

A Day of Conversion

Zephaniah 3:9-13

Studies in Zephaniah #3

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“**T**herefore wait for me” (3:8). Zephaniah is all about the advent of the Lord. He’s described it as a day of final and ultimate judgment; he’s described it as a day of conquest in which a new Joshua leads a new Israel into a new heavens and new earth. In other words, the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ teaches us the twin truths that it is a bane to the unbeliever but a blessing to the believer. As our Belgic Confession article 37 says, “the consideration of this judgment is justly terrible and dreadful to the wicked and ungodly, but most desirable and comfortable to the righteous and elect.”

Here at the end of chapter 3 that blessing is prophesied. But it’s not a blessing only at the Second Coming; it’s a blessing we experience because of his first coming.

Remember that I said as the prophets spoke of the coming of the Lord, it’s like driving towards the mountains. You see a peak in front of you and think it’s the highest one there is, but then as you get closer you notice another one rising up behind it. And what looks like two peaks on top of each other are really two peaks with a vast distance between them. That’s what it’s like reading the prophets. They speak of the coming of the Lord, but they don’t always see that the Lord’s coming is in two stages.

So Zephaniah is describing here the blessings of salvation that because of the first coming of the Lord Jesus, which is brought to perfection at his Second Coming. “But our reading didn’t sound like what I’m used to reading in the New Testament about my

salvation: being born again, trusting in Jesus, being justified, etc.” There’s a second principle you have to keep in mind when reading the prophets. Zephaniah is describing the gospel blessings of Jesus Christ but in ways that his hearers six hundred years before would understand. The first time I traveled to Brazil, I was offered a traditional candy eaten in the north of the country. I asked what it was and they said cupuaçu. Of course, that didn’t mean anything to me so they described it to me through a translator who who had eaten North American candy. “It’s like white chocolate, but not as smooth. It’s like pineapple, but less sweet. It’s like banana, but less mushy.” So I tried it and loved it, unlike most Americans apparently!

A Conversion of Words

Zephaniah describes the advent of the Lord as a day of conversion. And the first thing that is converted or changed is *a conversion of words*. Notice how he continues the previous thought in verse 9 with the words, **For at that time**. We expect him to give us an elaboration upon the previous words of judgment. But the Lord surprises us! Isn’t this just like the Lord? Here this OURC. It’s when we think we are down and out and he has nothing good in store for us he comes with a surprising word of hope.

Instead of judgment he says, **I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech** (v. 9). And what’s so amazing is that this word **change** is used of the Lord’s judgment in “overturning” Sodom and Gomorrah; but here Zephaniah uses it for the Lord’s saving work. And why is he going to change **speech**? Look back at what we’ve read people were saying about the Lord:

In 1:5 he spoke of Judahites who “who swear to the LORD and yet swear to Milcom.”

1:12 he spoke of Judahites “who say in their hearts, “The LORD will not do good, nor will he do ill.”

In 2:8 he spoke of Judah’s enemies: “I have heard the taunts of Moab and the revilings of the Ammonites, how they have taunted my people and made boasts against their territory.”

In 2:10 he continued: “This shall be their lot in return for their pride, because they taunted and boasted against the people of the LORD of hosts.”

In 2:15 he spoke of Nineveh: “This is the exultant city that lived securely, that said in her heart, “I am, and there is no one else.”

But a day was coming in which this defiled speech about the Lord from his own people as well as his enemies would be converted into a **pure speech** (v. 9). Why? Notice the purpose: **that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord** (v. 9). This is describing the blessings of Jesus Christ. We can evaluate this by asking what happens when Jesus converts us?

First, conversion is a work of his grace: **I will change the speech...that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD** (v. 9). Grace makes us a new creation; grace causes us to be grateful in service to the Lord. As John Calvin said, “God cannot be rightly invoked by us, until he draws us to himself.”¹ And what illustrates this so graphically here is how Zephaniah says that **from as far as beyond the rivers of Cush** (that’s Egypt), **my worshipers, the daughter of my dispersed ones, shall bring my offering** (3:10).

Second, conversion leads to worship. In 1:5 Judah was worshipping the Lord and Milcom, but conversion caused them to call upon the Lord (3:9). As one old writer said,

¹ Calvin, 284.

“The true characteristic of a converted and spiritual people are their being much in prayer to God.”²

Third, conversion unites diverse people to serve the one true God. When 3:9 speaks of serving the Lord **with one accord** the image Zephaniah uses is “one shoulder.” The image is people standing shoulder to shoulder serving the Lord together. Children, have you ever gone to a party and there was a three-legged race? That’s where you and a friend stand side-by-side, and the two legs close to each other are tied together as one? That’s what it’s like being a Christian, serving the Lord tied together as one.

A Conversion of Deeds

And this serving the Lord together leads to a second major change. As Zephaniah describes the advent of the Lord as a day of conversion he proclaims *a conversion of deeds*. The Lord would not only convert the wicked speech of the peoples into a pure speech, but **on that day** (3:11) instead of his people being **put to shame because of the deeds by which you have rebelled against me** (v. 11), the Lord would convert them from their evil deeds.

Look at the contrast from verse 11 to verse 12. In order for an ancient prophet to speak of the gospel grace of conversion he speaks in a language that ancient Israelites would understand. The conversion of sinners into saints is like a judgment of purification: **I will remove from your midst your proudly exultant ones, and you shall no longer be haughty in my holy mountain** (3:11). Mount Zion was the holy mountain and on it

² Hutcheson, 322.

was the holy temple and in it was the “Holy, Holy, Holy” Lord (Isa. 6:3). And to illustrate conversion the Holy Spirit uses the imagery of cleansing that holy place. This is an Old Testament way of describing what you were before you came to Christ, brothers and sisters. You “dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked” (Eph. 2:1–2). You “follow[ed] the course of this world” (Eph. 2:2). You “follow[ed] the prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:2). You “lived in the passions of [y]our flesh” (Eph. 2:3). You “carr[ied] out the desires of the body and the mind” (Eph. 2:3). You were “by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Eph. 2:3). Have you stopped to think lately where you would be today, left in that condition, apart from Jesus Christ? I don’t know if I’d be anywhere else six feet under.

What would be left behind? A holy remnant. Notice how Zephaniah describes a converted people: **a people humble and lowly** who would **seek refuge in the name of the LORD** (3:12). Most amazing is how he describes them in 3:13: **They shall do no injustice and speak no lies, nor shall there be found in their mouth a deceitful tongue.** How is this true of you and me? We’re still sinners! Let me give you a helpful distinction. *Positionally* we are righteous in Christ so that we can say in him we **do no injustice**, we **speak no lies**, and **nor shall there be found in our mouth a deceitful tongue.** *Practically* we struggle as we pursue being just, but show injustice; we struggle to tell the truth, but lie; we struggle in being honest, but deceive. Zephaniah is describing what we have in Christ—what we call our justification. That’s the first mountain peak he sees. But there’s another behind it at a vast distance—our glorification in Christ in eternity. As John says, “what we will be [in the future] has not yet appeared; but we know

that when [Jesus] appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

And it’s because the Lord’s coming has changed us from unrighteous to righteous in him that “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). Look at how Zephaniah envisions that peace: **For they shall graze and lie down, and none shall make them afraid** (3:13). Lambs eating and sleeping in a meadow without fear of wolves but in total peace. That’s you in Christ! This is what you can be in Christ if you repent of your sins and give your life to Jesus Christ. This is what his first advent is all about. This is what we wait for in its perfection when he arrives again. Amen.