



**Sunday School Lesson Summary for July 8, 2007
Released on July 4, 2007**

“Zephaniah Announced God’s Justice”

Printed Text: Zephaniah 3:1-5; 8-9

Background Scripture: Zephaniah 3:1-13; 2 Chronicles 34:1-3

Devotional Reading: Psalm 27:7-14

Zephaniah 3:1-5

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.

Zephaniah 8-9

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.

INTRODUCTION

Moral Choices in an Immoral Society

Does our society reflect the morals found in the Bible? The answers to this question range from *yes*, to *not really*, to *who cares*? Increasingly, there are large segments of the population that want to get away from *moral* versus *immoral* distinctions. They prefer to see things from an *amoral* perspective- a perspective that does not

recognize any absolute standards of right and wrong. Under amorality, what may seem wrong to one person becomes enjoyable and right to another. This worldview is becoming more common, even within the church.

Yet the Christian who believes that the teachings of the Bible are from God will never be comfortable with attempts to paint morality a neutral gray. If we come from the perspective of biblical morality, then *amoral*= *immoral*, a violation of God's standards. We seek to live as God's people in a society that for the most part, does not recognize God.

In the ancient world there were plenty of people who rejected God's standards, even within God's chosen people of Israel. God continually raised up prophets to proclaim His demands for justice and righteousness. The prophets' call for reform was accompanied by a dire warning: God would not allow wickedness to go unpunished forever. There would be a day when the righteous would be rewarded and the evil would be purged. Zephaniah was the ideal prophet for this message.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Zephaniah received this prophecy during the reign of Josiah, perhaps the best king Judah had after David. Zephaniah traced his genealogy back four generations to King Hezekiah (Zephaniah 1:1), and he himself ministered during the reign of King Josiah. Having a royal lineage might have given him access to Josiah. Josiah was a godly king who, in his eight year, destroyed everything in Judah associated with idolatrous worship (2 Chronicles 34:1-7). Although he was already serving the Lord, certainly Zephaniah's encouragement helped.

It was during Josiah's reign and while the temple in Jerusalem was being restored that Hilkiah the high priest found a copy of the book of the law (1 Kings 22:8). While hearing it read to him, Josiah realized how far away from God the nation had gone.

Josiah eventually was responsible for many godly reforms in Judah. These reforms "didn't take," however. Zephaniah saw the coming demise of Judah after those reforms were rejected. He preached the coming down of Judah because of its deep sin. But Zephaniah also gave a picture of God's future restoration.

Zephaniah was a spokesman for the concept of *the day of the Lord*, a future point in time when God would move powerfully to punish wickedness and redeem the righteous. *The day of the Lord* found fulfillment in the history of Judah with its exile and return but also looks forward to a future day of God's final judgment of all humanity.

TODAY'S AIM

Facts: to examine the justice of God as it was prophesied against Jerusalem by Zephaniah.

Principle: to see that God's wrath is poured out on all who rebel against Him.

Application: to expect that when we rebel against God, His wrath will be poured out on us.

A Shameless People (Zephaniah 3:1-4)

1. What were the three things going on in Jerusalem that prompted God's announced "woe" upon her? (Zephaniah 3:1)

A glance at chapter 2 reveals that God had pronounced judgment on a number of the nations surrounding Israel. The city is not named in this verse, (3:1) but the context makes it clear that Jerusalem was the one intended because she was the one city expected to obey God.

The "woe" pronounced against Jerusalem is threefold. The word that has been translated "filthy" actually has to do with being rebellious or self-exalting. Jerusalem considered herself to be above God and His ways. The word "polluted" has to do with being desecrated or stained. Her sinfulness had robbed her of any purity she might once have had, and she was now deeply stained with sin. The word "oppressing" refers to that which is full of rage and violence. A "woe" is an indictment, and these three descriptions reveal its cause.

2. What four charges did God pronounce against Jerusalem? (v. 2)

This woe is followed by four distinct charges against the city. First, Jerusalem had not been obedient to God's voice. Perhaps you have known someone who, when disagreed with, absolutely refused to listen to the reasoning of the one who disagreed with him. A hard attitude takes over in such a person because he is certain he is right and has no need to hear from someone else. This is the kind of refusal Jerusalem was exhibiting. Since it was not important to hear God, it certainly was not important to obey what He said.

Second, Jerusalem had not been receptive to correction from God. In various ways throughout her history, God had sent word to her about His displeasure. Sometimes He sent chastisements along with warning words from the prophets. Jerusalem refused to recognize that these actions were from God.

Before we become too critical of Jerusalem, we should stop to think about whether or not we are sensitive to the various ways in which God seeks to get our attention. Is it possible that at times we too refuse His correction?

Third, Jerusalem did not trust in God. When times were difficult, she should have cried out to God and then trusted that He would work on her behalf. We must realize that the city was made up of individuals; so it was the people who were failing to trust God when they needed to.

Fourth, Jerusalem did not draw near to God in worship, sacrifice, or daily living. Apparently the people were simply trying to live on their own without recognizing God's desire to direct them and have them fulfill His will for them.

3. What four categories of leaders did God refer to? (v. 3-4)

The four categories of leaders God referred to were the princes and judges who were political leaders and the prophets and priests who were religious leaders. All of them are described as being corrupt and far less than God wanted. It is no wonder

that the people of Jerusalem were corrupt, for these people reflected the leadership that is over them.

4. What were they doing that displeased Him? (v. 3-4)

When Zephaniah compared Jerusalem's princes to roaring lions, he described them as rulers who insatiably and voraciously destroyed the people in order to satisfy their own desires for wealth and power. Instead of leading the people, as God intended, they drove them heartlessly in order to better themselves. Our world today has examples of this type of leader under whom people suffer.

