

*Zephaniah, Haggai,
Malachi*

REFORMED EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY

A Series

Series Editors

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Testament Editors

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Daniel M. Doriani, New Testament

*Zephaniah,
Haggai,
Malachi*

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MATTHEW P. HARMON

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For Bob and Louise Schmidtberger:

Every pastor needs cheerleaders:
people who are unfailingly supportive, caring, and encouraging.
You have been that for us in Grove City. Thank you!

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

In every generation there is a fresh need for the faithful exposition of God's Word in the church. At the same time, the church must constantly do the work of theology: reflecting on the teaching of Scripture, confessing its doctrines of the Christian faith, and applying them to contemporary culture. We believe that these two tasks—the expositional and the theological—are interdependent. Our doctrine must derive from the biblical text, and our understanding of any particular passage of Scripture must arise from the doctrine taught in Scripture as a whole.

We further believe that these interdependent tasks of biblical exposition and theological reflection are best undertaken in the church, and most specifically in the pulpits of the church. This is all the more true since the study of Scripture properly results in doxology and praxis—that is, in praise to God and practical application in the lives of believers. In pursuit of these ends, we are pleased to present the Reformed Expository Commentary as a fresh exposition of Scripture for our generation in the church. We hope and pray that pastors, teachers, Bible study leaders, and many others will find this series to be a faithful, inspiring, and useful resource for the study of God's infallible, inerrant Word.

The Reformed Expository Commentary has four fundamental commitments. First, these commentaries aim to be *biblical*, presenting a comprehensive exposition characterized by careful attention to the details of the text. They are not exegetical commentaries—commenting word by word or even verse by verse—but integrated expositions of whole passages of Scripture. Each commentary will thus present a sequential, systematic treatment of an entire book of the Bible, passage by passage. Second, these commentaries are unashamedly *doctrinal*. We are committed to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Each volume will teach,

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promote, and defend the doctrines of the Reformed faith as they are found in the Bible. Third, these commentaries are *redemptive-historical* in their orientation. We believe in the unity of the Bible and its central message of salvation in Christ. We are thus committed to a Christ-centered view of the Old Testament, in which its characters, events, regulations, and institutions are properly understood as pointing us to Christ and his gospel as well as giving us examples to follow in living by faith. Fourth, these commentaries are *practical*, applying the text of Scripture to contemporary challenges of life—both public and private—with appropriate illustrations.

The contributors to the Reformed Expository Commentary are all pastor-scholars. As pastor, each author will first present his expositions in the pulpit ministry of his church. This means that these commentaries are rooted in the teaching of Scripture to real people in the church. While aiming to be scholarly, these expositions are not academic. Our intent is to be faithful, clear, and helpful to Christians who possess various levels of biblical and theological training—as should be true in any effective pulpit ministry. Inevitably this means that some issues of academic interest will not be covered. Nevertheless, we aim to achieve a responsible level of scholarship, seeking to promote and model this for pastors and other teachers in the church. Significant exegetical and theological difficulties, along with such historical and cultural background as is relevant to the text, will be treated with care.

We strive for a high standard of enduring excellence. This begins with the selection of the authors, all of whom have proved to be outstanding communicators of God's Word. But this pursuit of excellence is also reflected in a disciplined editorial process. Each volume is edited by both a series editor and a testament editor. The testament editors, Iain Duguid for the Old Testament and Daniel Doriani for the New Testament, are accomplished pastors and respected scholars who have taught at the seminary level. Their job is to ensure that each volume is sufficiently conversant with up-to-date scholarship and is faithful and accurate in its exposition of the text. As series editors, we oversee each volume to ensure its overall quality—including excellence of writing, soundness of teaching, and usefulness in application. Working together as an editorial team, along with the publisher, we are devoted to ensuring that these are the best commentaries that our gifted authors can provide, so that the church will be served with trustworthy and exemplary expositions of God's Word.

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It is our goal and prayer that the Reformed Expository Commentary will serve the church by renewing confidence in the clarity and power of Scripture and by upholding the great doctrinal heritage of the Reformed faith. We hope that pastors who read these commentaries will be encouraged in their own expository preaching ministry, which we believe to be the best and most biblical pattern for teaching God's Word in the church. We hope that lay teachers will find these commentaries among the most useful resources they rely on for understanding and presenting the text of the Bible. And we hope that the devotional quality of these studies of Scripture will instruct and inspire each Christian who reads them in joyful, obedient discipleship to Jesus Christ.

May the Lord bless all who read the Reformed Expository Commentary. We commit these volumes to the Lord Jesus Christ, praying that the Holy Spirit will use them for the instruction and edification of the church, with thanksgiving to God the Father for his unceasing faithfulness in building his church through the ministry of his Word.

Richard D. Phillips
Philip Graham Ryken
Series Editors

PREFACE

This volume represents in some respects a passing of the baton at Christ Presbyterian Church, Grove City, Pennsylvania. Having earlier collaborated on a series of sermons on Joseph, Matt and I had the delight of preaching through Malachi together; the material on Zephaniah and Haggai is mine alone. It is a great blessing to work with like-minded colleagues who can share the challenges and burdens of pastoral ministry, and I am deeply thankful to Matt for his partnership in the gospel. Now I have relocated to Philadelphia and engaged in another church plant, while Matt remains in Grove City along with a new colleague, Jonathan Kuciemba. I am glad to be able to leave the flock in such safe hands.

There is much that we miss about our time in Grove City. It was a wonderful opportunity to preach week after week to enthusiastic college students, along with a steady core of more mature faces. I would like to thank the congregation of Christ Presbyterian Church, Grove City, for being such an encouraging and responsive group of listeners, eager not only to hear the Word but to put it into practice. It is a real blessing to continue to minister week after week at Christ Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, now to a slightly older community, but still seeking to connect the gospel with real life in new and fresh ways.

