

God's Message to Us in Zephaniah

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Introduction

Do you yearn for real reformation?

- Do you know what I mean by that?
- It can be frustrating to see the church struggling along through the centuries.
 - I mean, wonderful things have happened as people from all over the world have come to Christ... but there is something very disappointing about it.

There are scandals in the church.

- The majority of those who are baptised do not trust the LORD for their salvation or seek to obey Him as their LORD.
 - And even in congregations that do hold to the truth and follow Christ, it is only a generation or two until they drift into unbelief and are divided, often with the faithful followers being the ones who are driven out.
 - And even where there is a measure of reformation, there is always a lot of unfaithfulness that gets mixed in—hypocrisy, with members living double lives and engaging in secret sins, sometimes gross sins.
 - And there are families quarreling and bickering in their own households,
 - While we ought to stand out in the world for our integrity in business and for our love to others, often we are a very poor example... even when we have had a real reformation.

So my question again is, do you, dear Christian, yearn for real reformation?

- The prophet Zephaniah lived in the time of King Josiah, and under Josiah's faithful leadership, there was a time of reformation.
 - King Josiah and his grandfather, King Hezekiah, were the only two kings out of all the kings of Judah and Israel who ever sought to return fully to the worship that God had commanded.
 - All the others came short in their reforms, at best removing the worship of other gods, but never removing the worship at the high places—and God makes note of this failing with every king.
 - The reformation of worship is the most difficult.

But even though Josiah led the church in such reform so that the LORD said of him in 2 Kings 23:25: **“Now before him there was no king like him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses; nor after him did *any* arise like him,”**

- the LORD was still going to judge Judah: **2 Kings 23:26-27: Nevertheless the LORD did not turn from the fierceness of His great wrath, with which His anger was aroused against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked Him.**
²⁷ And the LORD said, “I will also remove Judah from My sight, as I have removed Israel, and will cast off this city Jerusalem which I have chosen, and the house of which I said, ‘My name shall be there.’ ”
 - What had been done in the reign of Manasseh was so great an offense that Judah must be judged.

- The LORD knew that as soon as Josiah was gone, the reformation was not really in the hearts of the nation and that they would go right back to their old ways—which they did.

Zephaniah may have even had a part in giving this prophecy that is recorded by faithfully by the author of Kings.

- But in any case, being a prophet, he knew that despite the reforms that Josiah had made, the reformation was not really in the heart of the nation.
- Certainly, it was in the hearts of some of the people, but not in the majority of them.
- And Zephaniah’s book that we are looking at today is about what we might call *real reformation*.
 - He is writing to encourage those who yearn for real reformation that God will indeed give it to them...
 - And he is writing to stir up a desire for real reformation among those among the people who are not yet born again... to call them to salvation.

This is a subject that is certainly relevant to us today!

- We see the church in such a deplorable state—but here in Zephaniah we are reminded that the LORD is at work to bring about the real reformation that we long for (if we know the LORD in a saving way)...
 - Even when we see some outward reform, we see that the hearts of many are not really changed—God has not really gotten ahold of them.
- So let’s see what Zephaniah, or rather the LORD through Zephaniah, has to say to us.

I. In chapter 1, Zephaniah shows that the reforms were not complete.

A. Judgment is still going to come.

1. Speaking for the LORD, Zephaniah tells of it:

- You can see in verse 1 that he wrote in the time of Josiah.
 - According to Floyd Jones, Josiah was king from 648 to 617 BC...
- And as we saw in 2 Kings 23:26-27, even though there was great reformation going on, God will still going to judge them.

2. Here is the prophecy that Zephaniah gives about that.

- He speaks of dreadful judgment coming when God would stretch out His hand against those who did not really repent.
 - **Zephaniah 1:2-6: “I will utterly consume everything from the face of the land,” says the LORD; ³ “I will consume man and beast; I will consume the birds of the heavens, the fish of the sea, and the stumbling blocks along with the wicked. I will cut off man from the face of the land,” says the LORD. ⁴ “I will stretch out My hand against Judah, and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. I will cut off every trace of Baal from this place, the names of the idolatrous priests with the *pagan* priests— ⁵ those who worship the host of heaven on the housetops; those who worship and swear *oaths* by the LORD, but who *also* swear by Milcom; ⁶ those who have turned back from *following* the LORD, and have not sought the LORD, nor inquired of Him.”**

➤ But why does the LORD make such threats at the time when reformation is going on?

