

Zephaniah: Change Your Ways, You Lazybones!

The funny thing about the Bible is that it isn't written in a way that resembles any other kind of book. Keith mentioned an acronym for what the Bible is good for a few weeks ago: Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth. This was the approach that I was taught when I was young; the Bible was an instruction manual meant to tell me what to do. As a teenager, I would often treat it like a magic 8 ball—I would ask God a question, close my eyes, drop my finger onto a verse in the Bible and take that as my answer.

Just for research purposes, I did this again while I was preparing for today. It was Monday morning, and I asked God what he would want me to do that day. I closed my eyes, let my Bible fall open, put my finger on the page, and opened my eyes.

"At midnight I rise to give you thanks for your righteous laws." (Ps. 119:62)

Well, that was actually kind of good advice, except that it was already the morning. So, I closed my eyes and did it again. This time, I got Ezekiel 40:24.

"Then he led me to the south side and I saw the south gate. He measured its jambs and its portico, and they had the same measurements as the others."

Okay, that one was a lot less useful. So, I did it one more time. This time, I clued in that the middle of the Bible is either filled with Psalms (which are often useful) or weird prophetic books (usually less helpful), so I flipped to the back of the Bible and landed in Ephesians.

"Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise." (Eph. 5:15)

Hmm, yes that is useful. Not clear, exactly, but a good reminder, nonetheless. Well then, Bible reading done for the day, I continued on with my to do list and tasks.

Now, just to be clear, this is not my usual Bible reading practice. However, it *is* the way that many of us were taught to read the Bible, at least to some degree. The Bible and prayer are viewed as things to do to check off the list and maybe gain God's divine approval before we continue with our previously ordained plans. It's more of a pep talk than a conversation with God.

But the funny thing about the Bible is that it *isn't* a magic 8 ball or a pep talk. It *isn't* an instruction manual telling me exactly what to do... it sure didn't on the morning that I tried this. That kind of reading of the Bible is simply lazy—we approach it with the attitude of "what's in it for me?"

We've been moving through what scholars call "the Book of the Twelve," what we usually call the "Minor Prophets," this summer, and I think that they are a prime example of how reading the Bible and hearing what God says isn't about getting a pep talk. We have to dig

into it to understand *what in the world* the prophets are saying. It is hard work, because they are often written in poetry or prophetic oracles that are difficult to understand. Our purpose in going through these prophets is because many people have the questions: “How do I read the prophets? What *in the world* are they talking about??” Well, **here’s the first step: We read the prophets with effort. Understanding the prophets doesn’t happen automatically.**

Zephaniah in particular talks in great detail about the judgment and wrath of God and the coming Day of the Lord. Now, you might have heard about these things either in Sunday School or by watching the Left Behind movies or Lucifer on Netflix. Usually, the Day of the Lord involves things like the rapture, flaming fires of hell, or the pearly gates. That’s the interpretation we get when we let culture inform our interpretation.

Here’s a secret: The Day of the Lord doesn’t mean any of these things. So, what is it? What is Zephaniah talking about, and how is it relevant to us some 2,700 years after he lived?

So far in our journey through the minor prophets, we have heard prophets warning Israel and Judah of coming judgment because of their disloyalty to God, and against the oppressing nations for their brutality to others. We have seen Nineveh judged and repent, then judged again; we have seen Babylon judged for taking God’s people into exile, and the people reminded that justice comes in God’s timing, not theirs.

Zephaniah, though, is a step backward in history about a hundred years—way *before* the exile of Jerusalem. The northern nation of Israel had been captured by the Assyrians already, but the southern kingdom of Judah was hanging on by a thread. Zephaniah’s work happens during the reign of King Josiah, who was just about the best king that Judah ever had after King David.

The problem was that Josiah’s grandpa was Manasseh, who was *the worst* king Judah had ever seen. You can read all about his terrible practices of idolatry, defiling of the Temple of God with the sacrifices to other gods, and even child sacrifice in the book of Second Kings.¹

There was absolutely nothing good about Manasseh, and the worst of it was that he led the people to do the exact same things—and even worse than the nations around them! God responds to the situation, saying,

“I will wipe out Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down. ¹⁴I will forsake the remnant of my inheritance and give them into the hands of enemies. They will be looted and plundered by all their enemies; ¹⁵they have done evil in my

¹ 2 Kings 21:1-6

eyes and have aroused my anger from the day their ancestors came out of Egypt until this day.” (2 Kings 21:9-15)

Enough is enough, God says.

If we simply read the words of the prophets at face value, we may come away with a view of God that is harsh, or even petty. God seems jealous, vindictive, and overly possessive. Not all that different from your average evangelical influencer these days, actually. But that doesn't seem right. Surely God isn't *really* like that! God is supposed to be good and loving, right?