The judges were supposed to oversee justice and obedience to the law: One of the characteristics of wolves is their preference for hunting food in the early evening. By that time of day they are ravenously hungry and greedily devour the entirety of their prey.

The religious leaders were no better. The prophets were described as "light and treacherous" (Zeph. 3:4). Their messages had no depth or meaning because they did not come from God. Their being treacherous indicates that they were unfaithful to God and as a result gave false messages to the people. Since the people did not receive the truth, they had no basis for living the way God intended them to, which meant they were outside the fold of His blessing. It is dangerous for any of us to be removed from the Lord in that way.

The priests are described as having polluted the sanctuary and having done violence to the law. These were the leaders who should have been most active in protecting the sanctity of the sanctuary and the worship practiced there and in leading the people to obey the law. Instead, they were the very ones doing the most damage and leading others astray in the process.

A Righteous God (Zephaniah 3:5)

5. What did Zephaniah say about the presence of God among the people? (v. 5)

Is God not a merciful, gracious, and long-suffering God? In spite of all the corruption just described, He assured the people that He was still there. In contrast to the leaders just described, however, He was still righteous and would never do anything wrong. The presence of iniquity did not implicate Him, for He is always above and beyond its reach. He maintains His righteousness and holiness even in the presence of sinful people. It is that righteousness and holiness that should be the standard His people follow.

Let us also be mindful that "no matter how spiritually desolate the world seems, God is here, and He is at work" (*Life Application Bible Notes, Tyndale*) How grateful we should be that God is present and available for our assistance!

As if to reinforce the truth of God's righteousness, Zephaniah said, "every morning doth he bring his judgment to light, he faileth not." Jeremiah wrote, "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness" (Lam. 3:22-23). In spite of Jerusalem's

iniquity, God's justice (the meaning of "judgment" in Zephaniah 3:5) was renewed every day and, if anything, became more and more obvious. Even so, His people felt no shame due to their wickedness in His presence.

A Renewing God (Zephaniah 3:8,9)

6. What leap in time did Zephaniah take near the end of his message? (v. 8)

In spite of the iniquity prevalent in Jerusalem, there were some who were still faithful to the Lord. It is probably these to whom the word was given: "Wait ye upon me" (vs. 8). There was definitely something better coming, and those faithful to God would be part of it.

Near the end of Zephaniah's message about the judgment on Jerusalem, he changes from a historical perspective to an eschatological one. This two-fold meaning also looks ahead to the time of the tribulation. These events also appear to be those that will occur at the Battle of Armageddon (Revelation 16).

Zephaniah explained that God is going to pour His indignation, also referred to as His fierce anger, out on those who for so long have ignored and defied Him. God's motivation for national destruction is pictured here as red-hot *jealousy*. This is not the petty jealousy of a girlfriend who observes her boyfriend looking at another girl for a little too long. This is the righteous jealousy of the wrath of God. He is unwilling to share devotion with any man-made gods and false religions (Exodus 34:14). Why should He? There is no other God!

7. What encouragement was there for Israel following the judgment? (v. 9)

From this litany of wrath and destruction emerges a bright ray of hope. Zephaniah looks forward to a restoration of the unity of humanity under God.

At that time everyone will speak "a pure language" (Zeph. 3:9), that is, language free from any impurity that would keep people from worshiping the Lord. This probably does not indicate a universal language but rather one no longer contaminated by the evil thoughts behind much of what is said today. People will universally call upon the name of the Lord and serve Him in conjunction with everyone else. The idea portrayed by "with one consent" is that of a pair of oxen yoked at the shoulder, enabling them to pull together.

We live in a wicked world much like that described by Zephaniah. We can, however, be true to the Lord in spite of the evil around us. We must be sensitive to His Spirit's prodding in our hearts when we stray from His will and then do whatever is necessary to get back into a right relationship with Him. The spiritual struggles we face will one day be forgotten and well worth the effort. Keep an eternal perspective in your mind at all times, and strive to obey Him. Justice will prevail one day.

CONCLUSION

The Mighty Day of the Lord

Zephaniah has been called *the prophet of the day of the Lord*. That phrase occurs several times in his little book.

The *day of the Lord* is a concept with strong biblical roots (see Isaiah 2:12; Joel 2:31 (quoted in Acts 2:20); Obadiah 15; and Zechariah 14:1 for a few examples). Old Testament prophets foresaw this as a future day when God would intervene in history to punish evil and reward righteousness. This was accomplished in an unexpected way when Israel and Judah both suffered destruction at the hand of foreign invaders.

That destruction was only what we call a "type" of the ultimate day of the Lord, however. In the New Testament it is synonymous with Christ's second coming (1 Thessalonians 5:2). The New Testament it is synonymous with Christ's second coming (1 Thessalonians 5:2). The New Testament authors see this as a day of finality, when there will be a destruction of heavens and earth (2 Peter 3:10). This too will be a pouring out of the wrath of God (see Revelation 6:17).

The day of the Lord can be either terrifying or comforting, depending on one's relationship to God. May we, as believers, take comfort in the assurance that God sees us as righteous because of the blood of Jesus. We have nothing to fear.

PRAYER

God of all nations, we pray for the day when our speech will become pure, and we will worship You with one voice. We pray this in the name of Jesus, our soon and coming king, amen.

THOUGHTS TO REMEMBER

God is always righteous, whether in punishment or deliverance.

There will be no shame, guilt, or remorse where sin is not recognized as sin. Helping people see the truth of this concept is thus vital.

ANTICIPATING NEXT WEEK'S LESSON: Habakkuk Announced the Doom of the Unrighteous. Study **Habakkuk 2:1-14**.

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