- B. The purpose of these judgments (and the warnings of them) is to teach them to truly feel (even to taste) His hand of displeasure for their wickedness.
1. We all have a tendency when sin has become very prevalent in the church to flatter ourselves when there is a bit of reformation...
 - Or in our own circumstances today, to flatter ourselves that we are serving the Lord quite faithfully... when in fact, we are not really facing how egregious our conduct has been.
 - a. In verse 7, he calls us to **“Be silent in the presence of the Lord GOD; for the day of the LORD is at hand...”** etc.
 - The idea here is that hearing the warning of coming judgment should make us stand in fear before God so that we will stop flattering ourselves.
 - Severe affliction is necessary for us as Christians to humble us and stop the self-flattery and the complacency.
 - b. In verse 8 & 9, the LORD says that He will punish the princes who go about in foreign apparel and follow pagan worship rituals...
 - and in verse 10 & 11, that there will be cries and anguish all around Jerusalem and in the marketplace.
 - They will begin to see just how offensive they have been to God.
 2. In verse 12 & 13, the indifference that had come over all the people is the thing that God says He will expose.
 - **Zeph 1:12-13: “And it shall come to pass at that time *that* I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and punish the men who are settled in complacency, who say in their heart, ‘The LORD will not do good, nor will He do evil.’¹³ Therefore their goods shall become booty, and their houses a desolation; they shall build houses, but not inhabit *them*; they shall plant vineyards, but not drink their wine.”**
 - You see?
 - The people suppose that the LORD does not care that they are doing wickedness and that He won’t do anything about it.
 - God will search you out with lamps if you are like that.
 - He will expose your complacency and wake you up by bringing hardship upon you... you will lose the things that you have worked for.
 3. I believe that is something our congregation especially needs to hear.
 - We need to get our priorities straight.
 - Our goal is not to make it big in the world but to be godly.
 - Our calling is to worship the LORD our God, not only on Sunday, but in our families each day.
 - We need to make family prayer and Bible reading and exhortation and singing of praise a priority in our homes.
 - Our indifference to the things of God because of our love for the world will be our ruin.
 - Have you lost your focus? Have you forgotten your calling?
- C. God says that we will not be able to stop His punishment from coming on us.

1. In v. 14, he begins by saying: **The great day of the LORD is near; it is near and hastens quickly...**
 - And then in verse 18 He reminds them their riches that they find so much pleasure in will not be of any help to them in alleviating His judgment...v. 18: **Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the LORD'S wrath; but the whole land shall be devoured by the fire of His jealousy, for He will make speedy riddance of all those who dwell in the land.**
 - Even though there was a general reformation under Josiah, so much had been wrong that there was no turning back now.
 - The people were just too cold and callous toward the LORD.
 - They were to just too comfortable with sin.
 - There was no way to turn back this punishment at this point.
 - It had to come because it was still in their attitudes that the LORD could not be very displeased with them.
2. In verses 15-17 He describes how dreadful the judgment will be—it is meant, you see, to jolt them awake to the reality of their sin.
 - **Zeph 1:15: “That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of devastation and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, ¹⁶ a day of trumpet and alarm against the fortified cities and against the high towers. ¹⁷ I will bring distress upon men, and they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the LORD; their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like refuse.”**
3. Do you not agree that we need such measures so that we will take the LORD seriously as a God who hates sin?
 - We think we are being treated unjustly when we are receiving mercy.
 - We think our sins are small when in fact they are big.
 - We do not see how much we need a Saviour – that our own righteousness is worthless... even our reformations are not enough.
 - We are an unclean thing before the LORD.

