

Route Sixty-Six

Part Thirty-Six

Zephaniah

The Lord in the Midst of Thee

(John 5:39; Zephaniah 3:16b-17)

With Study Questions

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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 (Zephaniah 3:16b-17).

Introduction

I find myself regularly involved in three struggles. The first is the inevitable, and often addressed, conflict between the Christian and the world. Jesus taught, in no uncertain terms that the world hated Him and, therefore will hate those who follow Him (John 5:18, 19).

We shouldn't be seeking that hatred. This should not be an excuse for unseemly behavior on the part of Christians. It doesn't mean that you are to constantly be at odds with your non-Christian neighbors on all the time on every conceivable issue. Elders, for example, should have a good reputation among those outside the church (1 Timothy 3:7).

It does mean that the heart of what you believe will be at odds with the world in general. And the more worldly the world becomes, the more hostility you can expect.

My second struggle is with the church (or so-called) and the current religious luminaries. When presented with the top-ten largest churches in America or the most influential Christian leaders in the west, I find the list enormously discouraging. Most of those on the mentioned lists are barely within the pale of orthodoxy. I don't mean to sound harsh, but I do think I am being charitable.

Again, this should not be surprising. If one reads their Bibles, they will readily find that the covenant people of God (Israel in the Old Covenant and the church in the New Covenant) were rife with darkness, immorality and theological error. For thirty-five chapters we've been reading of the wickedness and judgments of Israel. When Jesus was born

into the Old Covenant, He **“came to His own, and His own did not receive Him” (John 1:11).**

The error didn't altogether end in the New Covenant church. Virtually every epistle in the New Testament was written to correct theological error and immorality. In the encyclical of Revelation, which went to at least seven New Covenant churches, Jesus continually threatens to expel them unless they get back on course.

Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place – unless you repent (Revelation 2:5).

Prior to revealing my third struggle, I have noticed something both odd and frustrating when it comes to these first two struggles (something addressed in Zephaniah). It is the difficulty of being caught in the crossfire of a godless culture and an apostate church. Many of the criticisms my unbelieving friends level against today's church (often times in their efforts to dress me down) are criticisms with which I heartily agree.

Modern day prophets seeking to pray/scream the coronavirus off the Manhattan Beach Pier has made the church, what the Scriptures call, an **“astonishment”** (or horror) and an object of ridicule (Deuteronomy 28:37). Similar to Nathan's criticism of David, there are many in today's church that have given **“great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme” (2 Samuel 12:14).** These can be difficult waters to navigate.

My third struggle is internal. It is not with the world (although it certainly includes the world). It is not against waning spiritual climate of the western church (though it includes that as well). It is within my own mind and heart. What the Bible often refers to as the flesh.

For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do (Galatians 5:17).

Not that everything we **“want to do”** is necessarily sinful. But when there is a conflict between the Spirit-given word of God and my flesh, I should defer always to the Spirit. It is not uncommon for Christians to do

just the opposite. We often evaluate a peace we feel in our flesh as the guidance of the Spirit. A joy in the flesh or a comfort in my feelings may accompany the work of the Spirit, but it is very dangerous to view the two as synonymous.

This inward conflict, again, should not come as a surprise. Hebrews testifies to the inwardly cutting, sanctifying and piercing work of the Spirit of God through His word. It is a...

...discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. ¹³ And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we *must give* account (Hebrews 4:12b, 13).

So, we wrestle with the world, with the influences and interactions with an apostate church and with our hearts/flesh. And there is an enemy of our souls who wishes to see us moving rapidly (but slowly is fine) in the wrong direction, or what John calls walking **"in darkness"** (1 John 1:6).

I mention these things in our study of Zephaniah because we tend to forget that these, what appear to be, minor adjustments or compromises shoot us and our posterity into thoroughly different destinations than the destination God has promised to those who are His. And as our hearts are slow-baked in a kiln to hardness. We, like the Israelites, are...

...settled in complacency, Who say in their heart, 'The Lord will not do good, Nor will He do evil (Zephaniah 1:12b).'

We forget that there is a judgment. We interpret God's patience as God's indulgence. We should never forget that we live in the midst of a battle. Zephaniah offers a wake-up call.

Survey of Zephaniah

Through Zephaniah the Israelites would be reminded, in the severest of terms, that their spiritual direction does have a destination. And it wasn't a good one. One would not call Zephaniah a feel-good book. Reading through it, a pastor is tempted to merely read Jonathan Edwards famous sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* and leave it at that (something I do plan on at some point).

The book opens with the words,

**“I will utterly consume everything From the face of the land,”
Says the Lord (Zephaniah 1:2).**

As a teacher and as a Christian this kind of verbiage brings us to pause. And God holds us in this discomfort for three chapters. As if God would have us meditate upon the bad news prior to any good news. We generally don't like that. I was listening to the news yesterday and they gave the sports report (not much to report during the quarantine). But the reporter caught my attention when he said, “Let me start by saying he is okay, he is okay, he is okay.” He then proceeded to report how the beloved Dodger announcer, Vin Scully had been hospitalized for a health issue.

