

The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah

Lesson 8: Woe to the Rebellious City -- Zephaniah 3:1-8

It is one thing for God to pronounce judgment on Nineveh and Moab, the pagan nations outside the covenant. It is another thing entirely for Him to turn that same searching gaze on His own city. That is what happens at the start of Zephaniah 3. After sweeping across the surrounding nations, the prophet comes home. 'Woe to her that is filthy and polluted, to the oppressing city!' He is not describing Nineveh now. He is describing Jerusalem, the city of the temple, the city that bore God's name. The hardest words in the book are aimed not at the outsiders but at the people of God who should have known better.

Zephaniah's indictment is painfully specific. The city 'obeyed not the voice; she received not correction; she trusted not in the Lord; she drew not near to her God.' Four failures, and they cut to the bone: she would not listen, would not accept discipline, would not trust, would not draw near. Then he names the leaders. The princes are roaring lions. The judges are ravaging wolves. The prophets are light and treacherous. And worst of all, the priests 'have polluted the sanctuary, they have done violence to the law.' The very people charged with leading Judah to God had become predators and corrupters. When the shepherds go bad, the whole flock suffers.

And yet, woven right through the indictment, is a line of heartbreaking beauty: '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.' In the middle of all this corruption, God Himself was present, faithfully doing right every single morning, and the people simply did not notice and felt no shame. That is the deepest tragedy of the chapter: not merely that the city sinned, but that God was right there, faithful and just, and they had grown so calloused that His daily faithfulness made no impression on them at all.

This lesson holds up a mirror to the people of God, and that includes us. It warns against the particular dangers of religious people: hearing without obeying, going through the motions without trusting, being near the things of God without drawing near to God Himself. And it sounds a sober warning to leaders, that those who handle holy things carry a weighty accountability. But it also comforts, for the just Lord is still in the midst, still faithful every morning, still bringing His judgment to light. The question the chapter presses on us is whether we have ears to hear and hearts soft enough to be ashamed of our sin and to return.

Group Discussion: Read together the four-fold indictment of Jerusalem: 'she obeyed not the voice; she received not correction; she trusted not in the Lord; she drew not near to her God' (Zephaniah 3:2). Which of these four failures do you think is most common among religious people today, and why?

Personal Reflection: This chapter aims its hardest words not at outsiders but at the people of God. Where do you recognize one of these four failures, not listening, not accepting correction, not trusting, not drawing near, in your own walk with God right now, and what is He inviting you to do about it?

Read Zephaniah 3:1–8

Study Questions

1. 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)?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. Zephaniah condemns the corrupt leaders, princes like roaring lions, judges like ravaging 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?

6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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)?

10. 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.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: 1 Peter 4:17, judgment beginning at the house of God; Luke 12:47–48, greater accountability for those given much; Hebrews 12:5–11, receiving the Lord's correction as a loving Father's discipline; James 4:8, drawing near to God so that He draws near to us; Ezekiel 34:1–10, God's indictment of the false shepherds who fed themselves.

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