

## ***Zephaniah 1/3: 1:1-2:3***

Friends! Let's begin with prayer today.

### ***Prayer:***

### ***Introduction:***

We continue to walk through the prophets, and I've given us, again, a timeline of when these prophets did their work. And I want us to have it simply because as we open our Bibles, and flip to find whatever prophetic book that we're looking at, we'll notice that we skip past books to get to the ones we're talking about. Again: The Minor Prophets, as they appear in our Bibles, aren't in exact chronological order. We'll come around to all of these prophets by the time we're done.

Today we're talking about Zephaniah. He's speaking some 30 years after Nahum's last word to Assyria. Today's message is an introduction message, as much as a look at Zephaniah's first chapter, and I'll do what I can to help us connect what Zephaniah says to our own spiritual formation.

We won't talk about idolatry, although I thought we

might. We won't talk about syncretism--attempting to make God fit into the shape we want our religion to take. I thought we would. We will talk about what it means to be different from those who don't follow Christ, and what that might mean for us.

So: Zephaniah.

### ***Zephaniah The Prophet:***

We actually know a little more about Zephaniah than we do many of the prophets. His name means "Yahweh Protects," which fits the message of his book. He's the son of "Cushi," which means, "African," and we read how Cushi was "Gedaliah's grandson, Amariah's great-grandson, and Hezekiah's great, great grandson."

And it would make sense, if Zephaniah were King Hezekiah's great-great-grandson, for ol' Hezzie to get name-dropped. It would increase Zephaniah's legitimacy. Hezekiah died around 687, some 50 or 60 years before Zephaniah, so the numbers work out.

And we've already seen how Hezekiah was basically a good king; so good that God extended his life for him, he saved Jerusalem from Assyria's first takeover

attempt because he helped reorient God's People back to faithfulness. And we read in today's introduction verse that Zephaniah spoke during Josiah's reign.

### ***Zephaniah: Josiah & Context***

Hezekiah was the last God-obeying king before Josiah came along, a gap of, gosh, about a 75 years, but Josiah became especially famous for his faithfulness. When he was 18, and had already been king for a decade, which makes me reflect on my 8 year old, a chunk of Deuteronomy was found in the Temple; it had been forgotten, and it was read to Josiah, because he cared about God and wanted to hear it. He immediately tears his clothes in repentance, and in the end launches a total religious renewal in Israel, but immediately seeks out Huldah, a famous prophet who, if you're looking for Old Testament examples, was not only well-respected but a woman. This happens in 2 Kings 22, if you're interested.

***13 "Go and inquire of the Lord for me and for the people and for all Judah about what is written in this book that has been found. [Josiah says.] Great is the Lord's anger that burns against us because those who have gone before us have not obeyed the words of this book; they***

***have not acted in accordance with all that is written there concerning us.”***

A handful of important administrators, and the High Priest, go to Huldah.

***15 She said to them, “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: Tell the man who sent you to me, 16 ‘This is what the Lord says: I am going to bring disaster on this place and its people, according to everything written in the book the king of Judah has read. 17 Because they have forsaken me and burned incense to other gods and aroused my anger by all the idols their hands have made,[a] my anger will burn against this place and will not be quenched.’ 18 Tell the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the Lord, ‘This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says concerning the words you heard: 19 Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the Lord when you heard what I have spoken against this place and its people—that they would become a curse[b] and be laid waste—and because you tore your robes and wept in my presence, I also have heard you, declares the Lord. 20 Therefore I will***

***gather you to your ancestors, and you will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring on this place.'"***

Josiah is promised peace. The city, though, is promised to “become a curse,” which is the opposite of what God promised Abraham when he was first chosen, that his descendants would become a blessing. What’s clear is that God wasn’t fooling around when he promised blessing and reward for their faithfulness, and judgment for the ways they’d abandon him. Making the covenant their ancestors made with God was no small thing.

***Zephaniah: Shaped By His Historical Situation:***

There’s other things: Zephaniah seems to understand how Jerusalem works in a way some of the other prophets don’t. He knows the city well, and cares especially about Jerusalem’s inhabitants, which makes sense if he’s still got family and royal and faithful connections to these people he lives among as an insider. He knows Temple rituals and has a number of oracles he gives related to these, which makes sense if a national religious renewal is going on around him. And again, he’s saying what he’s saying some 20 years before Babylon first comes knocking on

Jerusalem's door, and only 35 years before Jerusalem and the Temple are razed to the ground, and all their people exiled, and the city traditions Zephaniah knows are ended. Josiah, of course, doesn't live to see any of that.

### ***Zephaniah's Message:***

And the message Zephaniah gives is that the "Day of the Lord" is coming. It's coming as judgment, which is a huge part of what we see in today's passage, and it's coming as salvation, as rescue, which is much of what Chapter Three discusses. The Day of the Lord is judgment for those who've turned their back on Yahweh, and its rescue for those who've persisted in faith despite their incredibly hard situations.

