

Zephaniah Continues His Prophecy of Judgment

Zephaniah 3:1-8

Zephaniah 3:1-8: *“Woe to her who is rebellious and polluted, to the oppressing city! ² She has not obeyed His voice, she has not received correction; she has not trusted in the Lord, she has not drawn near to her God. ³ Her princes in her midst are roaring lions; her judges are evening wolves that leave not a bone till morning. ⁴ Her prophets are insolent, treacherous people; her priests have polluted the sanctuary. They have done violence to the law. ⁵ The Lord is righteous in her midst, He will do no unrighteousness. Every morning He brings His justice to light; He never fails, but the unjust knows no shame. ⁶ “I have cut off nations, their fortresses are devastated; I have made their streets desolate, with none passing by. Their cities are destroyed; there is no one, no inhabitant. ⁷ I said, ‘Surely you will fear Me, You will receive instruction’ — so that her dwelling would not be cut off, despite everything for which I punished her. But they rose early and corrupted all their deeds. ⁸ “Therefore wait for Me,” says the Lord, “Until the day I rise up for plunder; My determination is to gather the nations to My assembly of kingdoms, to pour on them My indignation, all My fierce anger. All the earth shall be devoured with the fire of My jealousy.”*

Background Notes

The structure of Zephaniah’s prophecy is similar to a number of Old Testament prophets. We could call it “the good news and the bad news” - with the bad news coming first. Zephaniah started his book with prophecies of God’s judgment, and ended his book with prophecies of God’s blessing – as do several other Old Testament prophets.

Zephaniah gave the good news of God’s future blessing in the second half of chapter 3. In the first half of the chapter, however, prophecy of God’s judgment continued.

In chapter 1 we saw prophecies of judgment against the whole world in the first few verses. Then Zephaniah zeroed in with prophecies of judgment against Judah and the capital city of Jerusalem. Chapter 2 contained prophecies of judgment against the foreign nations surrounding Israel. In chapter 3, Zephaniah returned to prophecies of judgment against Jerusalem (v1-7), and then concluded his judgment section of the book with a final prophecy of judgment against the whole world (v8).

The fact that Zephaniah and other Old Testament prophets spent so much time pronouncing judgment against sin should send a message to us. God hates sin and rebellion, and He must judge sin - then and today. Reading the predictions of judgment in the Old Testament prophets sometimes becomes tedious. But don’t miss the message. Whether it was the sins of a nation, or a city, or an individual person - God pronounced judgment against sin.

Doctrinal Points

1. The past judgment of Jerusalem was justified.

The “oppressing city” mentioned in verse 1 was Jerusalem. Because of her sins, Jerusalem would be judged. Not too many years after this prophecy was given, God allowed the Babylonian armies under Nebuchadnezzar to conquer Jerusalem, kill many of her people, and destroy the beautiful Temple that Solomon had built.

Notice the sins for which Jerusalem was judged and think of how all this applies today:

a. The people of Jerusalem did not trust and obey the Lord.

“She has not obeyed His voice, she has not received correction; she has not trusted in the Lord, she has not drawn near to her God” (v2). Do we “trust and obey” the Lord - or do we just sing the song?

b. The civil leaders of Jerusalem corrupted justice.

“Her princes in her midst are roaring lions; her judges are evening wolves that leave not a bone till morning” (v3). Do you know any corrupt politicians today who could be likened to lions and wolves?

c. The religious leaders of Jerusalem twisted and distorted the Word of the Lord for their own purposes, and the Temple of the Lord was no longer a holy place.

“Her prophets are insolent, treacherous people; her priests have polluted the sanctuary, they have done violence to the law” (v4). Think of the sad condition of much of the visible church today. The Word is not preached and there is sin in the congregation.

The point of verses 5-7 is that the people did not respond to God’s blessings or His discipline. Even though God made sure that the people knew His righteous standards (v5), and even though God cut off other nations for Israel’s sake (v6), and even though God disciplined His people, hoping that they would return to Him (v7) - yet there was **no response**. They did not return to the Lord. Rather, they rose early, or were eager to corrupt all their deeds (v7). What will it take to turn our own country around? Will it take a national tragedy, like some we’ve seen recently?

