

# 4

## Renewal and Restoration

### Zephaniah 3

#### **a** Judgment on Jerusalem (3:1-5)

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.

—Zephaniah 3:1, 2

After pronouncing judgment on the surrounding nations, Zephaniah returned his focus to Judah and particularly to Jerusalem. The con-

text of verses 1-5 makes it clear that this “city of oppressors” (vs. 1) was none other than Jerusalem. Such a reputation for oppression usually came from disregarding the rights of the weak such as the poor, orphans, widows, and strangers. Showing love to others was a fundamental aspect of the law that the people of Jerusalem chose to disobey.

Jerusalem was also characterized by a “rebellious” spirit. Although the citizens possessed the revealed Word of God, they refused to submit to it. Instead, the people boldly refused to do what the Lord clearly instructed them to do.

The city was “defiled” because of

*Jerusalem as it appears today. Zephaniah described Jerusalem as a “city of oppressors” (Zeph. 3:1).*



its association with the worship of Baal, the stars, and Molech (see 1:4, 5). In spite of all its religious ceremony, the city was unclean and about to be handed over to judgment because of its spiritual filthiness.

All three descriptive terms in verse 1 point to Israel's breaking of its covenant with God.

God sent many prophets to the nation and to the city, but Jerusalem resisted all their calls for repentance and would not accept their correction (3:2). Jerusalem was unique in that it heard God's voice through His messengers. But still, the people would not turn from their wicked ways.

Rather than trust in the true and living God, the people of Jerusalem relied on idols and on their allies. Rather than draw near to God through worship, they moved deeper into idolatry and wickedness. God gave Jerusalem a favored position, but the city squandered its opportunity.

Like Jerusalem of old, we too are privileged. Copies of God's recorded Word abound in easy-to-read translations with a multitude of books and helps for understanding its message. God longs for us to spend time with Him through worship, prayer, and Bible study. But we must take advantage of these opportunities in order to honor God through obedience to His Word.

**Ask Yourself** . . . *What kinds of hindrances sometimes prevent me from spending time with God? How can I eliminate these obstacles?*

Next, Zephaniah turned his attention to the leadership in Jerusalem (vss. 3, 4). Though he named many groups of leaders, the prophet carefully avoided saying anything that would implicate King Josiah, who initiated genuine attempts at spiritual reform.

In verse 3, these leaders are called "roaring lions" and "evening wolves, who leave nothing for the morning." Like lions, these officials devoured the souls of the people, acting like predators rather than shepherds. Rather than act in fairness and justice, they satisfied their greed at the expense of the people they were called to serve.

The "rulers" were judges charged with upholding God's law. But they, too, were destroying the very ones they were called upon to protect. God saw their perversions of justice and acted to stop their abuse of power.

Zephaniah characterized the prophets of his day as "treacherous people" (vs. 4a). We know that there were several good prophets at that time such as Jeremiah and Nahum. But many other prophets were unfaithful to their calling and willingly led the people astray (see Jer. 28). Their misrepresentation of God gave the people a false sense of security when disaster was closing in upon them.

The priests also encouraged the city's rebellious ways through their actions and distortions of God's law (Zeph. 3:4b). They were responsible for demonstrating God's holiness and accurately interpreting His law

(see Lev. 10:10, 11). Instead, their wicked example and careless reading of Scripture caused many to stumble.

Those given the task of interpreting and teaching God's Word have a solemn responsibility. Their actions as well as their words can lead many astray if they are not faithful. James said, "Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (Jas. 3:1).

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Do I understand the importance of accurately explaining and embodying the Word of God to others?*

Zephaniah 3:5 clearly marks the city as Jerusalem, for no other city could boast of having the living God dwelling in its midst. While the leaders, judges, prophets, and priests might be corrupt, He was the righteous one who could do no wrong.

God did not go into hiding because of all the sin, but rather stayed to expose the evil and set Himself up as the perfect standard. But the people, calloused by their sins, were shameless despite His presence with them.

Zephaniah said, "Morning by morning he dispenses his justice." Some suggest God's justice was expressed through the daily temple ceremony (see Exod. 30:7; II Chron. 13:11). Others see it as a general reference to the continuous manifestation of His justice in His treatment of Judah and the surrounding nations.

