



Zephaniah: The Day of the Lord
Week 9: Zephaniah 2:12-15
“I Am, and There Is No One Else”
Pastor Onan Coca June 28, 2026

[CALL TO HEAR]

[READ THE TEXT]

Zephaniah 2:12-15

12 You also, O Cushites, shall be slain by my sword.

13 And he will stretch out his hand against the north and destroy Assyria, and he will make Nineveh a desolation, a dry waste like the desert. 14 Herds shall lie down in her midst, all kinds of beasts; even the owl and the hedgehog shall lodge in her capitals; a voice shall hoot in the window; devastation will be on the threshold; for her cedar work will be laid bare.

15 This is the exultant city that lived securely, that said in her heart, “I am, and there is no one else.” What a desolation she has become, a lair for wild beasts! Everyone who passes by her hisses and shakes his fist.

“People of God, this is the Word of God!”

Congregation - “Thanks be to God!”

[PRAYER OF ENLIGHTENMENT]

Main Point: Only God Is the True “I Am.” Every Pretender Is a Fool.

1. **God’s Judgment Reaches Even Those Who Feel Distant and Secure (v. 12)**
2. **God Dismantles Whatever People Trust Most (vv. 13–14)**
3. **God Exposes and Judges the Ultimate Foolishness of Playing God (v. 15)**

Good morning and welcome to Highlands Community Church on the most wonderful day of the month, Potluck Day! We do love our potlucks here, as you can see by my chiseled physique.

If you’re visiting with us today, my name is Onan Coca, and I am one of the elders here, along with Pastors Jody May and Bill Alderson. The last month has been busy for us, as evidenced by the fact that y’all will have recently heard me preach three times by the time we finish today. We’ve had graduations, mission trips, vacations, the CAYA summer lunch program, a potluck today, and next week a July 4th bash! Summer has already been crazy, and we’re just getting started, but thank the Lord, we’re here to do this together.



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Well, today, we'll be in our 9th week walking through the book of Zephaniah, and we'll be concluding chapter 2 by talking about something that is relevant to each one of us.

A few weeks ago, Pastor Jody spoke of his childhood and his difficulties with being afraid of the dark. I think many of us can relate to that. I know I certainly can. As a kid, I struggled with a fear of the dark, too.

I can remember a small home that my family lived in when I was pre-school age. It had one bedroom, which my parents gave me, sacrificing by sleeping on a pullout couch in the living room!

But my fear of the dark was so intense that one of my first memories is of getting out of that bed in the middle of the night, walking into the living room where they were sleeping, and sliding myself under the sofa bed to sleep between the legs of the bed! My young mind said, I was far safer there, even though they were dead asleep, than I was in my warm, comfortable bed.

I know I'm not unique. Who hasn't ever gotten scared and pulled their covers over their head for protection? It's nonsense, of course, a little bit of fabric can't protect you, but we do it anyway, and somehow it comforts us.

We all do this in different ways as we get older, too. We build little forts around our lives, some of them physical, most of them mental or emotional, and we tell ourselves we're safe in there. We hide under the covers of our careers, our bank accounts, our politics, our online reputations, or our "I've got this under control" attitudes. And for a little while, it feels like it's working. But eventually the lights come on, the covers get pulled back, and we discover that what we trusted to protect us was never really protection at all.

That's exactly what we're going to see today as we finish chapter 2 of Zephaniah. Remember, over the past few weeks, the prophet has been walking us around the compass, showing us that the Day of the Lord is coming for everyone. We've already heard the word of the Lord against the proud Philistines to the west and the taunting nations of Moab and Ammon to the east.

Today, we turn south to the distant Cushite Empire, then north to the mighty Assyria and its capital city, Nineveh. You might remember Nineveh from the books of Jonah and Nahum. In each of these cases, God will expose the same deadly lie.

The lie that we can declare ourselves safe, secure, and ultimately in charge.



