

Series: The Minor Prophets
“Zephaniah: A Time Is Coming!”

This is the 3rd message in this series on the so-called “minor prophets”. They’re called minor prophets, not because what they said wasn’t that important, but because their writings are not as long as prophets like Isaiah or Jeremiah. The prophet Zephaniah is one of those minor prophets. His writings take up only 3 chapters in the Old Testament. And, like so many of these minor prophets, people find these Old Testament books hard to find in their Bible, and they are often pretty much ignored.

Today let’s look at Zephaniah, and what God had to say through him. (Take a Bible, and follow as we delve into this book).

The setting is the southern kingdom of Judah, sometime around 600 years before Jesus set foot on earth – perhaps around 630-624 B.C. It begins, “The word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah...” (Zephaniah 1:1). He starts off with a bang! He cuts right to the chase!

“I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, says the Lord. I will sweep away humans and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. I will make the wicked stumble. I will cut off humanity from the face of the earth, says the Lord. I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and I will cut off from this place every remnant of Baal and the name of the idolatrous priests, those who bow down on the roofs to the host of the heavens, those who bow down and swear to the Lord but also swear by Milcom, those who have turned back from following the Lord, who have not sought the Lord or inquired of him” (Zephaniah 1:2-6).

God is going to sweep everything away from the face of the earth! He’s going to cut off humanity from the face of the earth (Zephaniah 1:2-3). Do you think God was literally going to destroy the whole earth because of what was going on with God’s people in Judah? I don’t think so. But this is a wakeup call. This is forceful language. The moral and spiritual condition of the Hebrew nation was corrupt, bankrupt! His words are like a smoke alarm that is loud and shrill and meant to get our attention!

God’s going to cut off any remnant of Baal (vs. 4) – Baalism. The worship of a false god. God’s going to name the idolatrous priests (vs. 4) – even the spiritual leaders were into idol worship – the holy men weren’t very holy! The people have “turned back from following the Lord” (vs. 6). God will punish the officials, and the king’s sons (vs. 8). Leaders were corrupt.

The prophet goes on: “At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the people who settle like dregs in wine, those who say in their hearts, ‘The Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm.’ Their wealth shall be plundered and their houses laid waste. Though they build houses, they shall not inhabit them; though they plant vineyards, they shall not drink wine from them” (Zephaniah 1:12-13)

God’s going to punish the people for their apathy. Caught up in wealth and their indulgences they think the Lord won’t do any good nor any harm – God is just some kind of neutral entity in

their way of looking at life. Nancy and I recently attended the funeral of a friend. Joyce was about our age growing up, and lived next door. Come to find out she was a wonderful Christian lady and prayer warrior. The pastor who preached at her service was trying to make sure those of us who were there took the Lord seriously. He said how his wife witnessed to her brother, and her brother rather casually said he and his wife were going to hell. He trivialized God, and his own eternal destiny. When I was in high school I worked in a wholesale shoe firm in Lancaster. I worked with an elderly German man who used to say it didn't matter where he went when he died, he had friends in both places!

The people of Judah are corrupt. They have turned from God, and apparently just didn't take it all seriously!

Look at what Zephaniah says next: "The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter; the warrior cries aloud there. That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements" (Zephaniah 1:14-16a).

The "Day of the Lord" is coming! And it will not be a joy ride for these wayward souls! The Jews had this idea of the "Day of the Lord". God was going to intervene in the world. God was going to vanquish evil. God was going to put His people in charge to govern this new realm. That time of transition from the old realm to the new realm was going to be a glorious time for the Israelites! They couldn't wait! But Zephaniah says it's going to be a day of wrath, distress, anguish, ruin, devastation, darkness and gloom. For God's disobedient people! Uh-oh!

So, that's chapter 1. *God's people have strayed way off course, and God is going to judge them.* Bet you can't wait for chapter 2! Let me summarize chapter 2 this way: Chapter 2 says God will judge Israel's enemies too. They're not going to get off the hook.

Maybe you're thinking: "I didn't know anything about Zephaniah before this. I couldn't easily find it in the Bible. I don't think I missed much! It's depressing. God's going to judge us, God's going to judge me, for my sins."

Okay, I realize, you don't want to come to church just to feel bad, just to feel guilty, do you? You don't want to come here just to be told that God's going to judge you, do you? At our last Community Friends meeting we looked at a video of Christian comedian Ken Davis. He told how he grew up thinking Christianity was just having a list of things you didn't do – didn't smoke, didn't drink, didn't play cards, didn't dance, etc. And God was just watching him to slip up, so God could punish him. He thought that whenever he came close to having fun, God would stomp on him and say, "Stop!"

