

Zephaniah Announces God's Justice

Printed Text · Zephaniah 3:1-5, 8-9

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: EXPLORE those things that will bring God's judgment upon us; DEVELOP hearts that are not arrogant, treacherous, or profane; and PRACTICE obedience to God's law.

In Focus

Marcus was alienated from his family at age 22. He and his parents argued because of his drinking and refusal to work. He moved in with various friends until his family no longer knew how to contact him.

Now, at age 40, he turned his life around; divorced and remarried, Marcus was the father of a blended family of five children none of whom his parents had ever seen. However, Marcus' parents never stopped loving him or trying to find him.

One day, Marcus saw his high school football coach, Quincy Tipp at the mall. After some catching up, Coach Tipp said, "Your parents are concerned about you. They have never given up hope of reuniting with you. Your dad has been ill and it has been a difficult time for them physically and financially. They held on to the house in case you ever return, but it is clearly too much for them."

Marcus said, "I have been away so long and there are a lot of hurt feelings between us. I always wanted to go back when I made something of myself. But I still didn't go back."

Coach Tipp asked him, "Do you think it is right for you to live comfortably and enjoy your children while your parents struggle and lose the opportunity to be with you, their only child?"

Marcus admitted his shame, and as soon as he left the mall, he went to his parents' house.

Just like Coach Tripp called Marcus to be humble, God calls us to humility. How do you remain grounded in God?

Keep In Mind

"Therefore wait ye upon me, saith the LORD, until the day that I rise up to the prey: for my determination is to gather the nations, that I may assemble the kingdoms, to pour upon them mine indignation, even all my fierce anger: for all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of my jealousy" (Zephaniah 3:8, KJV).

Words You Should Know

- A. **Filthy** (Zephaniah 3:1) mara (Heb.) – Rebellious.
- B. **Polluted** (v. 1) gaal (Heb.) – Soiled or desecrated.
- C. **Oppressing** (v. 1) yanah (Heb.) – Raging or violent; suppressing; maltreating.
- D. **Light** (v. 4) pachaz (Heb.) – Literally, to bubble up or froth; hence, without substance; insignificant.

Say It Correctly

Zephaniah. zef-uh-NIGH-uh

Manasseh. muh-NAS-uh

Commandments. Kuh-MAAND-muhnts

Covenant. Kuv-UH-nuhnt

KJV

Zephaniah 3:1 Woe to her that is filthy and polluted, to the oppressing city!

2 She obeyed not the voice; she received not correction; she trusted not in the Lord; she drew not near to her God.

3 Her princes within her are roaring lions; her judges are evening wolves; they gnaw not the bones till the morrow.

4 Her prophets are light and treacherous persons: her priests have polluted the sanctuary, they have done violence to the law.

5 The just Lord is in the midst thereof; he will not do iniquity: every morning doth he bring his judgment to light, he faileth not; but the unjust knoweth no shame.

8 Therefore wait ye upon me, saith the Lord, until the day that I rise up to the prey: for my determination is to gather the nations, that I may assemble the kingdoms, to pour upon them mine indignation, even all my fierce anger: for all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of my jealousy.

9 For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord, to serve him with one consent.

NLT

Zephaniah 3:1 What sorrow awaits rebellious, polluted Jerusalem, the city of violence and crime!

2 No one can tell it anything; it refuses all correction. It does not trust in the Lord or draw near to its God.

3 Its leaders are like roaring lions hunting for their victims. Its judges are like ravenous wolves at evening time, who by dawn have left no trace of their prey.

4 Its prophets are arrogant liars seeking their own gain. Its priests defile the Temple by disobeying God's instructions.

5 But the Lord is still there in the city, and he does no wrong. Day by day he hands down justice, and he does not fail. But the wicked know no shame.

8 Therefore, be patient," says the Lord. "Soon I will stand and accuse these evil nations. For I have decided to gather the kingdoms of the earth and pour out my fiercest anger and fury on them.

All the earth will be devoured by the fire of my jealousy.

9 "Then I will purify the speech of all people, so that everyone can worship the Lord together..

The People, Places, and Times

Zephaniah. The name Zephaniah means "the Lord hides" or "he whom the Lord hides." The first verse of the book that bears his name says that Zephaniah was the son of Cushi and the great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah. Thus, he was a prophet of royal blood. Zephaniah lived in Judah. The length of his ministry is not known. The word of the Lord came to him in the days of Josiah, king of Judah, placing Zephaniah's ministry between 640 and 609 B.C. and making him a contemporary of the prophets Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Nahum. The central theme of the book of Zephaniah is "the day of the Lord."