When something doesn't make sense in Scripture (like “How is God's anger and wrath a good thing?” and “Does God actually wipe out entire people groups just because he wants to?”), it is an invitation to dig deeper, to ask questions, and to explore these themes further. **This is point number two when reading the minor prophets: We read the prophets with context.**

So, let's read a few verses from the first chapter of Zephaniah.

“I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth,” declares the Lord.
3 “I will sweep away both man and beast; I will sweep away the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea—and the idols that cause the wicked to stumble.”
“When I destroy all mankind on the face of the earth,” declares the Lord,
4 “I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem.”
(Zeph. 1:1-4)

Manasseh's actions provide the backdrop for the Day of the Lord in Zephaniah. But there are hints in Zephaniah of events that go way, way back to the beginning of Genesis. God promises a *flood of judgment* on the land. Now, what Bible story does that sound like?

Noah, of course! In the days of Noah, evil had spiraled so completely out of control that God promised to wipe out the land completely, but he saved one faithful man and his family—a **remnant**. It's a reset button, and one of the conditions of this reset is that Noah and his family will keep an agreement with God, also known as a **covenant**.

By most counts, this is the first covenant that God makes with humans. The point of making a covenant was to ensure a two-way relationship between two parties. In the ancient world, these were made between conquering kings and their vassals; in exchange for protection and safety, the vassal would swear fealty to the king. Therefore, it makes perfect sense that God would make a covenant with his people. If he is the Creator of everything and he is offering protection to his created beings, it only makes sense to swear fealty to him,

promise to obey him, and follow his laws. Obedience in exchange for protection. Then, if the vassal broke the covenant, they were subject to the king's wrath, which meant death.

God later saves all of Israel from slavery in Egypt and makes another covenant with them at Mount Sinai. He says,

“You shall have no other gods before me. ⁴You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.” (Ex. 20:3-6)

In Deuteronomy, God goes into greater detail: If they obey him, they will be blessed; if they disobey, God promises curses of famine, plague, disease, war, and eventually, captivity.² The people of God say, “Yep, that sounds pretty good to me. I want this God on my side.” And they swear their loyalty to the God who brought them through the waters out of Egypt.

Only, as we read through the biblical story, we find that Israel *often broke* their covenant. They are tempted by the shiny fruit of self-gratification, self-reliance, and self-rule. Repeatedly, God allowed plagues, wars, and famines to happen to his people, just as he promised would happen if they disobeyed him. Repeatedly, the people recognized where they'd been wrong, and they repented. It's a never-ending cycle of rebellion, judgment, and repentance, followed again by rebellion.

For a thousand years, God allowed this cycle to continue. I can't help but feel like with each cycle, God was hoping, “*Maybe this time, it'll stick.*” And for some generations, it seems like it does—such as during the leadership of Moses, Joshua, David, and Josiah. But there is also a sinking feeling that Israel is a burning ship and there is no saving her. They've set their own judgment on themselves as they repeatedly choose to give their allegiance away.

The Day of the Lord is *exactly* what God promised would happen if the people refused to follow him—plagues, death, famine, capture, and exile. It is the fulfillment of God's promises in response to his people's repeated rejection. The Day of the Lord is a picture of *God's faithfulness to his word* contrasted with the *utter unfaithfulness* of the people.

Zephaniah records these harsh words against Jerusalem:

“Woe to the city of oppressors, rebellious and defiled! She obeys no one, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the Lord, she does not draw near to her God. ³Her

² Deut. 28-29

officials within her are roaring lions; her rulers are evening wolves, who leave nothing for the morning. ⁴Her prophets are unprincipled; they are treacherous people. Her priests profane the sanctuary and do violence to the law.” (Zeph. 3:2-4)

The Day of the Lord is **bad news** for those who trust in themselves, who think that they can give their allegiance to other things that are not God. But it is **good news** for those who have been oppressed; corrupt systems are wiped out and justice is restored.

Zephaniah is tying together all these threads from the earlier history of God’s people, and the Day of the Lord is **really bad news** for Jerusalem because **they have failed**.

Jerusalem, the epitome of God’s shining presence in the ancient world! They are named oppressors, like Babylon and Assyria. Those who were called to be God’s people of light and justice look *just like those* who used violent force to take what they want. The officials, rulers, prophets, and priests who were supposed to care for and lead the people in the ways of God are corrupt, treacherous, profane, and violent.

And here’s where we come to **our third point in how read the prophets: We read the prophets with humility**, turning their words toward us and our world only once we understand what they were saying to their world. It’s one thing to read the prophets as written to an ancient people long ago; it’s another thing entirely to begin to connect these same patterns to God’s people today.