## **b** Missed Examples of God's Judgment (3:6-8)

Of Jerusalem I thought,  
"Surely you will fear me  
and accept correction!"  
Then her place of refuge would not  
be destroyed,  
nor all my punishments come  
upon her.  
But they were still eager  
to act corruptly in all they did.  
—Zephaniah 3:7

God reminded His people how He had destroyed other nations, leaving nothing but ruins and heaps of rubble in their once-busy city streets (vs. 6). There has been much speculation about the identity of these nations and cities, particularly since the northern ten tribes had already been taken captive by Assyria. Perhaps it was meant as a general reference to those who had fallen to the wrath of God, including the northern kingdom of Israel.

Why did God suddenly begin talking through Zephaniah to emphasize His destruction of other countries? God's judgment of these other nations was meant to be a warning to the people of Judah. God's people should have observed how the Lord had punished the sin of these lands and how the idols were powerless to protect those who worshiped them. But they missed the message and kept on serving lifeless idols.

Today we have the record of Scripture as well as our own experiences to warn us about the effects of sin. If we look hard enough, we will see examples of God punishing wrongdoing in the world around us. While God does not instantly punish all wickedness, He does enough for the faithful to see and take heed in their own lives.

**Ask Yourself** . . . *Have the results of sin in the lives of others ever kept me from copying their behavior?*

In light of all He had done to judge sins in the surrounding nations, God expected His people to repent and obey Him (vs. 7). The Lord's purpose in judging sin was to create a godly fear within the people so He would not have to carry out

His sentence of destruction on Jerusalem. If they humbly returned to Him, He would refrain from punishing their sins.

Yet not only did the people persist in their immorality, but they also showed an eagerness to carry out their wickedness. The text indicates the defiance and intentional nature of their actions. Despite seeing God's judgment on other nations and knowing the penalty for their actions, they did not repent or seek mercy from the Lord.

After the disappointing response described in verse 7, one would expect the next verse to begin with a declaration of God's intention to judge Judah. Instead, the Lord instructed Judah to wait for a time when He would gather the king-

## **A Day of Gathering**

The gathering of the nations for judgment (Zeph. 3:8) is a frequent theme of biblical prophecy. Joel 3:1-3, 11-13 speaks of an assembly of the kingdoms of the world in the "Valley of Jehoshaphat." The prophet Zechariah stated that when the Lord comes to His people, He will defeat the armies of the world who will be gathered against Jerusalem (Zech. 14:1-4). And, of course, in the Book of Revelation, John stated that upon Christ's return to earth, He will battle "kings, generals, and the mighty" (Rev. 19:18).

doms of the earth together and pour out His wrath upon all of them at one time (vs. 8). Rather than just warn Judah about what the Babylonians would do to it, God told the city to wait for a time when He would judge the entire earth and consume the nations with His “fierce anger.”

## **C** The Meek Remnant of Israel (3:9-13)

**“The remnant of Israel... will do no wrong;  
they will tell no lies.  
A deceitful tongue will not be found in their mouths.  
They will eat and lie down  
and no one will make them afraid.**

—Zephaniah 3:12b-13

Having described a catastrophic judgment on the scale of what happened in Noah’s day, Zephaniah discussed the results of God’s action. The prophet pictured the global outpouring of the Lord’s anger producing a worldwide revival in which people of all nations would call out to the Lord (vs. 9). His defeat of the gathered nations would result in a time of peace when people of all nations would worship the Lord.

Some regard the phrase “purify the lips” as referring to a “purified language,” which they suggest is a pure Hebrew language to be spoken by the remnant of Israel in the last

## **To Call on the Name of the LORD**

The words “call on the name of the LORD” (Zeph. 3:9) indicate a sincere and somber seeking of God. It usually comes in response to a critical need as people recognize their sinfulness and the necessity of depending on God (Gen. 4:26). God responds favorably to all who call upon Him in such a way (Ps. 145:18).

days. Although this is a possible translation of the original language, the idea of purified lips fits better with the calling “on the name of the LORD” mentioned later in verse 9.

Verse 10 has been understood in a variety of ways. Some believe that it refers to the Gentiles bringing God’s people, the Jews, back to the promised land as their “offering” to the Lord. Others interpret it to mean that after judgment, God will bring His people back from the remote areas of the earth, even as far south as Cush (Nubia, once called Ethiopia). Still others see this verse referring in part to the return of the Jews

to their homeland after the Babylonian captivity, and in part to the coming of people to God through faith in Jesus, regardless of their ethnic background.