Many individuals within both congregations have encouraged us along the way. This book, however, is dedicated to our friends Bob and Louise Schmidtberger, who have made it their mission in life to love God and his people. Bob's quiet pastoral care for individuals meant that he would often bring to my attention those in need of a word of encouragement. Of course, he had himself already spoken to them and prayed for and with them. Once a shepherd, always a shepherd. Equally, Louise shared in the task of loving people (no matter how hard those people were to love), and through her amazing gift of hospitality continually fed us with wonderful fare. Ireland

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never tasted so good. Throughout many intense trials, they both exhibited grace, patience, and cheerful steadfastness. Bob and Louise, the kingdom of God has been a profoundly better place for your presence in it.

I would also like to thank those who have contributed to the production of this volume: Phil Ryken and Dan Doriani read the manuscript carefully and corrected many mistakes, while Amanda Martin, Andrew Buss, and John Hughes, along with the whole team at P&R, skillfully brought it into its finished form.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Barb, for her irreplaceable role in enabling me to do what I do. She works incredibly hard behind the scenes in our church, often without nearly enough recognition for her contributions—sadly, even from me. Barb, I count myself richly blessed to be married to a woman who understands grace so deeply and who continues to extend it freely to someone as needy of it as I am.

Iain Duguid

1

INTRODUCTION TO ZEPHANIAH, HAGGAI, AND MALACHI

The books of Zephaniah, Haggai, and Malachi are not typically high on most readers' lists of favorite books of the Bible. They are tucked away in our translations in a section unpromisingly titled "Minor Prophets," and it is easy to miss them when skimming through the pages of the Old Testament. Yet these books too are part of God's inspired Word, written down for our instruction, reproof, encouragement, and training in righteousness (see 2 Tim. 3:16). Studying and preaching from them is all the more important, since many Bible readers will not have encountered them before, except perhaps for an occasional sermon on stewardship from Malachi 3. These books that come to us from the latter part of the period of the history of God's Old Testament people speak to us of judgment and hope, of challenge and blessing, and will point us again and again to the sufferings of Christ and the anticipated glories that will follow, just as Luke 24 told us.

THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH

Author and Date

We know very little about Zephaniah's personal story. Based on his genealogy, some have speculated that he had African blood because of his father's name, "Cushi," or that he was of royal descent, since the last name in the genealogy is "Hezekiah," the great-grandfather of then-reigning King Hezekiah (Zeph. 1:1). Neither of these claims is certain. Apart from the Cush

Introduction to Zephaniah, Haggai, and Malachi

in Upper Egypt, there is also a Cush within the borders of Canaan, while “Cushi” and “Hezekiah” were both common personal names in the West Semitic context.¹ Both are plausible, however, given the brief mention of Cush (2:12) that certainly refers to Southern Egypt and the fact that the prophet seems intimately familiar with the goings-on in the upper echelons of society. Either of these alternatives might explain the unusually long four-generation genealogy that is given at his introduction.

Zephaniah lived and ministered during the reign of King Josiah of Judah, who ruled from 640 to 609 B.C. King Josiah was a reforming king, but he inherited a nation in a spiritually dangerous state. His grandfather, Manasseh, and his father, Amon, had both led the people astray. Manasseh had installed pagan altars in the Lord’s temple and encouraged worship of pagan deities at the high places throughout the land (2 Kings 21:1–7). Amon had followed in his father’s unspiritual ways during his short reign of two years (2 Kings 21:19–22). Josiah came to the throne while he was still only a child, but from the beginning he pursued a different path, seeking to cleanse the land of the pagan abominations (2 Chron. 34:5–7). In the eighteenth year of his reign, he restored the temple in Jerusalem. During the renovation work, the high priest Hilkiyah found the book of the law in the temple (2 Kings 22:8). This document seems to have included the book of Deuteronomy, since Josiah’s reforms proceeded along the lines of that ancient work. It is a mark of the poor state of spiritual affairs in Judah during Josiah’s reign, however, that such a crucial book could be so little known as to need to be rediscovered.

Nor did Josiah’s reform last. After his death, many of his reforms were rolled back and Judah headed downward into a spiral of sin that culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. Zephaniah’s unheeded warnings (along with those of many other prophets) came home to roost.

It is not certain when during Josiah’s reign Zephaniah prophesied. Commentators are divided about whether his ministry predated or followed the discovery of the book of the law in the temple in 622 B.C. At times, his language seems to be influenced by the book of Deuteronomy, which might argue for a later date, though the description of the state of affairs in Judah seems more apt to describe the earlier situation. Zephaniah 1:8–9 in particular seems to describe a situation in which members of the royal

1. See Ehud Ben Zvi, *A Historical Critical Study of the Book of Zephaniah*, BZAW 198 (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1991), 42–51.

family are behaving with unchecked license. His ministry presumably predated the fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C., which is still future in the book, but we cannot be more precise than locating it somewhere in the second half of the seventh century B.C.

Themes

The book of Zephaniah focuses on the imminent judgment of God both on Judah (Zeph. 1:2–18; 3:1–8) and on the surrounding nations (2:4–15) because of their sins, which include pride, idolatry, and oppression of the poor. These anticipated judgments were fulfilled in history in the latter part of the seventh and the early sixth century B.C., as the power of Assyria was swept away and the Babylonians came to dominate the region. Yet Zephaniah insists that this change in geopolitical realities was not the result of the ascendancy of the Babylonian gods or a meaningless turn in the global wheel of fortune. Rather, it was a sovereign act of judgment on the part of the Lord, whose power extends over every people and nation. Thus, this historical event foreshadows the last and final judgment on the day of the Lord, when the Lord will bring all human beings to account.

At the same time, Zephaniah speaks words of hope and encouragement that flow from the reality of the Lord's sovereign power. If it is the Lord who is our Judge, then repentance is possible. If God's people repent and humble themselves, seeking the Lord's face, then a refuge may be found on the coming day of judgment (Zeph. 2:3). Indeed, the Lord's purpose is not to destroy all flesh but rather to transform the nations into his pure worshipers (3:9–10). A remnant will be found in Israel, too, who humble themselves and find refuge in the name of the Lord (3:12). The Lord who demonstrated himself mighty in judgment when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. will also demonstrate himself as mighty in salvation, redeeming a people over whom he will rejoice with singing (3:17).