II. What does Zephaniah, or rather the LORD, hope to gain by these warnings?

- **He wants us to turn to Christ our Saviour... that is where we need to go!**
- A. You see how He earnestly calls us to repent and to seek the LORD.
- Look at the call in 2:1-3: **Gather yourselves together, yes, gather together, O undesirable nation,**
 - That is what we are—an undesirable nation deserving of judgment.
 - He tells us to gather together (v. 2) **Before the decree is issued, or the day passes like chaff, before the LORD'S fierce anger comes upon you, before the day of the LORD'S anger comes upon you!**
 - We need to be prepared for the coming judgment so that when it comes, we will be looking to the LORD.
 - He says (v. 3): **Seek the LORD, all you meek of the earth, who have upheld His justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility. It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the LORD'S anger.**

- Oh yes—to be found in Him, not in pride, but in humility with a broken and contrite heart before Him—disgusted with our sin and yearning for His grace.

B. This is a call to come to Christ.

1. Yes, do you see the problem—even though there was reformation going on—the people had grown so familiar with their deplorable conduct,
 - that in their reformation they did not see the depth of their sin—they felt that they were doing pretty well now.
2. By calling them to repent and seek the LORD, to seek righteousness and humility, He is calling them to come to Him for His promised mercy.
 - Christ had been revealed to them through the shadows of the temple, but the point is that we look to God for mercy and grace instead of resting in our own goodness.
3. It is only in Christ that you can be hidden in the day of God’s anger.
 - You must come to Him knowing that you are full of sin and then you must look to Him to make you whole and to secure your pardon.
 - You cannot atone for your own sins.
 - You cannot present your own righteousness...
 - You will be rejected if you do that, but if you come seeking salvation in Christ, you will surely be accepted.

C. As for the surrounding nations, they too will experience God’s judgment.

1. When we do not fear the LORD as we should, we also begin to think that God will not judge the nations.
 - Our thought is that God does not care that much about sin—that He is like us in that way.
 - You remember what the LORD said in 1:12—that the people had come to think that the LORD will not do good or evil...
 - You know how this is—lots of Christians are like this today...
 - They draw comfort in supposing that God won’t judge the nations and therefore surely won’t judge us as His people.
2. But Zephaniah puts an end to such notions in 2:4-15.
 - He pronounces judgment against Philistia, then Moab and Ammon, Ethiopia, and then against Assyria (this was written before the fall of Nineveh in 612 BC).
 - a. The judgment against Philistia is found in 2:4-7.
 - Their principle cities, Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, and Ekron are mentioned, and in verse 5 God says He is against them and will destroy them.
 - And in verse 7 it is mentioned that their sheepfolds will be used by God’s people...
 - showing that Philistia will not be restored as Judah will.
 - As God’s people, we will be purged, but we will also be restored.
 - b. And then with Moab and Ammon... these were the descendants of Abraham’s nephew Lot.
 - Do you remember Lot?

- He was the one that God rescued from Sodom and Gomorrah when the LORD destroyed those cities for their wickedness—
 - Moab and Ammon were the sons Lot had by incest with his daughters after they escaped from Sodom.
 - What is striking here is that these who escaped from Sodom and Gomorrah are now told that they will be judged like Sodom and Gomorrah were judged.
 - Look at verse 8-9: **“I have heard the reproach of Moab, and the insults of the people of Ammon, with which they have reproached My people, and made arrogant threats against their borders. 9 Therefore, as I live,” says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, “Surely Moab shall be like Sodom, and the people of Ammon like Gomorrah—overrun with weeds and saltpits, and a perpetual desolation. The residue of My people shall plunder them, and the remnant of My people shall possess them.”**
 - He will bring them down for the pride and for their worship of false gods—these nations that came from Lot who knew the Lord’s salvation.
 - Now here they are warring with the people who were to bring forth the Saviour of the world.
 - This shows us how nations that once knew the LORD can turn away from Him over the generations.
 - It is in all of us to do so apart from the LORD’s mercy and grace that preserved Israel by constantly restoring them.
 - We must look to the LORD to keep us, not only in our personal lives, but also our children that come after us.
 - O children of the church—you need to be stronger, not weaker than your parents, for you have grown up in God’s gracious covenant.
 - c. Ethiopia is mentioned briefly in verse 12—that they will be slain by the sword.
 - d. And then the fall Assyria and the coming destruction of their capital city Nineveh (that Nahum wrote about) are prophesied in verses 13-15.
 - And the reason?
 - Because they were lifted up in pride putting themselves in the place of God.
 - In verse 15 they are charged with saying what is true only of the LORD God: **This is the rejoicing city that dwelt securely, that said in her heart, “I am it, and there is none besides me.”**
 - This is typical of the nations... when they reject God, they start to look at their government as their saviour and give them the honour that belongs to God only.
 - They will fail.
 - The government is not able save anyone.
3. This pronouncement of judgment on the nations is not meant to make us proud, supposing that we are better, but rather to break our pride.
- They are judged for pride that is so much like ours as God’s people.