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This brings us to our main point this morning:

Main Point: Only God Is the True “I Am.” Every Pretender Is a Fool.

Let’s look at how Zephaniah develops this across these verses. First,

I. God’s Judgment Reaches Even Those Who Feel Distant and Secure (v. 12)

The first group we meet is the Cushites. Verse 12 says, **“You also, O Cushites, shall be slain by my sword.”**

Cush was located far to the south, in the region of modern Ethiopia and Sudan. These were not weak or insignificant people. They were powerful and wealthy. At times, they had even been a terror to Israel, which Scripture tells us about in 2 Chronicles chapter 14.

Listen to this and tell me the Cushites aren’t scary:

1 Chronicle 14:9-12

9 Zerah the Ethiopian came out against them with an army of a million men and 300 chariots... 11 And Asa cried to the Lord his God, “O Lord, there is none like you to help, between the mighty and the weak. Help us, O Lord our God, for we rely on you, and in your name we have come against this multitude...”

Thankfully, God did step in, but if anyone could have said, “We’re far enough away. The troubles happening up north won’t touch us,” it was the Cushites.

But God says, “You also... shall be slain by my sword.”

The “also” connects them to **every other nation** already under judgment. The words “my sword” are deeply personal. God is not distant or uninvolved. God is the one who brings the judgment.

We can see this universal reach of God’s judgment vividly pictured in Jeremiah 25. There, the Lord commands the prophet to take the “cup of the wine of wrath” from His hand and make all the nations drink it.

Look with me at Jeremiah **25:15-26**

“17 So I took the cup from the Lord’s hand, and made all the nations to whom the Lord sent me drink it: 18 Jerusalem and the cities of Judah... 19 Pharaoh king of Egypt, his servants, his officials, all his people, 20 and all the mixed tribes among them; all the kings of the land



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of Uz and all the kings of the land of the Philistines (Ashkelon, Gaza, Ekron, and the remnant of Ashdod); 21 Edom, Moab, and the sons of Ammon; 22 all the kings of Tyre, all the kings of Sidon, and the kings of the coastland across the sea; 23 Dedan, Tema, Buz, and all who cut the corners of their hair; 24 all the kings of Arabia and all the kings of the mixed tribes who dwell in the desert; 25 all the kings of Zimri, all the kings of Elam, and all the kings of Media; 26 all the kings of the north, far and near, one after another, **and all the kingdoms of the world that are on the face of the earth.** And after them the king of Babylon shall drink.”

No one escapes. Nobody gets a pass.

Jeremiah declares that the Lord will roar from on high, disaster will spread from nation to nation, and the slain will cover the earth from one end to the other (Jeremiah 25:30-33). The message is crystal clear: it doesn't matter how far away you are, how strong you think you are, or how secure you feel. When the Day of the Lord comes, no one is out of reach. God's judgment is unstoppable and all-encompassing.

Pride and self-confidence that ignore God always end in ruin. This is a recurring theme in Scripture.

Proverbs 16:18 says, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.”

And Proverbs 11:2 tells us, “When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom.”

The Cushites thought they were too far away to be touched. They were wrong. No one is out of reach of the Day of the Lord.

And family, we do the same thing, don't we?

We create our own versions of “safe distance.”

We convince ourselves we're safe because the paycheck keeps coming, the bills are paid, life feels stable, and we have an “I'm not like those people” attitude.

We assume tomorrow will arrive just like today, and that assumption becomes its own kind of idol.

We pull the covers of self-sufficiency over our heads and feel comforted for a moment. But it's the same nonsense as hiding under a sofa bed or pulling the sheets over our heads. A



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little bit of fabric, or a little bit of money, or a little bit of reputation, cannot protect us when the true Judge comes.

II. God Dismantles Whatever People Trust Most (vv. 13–14)

Cush was far away, but Assyria wasn't.

The prophet now turns our attention north, to a power that loomed much larger and much closer to home for God's people. Assyria was the empire everyone feared.