In many ways, the message of this book summarizes the larger message of the Minor Prophets thus far.² It echoes the announcements of condemnation of God's rebellious people in Hosea, Joel, Amos, and Micah, while confirming the Lord's judgment on those who plundered them, a key theme of Obadiah, Nahum, and Habakkuk. Yet it also points forward to the coming of Christ.

2. See Julia M. O'Brien, "Nahum-Habakkuk-Zephaniah: Reading the 'Former Prophets' in the Persian Period," *Interpretation* 61, 2 (2007): 177.

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Repentance and humility by themselves cannot atone for sins committed against God's holiness. Nor can Israel simply turn over a new leaf and choose to become holy. That much became crystal clear with the failure of Josiah's attempts at reform. As soon as the noble king died, Judah went back to her old ways with a vengeance.

If the Lord were to have a people over whom he could rejoice, he would need to provide them with a refuge against his own wrath, along with a righteousness that was not their own. He did this through sending his own Son, first to live the life of holiness that none of us could live. Jesus did not give his heart to idols, or rob the poor, or serve his own self-interests. Instead, he poured out his life in perfect love to God and to his neighbor. He truly sought the Lord in humility all the days of his life. And then he subjected himself willingly to the ultimate "day of wrath" on the cross, when all of God's righteous anger against the sin of his people was poured out on him. As a result, all those who humble themselves and seek refuge in Christ are eternally safe against the wrath to come. We can never be forsaken or put to shame: we are the Lord's redeemed people, over whom he delights with singing. This rescued community is now drawn not merely from Judah or Israel but from every tribe, nation, and language, a new redeemed humanity cleansed by Christ's blood.

Structure

- 1:1 Superscription
- 1:2–2:3 Judgment and the Need for Repentance
 - 1:2–3 Global Judgment
 - 1:4–13 Judgment on Judah
 - 1:14–18 Global Judgment
 - 2:1–3 A Call to Repentance
- 2:4–15 Judgment against Judah's Neighbors
 - 2:4–7 The Philistines (West)
 - 2:8–11 Moab and Ammon (East)
 - 2:12–15 Cush and Assyria (South and North)
- 3:1–20 Judgment and the Promise of Restoration
 - 3:1–8 Further Judgment on Judah and the World
 - 3:9–13 Promises of a Purified Remnant
 - 3:14–17 Rejoicing in Salvation
 - 3:18–20 Promises of Restoration and Deliverance

THE BOOK OF HAGGAI

Author and Date

Haggai prophesied alongside the prophet Zechariah to restore the faith of those who had returned from exile in Babylon. After Jerusalem's destruction in 586 B.C., most of the city's remaining inhabitants were taken into captivity in Babylon, where they were permitted to live in their own communities, retaining their ethnic identity. When the Babylonian Empire fell to the Persians in 539 B.C., the Persian emperor Cyrus encouraged many ethnic groups to return home and rebuild their national sanctuaries.³ The Jews were among these peoples, and a significant population returned immediately to Jerusalem, recognizing in this provision the fulfillment of divine prophecy. They began work on rebuilding the temple immediately, but they faced significant opposition right from the start, and work on the temple building was soon halted (see Ezra 4).

Meanwhile, the Persian Empire experienced political upheaval of its own. Cyrus was killed during a military campaign on the eastern frontier in 530 B.C., to be replaced by his son, Cambyses. In 522 B.C., a man named Gaumata led a coup attempt while Cambyses was away fighting in Egypt. When Cambyses died on the journey home, his place was taken by one of his generals, Darius, who successfully put down the coup and gained control of the empire. Haggai's prophecies were delivered around 520 B.C., while Darius was consolidating his power.

Themes

The rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem is the central theme in the book of Haggai (Hag. 1:8). Since the temple had been destroyed along with Jerusalem because of the people's sin, marking God's abandonment of his city, its rebuilding was a key mark of the Lord's blessing and presence with his people. Though life was hard in those days for those who had returned, they needed to reorder their priorities and invest their efforts and resources in building the Lord's house (1:2–5). God's renewed presence in their midst would result in renewed blessings in the present, in line with the promises

3. See the Cyrus Cylinder in James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 315–16.

Introduction to Zephaniah, Haggai, and Malachi

of the Sinai covenant (2:15–19). Yet their eyes should also be looking forward to a greater transformation that was yet to come, of which the present transformation under the leadership of Governor Zerubbabel was only a sign (2:21–23). His presence, as a son of David leading the people in obedience to the Lord, was a sign of the future fulfillment of God’s covenant with David, which promised an enduring and righteous king from that line.

Both the temple and Zerubbabel point forward to the coming of Christ. The temple was the visible symbol of Immanuel—God dwelling in the midst of his people—which finds its richest fulfillment in the person of Jesus, the eternal Word who took on flesh and “tabernacled” among us (John 1:14). Indeed, in the New Testament, Jesus himself is the new temple (John 2:19), as is his body, the church (Eph. 2:16–22). The message of this book for Christians, therefore, is not about reconstructing a building in Jerusalem but about building up the people of God. This is God’s work (Matt. 16:18), yet he invites us to join in it, through his Spirit (1 Cor. 3:10–17).

Jesus Christ is the faithful descendant of Zerubbabel (Matt. 1:12), in whom the cast-off status of the Davidic line is restored (Hag. 2:19–23; cf. Jer. 22:24–26). Jesus models perfect zeal to rebuild God’s house (John 2:17), a task that would cost him his life. It is through Christ’s death and resurrection that God’s eternal house is rebuilt.

Structure

1. The need to rebuild the temple (1:1–15).
2. The need to look forward to the Lord’s return (2:1–9).
3. The need to pursue holiness (2:10–19).
4. The reward for faithful obedience (2:20–23).