- Seeing what happens to them, while being told that it will also happen to us, has the effect of sending us to Christ as our only hope.

TRANS> So now the LORD turns back to His people in chapter 3.

III. He shows what the outcome will be for them.

A. First He exposes the fact that what He had done thus far to punish them has not changed them.

1. They have not turned to Him as their Saviour, but are still rebellious.
 - Look at 3:1-2: **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.**
 - Our Lord is a Saviour ready to receive us, and He sends His word to us and He faithfully chastens us and warns us, showing us our need of Him.
 - But we are foolish and do not receive His correction and draw near to Him.
2. Further, our leaders become predators...not ministering to the people, but becoming those who themselves stir up God's wrath...
 - Zeph 3:3-4...**Her princes in her midst are roaring lions; Her judges are evening wolves that leave not a bone till morning.** (Instead of defending the weak, they devour them and prey upon them.) **4 Her prophets are insolent, treacherous people** (ministers of the word who neither exalt God nor tell the truth); **her priests have polluted the sanctuary, they have done violence to the law.** (They are supposed to guard the purity of worship, but instead they themselves profane it.)
 - Do we not see this in our leaders?
 - Such conduct is so inappropriate when (vs. 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.**
 - Such leaders are so out of step with their Master!
 - He is just and they are not, even though they represent Him in the offices.
3. And so God sends correction and warnings to humble them and bring them to repentance... but these methods fail!
 - Verse 6-7 show that they are just not enough: **"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."**
 - Such judgments are not enough—we still go on in our pride and rebellion, never really changing even when there is a revival.

TRANS> Our cause would be utterly hopeless but for the LORD's special work that goes beyond sending prophets and warnings and punishment.

- All of these are used, but there must be more.

B. He changes us by His gracious renewing work of the Holy Spirit.

1. Do you know the work that I am talking about?
 - It is called by many names—

- It is called being born again, being born from above,
 - being baptised by the Holy Spirit, regeneration,
 - raised with Christ, made alive by Christ, renewed by the Holy Spirit,
 - freed from death and bondage,
 - freed from Satan and made servants of Christ,
 - replacing our heart of stone with a heart of flesh,
 - writing God's law in our hearts... we could go on.
 - Do you know this work of God in your own experience?
 - It is His transformation of you from pride to humility so that you receive and rest upon Christ alone for your salvation... you turn from sin to your Saviour.
2. Here in Zephaniah God calls this transforming work *giving us a new language*...
- A language so different that we call on the name of the LORD instead of continuing to rely on ourselves...
 - Look at verse 9: **For then I will restore to the peoples a pure language, that they all may call on the name of the LORD, to serve Him with one accord.**
 - What a marvellous change—where we go from those that do not trust in the LORD to those who call on Him!
 - But note the time of this great work of God...it tells you in verse 8.
 - It is after the great coming judgment by Babylon that the LORD has said was to come upon Judah and the nations around her:
 - **Zeph 3:8: “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.”**
 - This judgment that was coming on Judah and her neighbours would prepare Judah for the work of God restoring their language to a pure language by which they would call on the name of the LORD.
3. Look at the change that comes in us as a result of this great work.
- Verse 10 shows that it brings people from far away to God—even beyond Ethiopia.
 - **Zeph 3:10: From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia My worshipers, the daughter of My dispersed ones, shall bring My offering.**
 - And verse 11 shows that it finally breaks their pride and removes the proud and haughty from their midst:
 - **Zeph 3:11: In that day you shall not be shamed for any of your deeds in which you transgress against Me; for then I will take away from your midst those who rejoice in your pride, and you shall no longer be haughty in My holy mountain.**
 - And look what is left—this is marvellous—it is the result of God's powerful gracious saving work in us...
 - **Zeph 3:12: “I will leave in your midst a meek and humble people, and they shall trust in the name of the LORD.”**
 - That is what God wants—not a people who suppose themselves to be good, but a people who are meek and humble and who trust in Him for mercy to save them.

