

The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 8: Woe to the Rebellious City

Zephaniah 3:1-8

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson handles God's indictment of His own city, Jerusalem, and two doctrinal anchors matter. First, the principle of greater accountability for the people of God: judgment begins at the house of God (1 Peter 4:17), and to whom much is given, much is required (Luke 12:48). The covenant community is held to a higher standard precisely because of its privilege. Second, the seriousness of spiritual leadership: the corruption of princes, judges, prophets, and especially priests shows the grave damage done when leaders are unfaithful and the weighty accountability they bear. Keep before the class the luminous truth of verse 5, that the just Lord was present and faithful every morning even amid the corruption, which both comforts and convicts.

The formational aim is sharp self-examination for religious people. The four-fold indictment of verse 2, would not obey, would not receive correction, would not trust, would not draw near, is a precise diagnostic of the hardening heart, and it targets exactly the sins to which church-going believers are prone: hearing without obeying, resisting correction, going through religious motions without trust, and being near the things of God without drawing near to God Himself. The most dangerous condition in the chapter is numbness, being so calloused that God's daily faithfulness makes no impression and sin produces no shame. Aim to restore tenderness of conscience and genuine nearness to God.

Hold conviction and hope together. This is a convicting chapter and should not be blunted, but it sits just before the book's glorious turn to restoration and rejoicing. Let students feel the weight of the indictment while knowing that the just Lord in their midst is also the God who will, in the next passage, sing over His people. Point throughout to Christ, who perfectly did what Jerusalem failed to do: He heard, He trusted, He drew near, and He now enables us to do the same.

Question 1

Student Question:

Zephaniah turns his sharpest woe not on the pagan nations but on Jerusalem, the city of God (Zephaniah 3:1). Why does God hold His own people to such a high standard, and what does this teach about the greater accountability that comes with greater privilege (Luke 12:48; 1 Peter 4:17)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Note the shock of verse 1: after oracles against the pagan nations, the sharpest woe falls on Jerusalem, 'the oppressing city,' the city of the temple and the covenant. God's hardest words are for His own people. This sets the theme of greater accountability.

Teach the biblical principle directly. 'Judgment must begin at the house of God' (1 Peter 4:17). To whom much is given, much is required (Luke 12:48). Privilege increases responsibility. Jerusalem had God's presence, His law, His prophets, His temple, and therefore bore greater accountability than nations without these gifts.

Correct a common assumption. We sometimes imagine that being God's people exempts us from scrutiny, that our religious identity is a shield. Zephaniah teaches the opposite: nearness to God's gifts raises the standard. The church is not less accountable than the world but more.

Apply it soberly and humbly. Those of us with Bibles, churches, and decades of teaching have received much. The question is not whether we know the truth but whether we live it. Invite students to feel the weight of their privileges as a call to faithfulness, not a guarantee of safety.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Greater privilege bringing greater accountability (Luke 12:48).
- Judgment beginning at the house of God (1 Peter 4:17).
- Religious identity as responsibility, not exemption.
- The danger of assuming our standing shields us from scrutiny.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God hold His own people to a higher standard?
- How can religious privilege become a false sense of safety?
- What much have you been given, and how faithfully are you living it?

Question 2

Student Question:

Jerusalem 'obeyed not the voice; she received not correction' (Zephaniah 3:2). How well do you receive correction, from God's word, from circumstances, from others who love you, and where might God be trying to correct you in a way you have been resisting?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question focuses on the second failure of verse 2: 'she received not correction.' The refusal to be corrected is a mark of the hardening heart, and it is a sin to which mature, knowledgeable believers are especially prone.

Help students examine how they receive correction from various sources: from God's word when it confronts them, from painful circumstances God uses to discipline, from people who

love them enough to tell the truth. The instinctive human response is defensiveness; the spiritual response is humble receptivity.

Teach correction as love, not rejection. Hebrews 12:5-11 frames God's correction as the discipline of a loving Father who corrects the children He loves. To refuse correction is to refuse a form of God's love. The wise person loves reproof (Proverbs 9:8-9).

Move toward concrete openness. Ask each person to identify one area where God may be trying to correct them, through Scripture, circumstance, or a person, that they have been resisting, and to take a posture of humble receptivity toward it this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Refusal of correction as a mark of the hardening heart.
- Correction as the loving discipline of a Father (Hebrews 12:5-11).
- The wise love reproof; the proud resist it (Proverbs 9:8-9).
- Receiving correction from Scripture, circumstance, and people.

Discussion Prompts

- How do you typically respond when you are corrected?
- Where might God be correcting you in a way you have resisted?
- How does seeing correction as love change your willingness to receive it?