THE BOOK OF MALACHI

Author and Date

Unlike Zephaniah and Haggai, the book of Malachi lacks any date markers, so it is harder to identify its precise historical context. It is clear that the Jerusalem temple had been rebuilt and in operation for some time (Mal. 3:1–8) and that the Edomites had lost some of the land that they gained

during the sixth century B.C. The issues addressed in the book seem to have much in common with those that faced Ezra and Nehemiah during the middle of the fifth century B.C., which suggests a similar date. Evidently, the province of Judah was poor and struggling, with pressures to assimilate with the surrounding cultures through intermarriage. We know nothing about Malachi himself, not even whether “Malachi” (“My messenger”) was his given name or a pen name that described his calling.

Themes

The difficulty of everyday life in Malachi’s times led the people to doubt the Lord’s love for them (Mal. 1:2). This was the root of all their spiritual problems, so it is the one that Malachi addresses first. Flowing from their doubts about God’s love were a number of ways in which the priests and the people were flaunting God’s laws—for example, by making inadequate and unacceptable offerings that demonstrated a lack of love and respect for God as their Father and Master (1:6–8). For the same reason, they neglected their obligations to tithe their produce (3:8–10). They were also unfaithful in their relationships with one another, divorcing their (Judean) wives in pursuit of more advantageous matches with people from the surrounding nations (2:11–16). They believed that God had forgotten them and would not act to judge people—on the contrary, they claimed that he was blessing evildoers (2:17; 3:15).

Malachi addressed each of these issues in turn, citing a complaint by the people and then answering it. The Lord’s love for them was demonstrated in their very existence after the calamity of the exile: other nations were not restored when they fell (Mal. 1:2–5). God had chosen his people and would not abandon them, in spite of their long history of sin. The Lord was not distant and inattentive. On the contrary, he kept in his presence a book of remembrance of those who feared him (3:16). The messenger of the covenant would soon appear in the temple to initiate divine judgment on those who ignored or abandoned him (3:1). There would be blessings for those who kept the terms of the Sinai covenant (3:10). So while the people waited for the coming of Elijah to usher in the day of judgment and salvation, they must pursue godliness and righteousness and offer right sacrifices before the Lord (4:1–6).

Christians are part of the chosen people, elected by God before the foundation of the world, not because of our works but because of God’s grace

Introduction to Zephaniah, Haggai, and Malachi

(Eph. 1:4–6). Too often we doubt God’s gracious love, especially when life is hard, and we may fall into many different kinds of sin as a result. Yet we were chosen to be holy and blameless, so God confronts our sin in his Word and mercifully calls us to repent and seek forgiveness from him.

The ultimate answer for our sin is the coming of Christ, foreshadowed by a man dressed in Elijah’s trademark garments and pronouncing a similar message of fiery judgment (Mark 1:4–6). In the person of his Son, the Lord came to cleanse his temple, casting out the merchants and money-changers who had turned it into a den of thieves. But the ultimate cleansing of the temple came through the rending of Christ’s own body (John 2:19); by his taking the fire of judgment into himself, we are cleansed and refined and have our names written in the Lamb’s book of remembrance. We no longer need to fear the Lord’s coming but can look forward to it with confidence and joy as a day when our full and final healing will come (Mal. 4:2).

Structure

1. First dispute: The Lord’s love for Israel (1:1–5).
2. Second dispute: The importance of true worship (1:6–2:9).
 - a. The people’s defiled offerings (1:6–14).
 - b. The defiled priests (2:1–9).
3. Third dispute: The significance of covenantal unfaithfulness (2:10–16).
4. Fourth dispute: The inevitable coming of justice (2:17–3:5).
5. Fifth dispute: The proper response to the Lord’s faithfulness (3:6–12).
6. Sixth dispute: The reward for faithful service (3:13–4:6).

 *Zephaniah***HOPE THROUGH THE DARKNESS**

2

THE END IS NEAR

Zephaniah 1:1–2:3

Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, who do his just commands; seek righteousness; seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the LORD. (Zeph. 2:3)



he classic cartoon image of the Old Testament prophet is that of an old man with a long beard, walking around and crying out, “The end is near.” Apart from the fact that Zephaniah probably wasn’t that old, this depiction of the prophet’s task is not too far off the mark in his case. Zephaniah was called by God to deliver a stark message of imminent judgment to his contemporaries among the people of Judah, during the reign of King Josiah (640–609 B.C.). Fearsome judgment was coming soon upon Judah because of the many sins of God’s people. His society was out of step with the commandments of their God. The people urgently needed to be told to repent, while there was still time.

The ancient context of apostasy and renewal for God’s people into which the prophet spoke may seem distant from our own setting in the modern world. Yet the prophet’s fierce words still have relevance for us here and now because in the intervening centuries human beings have not significantly changed, and neither has God. The sins that Zephaniah recognized and confronted in his own situation are not simply ancient transgressions committed by other people in a distant place and time: they are the same sins that

The End Is Near

we commit and the sins of the communities in which we live. As a result, Zephaniah's words of condemnation and hope speak loudly to us as well.

A CRY FOR JUSTICE AND REPENTANCE

Zephaniah was an acute observer of the problems of his society. Under the inspiration of God, the prophet foresaw and proclaimed the inevitable consequences of the societal and religious abuses that he saw all around him. He recognized that evil cries out for justice, and that the time was drawing near when the Sovereign Lord, the God of Israel, would mete out a just punishment on Judah for the people's long history of sin.

Yet Zephaniah's prophecy also claims that the catastrophic events that he predicted—events that actually took place for Judah within fifty years of his prophecy—were not a unique outburst of divine wrath. Rather, the imminent destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in Zephaniah's day foreshadowed a much greater catastrophe that is yet to come, a day when every human being will finally have to give account to his or her Maker. According to Zephaniah, the day is coming when the end will be near for everyone, everywhere:

“I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD. “I will sweep away man and beast; I will sweep away the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, and the rubble with the wicked. I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD. (Zeph. 1:2–3)

On that final day, there will be a global calling to account of every evil word and every evil deed, a reckoning in which true justice for all sin will finally be rendered (Matt. 12:36–37; Rom. 2:5–10).