- And yes, when they do that, their behaviour is changed so that instead of devouring one another, they live in peace, and look out for each other:
 - **Zeph 3:13: The remnant of Israel shall do no unrighteousness and speak no lies, nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth; for they shall feed their flocks and lie down, and no one shall make them afraid.**

TRANS> My brothers and sisters, what a marvellous transforming work God does in His people!

- How excellent it is when He turns them from themselves to Christ for His grace, from trusting in their own way to trusting in Christ and finding their life in Him.
 - We make such a wreck of things when we try to find our own life, but such blessing comes when the LORD gives us a new language to call on His name in faith!
- But the blessing does not end with that... no indeed...

C. Best of all, we are restored to our heavenly Father—our dear heavenly Father in all of His gracious glory!

1. You are admonished to sing because He Himself is in our midst!

- **Zeph 3:14-15: “Sing, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! 15 The LORD has taken away your judgments, He has cast out your enemy. The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall see disaster no more.”**
- All is well when Christ Jesus comes among us.
 - He takes away our judgments and He casts out our enemies.
 - We see disaster no more once we are in Him.

2. For you see, He loves us with a most remarkable love and delight in us.

- These are some of the most delightful words in the Bible...
 - **Zeph 3:16-17: In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: “Do not fear; Zion, let not your hands be weak. 17 The LORD your God in your midst, the Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing.”**
 - Do you see that?!!
 - God actually rejoices over us—think of it!
 - We, a people worthy to go to Hell till He comes and saves us, and He, singing with joy about us, quieting us with His love—putting us to true peace and comfort!
- But understand, this is a love that we would never have understood without first being humbled and broken about our sin and what we are before Him...
 - a wretched filthy unclean thing worthy only to be destroyed...
 - And now... here He is, after His saving work, rejoicing over us with deep love and gladness—the holy eternal God—think of it!

3. So let me ask you... Are you grieved over the condition of the church? Are you grieved by her ungodliness? Is it a reproach to you?

- Do you see how much we need a Saviour and how none but a divine Saviour will do?

- I hope you do—that your pride has been broken and that you are among those who have a new language so that you call upon Him in faith.
- Because look what the LORD says to those who are grieved over the state of the church...
 - He says that He will gather us to Himself: **vs. 18-20: I will gather those who sorrow over the appointed assembly, who are among you, to whom its reproach is a burden.** (Those who are grieved about the condition of God’s church) ¹⁹ **Behold, at that time I will deal with all who afflict you; I will save the lame, and gather those who were driven out; I will appoint them for praise and fame in every land where they were put to shame.** (the lame, the weak, will be strong in the LORD) ²⁰ **At that time I will bring you back, even at the time I gather you; for I will give you fame and praise among all the peoples of the earth, when I return your captives before your eyes,” says the LORD.**
 - It will be a complete and glorious restoration before the whole world.

Conclusion: What grand things we have seen in the gospel according to Zephaniah.

- It begins with the church undergoing reformation, but it teaches that the church still needs to be humbled because they have grown so accustomed to their sin that they do not see their need for Christ...
 - And it ends with God having crushed them under His chastening hand,
 - now graciously restoring to them a pure language so that they call upon Christ for salvation and become the object of His love and joy...
 - Praise be to our God!