. Such a call was urgent, as indicated by the repetition of the verb.

In Zephaniah's day, the nation of Judah had experienced a dark moment spiritually. He calls Judah a *nation without shame*, meaning they willfully and defiantly disobeyed the covenant stipulations God gave them. They plunged into idolatry and persisted in wickedness. Yet, their faces were not red with embarrassment. They apparently felt no shame or remorse about breaking the covenant laws God had given them, even though they had promised to keep them all (Exodus 19:7-8). This would indicate that God's covenant laws were not even being considered (Hosea 8:12).

Through this urgent appeal, the prophet told them they needed to realize their improper behavior toward their covenant God and come to their senses to avoid His judgment. Indeed, repentance was necessary for Judah to avoid the coming disaster.

Zephaniah stressed the urgency of the command to repent in the next verse, where he used the preposition "before" in three consecutive lines. In doing so, he made clear that the people of Judah needed to turn away from their wickedness and turn to the LORD genuinely before it was too late. In the first line, Zephaniah said they needed to repent *before the decree takes effect* (vs 2).

The term *decree* broadly refers to an official order having the force of law. It is the result of an action carried out by a superior which affects an inferior. In our passage, the superior is Israel's Suzerain God, the covenant ruler of Judah (Job 14:5; 23:14; Psalm 148:6; Ezekiel 16:27). The

decree is His verdict concerning Judah. God had determined to judge the people of Judah for their sins. He would carry out His judgment on them in due time.

But the day of judgment was not far away because *the day passes like the chaff* (vs 2).

The term *chaff* refers to the husk and stalk of threshed grain. At threshing time, the grain would be tossed into the air. The heavy seed/fruit would drop and the *chaff* would blow away and be gone. So it will be with the time remaining for Judah to repent; it will be a short time, then gone.

In the second line, Zephaniah called Judah to repent *before the burning anger of the LORD comes upon you* (vs 2). The *anger of the LORD* is His response to disobedience and sin (Deuteronomy 1:26-46; Joshua 7:1). Since God is God, and sin is behavior that violates God's character and standards, God's righteous nature requires that He be just, and judge sin.

But God is a loving God, slow to anger (Psalm 103:8). He desires all to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). The prophet Zephaniah urged the Judahites to repent so that God might spare them from His wrath.

In the third line, Zephaniah repeated the same thought concerning the *LORD's anger* but intensified it by adding the word *day*, which refers to the time of God's judgment. He commanded the people to repent *before the day of the LORD's anger comes upon you* (vs 2). God had appointed a time to judge the people of Judah for their wickedness and rebellion. He had told them to obey His covenant stipulations to live long and prosper in the land of Canaan (Deuteronomy 8:1). However, the Judahites refused to obey the voice of the LORD. Therefore, He was about to judge them severely. Although God specifically stated that He would not relent from judging Judah because of the wickedness of King Manasseh, He relented from judging Judah when Josiah led a spiritual revival and the nation turned back to Him, perhaps in part as a result of Zephaniah's ministry (2 Kings 23:26; 2 Chronicles 34:33).

Nevertheless, amid the pronouncement of judgment, the prophet Zephaniah addressed those Judahites who desired to serve the LORD. He used the verb *seek* three times to emphasize the importance and urgency of the command. In the first instance, he said, *Seek the LORD, all you humble of the earth who have carried His ordinances* (vs 3).

Seeking is a conscious act with a specific goal in mind. It requires a lot of effort, as when someone searches for hidden treasures (Proverbs 2:4). In our context, the verb *seek* means to put forth effort to obey *the LORD*, to follow His *ordinances*. The term for *earth* in the phrase *humble of the earth* can be translated as "land." In this context it probably refers to the land of Judah. The phrase *humble of the earth* refers to those Judahites who desired to serve Yahweh and live for Him alone. It contrasts the nation that had "not sought the LORD or inquired of Him" (Zephaniah 1:6).

We can get a good idea what the Bible means by *humble* from this verse in Numbers:

"Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth."
(Numbers 12:3)

Moses was a bold, courageous leader who fearlessly spoke the truth in spite of potential danger to himself. And Moses was more humble than any other man. We can also gain insight from another verse from Deuteronomy. This is a verse Jesus quoted when resisting temptation. The context is God speaking to the second generation through Moses, just before they enter the Promised Land.