There is an impulse deep within every human heart that resonates with the prophet's concern, whether or not we believe in the God of the Bible. We are all faced with the fact that in this tragic world there is much unpunished evil that cries out for a just reckoning. Though people in our society may disagree about what exactly should be counted as evil, there is broad agreement among those of all religions or none that murder, genocide, and the abuse of the weak and helpless are deplorable. Moreover, almost everyone agrees that when a serious evil has been committed, someone ought to pay for it. That is why we have created international courts to judge war

crimes and other atrocities. On some level, we all want to see the day when justice will finally be done, when the evil and wicked finally receive their due punishment.

Zephaniah was not merely writing to condemn his hearers for their sins, however. Rather, he was urging them to flee from the wrath to come and find a safe refuge from the storm, while there was still time. Like a tornado warning, the prophet's stark message of the danger of impending death was not designed simply to terrify his hearers, but rather to save their lives. His message has been recorded in the Scriptures so that it may have the same impact on us as it was intended to have on his original hearers. If Zephaniah's tornado warning about the oncoming and imminent destructive storm of God's fierce wrath against human evil and sin is still in effect, then all of us had better heed it and seek shelter for ourselves while the opportunity exists. The day of the Lord is still a reality to be reckoned with.

In fact, Zephaniah himself explicitly makes clear the wider relevance of his words outside his own local context. Although his central message of judgment in this chapter is focused on the people of Judah, his opening salvo is much more widely framed. In Zephaniah 1:2–3 (quoted above), the Lord warns of a coming day when he will sweep away not only Judah but all mankind from the face of the earth (see 2 Peter 3:10–12). This coming judgment will be so cataclysmic and world-transforming that it includes not only all humanity but even the animals, the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea. If such a combination of the animals, the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea sounds familiar, it is because Zephaniah's words deliberately echo the book of Genesis (see Gen. 1:26; 9:2).¹ Creation itself will be reconfigured in the coming judgment, and the order that God set in place in the beginning will be upended, just as it was in the days of Noah. Likewise, at the end of Zephaniah 1, the prophet's focus once again zooms out from Judah to depict a worldwide scene of destruction that includes all the inhabitants of the earth, describing a time when the Lord will make a complete end of human existence because of the universal effects of sin. God's immediate judgment on Judah in history thus provides a microcosm and foreshadowing of his coming final judgment on all flesh, the ultimate "day of the Lord." As a result, what Zephaniah has to say to the people of

1. J. Alec Motyer, "Zephaniah," in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 3:911.

his own day speaks directly to us as part of wider humanity that still exists under God's wrath for our sin.

THE REASON FOR JUDGMENT

Judgment was coming upon Judah in Zephaniah's day because of the people's multiplied sin, which the prophet unpacks in two distinct dimensions: the religious and the social. He begins with a blast against pagan idolatry, which had taken deep root in Judah during the time of King Josiah's grandfather, Manasseh, and continued on largely unchecked during the brief reign of Manasseh's son, Amon (see 2 Kings 21). In Zephaniah 1:4–6, the prophet identifies three particular forms of idolatry that were prevalent: the worship of Baal, the worship of the stars, and the worship of Molech. Baal worship was practiced in the fertility cults that were native to the land that Israel conquered. With their promise of economic and personal prosperity, these were a continual temptation to Israel from the time of Joshua onward, and even affected the priesthood during Zephaniah's time (see Zeph. 1:4). These cults operated conveniently at the local high places distributed throughout the land and made few challenging moral demands on their adherents.

The worship of the heavenly hosts, on the other hand, seems to have been a newer form of apostasy, introduced into Judah in the days of Manasseh (2 Kings 21:3). It reflected the belief of many in that time that the stars and the planets held human destiny in their hands, and so their worship promised an effective means of bringing a chaotic world under control. Meanwhile, "Milcom" in Zephaniah 1:5 is probably a reference to the god Molech, whose name means "the King"² and whose service frequently involved the sacrifice of human children. This practice offered assured blessing for those who were willing to make a sufficiently radical commitment to the demands of their god. These three pagan cults are prominent in the description of Manasseh's reign in 2 Kings 21:3–6, just a few years before Zephaniah's ministry.³ The practice of "leap[ing] over the threshold" in Zephaniah 1:9 was another pagan superstition, perhaps connected to the idea that demons gathered around

2. The vocalization of Molech (rather than *melek*, "king") may represent a deliberate scribal change incorporating the vowels of the Hebrew word *bosheth* "shame." A similar shift may lie behind the representation of the Canaanite goddess Ashtart as *Ashtoreth* (for example, in 1 Kings 11:5). See John Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 128.

3. Adele Berlin, *Zephaniah*, Anchor Bible 25A (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 77.

doorways, while the reference to those who wear foreign attire (1:8) probably describes the special clothing associated with the priests of other religions.⁴

Of course, not everyone in Judah was an overt idolater, publicly given over to these foreign religions. While some had abandoned even the pretense of serving the Lord, as Zephaniah 1:6 makes clear, many other people thought they could combine devotion to these pagan cults and superstitions with bowing in worship to the Lord (1:5). It wasn't that they didn't believe in Israel's traditional god: they just wanted to add some other options and thus make sure that all their religious bases were covered.

Nor were Judah's sins merely of the religious variety: these were combined with widespread violence and oppression (Zeph. 1:9). Whom we worship has an inevitable impact on how we live. Many of those who were implicated in these sins held influential positions in society: they were officials and members of the royal family, as Zephaniah himself may perhaps have been. These people had acquired their power and wealth by filling the house of their master, the king, with ill-gotten gains. They had resources and influence, and they used them freely for their own benefit. As a result, they had prospered to the point at which they thought that they were well set, protected against every eventuality in life. They believed that with their wealth and connections they would be able to ride out any storm in their circumstances. What could possibly go wrong for such powerful people?

