

Zephaniah

Introduction – Switcheroos

a change, reversal, or exchange, especially a surprising or deceptive one. (Merriam-Webster)

We Need A Map For This – Look Around

“⁶ The land by the sea will become pastures having wells for shepherds and pens for flocks. ⁷ That land will belong to the remnant of the people 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.” (Zephaniah 2:6-7). (Philistia)

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.” (v. 9 Moab & Ammon)

“You Cushites, too, will be slain by my sword.” (v 12 Cush/Kush)

“I am the one! And there is none besides me.” (v15) Assyria

The Switcheroo – It’s You!

¹ Woe to the city of oppressors, rebellious and defiled! ² She obeys no one, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the Lord, she does not draw near to her God. (Zephaniah 3:1-2)

² For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

³ “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ⁴ How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? (Matthew 7:2-4)

The Surrounding Countries in the Time of COVID-19

Conclusion – Two Things (Recognize & Respond)

1st Recognize Our Plank

“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ (Luke 18:13)

2nd Respond in Grace

Zephaniah 2:4-3:8

Philistia

⁴Gaza will be abandoned and Ashkelon left in ruins. At midday Ashdod will be emptied and Ekron uprooted. ⁵Woe to you who live by the sea, you Kerethite people; the word of the LORD is against you, Canaan, land of the Philistines. He says, "I will destroy you, and none will be left." ⁶The land by the sea will become pastures having wells for shepherds and pens for flocks. ⁷That land will belong to the remnant of the people 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.

Moab and Ammon

⁸"I have heard the insults of Moab and the taunts of the Ammonites, who insulted my people and made threats against their land. ⁹Therefore, 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." ¹⁰This is what they will get in return for their pride, for insulting and mocking the people of the LORD Almighty. ¹¹The LORD will be awesome to them when he destroys all the gods of the earth. Distant nations will bow down to him, all of them in their own lands.

Cush

¹²"You Cushites, too, will be slain by my sword."

Assyria

¹³He will stretch out his hand against the north and destroy Assyria, leaving Nineveh utterly desolate and dry as the desert. ¹⁴Flocks and herds will lie down there, creatures of every kind. The desert owl and the screech owl will roost on her columns. Their hooting will echo through the windows, rubble will fill the doorways, the beams of cedar will be exposed. ¹⁵This is the city of revelry that lived in safety. She said to herself, "I am the one! 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.

Jerusalem

3 Woe to the city of oppressors, rebellious and defiled! ²She obeys no one, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the LORD, she does not draw near to her God. ³Her officials within her are roaring lions; her rulers are evening wolves, who leave nothing for the morning. ⁴Her prophets are unprincipled; they are treacherous people. Her priests profane the sanctuary and do violence to the law.

⁵The 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.

Jerusalem Remains Unrepentant

⁶"I have destroyed nations; their strongholds are demolished. I have left their streets deserted, with no one passing through. Their cities are laid waste; they are deserted and empty. ⁷Of Jerusalem I thought, 'Surely you will fear me and accept correction!' Then her place of refuge would not be destroyed, nor all my punishments come upon her. But they were still eager to act corruptly in all they did. ⁸Therefore 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.

Introduction – Switcheroos

I love movies, plays, and books that have some element of a switcheroo in them. Just in case you don't know what a switcheroo is I will define it for you. It is a

a change, reversal, or exchange, especially a surprising or deceptive one.¹
(Merriam-Webster)

It is the moment when you think you have the plot completely figured out and you are “tracking” with what the author is saying and suddenly a twist happens that makes you realize what you thought the author's point was is not actually what the point was at all. Several of Alfred Hitchcock's movies are great examples of this. Take his classic horror movie psycho. If you have ever watched the movie then you know that you spend 4/5sw of the movie moving toward a belief that Norman's mother is the villain of the movie only then to discover that it was a deranged Norman the entire time. By the way I don't think revealing the twist on a 60 year old movie counts as a spoiler so if you text me saying that I have ruined the movie for you then I am merely going to laugh and feel no sympathy for you.

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/switcheroo>

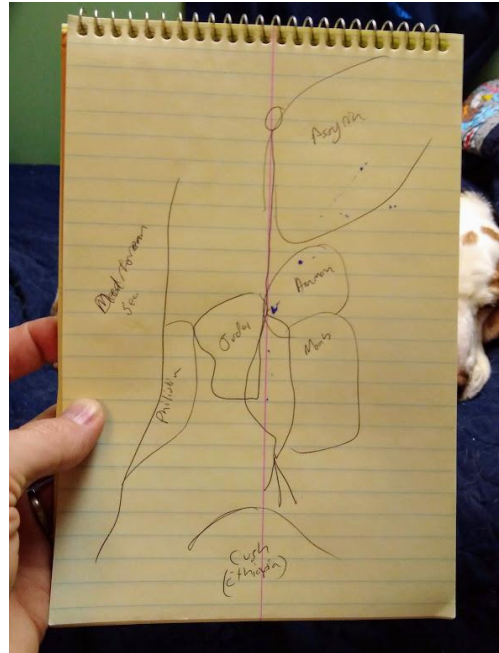
There are plenty of examples of switcheroos in the arts. From con-movies to thriller books. We love being tricked, well at least until the trick is to get us to rethink our presuppositions concerning our faith and position with God. At least in scripture it seems to be that people don't often respond well to switcheroos. For you see this tactic is used pretty often in scripture. Jesus used it very effectively in some of His parable of the Good Samaritan uses a little bit of this technique. "You want to know who is your neighbor? Let me tell you a story of being a good neighbor instead" If you look with clear eyes you will every now and then read something in scripture and do a spit take because you realize that the author of whatever you are reading lead his audience down one path only to suddenly switch it on them and make them look at themselves instead.