All three of the above alternatives fit with the following verses, which describe a future restoration of Israel. On that day the people would not “be

put to shame,” because the Lord would have removed their guilt far from them and healed the crippling effects of sin (vs. 11). All those who proudly refused to repent would be taken away. No one would assert his or her self-dependence again on God’s “holy hill,” or Jerusalem.

Humility is an essential ingredient of saving repentance. Only those who humbly admit their sins and need for a Savior find God’s grace (see Eph. 2:8, 9). Those who humbly appropriate God’s grace for themselves find salvation and eternal life.

**Ask Yourself** . . . *Have I come to the place in my spiritual journey where I have confessed my sins and humbly admitted my need of Christ’s forgiveness?*

After God’s judgments were finished, only the “meek and humble” would be left in the land (Zeph. 3:12). These are further identified in



*God was going to call His people back to Jerusalem, even from as far south as “the rivers of Cush” (Zech. 3:10). These are the Tisissat Falls, formed by the Blue Nile River on the Ethiopian Plateau. (The Blue Nile is a river in the area of ancient Cush.)*

“the name of the LORD” rather than in themselves. Zephaniah regarded pride as a chief cause of Judah’s sin and God’s anger against the nation. Once God finished His work with His people, the proud would no longer be found in the land.

After the Babylonian captivity, the remnant of the Jewish nation who returned to the land never resorted to idolatry again. But the scope of verse 13 seems to go beyond that time, pointing to a day when deceit would be totally purged from the people of God and when “no one

will make them afraid.” (This is quoted verbatim from Micah 4:4.) With no one left to harm them, God’s people would be able to enjoy a time of prosperity and uninterrupted peace.

## **d** Restored Glory for Israel (3:14-20)

**The LORD has taken away your punishment,  
he has turned back your enemy.  
The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you;  
never again will you fear any harm.**  
—Zephaniah 3:15

In light of the coming glory for Israel, Zephaniah exhorted the people to sing, shout aloud, and rejoice with all their hearts (vs. 14). The prophet did not merely look forward to this happy day or simply tell them about a joy that belonged to future generations. Instead, he encouraged his contemporaries to join in the celebration because God would one day restore Israel. In spite of the judgment that was headed for them, they were to revel in a coming day of great glory.

The Judahites were to celebrate the future glory for their nation as though it were a present reality. As believers we also possess many promises of future glory when we will be with the Lord clothed with imperishable bodies. The certainty

of our future should also be a source of celebration even in the midst of difficult circumstances.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Was I able to rejoice the last time I experienced a trial? Why or why not?*

Earlier in the passage, the Lord expressed His hope that Judah would repent so He would not have to send His punishment upon it (see vs. 7). But, in verse 15, Zephaniah looked forward to a time when God would remove the nation’s punishment and turn away its enemies. With the Lord in its midst, the nation would enjoy tremendous security free from the fear of impending calamity.

The emphasis of the passage is upon the safety the people would enjoy in the days described in verse 15. The long wars and captivities would be over. There would be no more need for fear or for letting their “hands hang limp” in paralyzing despair; the Lord would be with the people as a conquering and protecting hero (vss. 16, 17).

But the Lord would do much more than just save His people. He would take great delight in them, letting them sense His great love for them. Martin Luther explained the sense of verse 17 in this way, “He will cause you to be silent so that you may have in the secret places of your heart a very quiet peace and a peaceful silence.”

One day God would rejoice and actually sing over His people. While God must punish sin, it is equally true that He cheers for those who

humbly turn from their sins to follow Him. As a loving heavenly Father, He takes great delight in each one of His children.

As a sign of His love for His people, God would enable them to celebrate their appointed feasts once again (vs. 18). The years of captivity would bring sorrow as the people would yearn for these solemn assemblies. But a glorious day was coming in which that sadness would be removed and the people would be a blessing rather than a reproach to the world.

Included among the nations gathered for destruction would be those who had oppressed Israel and were hostile to God (vs. 19). After abolish-

ing their enemies, the Lord would gather His people from the lands in which they had been scattered and change their shame into "praise and honor." With great delight, God would restore the fortunes of Israel before their eyes (vs. 20).

The fulfillment of this passage found its immediate fulfillment 70 years after the Babylonian captivity when the Israelites were permitted to return to Jerusalem. Some interpreters also see a future realization of Zephaniah's prediction when the Lord returns to the earth (see Rev. 20:6). In any case, God's faithful people have great rewards awaiting them.

The wait will be worth it.