

SMALL GROUP GUIDE



Zephaniah
HOPE IS ON THE HORIZON

ZEPHANIAH: HOPE IS ON THE HORIZON

I used to live in New York. "Oh, like near the Statue of Liberty or Time Square?" people often ask. While I wish that were the case, far from it! I was about three hours away from the skyline of Manhattan. I lived in a small city called Binghamton. Our cozy little corner of New York had a lot of amazing things going for it. IBM was founded there, the food scene was incredible, and the winters were brutal. Okay, the last part wasn't great, to be honest. Our area is actually known as one of the gloomiest regions on the eastern seaboard. Our forecast goes for weeks without seeing even a glimmer of sunshine. From November to March, the scene outside our windows wash from a shade of grey to a darker shade of grey.

All winter long, it would snow, it would rain, and then it would snow again. Something amazing usually happened around April, though. We would get our first spring-like day of the year. The sun would come out and people would venture out of their houses like bears after hibernation. People would wear their shorts, t-shirts, and sandals despite the morning temperature being near freezing. That didn't matter to them! The sun was out, so the park was packed! It was time to catch some rays and make up for lost vitamin D and serotonin.

Isn't there something so refreshing about the sun after a dreary season? You can feel the warmth of the rays and the spontaneous joy that comes with it. When light cracks through the darkness, people take notice. When warmth radiates from the cold, people perk up. When winter finally starts to thaw, the whole community jolts back to life. (Especially the birds and squirrels.) The gloomy season was depressing, but the spring was encouraging.

The writings of Zephaniah, a complex Old Testament prophet, contain a narrative a lot like a New York winter. God's appointed prophet had to deliver a grey and gloomy message to a distressed nation. Most of Zephaniah's prophecies predict heart-wrenching problems for humankind. God was going to judge the nations — including Israel. Take a look at the tone-setting introduction at the very beginning of Zephaniah.

READ: Zephaniah 1:2-3a

"I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth," declares the Lord. "I will sweep away both man and beast; I will sweep away the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea — and the idols that cause the wicked to stumble."

As you can see, God was disappointed with the state of the world. He watched as His people worshipped false gods, lived selfish lives, and ignored his commandments. Unfortunately, destruction was coming. Zephaniah's difficult-to-read words teach us two valuable principles about God's heart and God's holiness.

Rebellion leads to repercussions.

Zephaniah woefully declares God's pending judgment in a way that alludes to the Great Flood in the era of Noah. Unfortunately, the nations had become too wicked, and God needed to set His people straight. They had rejected the Lord, so God needed to get their attention. Their rebellion had repercussions coming. How was God going to do that? By "destroying the idols that cause the wicked to stumble."

Most people struggle with Old Testament writings because of this kind of content. You may ask, "How can God punish people? Isn't He a God of love?" Guess what? You just answered your question. Since God loves His people, he will go to great lengths to protect them from pain. His justice is an extension of His holiness. God loves you, and sometimes love can be a little harsh.

If something is damaging your relationship with God, then God may need to destroy it. It's not mean; it's actually merciful. God smiles when someone's idol crumbles to the ground. Why? Because that destruction will lead to greater devotion. That idol harmed you, so its destruction will help you.

So what idols do you cling to? We often think of golden statues with smokey incense wafting towards the sky. Sure, that exists, but it's only a fraction of modern idol worship. An idol is anything that you position before God. It can be a person; it can be prosperity; it can be an activity; or it can be anything else that steals your attention and affection. Your idols may be a relationship, a career path, a sport, a musical artist, social media, or even your own reflection in the mirror. Idols are seldom bad things that corrupt you. They're usually just good things that consume you.

Invite God to destroy the idols in your life. His judgment will lead to refinement. When idols begin to fall, you begin to rise up. Yes, it's hard to have your idols crumble before you, but it's also helpful. God wants to leverage those hardships to grow us in holiness. That is God's tough love on display. He's ready to break out the hammer and start shattering your idols. Let Him. It's for your good and His glory.

READ: Zephaniah 3:14-17

Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm. On that day they will say to Jerusalem, "Do not fear, Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing."

Repentance leads to restoration.

If the first two chapters of Zephaniah are like a bleak winter season, the last chapter is like the sun breaking out from behind the clouds. It's time to break out your shorts and sandals, Israel! Spring is here! These words warm you up, don't they? God will delight in His people. God will not rebuke them. God will rejoice over His nation with singing and gladness. How wonderful is that?

What changed? Repentance. God's people heard His warnings, let their idols shatter, and turned back to God. This created a ripple effect of restoration over the entire nation. This passage is one of the most beautiful explanations of God's mercy I've ever read. God's people failed, but God forgave. God's people rebelled, but God restored them. God's people sinned, but God saved them. It's truly beautiful.

Do you feel like you need restoration in life? Then, it's time to repent. "What does repent mean?" you ask. Great question! Tragically, this beautiful word has been hijacked by harsh protesters with rude signs and megaphones. That's far from God's intention, though. When God calls us to "repent," He's simply asking us to return to Him. Repentance is a homecoming where we change our minds and turn back to God for help.

Zephaniah's call to Israel was simple, "repent! Things are about to get worse if you don't." The same message rings true for us in modern times. We all need to turn around and head back home. Have you been heading in the wrong direction? Turn to God and repent. When you do, God will help you pick up the pieces and put everything back together. Restoration is on the other side of repentance. Let's start heading home.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week and what was the lowest part of your week?

Q1: What's one thing that stood out to you from today's message?

Q2: What is an idol?

Q3: What do your peers tend to idolize?

Q4: How can we adjust our priorities to be sure we are not idolizing anything above God?

Q5: How do we repent if we've found ourselves wandering away from God?

Application: What's one idol in your life that you want to put in its place this week? How?

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Genesis 14:19

Matthew 6:33

Romans 9:23

Psalms 145

James 1:17

Matthew 13:44-46

Ephesians 1:22-23

Exodus 20:3

Proverbs 3:9-10

Psalms 27

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.