Today's passage uses some switcheroo to get the author's audience's attention. Let look at what Zephaniah wrote.

We Need A Map For This – Look Around

For this we are going to need a map of the Judah of the Ancient Near East in which Zephaniah was preaching. It doesn't have to be a great map so I am going to just draw a very basic map here so we can talk about it.

First let's draw out a rough outline of where Judah was in relation to a few landmarks. Here is the sea of Galilee the Jordan river and the Dead Sea. Next let's draw out the outline of the Great Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, and dead sea and its bays that form the Sinai Peninsula and the Nile River. Hopefully this is beginning to look like a terrain that you recognize as what we call the Middle East now and refer to as the Ancient Near East for that time period. Judah would have been located on the Eastern edge of the Dead sea and leading Southwest of it.



Now let's look at the people on who Zephaniah pronounces God's judgment. He begins with judgment against Philistia the land of the Philistines. You are possibly very familiar with the hatred between the Philistines and the people of God. After all it was from a battle with the Philistines that we have the story of David & Goliath. They would have been located between Judah and the Great Sea. God says to the Philistines by the sea:

"⁶ The land by the sea will become pastures having wells for shepherds and pens for flocks. ⁷ That land will belong to the remnant of the people 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." (Zephaniah 2:6-7). (Philistia)

Next comes Moab and Ammon declaring that because of the manner in which they have treated His people they will be as Sodom and Gomorrah. Ammon is going to be located on the Northeastern side of the Dead Sea and Moab would have been located on the Southeastern side of the Dead Sea. Both would have been neighbors across the sea from Judah.

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." (v. 9 Moab & Ammon)

Next is a judgment of just one line.

"You Cushites, too, will be slain by my sword." (v 12 Cush/Kush)

This is the region that we know as Ethiopia. So South of Judah located beneath and beside Egypt.

The next in line is the great empire of Assyria. A kingdom that said to herself

"I am the one! And there is none besides me." (v15) Assyria

She will be reduced to ruin because of the manner in which she has treated the peoples of the world.

If we were meeting together now is the time that I would ask if there is anything that stands out to you about the position of these nations. Since we aren't together I will fill in for you and just go ahead and say what I believe stands out. The prophet has just declared God's judgment upon the nations surrounding Judah and as we are about to discover it is a trick.

The Switcheroo – It's You!

I can only imagine how the people would have been responding to Zephaniah's message at this point. I suspect that they excitement had built up. Of course, God was going to judge their nations around them. Obviously, Judah was holy and they were evil. They deserve judgment and it is about time that God is getting to it and enacting the punishment on them that these surrounding nations so richly deserve. I picture them beginning to smile and cheer as they hear and read all this condemnation of evil going on around them. That's when the switcheroo happens because all that has been happening is that the prophet has just been lining up their attention for his real target.

And his real target is their own evil. Zephaniah writes the following:

¹Woe to the city of oppressors, rebellious and defiled! ²She obeys no one, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the Lord, she does not draw near to her God. (Zephaniah 3:1-2)

Who is the target he was aiming at. Oh just the city of oppressors who does not trust in the Lord. In other words, Jerusalem. This is the spit take moment of Zephaniah's prophecy. The entire time his audience thought he was just pointing out the evil of their neighbors, not realizing that he was using the evil that he recognizes in others to amplify their own evil. Their neighbors are bad but who is it that doesn't trust in the Lord? It is them. The neighbors have done evil but who fails to draw near to the Lord. It is her. They may have been surrounded by oppressors but the city of oppressors is Jerusalem herself.

In the church world this is the moment that you are sitting there thinking "so-so really needs to hear this message" and then you realize that the preacher just ended the message by saying he was talking about you the entire time. People love to think "someone else should hear this message". We avoid looking at our own sins because it takes courage to do so. It doesn't take courage to highlight someone else's sins. In fact, in our world it prompts us if we point out someone else's sins. "You aren't as holy or pure as I am" This isn't just a church thing. People all throughout the world do it. "I am more faithful to our cause than you are." We have these purity circles develops where the way you improve in standing is by others shrinking.