Verses 13 and 14 say, *13 And he will stretch out his hand against the north and destroy Assyria, and he will make Nineveh a desolation, a dry waste like the desert. 14 Herds shall lie down in her midst, all kinds of beasts; even the owl and the hedgehog shall lodge in her capitals; a voice shall hoot in the window; devastation will be on the threshold; for her cedar work will be laid bare.*

Assyria was the superpower of the ancient world at that time.

Nineveh, its capital, was legendary. It was massive, some estimates put the population well over 120,000, and its walls were so thick and high that three chariots could ride side by side on top of them. The city had beautiful palaces decorated with intricate reliefs depicting their conquests, advanced irrigation systems that turned the desert into farmland, and even a massive library holding thousands of clay tablets. They had conquered nation after nation. They seemed unstoppable.

Humanly speaking, the Assyrians had every reason to feel secure, just like verse 15 tells us.

But God says **He will stretch out His hand against** the north and destroy Assyria.

This isn't some distant threat or natural disaster. Nineveh wasn't unlucky. God did this. This is the language of direct, personal, sovereign action from the God who rules over all nations. And when He acts, the reversal is total and humiliating.

The once-glorious city becomes a dry waste like the desert. Where there used to be busy streets and bustling markets, now herds of animals lie down.

Wild beasts and birds move into the palaces and temples.

The fine cedar paneling, imported at huge expense from the forests of Lebanon to show off their wealth and permanence, gets stripped bare, left exposed to the weather.



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The sounds of commerce, of royal decrees, of celebration? Gone. Replaced by the lonely hoot of an owl in an empty window or the scurry of small creatures across deserted thresholds.

And this wasn't just poetry. It happened.

In 612 BC, a coalition of Babylonians and Medes attacked and destroyed Nineveh so thoroughly that the city's location was eventually lost to history. For over two thousand years, people walked over the ruins without knowing what lay beneath their feet. It wasn't until the mid-1800s that archaeologists began uncovering it again.

The nation that once terrified the world became so insignificant that people eventually forgot where it's capital was.

What's even more striking is that another prophet, Nahum, had already laid out in detail exactly how this would happen: the flooding of the river defenses, the breached walls, the plundering of the temples, and the scattering of the people.

God's word through Zephaniah and Nahum didn't just predict judgment in general terms. It named the city and described its end with precision.

Scripture keeps warning us about this kind of outcome.

Proverbs 14:1 says, “The wisest of women builds her house, but folly with her own hands tears it down.”

Proverbs 5:23 tells us the one who lacks discipline “will die for lack of discipline, and because of his great folly he will be led astray.”

And Jesus Himself gave us the picture of two builders in Matthew 7:24–27.

²⁴ “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

Assyria was built on sand. They refused to hear and obey the Word of God. They trusted in their own strength, their own wisdom, their own glory, and great was the fall of their city, their nation, their culture, and their people.



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We’re doing the same thing whenever we put our ultimate trust in anything other than God.

Our retirement accounts, our careers, our physical health, our technology, our political influence, or even our reputation in the community, these are modern versions of Nineveh’s massive walls and cedar-lined palaces. They look solid. They feel like they’ll last.

But it could all be gone in a moment. One diagnosis. One market crash. One unexpected turn of events. And what we thought was permanent is gone.

Proverbs 28:26 warns, “Whoever trusts in his own mind is a fool, but he who walks in wisdom will be delivered.”

Trusting in anything other than the Lord brings nothing but ruin and destruction in the end.

That brings us to the heart of what Zephaniah wants us to see.

If Cush shows us that no one is too far, and Assyria shows us that no one is too strong, then Nineveh reveals the deepest insanity of all: fools who think they can be God.

III. God Exposes and Judges the Ultimate Foolishness of Playing God (v. 15)

Look with me at verse 15, the heart of the matter:

15 This is the exultant city that lived securely, that said in her heart, “I am, and there is no one else.” What a desolation she has become, a lair for wild beasts! Everyone who passes by her hisses and shakes his fist.

