

“What About Them?”

Zephaniah 2:4-3:10

I'm sure you can recall a time when you and a sibling or friend did something you shouldn't have and were caught by your parents or a teacher. And if the brunt of the punishment seemed to fall on us, the tendency was always 'What about him or her? What's their punishment? They did more than we did! They started it or were more responsible than us' (so we always felt!). And at times we cried out 'That's not fair!' when the punishment seemed to fall on us more than the other person/people.

When we read the Bible and God is handing out discipline to His people Israel, sometimes they cry out 'What about them? What about the wicked nations around us?' In the book just prior to Zephaniah, the prophet Habakkuk voices his concern to God. In 1:2

How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save?

He continues to cry out to God about Israel's unfaithfulness for a few more verses. God answers Habakkuk in v.5-6 saying,

Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told. ⁶ I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own.

And God continues on for a bit telling Habakkuk He will deal with Israel's sins by using the Babylonians to come and sweep them away. Habakkuk is stunned and essentially says in 1:12-17, 'How can You, a holy God tolerate even worse sin? I don't get it!' But God does say in Ch. 2 'Don't worry, I will deal with them if they don't see that I'm the one who gave them power and control over the world.'

So here in Zephaniah, after God has declared through the prophet that He is going to discipline His people Judah, we have a change in 2:4 where God now deals with the nations, as if to answer the unspoken question 'What about them?' What about the nations around Judah who have oppressed them and hurt them and negatively influenced them with their false gods and wickedness? What are You going to do about them – and when?

We're no different as God's people either. We experience difficulties and trials – sometimes at the hands of unbelievers who ridicule or rebuke us. And we silently say to God 'What about them? When are You going to deal with their wickedness? Do You not see the persecution that Your people are experiencing?'

Almost every prophet who pronounces judgment against Israel's sins, also pronounces judgment on the other nations' sins against Israel. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel all have large sections about judgment against wicked nations who mistreated Israel. And some of the minor prophets' messages are almost primarily against other nations (Nahum, Obadiah and Jonah for example). When God pronounces judgment against Israel's nations, it's an encouragement to them. It's a reassurance that God has not forgotten His people and sees the difficulties they experience.

Likewise, when we read these sections we can be encouraged and reassured also that God sees the hurts imposed on us also by the hands of our oppressors. These sections remind us,

God Knows Every Affliction His People Have Experienced (2:4-15)

Zephaniah speaks out against the Philistines, who dwelled to the west along the coast of the Mediterranean; the Moabites and Ammonites who dwelled east of the Jordan River, the Cushites who dwelled south of the Egyptians in Africa and the Assyrians who dwelled northeast from Israel, but always came from the north because you couldn't travel across hundred of miles of desert. Were there other nations who oppressed Judah? Of course. So why these 4? Because these 4 were representative of all nations because geo-graphically they represented all 4 directions. And, they were furthest geographical points that Israel knew of at the time. God was making the point that,

Nothing will escape His notice (vv.4-5)

Zephaniah goes west in vv.4-7, then east in vv.8-11, south in v.12 and finally north in vv.13-15. All four corners of the earth. If anyone, anywhere in all the world hurts one of God's people, He sees it. He knows about it. And He will deal with them. "Trust Me" God was saying through Zephaniah. I see and hear Your pain and suffering. I will make it right but You have to trust Me.'

And in these judgments Zephaniah makes reference to things God has said to Israel in the past. He says to the Philistines that they will be abandoned from their land and "*it will be long to the remnant of the house of Judah. There they will find pasture . . .the Lord will restore their fortunes.*"

Those two phrases 'the remnant' and 'restore their fortunes' are found all over the prophets.' These are reminders to God's people that,

Not one of His promises will fail (v.7, 9, 11)

God heard the taunts of the Moabites and Ammonites "*who insulted My people and made threats against their land*" will become like Sodom and Gomorrah. And as a result, "*The remnant of My people will plunder them, the survivors of My nation will inherit their land*" (v.11).