THE GOD OF JUSTICE

The problem for these prosperous and powerful sinners was that they hadn't reckoned with the Lord. They had complacently said in their hearts, "The LORD will not do good, nor will he do ill" (Zeph. 1:12). But they were wrong. After all, the Lord had done good to his people in the first place by bringing Israel into the land of promise. At the time of the conquest under Joshua, he gave them houses that they had not built and vineyards that they had not planted, as Deuteronomy 6:11 reminded them. But Deuteronomy 6 went on to warn them that if they forgot the Lord and went after other gods, his jealous anger would be ignited against them and they would be destroyed from the face of the earth (Deut. 6:12–14). The

4. O. Palmer Robertson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 276.

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Lord could and would take away the vineyards and houses that he had given them and hand them over to others to enjoy (compare Zeph. 1:13 with Deut. 28:30). This warning addressed the precise situation that was happening in Zephaniah's day: the people had abandoned their covenant God in favor of the idols of the nations around them. As a result, they would experience the curses of the covenant that the Lord had established with them at Mount Sinai (see Deut. 28). The Lord was about to light a lamp and search carefully for these evildoers, to make sure that no one was overlooked for judgment simply because he or she was hiding in some dark corner (Zeph. 1:12).

Far from the Lord's being a distant and inactive god, as Zephaniah's contemporaries so confidently asserted, he was about to come against them like a terrible storm, wreaking havoc in their midst (Zeph. 1:15–16). The commercial and residential centers of Jerusalem would be devastated, along with the surrounding hill country (1:10). The inhabitants of the city who were currently sighing with contentment would soon be silent with horror (1:7) and then would weep and wail in torment (1:10–11). The resources in which they had trusted, whether money (1:18) or military strength (the “mighty man,” 1:14; the fortified city and lofty battlements, 1:16), would prove empty on that day. Their trading partners (lit., “the people of Canaan,” 1:11) would be cut off. It would be a day of distress and anguish for everyone, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of clouds and thick darkness (1:15). This passage furnished the material for the appropriately fearsome *Dies Irae* (“Day of Wrath”) hymn in the old Latin Requiem Mass.

THE GOD OF HOPE

If we were to follow the chapter divisions in our Bibles, the message would be one of unmitigated gloom. Yet rhetorically, the passage continues on into the beginning of chapter 2 and turns from judgment to hope, at least for some of the people. To be sure, for a nation that has hitherto been unable to blush for shame, there is only one possible outcome of the day of the Lord's burning wrath. When the Lord tells the shameless nation⁵ to gather itself together (Zeph. 2:1), the Hebrew word used for “gather” specifically refers to gathering stubble to make a fire. Like chaff, which is the worthless by-product of the threshing process, the nation will be burned up in the face of the oncoming

5. Calling Israel a “nation” (*goy*) rather than a “people” (*am*) is often an implicit rebuke in the Prophets.

wildfire (2:1–2). Just as the Lord previously rooted out the people of Canaan,⁶ the pagan inhabitants of the land in Joshua’s day, so too he would root out the present occupants of the land because of their commensurable sins.

Yet there was still hope for those who would heed the prophet’s words and seek the Lord before that terrible day came. Those who served the Lord faithfully, who paid attention to the admonition of Micah 6:8 to do justly, to love covenant faithfulness (*hesed*), and to walk humbly with their God, might yet find in him a tornado shelter from the coming storm (Zeph. 2:3). There was a refuge in which the remnant might be hidden away safely on the day of the Lord’s fierce anger. Even in the utmost expression of his wrath, the Lord is not merely a God who judges sinners; he is also a God who saves and blesses those who seek him humbly in repentance.

The subsequent history of Judah bore out the truthfulness of Zephaniah’s prophecies. There was a short-lived reformation during the reign of Josiah, perhaps in part encouraged by these prophecies. But after Josiah’s untimely death in battle against the Egyptians at Megiddo in 609 B.C., the people resumed their idolatrous practices, with cataclysmic consequences. In 586 B.C., the Babylonian army came and destroyed Jerusalem after a lengthy and terrible siege, slaughtering many of its inhabitants and dragging most of the rest away to exile in Babylon.

THE REASON FOR OUR JUDGMENT

How does this fearsome and terrifying oracle about impending justice for Judah speak to us as modern people? To begin with, we are guilty of many of the same kinds of sins as Zephaniah’s hearers. We may not be actively and violently oppressing others in order to enrich ourselves, as the rich and powerful members of Zephaniah’s society were, but we have many of the same motivations in our hearts. We want to gain resources and power for ourselves, and we frequently don’t care how we come by them. We may not beat up and rob our neighbor, but we engage in business practices that are less than truthful and cheat our customers out of their due. By our halfhearted and careless attitudes, we defraud our employers out of the work that is

6. The word translated “Traders” in 1:11 reflects the unique form *‘am kena’an* (“people of Canaan”), which links Judah’s trading partners ominously with the previous inhabitants of the land. On this term, see Marvin Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 91–92.

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properly theirs. Many of us benefit from economic systems that are unjustly stacked in our favor, without asking too closely about the situation of the laborers and subsistence farmers who provide the cheap goods we enjoy. We put down our coworkers, friends, or family members verbally, or we gossip about them behind their backs in order to build ourselves up. Instead of giving our time and resources freely and generously to serve those who are in need, we hoard them up to spend on maximizing our own pleasures and reputations. Our houses are filled with material trophies that we have gained for ourselves, but they have often been acquired at the cost of other people. We live for things that will rust and dent and end up in the garbage, and we are willing to trample anyone who gets in the way of our desired acquisitions!

Those outward behaviors are secondary to—and flow from—the pervasive idolatry that fills our hearts. To be sure, we don't have little statues of Baal and Asherah on our mantelpieces. We don't bow down physically to the stars of heaven or literally offer our firstborn children in the fire to Molech. But the heart motivations that led ancient people to worship in those ways still remain within each of us.