Look at verse 5: *“But the unjust knows no shame.”* Think of the sexual sin that is shamelessly practiced and promoted in America today. The longsuffering and patience of God will not go on forever. When God brings down the axe, His judgment will be justified, just as it was when He judged ancient Jerusalem. The past judgment of Jerusalem was justified.

2. The future judgment of the nations will be justified.

Verse 8: *“Therefore wait for Me,” says the Lord, “Until the day I rise up for plunder; My determination is to gather the nations to My assembly of kingdoms, to pour on them My indignation, all My fierce anger. All the earth shall be devoured with the fire of My jealousy.”*

In verse 8 Zephaniah concluded the judgment section of his prophecy. He began with a section about worldwide judgment in chapter 1, and here in his conclusion he returned to that subject. It’s interesting that this verse is the only verse in the Hebrew Old Testament that contains all twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. This may be just a coincidence - or it may emphasize the completeness of God’s judgment.

We believe that this judgment of the whole earth will occur during the coming Tribulation period of the last days, as we mentioned in chapter 1. The Tribulation period will follow the Rapture of the Church (which could occur at any time, even today). This is the judgment time of the future Day of the Lord - the time of the judgments that we read about in the book of Revelation. This is the time that the Lord will gather all nations against Jerusalem (Zechariah 14:2). This is the time of the “Battle of Armageddon” (Revelation 16). This is the time when the nations of the world will be judged and separated, as the Shepherd separates the sheep from the goats (Matthew 25 and Joel 3).

Notice that the Lord was addressing someone in verse 8: *“‘Therefore wait for Me,’ says the Lord, ‘Until the day I rise up for plunder.’”* To whom is the Lord speaking? It is the godly remnant of the last days. Revelation 7:4-17 speaks of a great number of believers coming out of the Tribulation period:

“And I heard the number of those who were sealed. One hundred and forty-four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel were sealed: ⁵ of the tribe of Judah twelve thousand were sealed; of the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand were sealed; of the tribe of Gad twelve thousand were sealed; ⁶ of the tribe of Asher twelve thousand were sealed; of the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand were sealed; of the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand were sealed; of the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand were sealed; of the tribe of Levi twelve thousand were sealed; of the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand were sealed; ⁸ of the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand were sealed; of the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand were sealed; of the tribe of Benjamin twelve thousand were sealed. ⁹ After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” ¹¹ All the angels stood around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures, and fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying: “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom, thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen.”

¹³ Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, "Who are these arrayed in white robes, and where did they come from?" ¹⁴ And I said to him, "Sir, you know." So he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵ Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple. And He who sits on the throne will dwell among them. ¹⁶ They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; ¹⁷ for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

The 144,000 believers from the nation of Israel and the great number of believers from every nation on earth are the believers of the future Tribulation period. These believers will constitute the "godly remnant" of the last days.

When God judges the nations in the future, it will be a righteous judgment. No one will dare question the Judge, the Lord Himself. The future judgment of the nations will be justified.

Practical Application

When you think everything is out of control, take a closer look!

Verse 5: *"Every morning He brings His justice to light; He never fails."*

In the context of this verse, we saw that the people of Judah had no excuse for their unrighteous ways. God's righteous standards were still known - even in the midst of all the spiritual and moral corruption.

The same is true today. Some people look around at all the unleashed evil and the spiritual and moral decay and say, "Where is God?" Well - take a closer look when you think everything is out of control.

Look around you! Every day you will find something to indicate that God is still on the throne, and that His righteous standards are still standing. You may see it when a person who has perpetrated evil is brought to justice. You may see it when God raises up a godly leader in a time of crisis.

How thankful we should be when we have a president who practices righteous standards. When this is the case, do you think it's just by chance? No way! Take a closer look when you think everything is out of control!