

# OpenTheo

## September 17th: Zephaniah 2 & Matthew 13:24-43

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### Alastair Roberts

The Day of the Lord comes upon the nations. The Parable of the Tares.

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## Transcript

Zephaniah chapter 2. Zephaniah chapter 2. Zephaniah chapter 2. Zephaniah chapter 2. Zephaniah chapter 2. Zephaniah chapter 2. Zephaniah chapter 2. Zephaniah chapter 2. Zephaniah chapter 2. Zephaniah chapter 2. Zephaniah chapter 2. Zephaniah chapter 2. Zephaniah chapter 2. A lair for wild beasts. Everyone who passes by her hisses and shakes his fist. In Zephaniah chapter 1, the prophet announced the coming of the dread day of the Lord, an imminent disaster that would sweep away everything from the face of the earth.

World chapter 1 particularly focuses upon the impact of this event in Jerusalem. In chapter 2, the impact of the day of the Lord beyond Judah, the fact that it will be a more general judgment of the nations of the region, is made more apparent. Having declared the rapidly approaching destruction, in chapter 2 verses 1 to 3, the prophet exhorts the people to prepare for the Lord's advent, to batten down the hatches as it were, before the storm of divine wrath hits them.

The imagery of the opening verse of the chapter is variously understood. Commentators commonly understand it to be referring to some act of gathering, but doing so using

atypical terminology, rather than relating to a generic act of gathering. A specific sort of gathering might be in view here.

Jim Roberts is one of several commentators who argued that the terms used here present the gathering of the people under the image of the gathering of worthless stubble. As such stubble, the people cannot presume upon the Lord's concern for their preservation. Evildoers are elsewhere compared to chaff, who are removed by the Lord's judgment, most famously in Psalm 1 verses 4 to 6. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. The people of the land are marked for removal in the imminent judgment, and so they must prepare themselves for the Lord's advent with some urgency.

They are like stubble, chaff and straw, and the wrath of the Lord is approaching like a consuming fire. Their only hope lies in seeking the Lord and walking righteously before Him. Perhaps He will have some mercy upon them.

In the next chapter we are told of those who will be left standing after the judgment, in verses 12 and 13. But I will leave in your midst a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord, those who are left in Israel.

They shall do no injustice and speak no lies, nor shall there be found in their mouth a deceitful tongue. For they shall graze and lie down, and none shall make them afraid. However, as in the Passover in Egypt, the righteous are also under threat, unless they heed the Lord's warnings and take action in preparation.

As with Jesus' teaching concerning the poor in the Gospels, we should beware of over-spiritualizing the language here. While there is an appropriate posture of spiritual humility in poverty, such a posture is more easily cultivated and more readily found among those who are lacking in social standing and wealth. The judgment that we have read about so far is focused upon the wealthy and the powerful of the land, and anyone wanting to escape it would be much more likely to do so among the poor and humble.

Renz observes that the focus on those in the land might also present those to be spared the disaster as principally being those of the countryside, in contrast to the urban elites. We might think here, for instance, about the way that the poorest of the land were left after the Babylonian overthrow of Jerusalem under the short-lived rule of Gedaliah, enjoying peace and arguably improved circumstances for a period of time. We might see in this a temporary initial fulfillment of the Lord's promise.

In verse 4, the prominent cities of the Philistines are mentioned, ordered in a way that moves towards Jerusalem. The devastation about to fall will fall upon all of the lands. The

Hebrew of the text also plays upon the sounds of words like Gaza and Ekron in a manner similar to Micah's word plays using place names in Micah chapter 1 verses 10 to 15.

The use of descriptions of judgment in a manner that recalls the names of the places to be judged is a literary means of implying the fittingness of the judgments about to fall. The surprising thing here, however, is that Zephaniah does not pun as extensively as he could have done. Renz references an intriguing theory of Lawrence Zalcman that seeks to explain this.

Renz writes, and consigned to four of the most bitter fates a woman can endure, abandonment, spinsterhood, divorce and barrenness. With modification, this may well be plausible. Gaza will be like a betrothed or married woman abandoned by her man.