That is why it takes courage to look at our own sins. Courage always implies "in spite of". The soldier does her duty in spite of the physical danger she may face. The nurse does his duty in spite of the risk of the virus.

The world's economy is that whatever you have limits me, but God's economy isn't like that. That's why it is courageous to recognize our own sin and extend grace to the other. It is courageous to accept that in spite of how unacceptable we may feel God has accepted us and to recognize that the same is true for the other around us and treat them in that manner.

I think of this as similar to Jesus's statement regarding the planks in our own eyes. Let's look at that passage for a second.

²For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

³“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?”⁴How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? (Matthew 7:2-4)

In this passage Jesus talks about our tendency to judge others. If you are honest with yourself I believe you will recognize that many of us have a tendency to relish pointing in the evil and wrong that others do, all while turning a blind eye to our own wickedness and sin. “Can you believe they did that” or “I can’t believe they said that.” But noticed Jesus didn’t say that we shouldn’t judge evil or point out when others do wrong. He did it, but he did it with humility. There are times where we need to point out evil and sin. But we always have to do it with an extreme humility always worried about our own sin that seems to stand out as a 4x4” piece of lumber when compared in our own minds to the speck of dust that the other person’s sin. The problem is that we often overexaggerate both the other person’s sin and our own righteousness.

The Surrounding Countries in the Time of COVID-19

I feel like I have mentioned this but one of my greatest fears from our current crisis is a greater fear of the other. We already have this in our society. We have our groups that we belong to. Tribalism is rampant. We trust those who are like us, who hold roughly the same views as we do, live in the same neighborhoods, and eat the same food as we do. Obviously, those that are like us are right and those who are different from us aren’t just wrong but actually a threat. This is nothing new.

But our current crisis seems to not just be revealing the extreme hold that this view has in our lives but actually amplifying its affects. The views of the other person aren’t just annoying to us now but we view them as actually dangerous. We blame the danger of the virus not on the fact that it is a novel virus that our immune systems has no experience with and thus no ability to fight it, but instead the danger is the way other people live and think. Since they are the danger, we justify ourselves in the way we treat

them. We see the differences in people who live half a world away and the differences in people who live in our own neighborhoods as proof that they somehow are a threat. We cheer when someone points out the speck of wrong that another group has done because we have trained ourselves very effectively to carefully avoid the log of our own sin.

We do this same thing with those in our own house, though maybe not to the same extreme. We are obviously the one that is right and they are obviously the one that is wrong. “I put the fork in the dishwasher with the tongs facing down and obviously that is the correct manner, therefore you must be doing it wrong.” “What do you mean that you put the toilet paper roll in the dispenser with the paper coming off the bottom rather than the top?” Okay well maybe that one really is wrong.

The people of God were all for condemning the sin of those nations around them but they did not realize that God was concerned with their sin. Confronting their own sin was more difficult than condemning the sin of the people who lived near them.

Conclusion – Two Things (Recognize & Respond)

So what do we do with this? How do we respond to Zephaniah being God’s voice to condemn the evil of His own people when they wanted Him to just respond to the evil of their neighbors? I think we need to do two things:

1st Recognize Our Plank

I believe the first thing we need to do is to have a constant awareness of our own need of grace. I don’t mean by this that we beat ourselves up. That doesn’t glorify God. God forgives us our inequities and that forgiveness is more than enough for us. Yet still when we approach someone else when they have done wrong, and we do need to do this, we always need to approach them with the recognition that we too like the tax collector in Jesus’s example of prayer need to pray for God’s mercy.

"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' (Luke 18:13)

Again this doesn't mean that we don't reproach evil. There is genuine sin and injustice in the world that we should confront. To turn a blind eye to it would be wrong. Zephaniah pronounced judgment on the neighbors of Judah as well as Judah. We must always approach another's sin with the overwhelming knowledge of our own need of God's grace. A knowledge that causes our sin to look like a plank to us when compared to our neighbor's sin.

2nd Respond in Grace

Secondly I believe that we need to respond in grace and mercy both to our neighbor's sin and our own. We should give unmerited forgiveness to our neighbors and our ourselves, and we should forgo the punishment that both they and we deserve for our evil. In other words, we should respond as Christ does both to our neighbor and ourselves. I bring up ourselves here because in trying to extend grace to your neighbor you are probably going to find that it is difficult and you don't do a good job of it. As I mentioned earlier we tend to over exaggerate our neighbor's sin and our own righteousness. As messed up as this is we have had years of practice in it. We need God's grace to overcome this tendency. It is difficult for us to accept that God accepts us because deep down we know how unacceptable we are. Yet God's grace accepts us. When we can trust and accept that we no longer need to make ourselves less than for us to have value then we will no longer compare ourselves with others. Then we will view them as people whom God can and does accept too. We need God's grace to see our neighbor and ourselves as He sees them and us. The great news is that our God is a grace giving God.