This isn’t ordinary, everyday pride, the kind we all battle with to some degree. This is something darker. This is a nation, a city, a people saying in their heart the very words that belong to God alone: “I am, and there is no one else.”

In Isaiah 45 verses 5 and 6, God through the prophet Isaiah declares, “5 I am the Lord, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, 6 that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other.”

The true and exclusive right to this language belongs to the God who revealed His name in Exodus 3:14 to Moses at the burning bush: “**I AM WHO I AM.**”

In fact, throughout Scripture, our God says over and over again: “**I am the LORD, and there is no other.**”

It’s one of His favorite ways of reminding us of who He is.



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Nineveh was blasphemously copying the divine prerogative. They were claiming for themselves what only the Creator can say.

It's the same arrogant spirit we hear from Babylon in **Isaiah 14:13-14**. Listen to the pride of Babylon - **You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north; 14 I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.'**

But how did God respond to them? **Isaiah 14:12 and 15-16** **12 "How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low!... 15 But you are brought down to Sheol, to the far reaches of the pit. 16 Those who see you will stare at you and ponder over you..."**

It also reminds us of the prince of Tyre, who said of himself in **Ezekiel 28:2** **"I am a god, I sit in the seat of the gods..."**

But God replies in verse 6-10, **"Because you make your heart like the heart of a god... 10 You shall die the death of the uncircumcised by the hand of foreigners; for I have spoken, declares the Lord God."**

And where did this lie that so many seem to struggle with start? All the way back in the garden, in **Genesis 3:5** when the serpent whispered to Eve, "You will be like God."

That's the original temptation, not just to disobey, but to take God's place, to decide for ourselves what's true and good and right, to live as if we're the center of the universe.

Paul says in Romans 1 that **when people refuse to honor God as God**, they don't become wiser.

They become fools.

When people suppress the truth about God and refuse to honor Him as God, their thinking becomes futile and their foolish hearts are darkened. They trade the glory of the immortal God for images, or in our day, for carefully curated self-images. They become wise in their own eyes and fools before God.

Proverbs 1:7 says, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction."



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James, the half-brother of Jesus, adds in James chapter 1, that if we lack wisdom, we should ask God, who gives generously, but the fool refuses to ask and trusts in his own understanding instead.

The result for Nineveh wasn't empowerment or freedom. It was desolation.

The city that lived so securely became a haunted place where wild animals moved in, and former admirers hissed in contempt as they walked by. There is no pity in the end for those who try to declare themselves god.

We see the same pattern all around us today. People live as if they are the center of their own universe.

“I am who I say I am.”

“My truth is my truth.”

“I don't need God or anyone else to tell me how to live.”

It may sound like freedom, but it's the same old copycat lie dressed up in modern clothes.

Tragically, we're not just talking about ancient history. We're watching the same lie play out in our own culture.

I recently heard Canadian apologist Wes Huff on the Diary of a CEO podcast note how the postmodernists promised us that disconnecting from God and religion would make life better. We'd finally be freer, healthier, and more authentic. But the opposite has happened. As our society has embraced secularization and self-idolatry, declaring that “I am who I say I am” and that we don't need God to tell us how to live, we've grown weaker, sicker, and more insecure. The rise in anxiety and depression and loneliness and despair, especially among younger people, is the bitter fruit of that lie.

Those covers we keep pulling over our heads are not protecting us. They are leaving us exposed and empty.

Turn with me to **Luke 12:15-21**, where Jesus tells the parable of the rich fool.

15 And he said to them, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” 16 And he told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man produced plentifully, 17 and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ 18 And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.



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19 And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” 20 But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ 21 So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”

Notice what this man never does.

He never asks God what to do with the harvest. He never thanks God for the abundance. He talks to his own soul like it’s his to command: “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” But God interrupts the whole conversation: “Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”

See, every false “I am” eventually collides with the real I Am.