Question 3

Student Question:

The city is charged with four failures: she would not obey, would not receive correction, would not trust the Lord, and would not draw near to God (Zephaniah 3:2). How do these four reveal the anatomy of a hardening heart, and how does each one feed the others?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 2 lists four failures that together form the anatomy of a hardening heart: 'she obeyed not the voice; she received not correction; she trusted not in the Lord; she drew not near to her God.' Walk students through them as a connected progression.

Show how each feeds the others. Refusing to obey God's voice dulls the conscience; a dulled conscience resists correction; resisting correction erodes trust, because we no longer believe God's way is best; and lost trust kills intimacy, so we no longer draw near. Hardening is not one event but a downward spiral.

Teach that hardening is gradual and often unnoticed. No one decides to become hard; we simply ignore one prompting, brush off one correction, and over time the heart grows callous (Hebrews

3:13 warns against being 'hardened through the deceitfulness of sin'). The four failures describe a slow process, not a single fall.

Apply it by reversing the spiral. The way back is the same path in reverse: begin to obey the voice again, accept correction, renew trust, and draw near. Invite students to identify where on this spiral they are and to take the next step back toward God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The anatomy of a hardening heart: disobedience, resisting correction, distrust, distance.
- How each failure feeds the next in a downward spiral.
- Hardening as gradual and often unnoticed (Hebrews 3:13).
- Reversing the spiral by obeying, receiving correction, trusting, and drawing near.

Discussion Prompts

- How do these four failures feed one another?
- Where on this spiral do you recognize yourself?
- What is the next step back toward God for you?

Question 4

Student Question:

Jerusalem 'drew not near to her God,' even while surrounded by the temple and its worship (Zephaniah 3:2). Where might you be near the things of God, church, Bible, religious activity, without actually drawing near to God Himself, and what would genuine nearness look like?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question isolates the fourth and saddest failure: 'she drew not near to her God.' The tragic irony is that Jerusalem was full of religious activity, the temple, the sacrifices, the feasts, yet the people did not actually draw near to God Himself. Proximity to holy things is not the same as nearness to God.

Help students see this danger in themselves, because it is the besetting sin of the religious. We can attend church, read the Bible, serve, and discuss theology while our hearts remain far from God. Jesus quoted Isaiah against exactly this: 'this people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth... but their heart is far from me' (Matthew 15:8).

Distinguish activity from intimacy. Drawing near to God is relational and personal: it is communion, attention, and love, not merely participation in religious forms. The forms are meant to carry us into His presence, but they can become substitutes for it.

Move toward genuine nearness. The promise of James 4:8 is direct: 'Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you.' Invite each person to name where they have settled for nearness to

religious things and one way to draw near to God Himself, in unhurried prayer, in worship that engages the heart, in honest communion.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Proximity to holy things versus nearness to God Himself.
- The religious person's besetting danger: form without heart (Matthew 15:8).
- Drawing near as relational communion, not mere participation.
- The promise: draw near to God and He draws near to us (James 4:8).

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you near the things of God without drawing near to God Himself?
- What is the difference between religious activity and genuine nearness?
- What would it look like to draw near to God this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Zephaniah condemns the corrupt leaders, princes like roaring lions, judges like ravening wolves, prophets who are treacherous, and priests who pollute the sanctuary (Zephaniah 3:3-4). What does this teach about the seriousness of spiritual leadership and the damage done when leaders are unfaithful?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 3-4 indict the leaders with devastating images: princes are 'roaring lions,' judges are 'evening wolves' that devour and leave nothing for the morning, prophets are 'light and treacherous,' and priests 'have polluted the sanctuary' and 'done violence to the law.' The very people charged with leading Judah to God had become predators and corrupters.

Teach the seriousness of spiritual leadership. Leaders shape the people they lead; when shepherds go bad, the flock suffers. God holds leaders to a stricter account (James 3:1, 'we shall receive the greater condemnation'). The corruption of the priests is singled out as especially grievous because they handled holy things.

Show the contrast with God's design. Leaders were meant to be shepherds feeding the flock, not wolves devouring it (compare Ezekiel 34, where God indicts shepherds who feed themselves). Christ is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep, the opposite of these predators (John 10:11-13).