For example, ancient people longed for fertility because they believed that it would bring them security and significance, and so they bowed to Baal and Asherah. For us, security and significance are wrapped up in money, or career success, or being part of the popular crowd, or a significant relationship. We believe that if we possess those things, we will be safe and our lives will matter. The sacrifices that these gods demand of us are that we put family and church in second place to our careers, or that we make moral compromises to get ahead or to make people like us. Sexual temptation continues to be a powerful drive for many of us: whether in literal or virtual forms, it promises satisfaction, or safety, or a distraction from the emptiness of the rest of our lives. The old gods still hold many of us in their grip.

Ancient people also made offerings to the stars because they believed that the stars controlled their destiny. In exactly the same way, we make offerings to the gods of academic success, or popularity, or cultural hipness, or financial security, or whatever else seems most likely to guarantee us a comfortable life that is under our control. We sign up for jobs that we don't like, enter unwise relationships, spend money that we don't have, and waste precious years of our lives because we desire power, comfort, or intimacy and we are willing to bow down and give ourselves to whatever seems most

likely to provide us with those things. We believe that if we are able to please our varied idols, then life will run more smoothly for us.

On occasion, ancient people even sacrificed their children in the fire to Molech (see Jer. 32:35). They gave the most precious thing that they possessed in order to get their god to do what they wanted, because they found themselves in a situation that was absolutely desperate. What would we be willing to give to achieve our goals if we became desperate enough? Some have given up their sexual purity because they were desperate to get into a relationship or to keep a relationship going. Some have quite literally sacrificed a child through having an abortion, to avoid the shame or other negative consequences of an unwanted pregnancy. If you have never personally found yourself in such a desperate situation, don't be too quick to judge others and assume that you could never do such a thing. We could all have easily gone down that road if our circumstances had been different and the Lord had left us to ourselves. Thankfully, there is forgiveness in Christ for that sin, just as there is for every other sin that we can possibly commit.

Others put off getting married and having children because those things would get in the way of reaching selfish goals, like buying a house or having a boat. Still others have children but constantly push them aside in pursuit of other things that they treasure as “more important,” whether it be their own comfort and enjoyment at home, the pursuit of significance and influence at work, or even the demands of ministry and the church. Alternatively, our lives may seem to revolve around our children, but we may actually simply be using our children as a means to reach the ends that we really desire: power, success, and comfort. We find our validation and meaning in life through our children's achievements. As a result, as long as our children are following our instructions, obeying us, and making us look like good parents, we treasure them, but the moment that they want to chart their own course in life, or they move away from us, or they stumble and make us look bad, we punish and reject them.

Just as in Zephaniah's day, there are many people in our culture who have given themselves over wholly to the pursuit of their idolatries. They make no pretense of trying to serve the God of the Bible. Yet many of us as Christians are also still deeply attached to our idols and seem convinced that we may keep hold of them alongside our devotion to the Lord. As James tells us in his epistle, our varied sinful behaviors flow out of hearts that want sinful things (see James 4:1–3). Once we recognize this, we can see that we

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are not so different from the ancient inhabitants of Judah. We too act as if the living God did nothing for good or ill in this world (Zeph. 1:12), while attributing ultimate significance to our imagined gods. The idols may have changed their shape, but the impulse from which idolatry flows is as powerful as ever. If we peel away the clothing of respectability behind which we conceal the messy reality of our hearts, we are all condemned as idolaters.

THE WRATH OF GOD

The reality of our sin and idolatry may not be news to most of us. We freely and rightly acknowledge that we are sinners in a general sort of way. Yet we often casually talk about our sin in the same way that we may joke about being a few pounds overweight or not having studied properly for a quiz. The ease with which we often dismiss the significance of our idolatry demonstrates that, like Zephaniah's hearers, many of us functionally believe in a god who will not act for good or ill. But Zephaniah warns us that this reality is desperately serious. Our God is a fiercely jealous God (Zeph. 1:18) who will not share our affections with another. His wrath still burns against idolatry and against those who practice it. In the ancient context, the idolatrous practices of Judah led directly to its destruction in the days of Nebuchadnezzar. The city of Jerusalem was quite literally destroyed by fire, and its inhabitants were slaughtered, young and old, at the hands of a merciless foe (see 2 Kings 25). As Zephaniah spoke, the time was drawing near for God's judgment on their sin to be poured out. The fierce thunderclouds of his wrath were gathering on the horizon. It was a terrifying prospect.

Nor is this simply an antiquated view of God. It is not as if the Old Testament is full of fire and brimstone, while the New Testament shows us a kinder, gentler God. Not at all. In Ephesians 5, Paul says:

For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. (Eph. 5:5–6)

Paul says that “because of these things”—that is, because of the idolatry that is expressed in our sexual immorality, in our driven pursuit of performance, and in our coveting what other people have—“the wrath of God

comes upon the sons of disobedience.” There is a day of judgment still to come—a day on which the wrath of God will be displayed and vindicated. God is still the Judge of all the earth, and a day is coming when his perfect justice will be satisfied.

THE MERCY OF GOD

If Zephaniah’s description of reality is accurate, how can there be any hope? If we who are Christians are all at heart idolaters, as his original hearers were, how shall we escape the great and dreadful outpouring of God’s wrath? The answer is that even in the Old Testament there was hope for repentant idolaters (see Zeph. 2:1–3). There was a refuge available to all those who would humble themselves, turn, and seek the Lord (2:3). There would be a future of hope for a remnant of God’s people beyond the destruction of Jerusalem. The people who heard Zephaniah’s terrifying prophecy about the city’s destruction could also remember Isaiah’s comforting words about its future restoration—words that looked forward to a day when Jerusalem’s hard service would be over, when the people’s iniquity would be pardoned and their sins paid for in full (see Isa. 40). That hopeful future was possible for Israel because of the coming servant of the Lord, whose fearful sufferings would finally pay for Israel’s sins (see Isa. 53). He would take the place of Israel under God’s wrath, despised and rejected by men, afflicted beyond recognition, and thereby provide the refuge in which the remnant could hide on the day of judgment. In Zephaniah, the note of hope is muted: “*perhaps* you may be hidden” (2:3), but the God who speaks these words had long before revealed himself to Moses as the long-suffering God of mercy and grace as well as the jealous God of justice (Ex. 34:6–7).