We spend our lives trying to convince ourselves we’re in control. The businessman discovers he wasn’t as indispensable as he thought. The politician discovers power doesn’t last. The athlete discovers that strength fades. The proud man discovers he can’t negotiate with death. Sooner or later, every pretender meets the King.

Some people spend years chasing the next promotion, the next raise, the next achievement. And when they get there, the satisfaction lasts about a week before they start looking for the next thing.

You probably know parents who pour everything into their children’s success as if that will finally bring the security they crave.

We Reformed Baptists aren’t immune to this. Sometimes we can begin trusting our confessions, our theology, or our works instead of Christ Himself. We know all the right answers, and we quietly begin finding our confidence in our performance rather than in His grace.

All of it is sand. When the storm comes, it can be washed away in a moment.

But here is the hope of the gospel, church.

There is one Person who has the right to say “I Am” without it being blasphemy.

Jesus Christ declared in **John 8:58**, right in the middle of a heated argument with the religious leaders, **“Before Abraham was, I am.”**



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He wasn't claiming to be like God. He was saying that He is God. He was deliberately claiming that same divine name revealed at the burning bush; the eternal, self-existent "I AM" in human flesh.

And what's truly amazing is that He didn't use that status to crush us the way our pride deserves.

Instead, Philippians 2 tells us that though He was in the form of God, He humbled Himself by taking the form of a servant and becoming obedient to the point of death on a cross.

He took the judgment that every copycat "I am" has coming. He was treated as the fool, the outcast, the one under God's curse, so that fools like us could be made wise in Him. He was cut off so we could be brought near.

Everyone who hides in Him by faith alone becomes part of the remnant God preserves by grace.

Zephaniah has been talking about this remnant throughout the book: those who seek the Lord, who humble themselves, who may yet be hidden in the day of His anger (Zephaniah 2:3).

Jesus is the true and better remnant, the faithful Israelite who perfectly trusted the Father even when it cost Him everything. And everyone who belongs to Him is safe. On the final Day of the Lord, those who are in Christ will not hear hissing and contempt. They will hear the voice of their Savior saying, **"Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master."**

He's the only "I Am" that can actually deliver on its promise. Because...

Main Point: Only God Is the True "I Am." Every Pretender Is a Fool.

Nineveh said in her heart, "I am, and there is no one else."

God answered, **"I AM WHO I AM, and there is no other."**

And two thousand years later, Jesus stood before the crowds and said, "Before Abraham was, I am."

Every pretender falls. Christ alone remains.



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[CALL TO OBEY]

So what do we do with this word this morning?

First, **Repent of every “I am” in your own life.**

Where have you quietly declared your autonomy with your identity, your security, your morality, your plans? Bring that darkness into the light and confess it to the Lord.

Second, **Stop building idols that cannot protect you.**

Whether it’s financial security, cultural approval, political power, or personal self-sufficiency, lay it down. It will not save you when the Day comes.

Third, **Run to Jesus, the true and only “I Am.”**

If you have never trusted Christ, today is the day. Don’t pull the covers over your head! They can’t hide you. Only Jesus can! Mercy is still available. Hide yourself in Him. Jesus bore the Day of Wrath in your place.

Fourth, **Live as the remnant.** Gather with God’s people. Seek the Lord in His Word and in prayer. Worship Him alone. And point the watching world to the only One who can truly say “I Am” and make good on it.

Church, the God who brought proud Nineveh to ruin is the same God who is mindful of His remnant. He has not forgotten you. In a world full of people shouting “I am,” we get to live with quiet, joyful confidence: He is the true “I Am,” and He is ours in Jesus Christ.

Main Point: Only God Is the True “I Am.” Every Pretender Is a Fool.

Let us pray.

[CLOSING PRAYER]

[COMMUNION]

[BENEDICTION]

[RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY]

Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible

John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*

O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*