Ashkelon will be like a desolate wife following desertion by her husband. Ashdod will be driven out like a divorced woman. And Ekron will be like a barren woman.

What then might happen to the daughter of Zion is the unspoken question that motivates the call to seek Yahweh. How we regard the place of verse 4 within the division of the chapter is a question worth considering. Its introduction suggests a reference back to material that preceded it.

The cities aren't directly addressed as well. Perhaps the point is to describe the judgment about to fall upon the whole land as it approaches Jerusalem. Verse 5 begins a statement of woe and presumably a new section.

However, the fact that verse 4 also speaks about the judgment of the Lord falling upon nations beyond Judah might associate it with the material that follows. It would seem to function then as a sort of hinge verse connecting the two sections. Verses 5-15 speak of judgment about to fall on a number of nations.

Upon the Philistines in verses 5-7, continuing the judgment spoken of in verse 4. Moab and Ammon in verses 8-11. And Cush and Assyria in verses 12-15. Interestingly, there are no oracles against Edom or Egypt.

The Philistines inhabited the Mediterranean coast to Judah's west. Cherethites were formally mentioned in scripture as being represented among David's fighting men along with the Gittites and the Pelethites. The Pelethites possibly being another name for the Philistines.

It is likely that the Cherethites were a people associated with the Philistines. Given their coastal location, Philistia and its cities were of strategic significance and the Philistines were often vassals of or loyal to Egypt. The Philistines are here associated with the land of Canaan.

Canaan, of course, evokes the memories of the first conquest of the land, the division of

the land and as a name is also associated with merchants. The great cities of the Philistines would be devastated. The description of verse 6 suggests that there would be ruins, wilderness places in which shepherds could keep their flocks.

Throughout this chapter we see old urban ways of life collapsing and herdsmen and farmers coming up in their place. There will be a remnant of Judah that remains and they will use the land of the Philistines as pasture land. Next in line are Moab and Ammon, two nations towards the east of Judah.

Historically, these nations descended from Lot, so it seems appropriate that there is a reference to Sodom and Gomorrah here. Lot had been delivered from Sodom and yet the nations descending from him would suffer the fate of the cities of the plain. The Moabites and the Ammonites had boasted against the people of the Lord and in consequence they would be possessed as a people by the remnant of the house of Judah.

This would also serve as a judgment against false gods. The Cushites that are mentioned in verse 12 might be surprising. The Cushites were far away from Judah to the south of Egypt and did not seem to pose any threat to the land and had minimal involvement with it.

It is possible that this looks back in time to an event also mentioned in the book of Nahum to the overthrow of Thebes by the Assyrians in 663 BC. What had seemingly been a demonstration of the power of the Assyrians was really a demonstration of the power of the Lord and that power that Assyria claimed for itself would now be proved to be nothing when the Lord's hand turned against them. As foretold by the prophet Nahum, the Lord's judgment would come upon Assyria.

Nineveh, once a place of great buildings and a place of great canals and waterworks would be made like a dry waste. The destruction of Nineveh would occur in 612 BC at the hands of a Medo-Babylonian army. Where there had once been a great city, there would be ruins, occupied by the beasts of the desert.

A city and people marked out by their pride and their cruelty and brutality would be subject to the derision of people that it had once dominated. A question to consider, how many examples can you see in this chapter of the Lord bringing low the proud and raising up the humble? Matthew chapter 13 verses 24-43 So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds? He said to them, An enemy has done this.

So the servants said to him, Then do you want us to go and gather them? But he said, No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn. He put

another parable before them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field.

It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches. He told them another parable, The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three meshes of flour till it was all leavened. All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables.

Indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet, I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world. Then he left the crowds and went into the house, and his disciples came to him, saying, Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.

He answered, The one who sows the good seed is the son of man, the field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels.

Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all lawbreakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father. He who has ears, let him hear. Matthew 13 involves three cycles of parables, and in the centre section we have the parable of the wheat and the tares as the core parable.