These biblical themes of God’s wrath and mercy meet and merge in the cross of Jesus Christ, the place where glorious hope and refuge is to be found for idolaters like us. Zephaniah describes an impending day of darkness and distress, a day of ruin and anguish, a day when blood will be spilled like water and bodies scattered on the ground on all sides:

A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against

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the lofty battlements. I will bring distress on mankind, so that they shall walk like the blind, because they have sinned against the LORD; their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung. Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them on the day of the wrath of the LORD. In the fire of his jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed; for a full and sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth. (Zeph. 1:15–18)

This terrible depiction of the outpouring of God's wrath is nothing compared to the ultimate outpouring of God's wrath at the cross. On that dark and distressing day (see Zeph. 1:15), Jesus took the full force of the ferocious deluge of God's wrath on himself. Jesus was the only person who ever continually sought the Lord; he was the only one who always obeyed God's just commands and sought righteousness; he was the only one who truly walked humbly with his God and never went after idols. Yet at the cross, the righteous Son was sacrificed like a silent sheep before its slaughterers. His blood poured down to the ground from the wounds in his hands and his feet, from the scars on his back and on his brow, and finally from the deep spear wound in his side (see 1:17). His flesh was racked with pain every time he lifted himself up to breathe, as the deep wounds in his body were wrenched open afresh.

Yet that was just the physical side of Jesus' suffering. Far worse was the burning shame of bearing every sin that we have ever committed: at the cross, Jesus carried every idolatrous thought that we have ever cherished, along with all the innumerable sinful actions that flowed from them. On the cross, the weight of that awful load hung around Jesus' neck and separated him from the Father, the one whose continual presence with the Son had brought light into his life for all eternity. There was no refuge to conceal him on the day of the Father's anger, no protection from the fire of his jealousy (see Zeph. 1:18). Instead, his wrath was poured out on Christ's head. Do you want to see the seriousness of God's wrath against sin? If you want to contemplate the awfulness of God's judgment, gaze for a while at the cross.

A SAFE REFUGE

After you have contemplated the awful judgment day of the cross, you must run. Flee to the only refuge that will endure the future day of God's wrath, to the shelter that God himself has provided, which is faith in Jesus Christ. At the cross, Jesus wasn't suffering for his own sin. Rather, he was

bearing the wrath of God that our sin deserved so that we wouldn't have to bear it. Jesus was making a safe place for us to hide by taking the wrath of God against all our sin and injustice onto his own back. There are really only two choices in life: either we must trust in ourselves and our own resources as protection against the wrath of God on that last day, like many did in Zephaniah's day, or we must trust in Christ. Either we rely on our own wealth, power, connections, and goodness for that day when we will all stand trembling before God, or we must trust in Christ and his power, goodness, and connections as our only hope in life and death.

But no one who trusts in Christ has to tremble at the prospect of the final judgment of the world! There will be no condemnation for us on that day (see Rom. 8:1). Christ's righteousness, credited to us by his grace alone, is a refuge that is safe against the fiercest storm. His resurrection is the guarantee of that. After Jesus took all that wrath against sin into himself and was buried by it, God then raised him from the dead to prove to all creation that his sacrifice had been sufficient. The refuge has been tried and tested in the fiercest storm imaginable. Instead of your having to offer your firstborn son to a god in a vain attempt to get him to bless you, we actually have a God who gave *his* firstborn Son in order to bless us! If our God loves us enough to pay such a cost for our redemption, how will he not also give us whatever we need in life and in death (Rom. 8:31–32)?

What is more, that same Son, Jesus Christ, has been raised from the dead and now sits at the Father's right hand, testifying and interceding on our behalf. On that final day when we must appear before God and our sin cries out so loudly against us, we have a powerful Advocate in Jesus Christ. When our lives lie fully exposed before God's judgment seat, revealing the fact that we were indeed desperate idolaters who sacrificed many precious things in the service of our favorite idols—idolaters who deserve nothing other than God's fierce wrath—Jesus will step forward and say, "I died for that sin of his. I was crucified for her false worship. I bore the wrath that this brother or sister of mine deserves. It is finished: the debt has been paid in full. Welcome this precious child into glory for my sake!" And as a just Judge, the Father will delight to grant his Son's request. But for those who trust in themselves and their own resources on that great and dreadful day, there will quite literally be nowhere to run and nowhere to hide from the Lord's terrible wrath.

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Where is your trust for that day? Have you found refuge in Christ from the coming storm of God's wrath? If not, run to Christ today! Ask him to forgive your many sins, and the idolatries from which they flow, and to receive you into his kingdom. God will not turn away any who come to him through Christ seeking safety and life, no matter what they have done. And Christian—"you who to Jesus for refuge have fled," as the hymnwriter put it⁷—give thanks in your heart today for the safety that is yours in him. This is what enables you to be truthful with God and honest with your neighbor about how messy and sinful your life still is, without fear of wrath. Agree with Zephaniah about your heart's deep propensity to idolatry. Ask the Spirit to show you increasingly the specific shape that idolatry takes in your own heart. What do your idols promise you? How do you give in to their blandishments? Ask God for his Spirit's help to seek him daily and to walk increasingly in his ways, in humility and righteousness.

As you ask God to show you your sin more clearly, however, ask that he would also fix your eyes firmly on the safe refuge that you have in Christ. Otherwise, the growing awareness of your own brokenness might immerse you even further in shame and despair. Ponder often the truth that the wrath of God has been completely satisfied for you in Christ. Your judgment day has been swallowed up in his; no anger is now left in the cup that he drained for you. The loud thunder of God's judgment has been hushed once and for all in Christ, silenced by the prospect of perfect peace. In that reality is your rest, both now and forever.

7. "How Firm a Foundation"; the author of this hymn is uncertain, but it was published by John Rippon in his *A Selection of Hymns from the Best Authors* (1787).