

Lesson 5

Zephaniah 2-3: Examples of God's Judgment

Introduction

After speaking of the dire consequences to come in the *Day of the Lord* in chapter one, Zephaniah now turns to the people and encourages them to repent. Judah is encouraged to come together. The usage of *nation* in 2:1 is significant. Hubbard notes that “God’s people are this time called a “nation,” the usual description of pagan people.”¹ The people had no shame – all its sinful acts were brazen and in the open. It had become no different than the nations it surrounded. The idea conveyed in the first three verses of chapter two is that the people needed a large dose of humility. This would be demonstrated by their repentance. The time to act was sooner, rather than later. . . *Before the decree takes effect. . .*, 2:2. The *decree* referred to is the day of the Lord. The intensity of the Lord’s anger is described as *burning*. The day of the Lord was inescapable and unpleasant.

How could the people demonstrate repentance?

- They are first told to *seek the Lord*, 2:3. Those who realized who Jehovah was were to follow Him seeking His mercy and grace.
- They were to *seek righteousness*, 2:3. Righteousness would be seen in their actions, the result of a changed heart. Seeking righteousness would involve ceasing all sinful behavior.
- Finally, they were told to *seek humility*, 2:3. All pride and feelings of self-pride were to be cast off.

Doing these three things would be necessary if there were any chance of them staving off the terrible and great day of the Lord. *Perhaps you will be hidden in the day of the Lord’s anger* has stirred up some controversy in its meaning. Does this mean that those who humbled themselves could not trust in the deliverance of God? No. Ultimately, those who humbled themselves and followed through on the Lord’s expectations would be a part of His remnant. But they might be forced to suffer the consequences of their own sin and the sins of their society. Think of how this is true in our own time.

Judgment on the nations, 2:4-15

Attention now turns off the people of Judah and toward those in surrounding nations.

Philistia

Philistia is mentioned first. Philistia was located to the west of Judah. The four cities listed here represent the entire nation. Gaza was in the southern part of the country and would be abandoned. Ashkelon would become desolate, 2:4. Ashdod would be *driven out at noon*, 2:4. This could mean that they would be subjected to a surprise attack, or their defeat would come only after a half-day’s battle. Ekron was going to be *uprooted*, 2:4. What Zephaniah describes is destruction.

Cherethites refers to the Philistines. This group of people were some of David’s bodyguards (2 Samuel 8:18; 20:23). Zephaniah also describes the Philistines as *Canaanites*. Just like the Canaanites were destroyed by Israel, so would be the Philistine people. *I will destroy you So that there will be no inhabitant*, 2:5. The seacoast would

become a pasture, and it would be reserved for the *remnant of the house of Judah*, 2:7. This prophecy was fulfilled after the Babylonian exile. God's people did possess this land, just as Zephaniah foretold!

Moab and Ammon

In 2:8-11, the spotlight turns to Moab and Ammon. Moab and Ammon often fought with Israel and Judah. They are referred to in other places in prophecy but are never addressed at the same time. These nations had reveled in the fact of Israel and Judah's humiliation. They encroached upon the border of Judah and were filled with pride, 2:10. The nations of the east had long prided themselves in their domination over the people of God. For this, God promises certain destruction, 2:9. They would become as Sodom and Gomorrah. This prophecy was fulfilled during the period between the testaments (400 B.C. to the birth of Jesus.) During this time, the Maccabean rulers launched campaigns in this region.² God would demonstrate His power over all the gods of the earth, 2:11. Each person would recognize God's supreme power and authority over everything on earth.

Ethiopia

In 2:12, Ethiopia is called out. Some speculate this is directed at Egypt. This could be. From 715-664 B.C., Egypt and Ethiopia were united under one government. It is speculated that this prophecy of destruction refers to both nations. Both nations would suffer military defeat in the days after Zephaniah. Egypt was defeated in 525 B.C. by the Persians. The Persian influence also reached into Ethiopia. Their destruction would be brought about by the sword of the LORD.

Assyria

In 2:13, Assyria comes into view. They were going to be destroyed. While it is true that by Zephaniah's day Assyria's influence had diminished greatly, God says that they would be destroyed. What had once been the home of a fierce, brutal, and proud nation, *Flocks will lie down in her midst, all beasts which range in herds; Both the pelican and the hedgehog Will lodge in the tops of her pillars. . .*, 2:14. Even though the Assyrians took comfort and pride in their fortified cities, they would be cast down and forever destroyed.

What is the point of speaking of the destruction of the nations to the west, east, south, and north of Judah? If God would punish them decisively for their sins, would He not punish Judah? This writing was to serve as a warning. Just as the sword of God was raised to destroy Ethiopia, so it would be raised to destroy Judah. Would the people be wise enough to humble themselves, seek righteousness and humility? Or would they rush headlong into the whirlwind of God's destruction? The answer to these questions is seen in 3:7, *But they were eager to corrupt all their deeds.*

Judgment against Jerusalem

What will happen to those who refuse to seek the Lord, righteousness, and humility? That is the focus of Zephaniah 3. Jerusalem was a city that had long been rebellious against the ways of the LORD. Her sins are listed in verses 2-7. In her we see a group of people who refused obedience (3:2); refused to draw near to God (3:2); gave itself over to unceasing violence and bloodshed (3:3); put godless officials and judges over her (3:4) and proudly committed their sins with no *sense of shame* (3:5). While these dreadful activities were going on, God dwelt within the city inside the temple. Each day He demonstrated the way of justice and holiness. Each day the people were called upon to remember the seriousness of their sin with various offerings and sacrifices. Yet they continued to sin with impunity.