Apply it in two directions. For those in any kind of leadership, parents, teachers, elders, this is a sober call to faithfulness and a warning against self-serving leadership. For all, it is a call to pray for and rightly esteem faithful leaders, and to recognize the real damage unfaithful ones can do. Note here, consistent with sound teaching, that God's pattern reserves the offices of elder,

preacher, and the teaching of mixed assemblies to qualified, faithful men, which makes the call to faithful, godly male leadership all the weightier.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The seriousness of spiritual leadership and its stricter accountability (James 3:1).
- The damage done when leaders become predators rather than shepherds (Ezekiel 34).
- Christ the Good Shepherd as the opposite of the false leaders (John 10:11-13).
- The weight of God's pattern of faithful, qualified male leadership in the church.
- Honoring and praying for faithful leaders.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God hold spiritual leaders to a stricter standard?
- What damage results when leaders feed themselves rather than the flock?
- How can you support and pray for faithful leadership?

Question 6

Student Question:

The priests 'have done violence to the law' (Zephaniah 3:4), twisting and corrupting what God had given to guide His people. Where are you tempted to bend or explain away God's clear instruction to suit your own preferences, and what would faithful submission to His word look like instead?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question draws on the charge that the priests 'have done violence to the law' (verse 4), twisting and corrupting God's given word. The sin is not ignorance of the law but the willful bending of it to suit themselves.

Help students recognize this temptation in their own handling of Scripture. We do violence to God's word whenever we explain away its clear commands, reinterpret it to permit what we want, or soften it where it confronts us. This is more subtle than open disobedience; it dresses disobedience in the clothing of interpretation.

Teach the proper posture toward Scripture: submission, not negotiation. God's word is to be obeyed, not edited. The faithful response to a hard command is not to find a loophole but to bow. 'Speak, Lord; for thy servant heareth' (1 Samuel 3:9), not 'Listen, Lord, while I explain.'

Move toward honest obedience. Invite each person to identify one area where they have been bending or explaining away God's clear instruction to fit their preferences, and one step of faithful submission they will take, trusting that God's commands are for our good.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Doing violence to God's word by bending it to our preferences.
- The subtlety of disobedience dressed as interpretation.
- Submission, not negotiation, as the right posture toward Scripture.
- Trusting that God's commands are for our good.

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you tempted to explain away a clear command of God?
- What is the difference between honest interpretation and bending the word to suit yourself?
- What would faithful submission look like in that area?

Question 7

Student Question:

Even amid the corruption, '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' (Zephaniah 3:5). What comfort and what challenge come from knowing God is faithfully present and just every single day, even when His people are not?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 5 is the luminous center of the passage: '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.' In the middle of all the corruption, God Himself was present, faithful, and just, every single morning.

Draw out the comfort. God's faithfulness does not depend on the faithfulness of His people. When the princes were lions and the priests were corrupt, the just Lord was still in the midst, still doing right, still reliable every morning. His character is the fixed point that the failure of His people cannot move.

Draw out the challenge. The same verse exposes the people: God was faithfully present and they did not notice or care. His daily faithfulness should have shamed them into repentance, but they were too calloused to feel it. God's nearness is a comfort to the tender and a judgment on the numb.

Apply it personally. The God who was faithful every morning in Zephaniah's Jerusalem is faithful every morning now (Lamentations 3:22-23, 'his compassions fail not; they are new every morning'). Invite students to notice and respond to His daily faithfulness rather than taking it for granted.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's faithfulness independent of His people's faithfulness.
- God present and just every morning, 'he faileth not.'

- His daily faithfulness as comfort to the tender and judgment on the numb.
- New mercies every morning (Lamentations 3:22-23).

Discussion Prompts

- What comfort do you draw from God being faithful every morning even when His people are not?
- How does His faithful presence also challenge complacency?
- How can you notice and respond to God's daily faithfulness?

Question 8

Student Question:

The tragedy is that God was faithfully present every morning, 'but the unjust knoweth no shame' (Zephaniah 3:5); they had grown numb to His presence and felt no conviction. Where have you grown numb to God's faithfulness or lost a healthy sense of conviction over sin, and how can that sensitivity be restored?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question draws on the heartbreaking phrase 'but the unjust knoweth no shame' (verse 5). The deepest tragedy was not the sin itself but the numbness, the loss of any sense of shame or conviction. They had sinned so long that conscience had gone silent.

Teach the danger of a seared conscience. Paul speaks of those whose conscience is 'seared with a hot iron' (1 Timothy 4:2). Repeated, unrepented sin dulls our sensitivity until we feel nothing where we should feel grief. Numbness is more dangerous than guilt, because guilt at least registers that something is wrong.

Help students examine their own sensitivity. Have they grown numb to a habitual sin that once bothered them? Have they lost the capacity to be moved by God's faithfulness, by the cross, by the needs of others? A heart that no longer feels conviction has drifted far, often without noticing.