Why does God specifically use Sodom and Gomorrah as an example? Because the Ammonites and the Moabites came from the loins of Lot and his daughters who escaped Sodom and Gomorrah by the skin of their teeth. But they didn't learn from God's grace and instead turned on God's people. Both Philistia and Ammom/Moab will one day lose their land to Israel. Why? Because God promised all that land to Abraham's descendants, the people of Israel. The covenant God made through Moses reminded Israel that enjoyment of the land was contingent on their obedience to God. Why does Israel not have all the land God promised them? Because many Israelites still reject Jesus as their Messiah.

Notice these promises are to the "remnant" of Israel. Most of Israel will not receive the blessings of God because they turned away from Him and His Son. These promises will be fulfilled at the Day of the Lord – which is the focus of Zephaniah. The Day of the Lord begins with cleansing of Israel's sinfulness at the hands of the other nations, led by the wickedness of the anti-christ himself. Daniel 9 tells us the anti-christ will make a 7-year covenant with Israel that somehow will allow them to rebuild their temple. This all a smokescreen on his part because at the half way point of the 7 years, he will stand in the temple and declare he is the Messiah. All those who reject him as the

messiah will not come under his protection (wearing his mark) and will suffer and many will die. Two thirds of the nation of Israel will die according to Zech. 13:7-9, but that 1/3 will turn to the lord and receive the promised blessings as Jesus returns at the end of the 7 years, tossing the anti-christ and the false prophet into the lake of fire and beginning His millennial rule from Jerusalem.

We'll see more of this next week. God also pronounces a brief judgment on the Cushites (which may include Egypt) and a longer one on the Assyrians because they inflicted a lot of pain and suffering on Israel during their tenure.

So, we too can be encouraged that God knows and will ultimately deal with every affliction we have received at the hand of those against us. But when? This was written around 630 BC, that's 2650 years ago!

God Will Do it in His Time and Manner **(3:1-8)**

Just when the Israelites started to come out from hiding after Zephaniah's opening rebuke, God returns to them. Why? Why does God come down on hard on His covenant people? God's punishment ...

Starts with those who know better (3:1-5)

In spite of King Josiah's attempts to bring about spiritual reform, many Israelites didn't respond to the words of the prophets.

Woe to the city of oppressors, rebellious and defiled! ²She obeys no one, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the LORD, she does not draw near to her God. ³ Her officials are roaring lions, her rulers are evening wolves, who leave nothing for the morning. ⁴ Her prophets are arrogant; they are treacherous men. Her priests profane the sanctuary and do violence to the law. ⁵ The LORD within her is righteous; he does no wrong. Morning by morning he dispenses his justice, and every new day he does not fail, yet the unrighteous know no shame.

God has never changed. He remains faithful to His covenant promises to bless obedience and judge disobedience. That's what Deut. 28 is all about. Zephaniah doesn't mention the king himself, but many of his officials, many priests and self-proclaimed prophets rejected God's Word. So, God begins judgment with those who should know better.

He does that with us, His church as well. In 1 Pet. 4 Peter lists the ways God disciplines us when we disobey God. He says,

¹⁴ If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. ¹⁵ If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. ¹⁶ However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. ¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin with God's household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸ And, "If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"

Peter encourages us that any suffering that happens because of our faith, God sees and will reward. Any suffering we experience because we sin, we'll suffer the consequences for, now in our lifetime. But that's it. The worst discipline a believer will ever experience happens in this life, not the

next. In that way 'judgement begins with us. The unsaved are not judged until after this life because God is giving them time by His grace to repent. What becomes of the ungodly and the sinner after they die is separation from God forever? The best they'll ever experience will only happen during their lifetime. Whereas we get to enjoy whatever blessings God wants to give us now but even more so, eternity with Him.

The reason why Israel shouldn't be disobeying God and that His warnings about punishment should be taken seriously is because God has,

Graciously been warning them through past judgments

... on the other nations and in Israel's past as well.