But judgment is a part of the fabric of life, isn't it? God's judgment on sin and evil. Our needing to hold one another accountable when we do wrong. That is not all there is to the gospel, the good news, but that's a part of it. God holds us accountable for the life we live. Just a few

sample verses: John 5:22: “The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son.” Acts 10:42 “(Jesus) commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.” Romans 2:16 speaks of the day when “God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.” 2 Timothy 4:1: “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead.”

Like most of the prophets, Zephaniah is trying to give God’s people a wakeup call! It’s like you’re watching a family member or friend destroy their life with some sort of habit or addiction, and you think, “I’d just like to shake him!” “I’d just like to shake her!”

And note this! 20-30 years after Zephaniah’s prophesies, the people of Judah *did experience God’s judgement!* They were conquered by the Babylonians, and many were taken into exile, into Babylon!

Aren’t there times when we need a wakeup call? To turn from evil, and start to do what’s right? Isn’t that a word for our country? Isn’t that a word for the Church? 1 Peter 4:17 says, “For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God.” Aren’t there times that we in the church have lost our concern for souls, or forgotten our mission to help those in need, or include those who are not like us? Don’t we - *individually* – at times need a wakeup call morally or spiritually?

Our oldest grandson Josh works in a bank in Chicago. He was to fly home for Thanksgiving. But his alarm didn’t go off. He missed his wakeup call. He missed his flight. It cost him time, and money. Prophets like Zephaniah rattled the cage, upset the apple cart, to call people to turn to the Lord, because they had a sense of what it would cost God’s people if they didn’t change.

But that’s not the note on which the book of Zephaniah ends. It ends with some of the most warm and gracious words God ever spoke. Not everyone will continue to be hard-nosed and stubborn, refusing to turn back to the Lord. “For I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord - the remnant of Israel; they shall do no wrong and utter no lies, nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths. Then they will pasture and lie down, and no one shall make them afraid” (Zephaniah 3:12-13).

Notice, “the remnant of Israel”. This “remnant” is mentioned in different places in the Bible. No matter how rebellious God’s people, how far they stray, there’s always a few, who will not the knee to Baal, who will remain faithful to the Lord Almighty. They will lie down in safety in the green grass of God’s pastures. “Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel...the Lord has taken away the judgments against you” (Zephaniah 3:14-15).

And then this verse: “The Lord your God is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love” (Zephaniah 3:17).

God has moved from His anger over their sin to rejoicing over them! A pastor named Jeremy Treat talks about his high school basketball coach, who was a classic screamer who motivated

with fear and shame. His voice was powerful, but Jeremy says, “I heard it only when I did something wrong... red in the cheeks and foaming at the mouth, he would scream until I had to wipe the spit off the side of my face.” That’s how a lot of people see God—as a screamer who uses shame and guilt to get people in line.

But here we have a very different picture. He is the God who forgives and saves, the God who rejoices over us! Do you believe in the God who rejoices over you? Can you feel God rejoicing over you!

American playwright and Jesuit priest, Bill Cain took a break from his own ministry years ago to care for his father, who was dying of cancer. His father had become a frail man, dependent on Bill to do everything for him. Though physically he was not what he had been, his mind remained sharp and alert. In the role reversal common to adult children who care for their dying parents, Bill would put his father to bed and then read him to sleep, exactly as his father had done for him in childhood. Bill would read from some novel, and his father would lie there, staring at his son, smiling.

Sometimes, Bill was exhausted from the day's care and work and would plead with his dad, “Look, here's the idea. I read to you. You fall asleep.” Bill's father would impishly apologize and dutifully close his eyes. But this wouldn't last long. Soon enough, Bill's father would pop one eye open and smile at his son. Bill would catch him and whine, “Now, come on.” The father would, again, oblige, until he couldn't anymore, and the other eye would open to catch a glimpse of his son. This went on and on, and after his father's death, Bill said that this evening ritual was really a story of a father who just couldn't take his eyes off his kid.

God is like that with His children! He sees us not just what we know we are – sometimes messed up, wayward, foolish. God’s true Son, Jesus, took our sins upon Himself on the cross. He endured the judgment and condemnation that we deserve. So, if we’re in Christ, when God looks at us, He doesn’t see the faults and failures – He sees us clothed in the righteousness of Christ – lovely and beautiful. Like Bill Cain’s dad, he just can’t take His eyes off His kid!

And this can make such a difference in our life, and how we see ourselves! Zephaniah put it this way: “He will renew you in his love” (Zephaniah 3:17). He will renew us again and again and again, when we know we are loved by the heavenly Father.

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