Background

The nation of Judah was one of two kingdoms into which the unified kingdom of Israel under King Rehoboam (son of King Solomon) had split. Judah was the southern kingdom and was inhabited by the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The 10 tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel had already been judged by God for their evil practices. The Assyrians had come, devoured the land, taken Israel captive, and deported the people around 722 B.C. The kingdom of Judah seemed oblivious to these events and made the same mistakes. Their degeneration was accelerated by King Manasseh, the grandfather of King Josiah (2 Kings 21:1–26).

King Manasseh did evil in the sight of the Lord by adopting the same practices as the heathen nations the Lord had driven out from the Promised Land. Manasseh reinstated idol worship in Judah after the death of his father, good King Hezekiah. Manasseh worshiped and served the gods of astrology, practiced soothsaying, used witchcraft, consulted spiritists and mediums, and established pagan places of worship. He went so far as to place an idol in God's temple and offer human sacrifices. Jerusalem was filled from one end to the other with the innocent blood that Manasseh had shed. The king seduced the nation of Judah to do more evil than all the pagan nations that surrounded them.

Judah failed to observe the commandments that the Lord had given them and broke their covenant with the Lord. They did much evil and provoked the Lord to anger. The Lord said that He would bring a great calamity on Jerusalem and Judah because of the great evil they were doing. This calamity would come at the hands of the Babylonians (Chaldeans) in a series of three attacks in 605 B.C., 597 B.C., and 586 B.C. Each time, captives would be taken back to Babylon. King Josiah was a "breath of fresh air" in the midst of the stench that permeated the nation. His father, Amon, who followed Manasseh, was assassinated after reigning for only two years, and Josiah became king when he was 8 years old.

Josiah reigned for 31 years and did what was right in the sight of the Lord. At the age of 16, he began to seek the Lord. Four years later, he had systematically torn down and removed all the idolatrous images and altars. In the 18th year of his reign, while the temple of God was being restored, the Book of the Law was found. When King Josiah heard the words of the Law, he humbled himself, tore his clothes, and wept before the Lord. He gathered the people of Jerusalem and read the Law to them, reestablishing proper worship practices in Jerusalem.

God honored King Josiah for his humility, obedience, and faithfulness. However, the nation as a whole was doomed; they could not stem the tide of corruption that had been set in motion by King Manasseh. They had passed the point of no return, and after the death of King Josiah they had gone back to their evil ways. The prophet Zephaniah spoke to this situation. We are not certain whether he spoke prior to or during the revival instituted by King Josiah, but he spoke to a deeply rooted condition of apostasy, one whose roots needed to be removed.

At-A-Glance

1. The Spiritual Condition of Jerusalem (Zephaniah 3:1–2)
2. The Spiritual Condition of Jerusalem's Leaders (vv. 3–5)
3. God's Justice Is Determined (3:8–9)

In Depth

1. The Spiritual Condition of Jerusalem (Zephaniah 3:1 –2)

“Woe” is a strong word of correction from the Lord. The word refers to an outward expression of pain and grief. God is saying to the city of Jerusalem, to the nation that she represents, and to all the inhabitants of the land, “Great pain and grief be to you!” The people deserved punishment because they were filthy, they were polluted, and they were oppressing those who were powerless to resist.

Here was a highly favored nation of whom much was expected. God had formed them and had given them a place to call home. He had protected them from their enemies. God entrusted the oracles of the one true God to them. All they had to do to be successful was to be faithful to the God who loved them.

The people of Judah were filthy in the sense of being rebellious, abandoning the instruction of the Lord. When they knew to do right, they chose instead to do the things that provided instant gratification. The people were polluted in that they continued in sin while at the same time observing religious rituals, combining the pagan practices of other nations with the worship of God. But the Lord loathed this syncretistic “worship.”

To make matters worse, the strong oppressed the weak, the poor, the orphans, and the widows. The strong had no regard for the rights of the poor. What could the poor do? They had no financial resources to pay for a defense, had no political connections, and posed no threat of retaliation. Because they were too insignificant, those in positions of power did not care about them. Those in power rushed to confiscate, by force, whatever property or valuables were left unprotected by a dead father or husband.