There are common assumptions that these parables are timeless moral fables, or perhaps illustrations of what is true for people in the age of the church. But Jesus is speaking as one fulfilling the prophets, one in the line of the prophets, bringing their missions to a climax, and it's very difficult to understand what he's saying without taking that into account. The parables are primarily speaking to a first century context, to Israel's experience and situation.

Once again the parables here are about sowing and growing. The parable of the wheat and the tares is a parable also about harvest. Jesus has already spoken about the harvest at the end of chapter 9. Then he said to his disciples, The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few.

Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. And those themes of harvest are ones that continue throughout the chapters that follow. Jesus and his kingdom are initiating a time of division, of judgement, and Israel needs to be prepared for this.

They're going to have to be judged as a result of how they received Jesus himself and his messengers. We often think of Jesus as standing at the beginning of the parables, the one who sets things in motion that will continue for the period of the church age, finally coming to their conclusion in the second coming. But in most of the parables, the stories are coming to their climax in Christ.

Christ is the one who completes the ministry of the prophets. He's the one who comes as the son after the servants have been cruelly treated. In the context of these parables, Jesus refers to Psalm 78, the opening verses of that.

That psalm is a retelling of Israel's history, a telling of Israel's history as one of constant failure and rebellion and disobedience, leading up to the establishment of David as king. Jesus is revealing the hidden truth of Israel's history in his teaching. He's telling Israel's history in the form of these parables.

Now the seed is sown in the world, not just the land. I believe the seed being spoken of here is the diaspora, the scattering of Israel among the nations. The very etymology of the word diaspora involves the notion of sowing.

Israel is sown among the nations so that they might grow in these different parts of the world. Now we often think about the scattering of Israel purely in terms of judgment, but it wasn't just judgment. We can see in many cases that the Israelites were having influence, that they were gaining prominence and power and speaking for God in various parts of the world.

However, as faithful Israelites were growing up throughout the known world, so were unfaithful ones. It wasn't just Daniels and Esthers and figures like that. It was also unfaithful people, people who were causing trouble and causing the Gentiles to blaspheme the name of God.

Both seem to be thriving together, and prophets and angels might ask God, why isn't he separating them? Why isn't he removing these tares? However, now the field is white for harvest and the division is about to take place. The cities that Jesus and his disciples go through are being prepared to stand in the judgment, and it will be worse for those that reject Christ and his disciples than cities such as Sodom and Gomorrah or Tyre and Sidon. The kingdom then is bringing about a sifting process, the initiation of a process of separation.

In the parable of the mustard seed that follows, Jesus is once again working with Old Testament background and talking about the story of Israel. More particularly, he's working with the parable of Ezekiel in Ezekiel chapter 17. In that parable, there are two eagles representing Babylon and the Egyptians.

The Babylonian eagle snaps off part of this cedar tree, its topmost of its young twigs, and

carries it to a land of trade, sets it in a city of merchants, places it beside abundant waters, and it starts to sprout and become a low spreading vine. Its branches turn towards it and it becomes a prosperous vine. There is then another eagle that comes along representing Egypt, and that eagle causes the vine to move towards it and the vine withers as it does so.

God then declares that at the end, I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs, a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar, and under it will dwell every kind of bird.

In the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest, and all of the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord. I bring low the high tree and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I am the Lord, I have spoken, and I will do it.

Within that parable of Ezekiel we have many of the same themes. We have the idea of sowing, we have the idea of this tree that becomes great and prospers, and this tree compared with all the other trees, we have the elements of the birds coming to take rest in its branches and shade beneath it. Similar language is also found in the book of Daniel in reference to Nebuchadnezzar.

The tree is a symbol of a powerful empire or a ruler, one that provides refuge and strength for others. Nebuchadnezzar is symbolised in the vision. The tree grew and became strong and its top reached to heaven and it was visible to the end of the whole earth.

Its leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the heavens lived in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it. That tree will later be lopped down as God judges Nebuchadnezzar, but the symbolism is there again.