### ***Message: Syncretism, Idolatry, Cultural Assimilation/Adoption***

Zephaniah preaches against the same things that Josiah's renewal condemned, and there were sort of three things in particular that he focuses on. The first is syncretism--when people try to worship Yahweh and a few other gods at the same time, and say God's good with it. The next is idolatry, when people literally make idols or buy idols, and worship these statues as if they had power in the world. God's against this

whether the people are pretending the statue is Yahweh or not. And, finally, Zephaniah speaks against, oh, really cultural assimilation, we could maybe say cultural adoption, but basically Zephaniah speaks to the way Israel was supposed to be different from the other nations around them, a people who uniquely expressed what God hoped for humanity, and blessed the world as they want, but instead Israel has just been acting like everyone else in almost every single way that could be measured, seen, counted.

Zephaniah does this mostly by condemning all the ways the people around them act, more than simply calling Israel to live up to what Yahweh asked of them.

### ***Identity Lost:***

But keep in mind, here: Nahum, who preached 30 years before Zephaniah, didn't call Israel back to faithfulness; he just condemned Assyria. And Micah prophesied at least 20 years before him, probably longer. It's been between 50 and 70 years since Hezekiah reigned, since Isaiah was preaching, since any written prophet called Judah back to faithfulness. Josiah's 20 years old. Generations of adults have failed to tell him and his peers what God wants of them, why they exist at all, what they were made for, and how their future will go.

Somewhere along the way they just lost their reason for living and by the time Zephaniah preaches, most of them don't even know what they don't know anymore. It's sad, and terrible, and yet: Israel was created for the purpose of redeeming the world, being the ones by whom all creation would be blessed. That core identity, that fundamental purpose for why any of them exist, has been given away, and how it obligates Israel to act in the world, has been shed more completely generation after generation.

I'm reminded of how Jesus condemned the Pharisees for their continual claim to be Abraham's children, heirs of God's promises, and his condemnation that "God could turn these rocks into Abraham's children if he wanted to," a condemnation with the point that heritage means nothing, if the obligations that come with your heritage are completely ignored.

### ***Zephaniah's Book: Structure:***

Like Nahum, Zephaniah is easy to outline. There are three major parts, units, that center around three groups of oracles. Out of Zephaniah's 53 verses, 47 of them are predictions about things to come. About half of those have to do with the way Jerusalem is going to fall to Babylon. Here it is:

***1:1: Preface***

***1:2-2:3: Judgment against Jerusalem & Judah***

***2:4-3:8: Judgment against Nations around & Jerusalem, Again***

***3:9-20: Promise to Redeem and Restore Exiles & Jerusalem***

This doesn't quite line up with the three chapters that are in Zephaniah, but it's not off too much. One person has talked about these three sections as Zephaniah "Looking Within," then "Looking Around," then "Looking Ahead." That's tidy. I like it. I don't remember who made it up.

There is that more detailed outline in your bulletins if you want it.

***Today's Passage:***

Because much of what Zephaniah says about the Day of the Lord are things we've already talked about, we're not going to review them much. Go back to Joel's message, to Amos message. The basic idea underlying the "Day of the Lord" is a time in which evil is judged, faithfulness is rewarded, and everyone recognizes God as creator and sustainer of everything.

Out of the gate, in today's passage, Zephaniah calls back to the flood as God gives voice to a desire to wipe off the face of the earth mankind, and everything alive with us. Oddly, though, in the middle of this, God points out that the "idols that cause the wicked to stumble" are going to get chucked with everything else, and we realize how idolatry is going to be lifted up in Zephaniah as one of the worst evils around.

And this makes sense, because the worship of idols wraps up in it everything that Israel was supposed to avoid, it forgets everything they were supposed to remember. For Israel, Idol worship is both a gateway drug and the thing it's easiest to overdose on. They bow down to these little idols that they buy, that they set up in their houses, and in that one act, they become like all the other people around them--the opposite of what they were meant to be. They ignore God's most basic requirement of the relationship He has with these chosen People--that they "serve no other God" than Him. Idolatry is the means and the method by which Israel abandons God's promises.

***"I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem. I will destroy every remnant of Baal worship in this place, the***

***very names of the idolatrous priests...who turn back from following the Lord and neither seek the Lord nor inquire of him.”***

Yikes, right! And God lays it out, lists out some of the pagan gods that His own priests are worshipping instead of him, and teaching others to worship, too. And we realize the call back to the flood makes sense: Just as humanity was completely given over to evil, except for one tiny family, so Israel has completely turned away from what they were created for. Concern for God is completely absent.

There's condemnation of "the king's sons and all those clad in foreign clothes." And we can imagine how Josiah must have responded when he heard this, as his reforms were beginning, because of course part of what was meant to keep Israel different from the nations around them was their dress. Like so many of the taboo and uncleanness standards in their relationship with God, clothing was meant to be an ever-present reminder and signifier of their special role in the world, and how important it was to protect that role.