We like to be told, right up front, that everything is going to be okay. The problem in Zephaniah is that it might not be okay—at least not for everybody. Nonetheless, the book which begins with **“I will utterly consume...”** ends with,

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 (Zephaniah 3:16b-17).

The lessons in between these two very distinct outcomes, need our attentive hearts, that we might be assured that the wonderful climax belongs to us.

Zephaniah begins his book with a fairly long introduction. He's the great-great-grandson of the godly king, Hezekiah. He is prophesying during the reign of another godly king, Josiah. There is safe speculation that, as a descendant of a godly king and during the reign of a godly king, he had the king's ear and was not shy to address the sin in the land.

Truly, the word of God is by the Spirit of God. But it would appear that God utilized the history and personalities of the writers. For example, it is highly likely that James was written by the half-brother of Jesus. Some would say that this explains the strength of his tone in addressing the budding easy-believe-ism of his day. Zephaniah may have had a similar disposition.

Briefly stated, the book can be broken into three parts. The judgment that would befall apostate Judah in chapters one and the beginning of two. The judgment of the surrounding nations from the beginning of chapter two to the middle of chapter three. Then the healing and blessing written of from the middle of chapter three to the end of the book.

The Old Covenant church was becoming darker and darker in this era prior to the incarnation. It should be of no surprise to us as our study of the Old Testament winds down, that the final word in the final chapter is the word **“curse” (Malachi 4:6)**. They are rapidly reaching the point of no hope. That place in the hearts of men where God turns them over to their own reprobate minds (Romans 1:28). To be sure, there is a call to repentance, and some will repent-those who will enjoy the peace of the final portion of the final chapter.

But as the covenant people of God, their days are numbered. Paul gives warning to the churches, lest they find themselves cut off in a similar manner (Romans 11:21). Whether we are born in the world or born in the church, we come into this world as sinners in need of a Savior.

Yet man is born unto trouble, As the sparks fly upward (Job 5:7)

Truly, we are **“conceived in iniquity” (Psalm 51:5), “estranged from the womb as soon as we’re born, speaking lies” (Psalm 58:3)**. We are to ever believe, ever improve upon and live out our baptism. And all of this is to be done by the heart, not merely for outward observation or benefit. Good earthly kings could only do so much. The ungodly infections remained in Israel because the **“people had not directed their hearts to the God of their fathers” (2 Chronicles 20:33)**.

Zephaniah then turns his prophecies to the desperately wicked surrounding nations and their impending judgment-a judgment due in large part because of their hostility toward Israel. What we learn in Zephaniah is that the world’s hostility against even an apostate church will find the world in the crosshairs of God’s judgment. The, albeit somewhat justified, arrows released against bad religion does not somehow vindicate the attacker. I am not Roman Catholic, and I think many of the criticisms against Rome have legitimacy. But when the world attacks Rome (as a sort of paragon of religion in general-since many in the world wouldn’t know the different between a Roman Catholic and a Presbyterian), the errors of Rome do not entirely exonerate the persecutor.

Many of us find ourselves in an odd spot when we're clumped in with heretics and idolaters donning robes, collars and buildings with crosses, baptismal fonts and open Bibles. Do I join the world in their critique of an apostate church and face the risk of being a divisive brother? Do I remain silent in the midst of massive apostasy in the name of peace among the brethren? These are not always easy questions to answer, depending on the level of the transgression.

Christ in Zephaniah

It is the third section of Zephaniah that leads us to Christ. There are numerous gates presented in Zephaniah. Those of an apostate church and those of a hostile world. They will all find themselves and their self-deification and oppressive abuse of their enemies and fellow countrymen under God's judgment. The third section of Zephaniah presents a faithful remnant and the narrow gate, which leads to life. And that gate is Christ (Matthew 7:14).

In almost romantic terms, we are told that God will rejoice over us with gladness. He will quiet us, our troubled souls, with His love and He will rejoice over us with singing (Zephaniah 3:17). But these promises of eternal peace and tranquility of heart did not come by the forceful overthrow of nations or even by mere citizenship in the nation which had been designated the apple of God's eye (Deuteronomy 32:10).

The words of peace and comfort are directed toward those who have faith and who walk by that faith. In the Old Covenant it would be faith in the Messiah promised and for us it is faith in that promise kept-faith in Christ.

Questions for Study

1. With whom or what do you find yourself in struggles? How do you engage (pages 2, 3)?
2. What are some misunderstandings when it comes to be hated by the world (pages 2, 3)?
3. How do you respond when the world criticizes religions or religious leaders who are less than orthodox (page 3)?
4. Discuss your internal struggles. What does that look like? How does it happen (pages 3, 4)?
5. Should we view God's patience as God's indulgence? Explain (page 4).
6. How does Zephaniah open his book? Where does he end up (pages 5, 6)?
7. What are the three parts of Zephaniah (page 6)?
8. How can you be assured that the wonderful promises found in the end of chapter three belong to you (page 7)?