The people of Judah refused to keep the terms of the covenant. They cast aside or misapplied God’s Word. God sent His prophets to warn them, but they ignored the warnings. Instead, they continued to pilfer from the poor and the oppressed. They built up their armies and fortified their cities, pursuing alliances with wicked nations rather than seeking security in God’s lordship. Yet they expected God to reward them for continuing to observe their empty religious rituals.

2. The Spiritual Condition of Jerusalem’s Leaders (vv. 3–5)

Zephaniah exposes the behavior of four groups of national leaders: the princes, the judges, the prophets, and the priests. The description of the princes is reminiscent of the way the apostle Peter describes the activity of the Devil, who goes about as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). A roaring lion is a lion preparing to attack. Likewise, these people in government were looking for every opportunity for personal gain at the expense of others. The judges were characterized as being insatiably greedy, leaving nothing until morning. They took bribes under cover of darkness and completed their business by morning. There was no justice in the land; God looked for justice but could not find any (Jeremiah 5:1). The poor, the orphans, and the widows were easy prey.

The “official” prophets committed adultery, declared false messages, encouraged evildoers, and became a stumbling block to any who might consider turning from wickedness (Jeremiah 23:14, 32). God had not sent these “prophets.” They proclaimed peace and prosperity, if the price was right. The priests polluted the temple with idols and sacrifices to false gods. They distorted the intent of the law and replaced the teaching of God with their own traditions. Thus, they failed in their duty as advocates of repentance, justice, and righteousness.

However, godly prophets such as Zephaniah, Jeremiah, Nahum, and Habakkuk still proclaimed God's truth. The godly king, Josiah, rose above the corruption of society. When he heard the words of the Law, he was receptive and humbled himself. He then implemented substantial reform throughout Judah.

3. God's Justice Is Determined (3:8–9)

The godly in the nation of Judah were encouraged to look to the Lord and trust Him. The poor, the orphans, and the widows could rest assured that God would end the injustices being heaped upon them. In one great act of judgment, God would pour out His wrath and indignation on all evildoers in Judah. There seems to be a transition here from the impending destruction of Jerusalem to that yet future great day of judgment when God will gather all nations for the final judgment. Yet a godly remnant will emerge who will worship the Lord together with pure hearts because God Himself will purify them. They will call on the name of the Lord and serve Him in unity.

Search the Scriptures

1. How is the "city" described in the first verse of the lesson (Zephaniah 3:1)?
2. Whom did the city of Jerusalem refuse to trust (v. 2)?
3. What were the princes of the city like (v. 3)?
4. How are the judges of the city described (v. 3)?
5. What was the condition of the church leaders (v. 4)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. What is the effect on society when governmental and judicial leaders behave like those described by Zephaniah?
2. Why do you think people in the church continue to follow leaders who do violence to God's law?
3. What makes you obey or disobey God's law?

Liberating Lesson

The pollution that the prophet Zephaniah identified in the nation of Judah in the 7th century B.C. is just as common in the 21st century. In recent years, adultery and fornication were reported in the highest office of the land: the presidency. Judges are promoting their own personal political agendas instead of rendering decisions based on the law of the land. Some people who claim to be representatives of God and spiritual advisors are committing the same acts as those they are supposed to be counseling. At least one church is still wrestling with a pedophile scandal in the priesthood. Those who do these things do violence to God's law. Many innocent people feel victimized and abandoned. However, God is not silent. Society may try to silence His messengers, but God still speaks to those in high places who abuse their position, as well as to the innocent. He is speaking to you; are you able to hear and obey? Will you trust God to correct the injustices of society and create righteousness in the hearts of humankind?

Application For Activation

God says to wait on Him to cleanse the world, but He requires us to clean ourselves now. We cannot be friends of the world system and still be friends of God (1 John 2:15). Submit yourself to God and resist the activities of a fallen world. Draw nigh to God and He will draw nigh to you (James 4:7–8).

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Zephaniah 3:1–5, 8–9

In our last lesson, we saw that the leaders and the people had many opportunities to repent. The “God of the second chance” had withheld His judgment for quite some time. Zephaniah is preaching about 100 years after Micah.