Move toward restored tenderness. The remedy is to draw near to God again, to expose ourselves to His word and presence, and to ask Him to restore a tender heart (Psalm 51:10, 'create in me a clean heart'; Ezekiel 36:26, a heart of flesh for a heart of stone). Invite each person to name where they have grown numb and to ask God to make them sensitive again.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The danger of a seared conscience that feels no shame (1 Timothy 4:2).
- Numbness as more dangerous than guilt.
- Growing numb to sin, to grace, to God's faithfulness.
- Asking God to restore a tender heart (Psalm 51:10; Ezekiel 36:26).

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you grown numb to sin or to God's faithfulness?
- Why is numbness more dangerous than feeling guilty?
- How can a tender, sensitive conscience be restored?

Question 9

Student Question:

God says He waits, gathering the nations, until the day He pours out His indignation, yet His aim throughout is that people would 'fear me' and 'receive instruction' (Zephaniah 3:7-8). How does this passage show that even God's judgments are meant to bring people to repentance, and how is this consistent with His desire that none should perish (2 Peter 3:9; Ezekiel 18:23)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal question of the lesson, drawing out God's purpose in judgment from verses 6-8. God recounts how He has cut off nations and laid waste their cities, 'saying, Surely thou wilt fear me, thou wilt receive instruction.' His judgments were meant to teach and to turn people to Himself.

Teach the redemptive intent behind God's judgments. Even God's severity has a saving aim. He disciplines in order to bring His people to repentance, 'surely thou wilt fear me, thou wilt receive instruction.' Judgment in Scripture is rarely the last word; it is most often a summons to return before it is too late.

Hold this together with God's revealed heart. God 'hath no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live' (Ezekiel 18:23, 32). He is 'longsuffering... not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance' (2 Peter 3:9). God's warnings and even His chastisements flow from a desire to save, not merely to destroy.

Address the sober note honestly. Verse 7 ends, 'but they rose early, and corrupted all their doings.' God's gracious intent can be refused. The same judgment meant to turn them, they hardened against. This is the tragedy of impenitence: mercy offered and mercy spurned. Be careful here, consistent with sound teaching, to present this as genuine human responsibility, God truly desires their repentance and they are genuinely able to respond, rather than as an unconditional decree that some cannot be saved.

Bring it home. God's discipline in our own lives, hardships, consequences, the conviction of His word, is meant to turn us back to Him. The right response is not resentment but repentance. Invite students to read God's correcting hand as the kindness that leads to repentance (Romans 2:4), and to respond before, like Jerusalem, they grow hardened against it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The redemptive, saving intent behind God's judgments ('surely thou wilt fear me, receive instruction').
- God's revealed heart: no pleasure in the death of the wicked, desiring all to repent (Ezekiel 18:23, 32; 2 Peter 3:9).
- Judgment as a summons to return, not usually the last word.
- The tragedy of impenitence: mercy offered and spurned.
- Genuine human responsibility and ability to respond, against any notion of an unconditional decree.
- Reading God's correction as kindness leading to repentance (Romans 2:4).

Discussion Prompts

- How does this passage show that even God's judgments aim at repentance?
- How does God's desire that none perish shape the way you read His warnings?
- How should you respond when God's correcting hand is on your life?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over this sobering examination of God's own people. Name one specific way the Lord is calling you, through this passage, to soften your heart, receive His correction, and draw near to Him, becoming more like Christ, who always heard, always trusted, and always drew near to the Father.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question gathers the chapter's call to the people of God and asks for a personal response. The aim is a softened heart: one that hears, receives correction, trusts, and draws near, in contrast to the hardened city.

Help students name their need. Some need to start obeying the voice they have been ignoring. Some need to receive a correction they have resisted. Some need to renew trust. Some need to move from religious activity to genuine nearness. Some need their numbed conscience made tender again. Meet each where they are.

Point them to Christ as the perfect contrast to Jerusalem and as the means of our change. Where the city would not obey, Jesus said, 'I do always those things that please him' (John 8:29). Where the city would not trust or draw near, Jesus lived in perfect trust and constant communion with the Father. He did what Jerusalem failed to do, and by His Spirit He forms that same heart in us. To become like Christ is to become a people who hear, trust, and draw near.

Invite a concrete commitment: one act of obedience, one correction to receive, one step of drawing near, one area of numbness to bring to God for renewal. Encourage each person to name it and begin this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- A softened heart that hears, receives correction, trusts, and draws near.
- Christ as the perfect contrast to hardened Jerusalem (John 8:29).
- Christ forming His own heart of obedience, trust, and nearness in us.
- Becoming like Christ: a people who hear, trust, and draw near to the Father.

Discussion Prompts

- Which of the four failures most needs to change in your life?
- How does Christ model the heart Jerusalem lacked?
- What one step toward God will you take this week?