There's a great long description of the distress and the

terror that will accompany the Day of the Lord; we've seen similar language elsewhere. And, as the prophets do, Zephaniah speaks to the way that this distress, this judgment, might be something escapable if only God's People turn to him. He doesn't mince words, but he lays out its possibility:

***Gather together, gather yourselves together,  
you shameful nation,  
2 before the decree takes effect  
and that day passes like windblown chaff,  
before the Lord's fierce anger  
comes upon you,  
before the day of the Lord's wrath  
comes upon you.  
3 Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land,  
you who do what he commands.  
Seek righteousness, seek humility;  
perhaps you will be sheltered  
on the day of the Lord's anger.***

What we notice here, though, is that Zephaniah doesn't suggest this judgment won't come. He suggests, simply, that those who turn to God might find safety when it does.

***Renewal:***

Jerusalem is in the middle of a renewal as Zephaniah prophesies. Josiah is reforming the religious life of God's People. People are rediscovering their own history, learning about what it means to be Abraham's descendants and bearers of the covenant promises--and curses--of God. Grandparents are talking about what they remembered happening back when Hezekiah was ruling, and those few who have kept faithful aren't ostracized anymore, aren't pressured to worship the pagan gods that their own priests had been worshiping. Kids, who thought Yahweh was just one more god to pick among many, and who grew up just like every other kid in the Ancient Near East, without a sense of their special purpose in the world, are discovering that their people were made for a reason and that God is unique and unlike every other god they've been taught to worship.

***Us:***

Now, our situation is far, far from theirs, our understanding of God is deeper, different, nuanced. The Messiah's arrival was a revelation, a realization of thousands of promises of redemption, restoration, and hope that God made over history, and the new covenant we live in, the realization of the old

covenant's hopes and the promises we still wait on, it asks different things of us than was asked of Israel. But those things that Zephaniah rages against, that Josiah set about reforming, are still things that we have to consider, because we have to reject them, still.

We still have to reject idolatry.

We still have to reject syncretism.

We still have to reject the pull to total assimilation-- that is, taking on the cultural values of our society.

### ***Rejecting Assimilation:***

And, you know, assimilation is, like, a completely unhelpful word. I know that. But I do get tired of talking about how we're not supposed to be "worldly." I get tired of contrasting "the world" with "the church," which happens all the time. We're meant to bless the world; we're meant to help the world approximate all the virtues of the Kingdom of God unto Jesus returns. We're meant to love the world.

And yet: we followers of Christ are to seek first the Kingdom of God, live up to the principles and values and make those choices that line up with Jesus' way in the world. We're salt and light; seasoning and

preserving the world, and breaking down its dark places so that people might see God's goodness around them.

Jesus says to us:

***13 "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.***

***14 "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.***

There is something about following Jesus that will always make us different from those who don't follow Jesus. If we lose our saltiness, if our light gives off darkness, then we are simply not living up to what it means to follow Christ. Our love of the world, its common blessings and joys, can't move from

appreciation into accommodation or emulation.

Christianity has always debated what form those differences can take--just how different we ought to be when it comes to our appearance, our style, our speech, our purchases, or work, or the like. But the Church has never suggested that our character or the principles that we live by can be anything other than Jesus' own.

And so Zephaniah can challenge us to consider: How salty are we? Are we different from those who don't follow Jesus, or are we just like them?

This is a deeply important question, and a deeply personal one. But it's one that we can answer better with some input from those who we know love us, and who are themselves trying to live for Jesus, too.

If all we did this week was pay attention to the ways our practices, habits, and character are more in line with what our society thinks is normal, than what Jesus asks of us, we might discover some real shortcomings that God can help us address. Our faithfulness would be stronger for it, our trust in God would be tested, and our character would deepen.

***Conclusion:***

Finally, we do have to make sure that we're passing on to others the truths that we know: that God loves us, that we bring God pleasure, that in the areas in which God has gifted us, we ought to be listened to.

We can't let our children not hear about the truth of God's love made real in Jesus. Generations between Micah and Zephaniah shed their role in God's redemption of the world; we can't give up passing our faith on--not just to our children, but to anyone. It's part of what God's People were meant to do back then, and what God's People are still meant to do.

We can reject idolatry--giving our attention, our resources, and our trust to anything other than God. We can reject syncretism--trying to fit God into our lives so that we can live the way we want to live. We can reject assimilation--blending so deeply into the world that we no longer season or preserve it. But the easiest way to reject these things is to remember God in all the places we go. To share with people--our children and grandchildren especially, but anyone we have influence, affection, and care for, that we trust God, and are trying to become more like Jesus all the

time through that trust. Passing on our faith keeps these other things at bay.