“[God] humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD.”
(Deuteronomy 8:3)

From these two instances, we can infer that *humility* is the willingness to see and engage with reality as it is. Since God is the essence of existence, and therefore reality, humility is seeking to see things from God’s perspective, because that is the perspective that is true and right.

God desired the Judahites to *seek* to hear the Lord, understand His ways, and believe that His ways are for their best. Thus they would be humble, because they would be living in and embracing reality.

In the second and third commands, the prophet continued his exhortation and said to the humble ones: *Seek righteousness, seek humility* (vs 3). It is interesting that God exhorts those who are *humble* to *seek humility*. This would tell us that humility is something that requires ongoing effort. It takes continual investment to see things from God’s perspective, to see and know what is real and true.

To *seek righteousness* means to do what is good and pleasing in God’s eyes. To do what is pleasing to God will also be seeking our own best interest (Deuteronomy 10:13). It is in our best interest to pursue treating others well; to love our neighbors as ourselves. Our natural bent is to exploit, rather than to love others. But when we love, we redeem our communities, create lasting bonds, and find true fulfillment.

To *seek humility* means to see things from God’s perspective. There are three choices each human is given to steward: who to trust, what perspective to choose, and what actions to take. All other things are outside our control. If we do not seek and discover reality, then we are doomed to live with a false perspective. This will inevitably lead to self-destruction.

The humble Judahites were exhorted to seek the LORD, their covenant God with genuine hearts, for doing so would lead to positive results. It is God’s desire to bless. But He has made it clear that the full experience of His blessing requires obedience to follow His ways.

Zephaniah concluded this section with the rationale for his call to the humble ones to seek the LORD. He introduced it with a term of hope, saying, *Perhaps you will be hidden in the day of the LORD’s anger* (vs 3).

The term *perhaps* makes clear that God is not manipulated; He is not transactional, like an idol. God decides what God does. And God cannot be held to a standard, because He is the ultimate

standard from which all standards are calibrated. But in this instance, the hope is simply that the humble may be *hidden in the day of the LORD's anger*. The hope is for deliverance for the individuals during a time when the entire nation is under severe judgement.

This follows a biblical principle that God often delivers the faithful from general judgement. Some notable examples are Noah, Lot, and Rahab (Genesis 6:8, 19:12-13; Joshua 6:17).

There is a different principle in this verse, which speaks of any land that has sinned and fallen under God's judgement:

“even though these three men, Noah, Daniel and Job were in its midst, by their own righteousness they could only deliver themselves,” declares the Lord GOD.”
(Ezekiel 14:14)

Zephaniah exhorts the godly to pray that they might be delivered.

We read in 2 Chronicles that in order for the nation to be spared, the people need to humble themselves. This was set forth by the LORD to Solomon regarding any time when the land has fallen under judgement, stating that if:

“My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”
(2 Chronicles 7:14)

However, God said He would relent from judging Sodom if there were just ten righteous men living there (Genesis 18:32-33). So there are no “magic words” by which we can manipulate God, like a genie in a bottle. But in all cases it is worthwhile for anyone and everyone to humble themselves before God, seek Him, and follow His ways.

The LORD might choose to spare those who sought *righteousness*. The verse indicates that it is a real possibility, but not a certainty. This possibility of relenting judgment for the righteous makes clear that the LORD's actions are not dependent upon anyone since He alone is God (Joel 2:14; Jonah 3:9). And knowing that the LORD is a merciful God, Zephaniah called the humble of the land to *seek humility* and *righteousness* so that they might find a hiding place and escape the coming destruction.

Amid the certainty of the LORD's judgment, there was a ray of hope for a remnant.

Biblical Text

**¹Gather yourselves together, yes, gather,
O nation without shame,
²Before the decree takes effect—
The day passes like the chaff—
Before the burning anger of the Lord comes upon you,**

Before the day of the Lord's anger comes upon you.

³Seek the Lord,

All you humble of the earth

Who have carried out His ordinances;

Seek righteousness, seek humility.

Perhaps you will be hidden

In the day of the Lord's anger.