

## Law and Gospel

In the Lutheran tradition: the distinction between the two

The Law: God's demands: what we have to do

*And the consequences of failing to do it*

The Gospel: what God has done for us in Christ

*And the benefits that he brings to us.*

It's not that we need to balance them:

Sometimes we need to hear more of one than the other.

When we are complacent: the Law

When we are fearful: the Gospel

And I'd also say it's not that we err on one side or the other

We need to hear *both* so that we place our trust

Not in idols, but in God: in Christ Jesus.

Note: God's left hand vs God's right hand work

God's alien vs God's proper work

## Today's reading: Some strong law

Some of the harshest words of judgement in the Old Testament

Note: the Bible Project on Zephaniah

The book of Zephaniah is written in the reign of Josiah

Remember: the Northern and Southern Kingdoms

The Northern Kingdom destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 BC

The Southern Kingdom destroyed by the Babylonians starting in 586 BC

The Babylonians aren't named as the invaders in the book

And it seems this is because Zephaniah wants his readers to understand

That the calamity that is about to come on them is *God's work*

Listen to what the prophet says:

**Be silent before the Lord GOD!**

**For the day of the LORD is at hand;**

**the LORD has prepared a sacrifice,**

**he has consecrated his guests.**

The day of the Lord: a time of crisis, of judgement

But also: a festival day, and a day of celebration

It's perhaps a bit like saying that God has prepared his Christmas feast

And the chief item on the menu is *you*

You proud, shameless, fraudulent, violent, and complacent people

And the guests God is inviting are your enemies

Who will destroy your government, take all you possess  
And cart you off into slavery

Part of what the Lord has against his people  
Is their complacency in the face of injustice and violence and fraud  
Listen to the word of the Lord:

**At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps,  
and I will punish the people  
who rest complacently on their dregs,  
those who say in their hearts,  
'The LORD will not do good,  
nor will he do harm.'**

The imagery here is taken in different directions in English translation  
One way to think of it: a person who has finished their wine  
The sediment is sitting at the bottom of the glass  
And they feel as if they're doing all right  
God's far away, and won't do anything good or bad  
They're thinking: There's no need to attend to the things of God  
Or to keep the commands of God or live within his covenant  
Instead, perhaps, they're thinking of the new house they'll build  
*And wouldn't it be nice to have a proper cellar in this one*

God gives a word of judgement:  
**Their wealth shall be plundered,  
and their houses laid waste.**

**Though they build houses,  
they shall not inhabit them;  
though they plant vineyards,  
they shall not drink wine from them.**

God is not far away: a time of judgement is coming  
And everything they have built up for themselves will be swept away

Listen to the imagery that is used in the word of judgement:

**The great day of the LORD is near,  
near and hastening fast;  
the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter,  
the warrior cries aloud there.  
That day will be a day of wrath,  
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 the lofty battlements.**

It's like an unwinding of the creation account in Genesis 1  
Instead of God bringing light and order out of darkness and chaos  
God brings thick darkness, devastation and distress  
This judgement is at hand, and it cannot be escaped  
It's a judgement that falls on God's own people  
But that has a universal scope  
The Lord says:

**I will bring such distress upon people  
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  
will be able to save them  
on the day of the LORD's wrath;  
in the fire of his passion  
the whole earth shall be consumed;  
for a full, a terrible end  
he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.**

Here we have a picture of people suffering the consequences of their sin  
Staggering in the darkness they have brought upon themselves  
With no hope of buying their way out  
We also have a picture of the inability of any human action to turn away  
Such wrath and destruction

Luther, by the way, had the opinion that the blood and flesh mentioned here  
Refers to the sacrificial offerings.

In his opinion, this was the sense:

***Even if they try to please God with flesh and blood, that is, of animals they have offered, even if they really want to sacrifice to the Lord, yet their sacrifices will not be pleasing. The enemy will come and scatter all their sacrifices, blood, and bread, like dust.***

So, in this Zephaniah reading we have a threatening picture

Of the consequences of sin, of the wrath and destruction that it brings  
A picture that is taken up and strengthened by the Lord Jesus and the Apostles  
So, for example, in today's epistle reading St Paul wrote:

**You yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, 'There is peace and security', then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape!**

We need to hear words like this

To wake us from our complacency

And to free us to hear Good News that comes not from what we can do

But from what God does for us in Christ

It was precisely because this passage of Zephaniah is so strong in judgement  
That Luther valued it so highly

Listen to what he had to say:

***This, then, is a marvelous and elegant passage, for it rejects all the righteousness of the flesh and calls it dung, even as the apostle Paul calls it that (Philippians 3:8). So he is indicating that one requires nothing for true righteousness except faith in the word of God.***

And here we get to the good news

It is in taking refuge in Christ Jesus

Who has borne the wrath that our sins incur

Who has by his sacrifice of himself reconciled us to the Father

That we have light in darkness

A refuge in distress

And hope in the face of our own failure

It is when we let God fight for us

When we let God have the victory in Christ Jesus for us

Then we can move from fear to trust

Then we can move from complacency to Christian love

The book of Zephaniah prophetically anticipates this victory

So that although the first chapter, today's chapter

Brings a harsh yet liberating word of judgement

The book closes with some of the sweetest Gospel

Listen:

**Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;**

**shout, O Israel!**

**Rejoice and exult with all your heart,**

**O daughter Jerusalem!**  
**The LORD has taken away the judgements against you,**  
**he has turned away your enemies.**  
**The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;**  
**you shall fear disaster no more.**  
**On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:**  
**Do not fear, O Zion;**  
**do not let your hands grow weak.**  
**The LORD, your God, is in your midst,**  
**a warrior who gives victory;**  
**he will rejoice over you with gladness,**  
**he will renew you in his love;**  
**he will exult over you with loud singing**  
**as on a day of festival.**

This is God's right hand work; his proper work  
The work that he wants to do among us: to win the victory for us  
To sing with joy over us as a bridegroom rejoices in his bride  
To have the true day of the Lord  
Where death is on the menu, and where by faith in Christ  
We are consecrated as guests at the feast laid out for us by God

In today's epistle reading St Paul could write these words: **But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.**

Let us encourage each other in the life of faith  
God has won the victory over sin and death for us  
So that we can know that God is near us  
So that we can be free from complacency as we show love for each other.  
May God grant this to us for Jesus's sake. Amen.