It is probable that Zephaniah ministered during the reign of Josiah (640–609 B.C.). Josiah was a good and godly king of Judah (2 Kings 22–23:30). Unfortunately, after 55 years of decadence under the wicked King Manasseh (697–642 B.C.), the die had been cast: “Nevertheless, the LORD did not turn away from the heat of his fierce anger, which burned against Judah because of all that Manasseh had done to provoke him to anger. So the LORD said, ‘I will remove Judah also from my presence as I removed Israel, and I will reject Jerusalem, the city I chose, and this temple, about which I said, There shall my Name be’” (2 Kings 23:26–27, NIV). Zephaniah was God’s prophet for the hour, sent to proclaim that the time for repentance was running out. In the first two chapters of the book of Zephaniah, the prophet lumps Judah in with the other nations who deserve judgment. The book begins with the condemnation of Judah and describes how God will pour out His wrath on the people. Judgment does indeed begin with the household of God (1 Peter 4:17). It is time to stop blaming TV or other media, the government, the public schools, or the neighbors for our lack of commitment and repentance. These things may play a part in our choices, but ultimately responsibility for our actions rests within ourselves. From God’s perspective, our lack of commitment to Him cannot be blamed on our circumstances. Our attitude and behavior, while walking through our circumstances, are our own responsibility. The real problem is often within us, not merely outside of us (Matthew 15:18–19). Zephaniah says that the corruption of God’s people is what has defiled the nation and the city. God’s people had continued to ignore His call to repent. Because they had propped up merciless leaders and ungodly prophets, they would incur God’s wrath. Reflection on the words of Micah spoken 100 years earlier lets us understand that these people had turned up their noses at God, and now God was about to “lower the boom.”

As we know from TV crime shows, gathering evidence has taken on a new dimension. The tiniest amount of DNA or some other substance can be traced to an individual and provide the basis for a conviction. On the other hand, it takes only a shrewd lawyer to raise a question about how the evidence was gathered to get an acquittal. God had been “collecting evidence” for hundreds of

years. He does not make a case against us; He allows us to make a case against ourselves. In today's lesson, the evidence was in, and the Lord God was about to proclaim judgment.

1 Woe to her that is filthy and polluted, to the oppressing city!

The first word in verse 1 is Howy (HOH-ee), translated "Woe," and is often used to express dissatisfaction. In this case, however, God was expressing more than just dissatisfaction; He describes the city as being filthy, polluted, and the embodiment of oppression.

The word translated "filthy" is mara (maw-RAW). This word can also be translated "lifted up," and its root form may be used of God. Likewise, the word translated "polluted," ga'al (GAW-al), has a form that can be translated as "redeem." Zephaniah is using wordplay to describe the situation. Ironically, although the city had become a place of oppression, characterized by anything and everything that opposed God, the second half of the verse suggests that the people were usurping God's authority and misusing it at best. Instead of living as redeemed, covenant people, they were acting just the opposite.

2 She obeyed not the voice; she received not correction; she trusted not in the LORD; she drew not near to her God.

Just as in Micah's day 100 years earlier, the leaders hated good and loved evil. Now, however, it seems that these attitudes and behaviors have spread to the whole society. Large numbers of the people were completely disregarding the things of the Lord. Using a series of negatives, Zephaniah brings a threefold indictment against the people: they did not listen, they did not receive correction, and they did not trust the Lord.

The first part of verse 2 could be translated literally as "not hearing the voice," "not receiving" the correction of the Lord," "not trusting the Lord," and "not drawing near to the Lord." The phrase "received [not] correction" is a translation of the Hebrew words laqach (law-KAKH), meaning "received," and muwcar (moo-SAWR), meaning "correction." In the Old Testament, the word muwcar usually refers to discipline that is initiated by God. Thus, rather than accept God's corrective words of discipline, the people dismissed the Lord's purposes as unimportant and trivial.

The result is evident: When we refuse to accept God's discipline, we are distancing ourselves from God. Qarab (kaw-RAB') is the Hebrew word for "draw near." In the Qal form (refer to the previous lesson), qarab means to draw near to a point of reference. God was no longer the peoples' "reference point." The perfect-tense verbs (hearing, teaching, trusting, and drawing), each prefixed by the negative "not," speak of completed action. For Judah, God was no longer on the throne, and their past and present actions verified Zephaniah's indictment.

3 Her princes within her are roaring lions; her judges are evening wolves; they gnaw not the bones till the morrow.

The princes and judges are governmental and judicial officials, respectively, all of whom were acting like animals of prey. Those who should have been protecting the people had become like "animals" (Micah 3:3). Never satisfied with what they could deprive others of, they stripped the people of everything. The prophet compares them to wolves gnawing on their prey until all is devoured, leaving nothing but bones.

