

*Text of messages delivered by Aidan Wivell at Windsor Park Baptist Church on Sunday 10th August 2025.
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Zephaniah: I See Fire

Zephaniah sees the fire of God’s righteous anger which can either bring about humble repentance and purification, or prideful resistance and destruction. The condition of the heart determines the effect of the fire. Humility or pride. Pick your posture.

The dragon Smaug burst from the mountain into the night with his heart bent on destruction. Provoked to outrage he spewed the words: “I am fire, I am death”.

And then the credits rolled. And Hobbit fans were left to wait for part 3 of the movie. In the awe-struck silence, a haunting soundtrack rose, capturing the feeling of dread in the air. The song was called “I see fire” and Ed Sheeran had recorded it for director Peter Jackson specifically for this moment. He was a lifelong Hobbit fan, it was the first book he ever owned, and he knew what was coming. Fire.

Today we’re talking about someone else who saw fire coming: The prophet **Zephaniah**.

But first I want to introduce to you another character. A young Jewish boy called **Josiah**. When Josiah was eight-years-old, his dad died. And, the thing is, his dad had been the King of Judah. So, while still grieving the loss of his father, eight-year-old Josiah, was crowned the new King of Judah.

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And he inherited a pretty messed up nation. Judah was in a dire state, worshipping the gods of the nations around them, bowing down to any and all idols, in any and all places. I'm introducing you to primary school Josiah, because this boy-king was in charge when Zephaniah started seeing fire.

And as for Zephaniah, unlike some of the other prophets who came from humble beginnings, he had some status. Zeph was directly descended from King Hezekiah and he likely had access to the royal courts so he may have been a significant influence for a young Josiah trying to adjust to life on the throne. We'll revisit Josiah later.

Sound the Alarm

As you may have noticed if you've been tracking with our series on the Minor Prophets, one of their consistent functions is to announce the coming **judgement of God**. If you were interviewing for a job as prophet you might hear something like this:

"Well that's great we can see here you have excellent experience proclaiming hope, you have a track record of predicting events correctly – that's nice, but honestly it's not as central to the role as a lot of applicants think, you do have a heart for justice and a close relationship with God – that's just what we're after! ... There's just one more thing... Have you got what it takes to get up in front of your people, the nobodies, the elites, the king, your own friends and family, and tell them the fire of God's judgement is coming?"

Yeah I'm not sure I would have made it as a prophet!

Sounding the fire alarm was not the only thing prophets did but it was fundamental to the role. And it's the part we readers often struggle with the most. I don't think I'm the only one who prefers Chapter 3 verse 17:

***God will take great delight in you;
in his love he will no longer rebuke you,***

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but will rejoice over you with singing.

to verse 8:

***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.***

So, what are we to make of God's judgement as proclaimed consistently through the prophets?

Firstly it's important to say that all the talk about fire today is metaphorical. It's an image. The Bible consistently links heat and anger. So much so that when they wanted to say someone was angry, they said their nose burned hot! God is not literally coming like Smaug the dragon to spew fire over the whole earth. But, there is something in that image that conveys just how much God hates sin and injustice.

In his book titled *Lies my Preacher Told Me* Old Testament scholar Brent Strawn unpacks biggest mistruths people come to the Old Testament with. One chapter is called "*The Old Testament God is mean... like really mean.*"

In this chapter he describes how divine judgement and wrath always go together. That is to say "*when God is angry, God is angry about something*" and when that something changes, God changes. "*When it comes to divine judgement and wrath, human change changes God.*"

This brings us to the purpose of prophetic warnings of God's judgement and wrath. It is to create a response. It is to beseech, to urge, to compel people to change! Imagine there was a fire in your office building or school and you are urgently shouting at those around you to evacuate – you're not

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telling them there's a fire so they know the pain that's coming but they can do nothing about it.
You're telling them so they can get out!

The chance to change is why the prophets preach.

The other thing we need to note about God's judgement is what it tells us about God. Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel wrote:

All prophecy is one great exclamation: God is not indifferent to evil! He is always concerned, He is personally affected by what man does to man. He is a God of pathos. This is one of the meanings of the anger of God: the end of indifference!

Strawn wonders if this is why we struggle so much with the judgement of God...

Perhaps we don't like divine judgment and wrath, wherever we find it in Scripture, because we are perfectly comfortable with injustice and sin, because we—unlike God—are indifferent to evil.

Now that's challenging.

So Zephaniah sees fire. He sounds the fire alarm. God's righteous judgement is coming. And God sends him to give the people time to pick their posture. Will their response be humble repentance or prideful resistance?