Further symbolism that might be in the background of this particular parable is found just two chapters earlier in the book of Daniel, where the stone that comes down grows into a mountain that fills the whole earth. Now while Jesus is using the background of Ezekiel, he does not mention a cedar tree. Rather he talks about a mustard seed, and a mustard seed that eventually grows into a tree and becomes larger than all the garden plants, and the birds of the air come and make their nests in its branches.

It's this great tree that stands out from the other trees. It's a very strange way to describe it, particularly since it defies all botanical reality. But that's because this isn't an illustration taken from nature.

It's playing off against the image of the cedar. The cedars like Babylon or the Romans or the Greeks stand out on this horizon. They're these vast trees, and yet Israel seems like this small, measly bush.

It's a mustard bush. It's not actually a tree at all. But yet what Jesus is saying is that it is a tree.

It's a great tree, great among all the other trees, and it is actually the central tree. It isn't great by nature. It has the smallest seed of all.

Also, not just the smallest seed of all, but naturally it just becomes a bush. But yet in God's kingdom, it is that great tree. It is the one that fulfills all these promises of this mountain that will fill the earth, of this tree that will give rest to birds in its branches.

What is happening with the mustard seed is not natural, but it is a sign of God's power and God's involvement. God is going to establish His kingdom through a mustard seed, not through the great cedars of the world. The parable of the leaven that follows works with very similar themes.

The leaven, which isn't the same as yeast, it's more like sourdough, is hidden in three measures of flour. Israel, as it's scattered throughout the world, as it's hidden among these different measures of flour, causes the nations to rise up like yeast has that effect in flour. Israel has been hidden among the nations by God, and this is part of God's purpose.

It is part of the means by which the kingdom is established. When Paul and others go on their missionary journeys throughout the world, everywhere they go, pretty much, there are synagogues. There are faithful Jews who are prepared to hear the message of the gospel.

This is part of how the early church develops. Maybe this is what's being referred to. But this isn't a dramatic process.

It's a gradual process. It isn't glorious. It uses leaven.

Leaven is something that has a lot of negative connotations in scripture. It might be seen as unclean, but yet this is the means by which God works. Not in a glorious, dramatic way, not through this great establishment of a kingdom on the front stage, but in very silent, hidden, imperceptible ways.

The work of the kingdom is going on in these different places. The parables of the mustard seed and of the leaven are twin parables. As we look through the gospels, we'll see several sets of twin parables, or even triplet parables.

These can be more readily understood when they're related to each other. They're



seldom identical twins, though. The point is not just to repeat what has already been said using a different illustration.

It's not what's going on. Rather, they represent different aspects of Israel's ministry in relationship to the nations. The parable of the mustard seed highlights the smallness of Israel relative to the nations.

The parable of the leaven represents the hiddenness of the work of the kingdom that's being carried out through them. Hiddenness is an important theme in these places. The work of the kingdom is marked by insignificant and inglorious origins.

Note that in the twinning, one parable involves a man sowing seed, and its counterpart involves a woman hiding leaven. Both involve an intentional action towards a goal with significant results, but imperceptible processes. And the fact that one involves a man and the other involves a woman suggests to me that we're supposed to see a marriage here.

Not a literal marriage between the two characters of the parables, but the parables themselves are, as it were, a married pair. And as you read them together, you'll understand them in ways that you would not if you read them separately. Matthew says that Jesus speaks in parables to fulfil the words found near the beginning of Psalm 78, which, as I've mentioned already, recounts Israel's history leading up to the establishment of the kingdom of David.

And as the son of David, he's doing the same thing in relationship to his own kingdom. Our section ends with Jesus explaining the parable of the weeds, or the parable of the wheat and the tares. And he does so by referring to a final judgement that's happening at the end of the age.

I believe as we go through the book of Matthew, it will become clear that the judgement in view is not the final judgement at the end of all things, but it's the judgement that's approaching at the end of that age, at the end of the age of the Old Covenant. As AD 70 and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem leads to the final hammer blow upon those who rejected Christ's ministry and that of his church. A question to consider.

The teaching of the parables is not exclusive to the situation of Israel in the first century and its identity. Rather, they speak to patterns of divine activity and work throughout history. How can we see in these parables the experience of the church?