4 Her prophets are light and treacherous persons: her priests have polluted the sanctuary, they have done violence to the law.

The prophets spoken of in verse 4 trusted in themselves more than they trusted in God. In Hebrew,

the first phrase is literally, “prophets lightmen.” Whether these were prophets of God who had turned away from Him or prophets whom God had not called in the first place, the result was the same: “ministry” guided by the dictates of men. Apostasy had infiltrated every aspect of society. The rulers had given themselves over to evil, the prophets concocted sermons to support evil, and those who worked in the house of the Lord benefited from the evil.

The word translated “polluted” in verse 4 is different from that used in verse 1. This word, *chahal* (khaw-LAL), in the Piel form means “to treat with contempt” (specifically, those things that belong to God). Jesus said, “Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’” (Matthew 7:22–23, NIV).

Even worse, the leaders of the city were trying to cover up their actions by distorting God’s word. The leaders were doing violence (*chamac*, khaw-MAS) to the word of God. The word *chamac* means “to strip off,” or tear something from that with which it is intimately connected. These rulers completely “stripped” the law of its intimate connection with the character of God.

5 The just LORD is in the midst thereof; he will not do iniquity: every morning doth he bring his judgment to light, he faileth not; but the unjust knoweth no shame.

The opening phrase of verse 5 literally reads, “Yahweh the righteous (just).” Again, noting the exact Hebrew phrase is helpful in understanding what Zephaniah is trying to communicate: “Yahweh the righteous in the midst (of a society of unrighteousness and injustice) is not doing unrighteousness or injustice.” Instead, “morning-by-morning judgment (justice) gives light.” The implication is that, when God is near, His light can direct us into paths of justice. The phrase “he faileth not” is reminiscent of Isaiah 55:11, which says, “So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it” (NKJV). Of course, the reverse is also true: If God is not near, the darkness increases.

The unjust do not understand that what they are doing is shameful. The nation of Judah had sunk so low and had become so “comfortable” with injustice that they no longer understood or cared how their actions were viewed by God. The priests, along with the rest of the leaders, had literally turned God’s house, God’s kingdom, into personal platforms to exalt themselves. As Jesus would later say, they had turned God’s house into a den of thieves (Mark 11:17).

God had provided clear and undeniable evidence that safety and security could be found only in Him. He had even gone so far as to show Judah that relying on other nations would only lead to captivity. Yet, even though the nation had been reduced to subjects of Assyria, they refused to acknowledge their idolatry and wickedness, pretending that all was well.

3:8 Therefore wait ye upon me, saith the LORD, until the day that I rise up to the prey: for my determination is to gather the nations, that I may assemble the kingdoms, to pour upon them mine indignation, even all my fierce anger: for all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of my jealousy. 9 For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the LORD, to serve him with one consent.

In verse 8, the word “wait” literally means “to wait for an unexpected event.” The faithful could look for an unexpected deliverance, the unfaithful, for an unexpected judgment. There is encouragement for the faithful and a warning for the unfaithful.

God Himself will “raise up” (establish) the prey. The time will come, says the Lord, when the prey—all those who are opposed to God—will think the battle is over, not knowing that the battle—indeed, the entire war—is about to come to an end.

The Lord will gather the nations, all who have opposed him, and pour out His indignation. The Hebrew word for “gather” is acaph (aw-SAF’) and refers to the assembly of like kinds. The Hebrew word translated “kingdom” is mamlakah (mam-law-kaw’) and is often used to refer to earthly kingdoms. In the Old Testament, it is used to refer specifically to non-Israelite kingdoms. Just as the saints are marked as God’s possession, so any who oppose the Lord are His enemies. We are either for God or against Him; there is no middle ground. Also, during this time God will make “pure” (Heb. barar, baw-rar’ meaning purge or cleanse) His people in order to unify everyone with one language so that we can all worship Him together in spirit and in truth.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday

Deuteronomy 30:1–6

Tuesday

Ezekiel 34:11–16

Wednesday

Zechariah 10:6–12

Thursday

Acts 5:27–32

Friday

Zephaniah 3:1–7

Saturday

Zephaniah 3:8–13

Sunday

Zephaniah 3:14–20