The condition of their hearts will determine the effect of the fire.

Let's now explore the contrast at the heart of the book of Zephaniah, between pride and humility, and then we'll catch up with boy-King Josiah at the end.

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The Great Sin

Right in the crosshairs of Zephaniah's prophetic message is the sin of **pride**. Pride has long been considered the great sin. Many notable theologians, from Augustine to Luther have taught that pride is the root of all evil. Even though no bible passage says this explicitly, a strong case can be made that all other sins flow from a position of pride. Pride is mutually incompatible with living as a Christian. Pride is not living like there is no God. It is living like we are god.

And it is pride that Judah and the nations around it are called out for through Zeph. We see this when he speaks against Ninevah, the pride of the Assyrian empire. Personifying the city as a woman with the words of chapter 2 verse 15:

This is the carefree city that lived in her safety.

She said to herself,

"I am, and there is none besides me."

That is the sin of pride wrought large. ***"I am – and there is none besides me."*** Words that sound godlike, but which are boasted by those with temporary kingdoms. In our individualistic society, we might not relate to those words as a nation, but how much of our time and energies do we spend living as though "there is none besides me"? Or maybe none but me and my family or inner circle?

Another way pride plays out in Zephaniah is through **resistance to correction**. Speaking now to Judah chapter 3 verse 2 says: ***"She obeys no one, she accepts no correction."*** And then God says in verse 7 ***"Surely you will fear me and accept correction!"*** Sadly, they didn't.

You see prideful people don't make great learners. The surest way to stop learning is to become proud. And learning often means **facing hard truths about ourselves**.

In my early twenties I was a promising sports science student, I had a lot of things going my way. I was young. I was passionate. I played football at a decent level. I did well academically.

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My supervisor saw my potential but he could also see at least one growth area for me. One day during a supervision meeting he hit me with a hard truth. He said: “If you’re going to be taken seriously in strength and conditioning, you need to look like you know your way around a gym.”

At that time I was basically skin and bones. No muscle. I was at risk of blowing away in a strong wind. You could argue that it was inappropriate for a lecturer to speak to a student like that around something as sensitive as body image but we had a good relationship and I knew he wanted the best for me. Even so his words hurt, to the point I still remember that interaction so clearly.

But he was right. It humbled me. And it hurts to be humbled. But I had the choice whether to get defensive, make excuses, live in denial, or face the truth and do something about it.

This is a physical example of a deeper spiritual truth.

I’m sure we can all relate to the hurt of hearing hard truths about ourselves. They may have come from the mouths of friends, colleagues, spouses, children, parents, or leaders. Or they may have come directly off the pages of scripture or through the conviction of the Holy Spirit. Maybe it involved a combination of all of the above. When we learn to accept feedback, to take a deep breath, drop our defences, and say:

“You’re right.”

“I’m sorry.”

We learn humility.

Through Zephaniah God **contrasts the fate of the proud with the humble.**

I will remove from you

your arrogant boasters.

Never again will you be haughty

on my holy hill.

But I will leave within you

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the meek and humble. (3:11-12)

With this Zeph begins to paint his closing picture for us. A picture of hope for the humble.

Hope for the Humble

After the frightening image of God's fiery anger in chapter 3 verse 8 - remember that line:

***The whole world will be consumed
by the fire of my jealous anger.***

The next words are unexpected:

***Then I will purify the lips of the peoples,
that all of them may call on the name of the Lord
and serve him shoulder to shoulder. (3:9)***

I thought the whole world was going to be consumed in fire? Now it's sounding a lot more hopeful. What's going on here?

When we take these verses together, remembering that the prophets use apocalyptic language for effect, it appears that the end goal of the fire of God is **not annihilation** but **purification**.

To purify means to remove contaminants from something. Our kidneys function to purify our blood. Air purifiers improve air quality. When it comes to purification by fire, metals can be refined at high temperatures by separating out impurities.

God separates the proud from the humble. And he further purifies the humble as a speaks of a time to come when:

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The remnant of Israel

will trust in the name of the Lord.

They will do no wrong;

they will tell no lies.

A deceitful tongue

will not be found in their mouths.

They will eat and lie down

and no one will make them afraid. (3:13)

The same fire can bring either destruction or purification. The condition of the heart determines the effect of the fire. And God's not finished judging. This was not just a choice for those ancient near-east people *back then*, but it is a choice for us *today*. Scripture is very clear that Jesus will come again as judge.

Will we choose a posture of stubborn resistance?

Arms folded.

Heart hardened.