⁶ *"I have cut off nations; their strongholds are demolished. I have left their streets deserted, with no one passing through. Their cities are destroyed; no one will be left—no one at all. 7 I said to the city, surely you will fear me and accept correction!" Then her dwelling would not be cut off, nor all my punishments come upon her. But they were still eager to act corruptly in all they did.*

God says, take a history lesson from the past. Where is Egypt today? Where are the former world powers, other nations that threatened you in the past? Think about the victories of David and Joshua and Gideon and Hezekiah and Moses. How many times has God come through for them? Over and over because He is committed to keeping His promises. So don't risk being cut off. Stop acting corruptly. Learn from history – don't repeat it.

The nation of Israel shouldn't even exist today; yet they do. Many times they should have been wiped out, yet God miraculously stepped in. Because God is faithful to His Word. So Zephaniah warns them to learn from past judgments. And the warning comes with urgency because this next judgment will come ...

In one final future calamity (v.8)

Therefore, wait for me," declares the LORD, "for the day I will stand up to testify. I have decided to assemble the nations, to gather the kingdoms and to pour out my wrath on them— all my fierce anger. The whole world will be consumed by the fire of my jealous anger.

Zephaniah is obviously pointing to the final battle, when according to Zech. 14 God sovereignly gathers the nations to Jerusalem (although they think they are doing it, ready to wipe out Israel once for all) where He has them where He wants them. Jesus returns and sets foot on the Mt. of Olives and rescues the remnant of Israel who have turned in faith to Him. Then He deals with the nations, defeating them and cleanses the land, preparing it for His earthly rule. We read in Zech. 14:9

⁹ *The LORD will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one LORD, and his name the only name.*

So God will have His day. It will come. All those who oppose Him and have hurt us will be dealt with. In the meantime, we are not to seek revenge, but leave it in the Lord's manner and timing to deal with. We have to trust Him to do things His way. His thoughts are not our thought and His ways are higher than ours. Jesus also commands us to pray for those who hate us and mistreat us and love them as He does because the reason again for His delay is, He wants some to be saved.

And this is something else we need to remember when we're going through persecution.

God Will Even Save Some of Them **(3:9-10)**

3:9-20 is all talking about Jesus' 1000-year reign on this earth. And we read in vv.9-10 that

⁹ "Then will I purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him shoulder to shoulder. ¹⁰ From beyond the rivers of Cush my worshipers, my scattered people, will bring me offerings.

I wonder how the original readers reacted to this! All this talk of our enemies getting what they deserve and then you tell us, some of them will come to know God. And we'll worship together!! One of the most fascinating verses in the Bible about the Millennial rule of Jesus is found in Is. 19:22-24

²² The LORD will strike Egypt with a plague; he will strike them and heal them. They will turn to the LORD, and he will respond to their pleas and heal them. ²³ In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians to Assyria. The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together. ²⁴ In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. ²⁵ The LORD Almighty will bless them, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance."

Some Egyptians and Iraqi and Iranian peoples will come to know the Lord during those awful days prior to Jesus' return. They will meet together in Jerusalem to worship the Messiah together. Amazing!

Will that disappoint us or please us? Will we be like a Jonah who didn't want the Ninevites to be saved because of the terrible things they did to his fellow Israelites and complain to God and even resist sharing the good news with them? Or will we rejoice in the sovereign plan of God to save those who He desires to save?

So how does this impact us today? Knowing God can save anyone and will save some of God's people's harshest critics and enemies should cause us to seek to love and pray for our enemies, as Jesus commanded. The command to love is not an emotional term as our culture has defined it. Biblical love is sacrificing our wants for other's needs. Putting their needs before our desires. What do people need? To be saved by faith in Jesus.

Most of us probably know people who are obstinate deniers of God or haters of Jesus or Christianity and have made that clear to us. Our flesh says 'argue with them, get biblical ammo to drown out their arguments'; and those are not bad things but often we're more interested in winning an argument rather than see them saved. Let's choose to serve them in grace, to let their need for salvation come before our desire to win an argument or (if we're honest) see them suffer in eternity without God.

Write their names down this week and pray for them specifically that God might open their minds and hearts to Himself and Jesus Christ – since only God can save people. Write down the names of prominent public figures who are openly antagonistic toward God and pray for them, that God might spare them His final judgment and show His mercy and grace. And who knows who we'll be sitting beside in eternity, praising and worshipping our Lord. God can

do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us
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