The people of God have failed. The same words of judgment proclaimed against the pagan nations are used against Jerusalem. They are not exempt from God’s eye just because they are his people.

Claiming God’s name is not enough. Claiming ancient ties to the Promised Land is not enough. Claiming the history of God’s presence among your people is not enough.

The people repeatedly chose other gods over the God who Created and Redeemed them; they repeatedly chose to worship what they decided was good over what God said was good.

The people of God have failed...

Where have we, the people of God, failed in our world today? Where have we chosen to climb the corporate ladder, build up our successes at the expense of others, rip land away from those who lived there first, and torch our land with the excesses of our pleasures?

Where has our anger at our employers, government, or anyone who does something differently than we would like set fires of destruction that will consume everything around us? Don’t get me wrong; sometimes our anger is justified. But is it being used to cancel,

tear down, and utterly sweep away others? Where have we looked entirely *like* everyone else in our world?

It is not enough to claim the name of Jesus; we must *follow* and *obey* our God in a two-way relationship if we are to claim his name. We must bow before him and proclaim, “*You* are God, not I!”

Zephaniah pleads with the people: “Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility.” (Zeph. 2:3)

What if we turned our anger toward God and released it to him instead of unleashing it on others? What if we chose to see the face of God in every person who upsets us?

Seek the Lord! When tariffs rise, seek the Lord! When your work conditions are unjust and strikes are imminent, seek the Lord! When that long line of cars stuck on Whoop-Up or Highway 3 refuses to zipper-merge and gets angry at you for doing it, seek the Lord! When you are tempted to point the finger of blame at everyone around you, or alternatively, when you are tempted to paint yourself as the victim in all the mess, seek the Lord!

This is the invitation to the faithful remnant—to cling to God, to search for him, and to find him there.

The Day of the Lord is not about vengeance. It’s not a petty God wiping out his people because they weren’t good enough. God says that the Day of the Lord is for *purification*. It’s for accepting God’s correction and being molded to look more like him.

“Then I will purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him shoulder to shoulder. ¹⁰From beyond the rivers of Cush my worshipers, my scattered people, will bring me offerings.” (Zeph. 3:9-10)

God’s judgment is *always* for restoration and repentance. His jealous anger is a fire that destroys all that is rebellious, evil, wicked, and corrupt. It leaves alone the faithful remnant who are protected from the waters of chaos by the ark of his hands. God says,

“¹²But I will leave within you the meek and humble. The remnant of Israel will trust in the name of the Lord.” (Zeph. 3:12)

This is **good news** for those who are faithful, humble, and accept where they have been wrong, because justice is done. It is **bad news** for those who are spreading anger and violence... because justice is done.

I’m not saying that every bad thing is a direct judgment of God. Sometimes bad things just happen, and sometimes they are consequences of our bad actions or others. But bad things *are* an invitation to turn our whole hearts to God.

The Day of the Lord is an ocean. It is a fire. It purifies God's people and gets rid of all the yucky bits where we tend to cling to self-preservation and self-aggrandization. It is a tidal wave of an invitation to:

- Be silent before God. Quit complaining about your circumstances and simply stare at God in awe. (1:7)
- Seek God. Seek humility, justice, and righteousness. (2:3)
- Accept God's correction for where we've wandered away from him. (3:7)
- Trust in God's name. (3:12)
- Rejoice in the God who rejoices in us. (3:14-17)

I recognize that there are many of us who are striving to live faithfully and humbly with God every day of our lives. The Day of the Lord is *not* beating you into the dust and saying that your efforts to be faithful aren't good enough. Remember—God sees those who are faithful.

Here is **our last point in how to read the prophets: they always end with hope for restoration and God's goodness in the land.** Zephaniah ends with a beautiful picture of God's delight in his people:

¹⁷The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing." (Zeph. 3:17)

God sings over all his faithful people! He is with us and *delights* in us as we delight in him. For us today, this covenant of God has been ratified in Jesus Christ. He is the perfect Human, whom we follow and worship. We who claim Jesus' name have placed our trust in God in a two-way relationship that says to God, "That life with you sounds pretty good. I want in."

Jesus says that his true disciples will be known *by their fruit*—is our fruit good, kind, loving, patient, joyful, peaceful, gentle, faithful, and self-controlled?³ Will we allow our hearts, minds, words, and deeds to be corrected by our good God? Will we choose to reject patterns of violence and anger and see *the image of God* in every human being?

There is no fear or guilt. God smiles on you as you seek him in word and deed.

Let's pray.

³ Galatians 5:22-23