The Sins of Jerusalem: Zephaniah 3:1-7

VERSE	SIN
Zephaniah 3:2	<i>heeded no voice, accepted no instruction</i>
Zephaniah 3:2	<i>did not trust in the Lord</i>
Zephaniah 3:2	<i>did not draw near to the Lord their God</i>
Zephaniah 3:3	<i>immoral officials; judges continually worked evil</i>
Zephaniah 3:4	<i>reckless prophets; priests doing violence to the Law</i>
Zephaniah 3:7	<i>people eager to corrupt all their deeds</i>

In 3:6-7, God specifically addresses the city, reminding them of His power to execute justice and vengeance. The people of Judah could literally look at the world they lived in and see the judgments of God on the nations around them. Think specifically of their northern neighbors, Israel, who had been destroyed by the Assyrians a century before. *Their corner towers are in ruins. I have made their streets desolate, with no one passing by; Their cities are laid*

waste, without a man, without an inhabitant, 3:6. God felt that surely these people would look at that destruction (or the destruction of others) and be moved to repentance. *‘Surely you will revere Me, accept instruction.’ 3:7.* But the people were *eager to corrupt all their deeds, 3:7.* Repeatedly God reached out to His people, exhorting them to repentance. They needed to turn from their wicked ways to be spared. Yet sin has a deafening effect on mankind. The people had become deaf to God’s constant pleas and would suffer because of it. Hubbard writes, “Grace is offered, but frivolously spurned, a sobering epitaph for the city of David.”³

In 3:8, God urges those who would humble themselves to Him to *wait for Me.* These had to trust in God waiting on Him to work out future events. Hailey points out how the phrase *wait for Jehovah* is used throughout the prophets, especially Isaiah. See Isaiah 40:31; 42:4; 49:23; 64:4. After the sentence of judgment was carried out, then the faithful would be rewarded. As a hunter waits patiently for the perfect time to pounce upon his prey, so God was going to act against His enemies. They would experience the *indignation...burning anger,* and the *fire of My zeal, 3:8.*

A sense of hope

Beginning in verse nine, Zephaniah begins to speak of a future time when remnants of all nations would seek the Lord. They would call on His name *from beyond the rivers of Ethiopia, 3:10.* The process of judgment would weed out all those who rebelled against Him. *For then I will remove from your midst Your proud, exulting ones, and you will never again be haughty On My holy mountain, 3:11.* Those who would comprise the remnant of God’s people are described as *humble and lowly people who take refuge in the name of the Lord, 3:12.* These verses strongly suggest there is no room for pride and arrogance among the people of God. God has always wanted human beings to put their complete and abiding trust in Him and His ways. Those who seek God will seek to be around others who serve God. They will find happiness in living the kind of life God expects.

I Will Promises of Zephaniah

ZEPHANIAH 3:18-20
<i>I will gather those who grieve...</i>
<i>I will save the lame and gather the outcast...</i>
<i>I will turn their shame into praise...</i>
<i>I will bring you in...</i>
<i>I will gather you together...</i>
<i>I will give you renown and praise...</i>
<i>I will restore your fortunes before your eyes...</i>

In 3:14-17, we read of a joyous and happy people. Zephaniah speaks of a time when the judgments and punishments of God have passed. This is a time when the Lord dwells amid the people, 3:15. This verse is Messianic in nature. Jesus promised He would always be with His people, Matthew 28:20. In verse seventeen, we

see the Lord pictured as a *victorious warrior*. He is a source of comfort to His people. But most importantly, we see the Lord *rejoicing* over His people with shouts of joy. God has always wanted a relationship with mankind! He rejoices because He sees the trust and faith the remnant has in Him. What a wonderful picture of the relationship Christians have with Almighty God! These verses express “the love and esteem of God for His redeemed.”⁴

The book closes with a final admonition to those who would read it during the Babylonian captivity. They would need hope to look forward to a time when a remnant would be restored. Chapter 3:18 speaks to people who would have been grieved because of their inability to observe Jewish feasts during captivity. God promises to deliver them from their oppressors. The children of Israel, who had been shamed and rejected, would once again receive *renown and praise Among all the peoples of the earth*, 3:20. Even though He had scattered them, He would gather them together again. What wonderful words of hope for a shattered people.

For Discussion

1. How was Judah like all the nations around them?
2. In what three ways could the people demonstrate their repentance?
3. Who were the *Cherethites*? What would become of their people?
4. How would Moab and Ammon be punished? What was the chief sin of Moab and Ammon?
6. What would happen to Ethiopia/Egypt and Assyria?
7. Why did Zephaniah mention the judgments against the nations surrounding Judah?
8. Describe Jerusalem's sins as listed in 3:1-4.

9. What were the people eager to do? (3:7)

10. Describe the happy time that would come after the *day of the Lord*. (3:11-17)

11. Does God dwell amid His kingdom today?

12. What does 3:17 tell you about God? What kind of relationship does He want with the creation?

13. What is the message of 3:18-20?

(Endnotes)

- 1 Hubbard, David Allan. *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, An Introduction and Commentary*. p. 102.
- 2 Smith, James E. *The Minor Prophets*. p. 419
- 3 Hubbard, David Allan. *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, An Introduction and Commentary*. p. 114.
- 4 Hailey, Homer, E. *A Commentary on the Minor Prophets* (Louisville, KY: Religious Supply, 1993), p. 246.