Mind closed.

Too cool, too clever, too strong, too successful – to need God.

Or will we adopt a posture of humble repentance?

On our knees.

Heart softened.

Defences lowered.

Too weak, too foolish, too broken, too tired – to save ourselves.

A Long-Lost Book and a Responsive Heart

Remember the boy-king Josiah? I said we'd get back to him! He had to make this choice as a young adult. When he was 26 he commissioned the repair of the temple. Amongst the relics too long gone faithful, they discovered a dusty old book. We call it Deuteronomy.

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And someone decided they better take this long-abandoned book back and read it to King Josiah.
Listen to his reaction from 2 Kings 22:11-13:

When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his robes. He gave these orders to Hilkiah the priest, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Akbor son of Micaiah, Shaphan the secretary and Asaiah the king's attendant: "Go and inquire of the Lord for me and for the people and for all Judah about what is written in this book that has been found. Great is the Lord's anger that burns against us because those who have gone before us have not obeyed the words of this book; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written there concerning us."

The king's inner circle consult the female prophet Huldah who says:

Tell the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the Lord, 'This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says concerning the words you heard: "Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the Lord when you heard what I have spoken against this place and its people ... and because you tore your robes and wept in my presence, I also have heard you, declares the Lord. Therefore I will gather you to your ancestors, and you will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring on this place."' So they took her answer back to the king. (2 Kings 22:18-20)

When confronted with Judah's fallenness, Josiah chose the posture of humble repentance. God sees and shields him from the coming judgement and uses him to lead widescale reforms in Judah.

What is our response when we are confronted with the hard truths of the gospel? Denial? Despair? Dismissal? Or humble repentance? There are both immediate and eternal consequences to our decision. Ultimately Jesus can only save us if we let him. If we submit to him as our Lord and saviour.

C.S. Lewis put it like this: *"There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, in the end, "Thy will be done."*

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I urge you, choose humility.

As Zephaniah shows us, God's judgement is real, but there is hope for the humble. Sure and certain hope because we have a God who is mighty to save. Hope of not just surviving but being delighted in by our Father.

This is the hope for the humble.

***The Lord your God is with you,
he is mighty to save.
He will take great delight in you;
in his love he will no longer rebuke you,
but will rejoice over you with singing. (3:17)***

Let's pray.

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These questions are intended to help you think more about this message. We hope they might enable conversation, encouraging you to wrestle with how God might be challenging us to apply what we have heard/read.

Reflecting on Sunday 10th August 2025: Last Sunday Mikayla highlighted how Habakkuk held tight to God in the wrestle of faith. What has caused you to wrestle with God this week? How have you stayed connected to Him?

Questions from this week's teaching:

1. **How do you personally respond to the idea of God's judgement?** Do you find it uncomfortable, motivating, confusing, hopeful—or something else? Why do you think that is?
2. **Christians have often understood pride to be the great sin.** Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. **Can you recall a time when someone spoke a hard truth to you that hurt—but helped you grow?** What made you able (or unable) to receive it humbly?
4. **Read 2 Kings 22. What stands out to you about this story?** Is there an area you have been convicted about recently? What would a posture of humble repentance look like?

If you'd like to chat with someone about your spiritual journey or anything else going on in your life, please contact us at care@windsorpark.org.nz; **we're better together and no perfect people are allowed.**

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Below are some further resources that may take the message further and deeper and enable you to explore other viewpoints on the same theme. We also encourage you to engage with the preacher if there are further questions you have or if you'd like clarification on anything. Email info@windsorpark.org.nz and we'll direct your query to the appropriate person.

1. The Bible Project has excellent videos on each Minor Prophet. You can watch **Zephaniah** to recap this week and explore **Malachi** ahead of Sunday 24 August.
<https://bibleproject.com/videos/zephaniah/>
<https://bibleproject.com/videos/malachi/>
2. **Brent Strawn's** *Lies My Preacher Told Me: An Honest Look at the Old Testament*. This fantastic, short, and accessible book unpacks common mistruths believed about the Old Testament.
https://www.amazon.com.au/dp/0664265715?ref=mr_referred_us_au_nz
3. Windsor Park provides free access to **RightNow Media** who serve the global Christian church with a mission to provide high-quality, Bible-based video content for the purpose of discipling people on their faith journey. To access RightNow Media and to create a free login go to the Windsor Park website here, <https://windsorpark.org.nz/resources>, and scroll down to the bottom. When you have a login, you'll see a curated library called **Prophetic Words: Ancient Voices, Modern Hope** with several resources you may want to browse.