

From Pride to Purity and Praise

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[0 : 0 0] You may like to have opened the Bibles in the pews at page 767. Today's the final of our four sermons on the book of Zephaniah.

So page 767 is where the reading is from. And let's pray that God will teach us. Our Heavenly Father, teach us from your word now we pray.

We pray that you'll write it on our hearts and change our hearts, that we may call upon you and serve you with one accord for the sake and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen. Remember back a few months to the rescue of the two miners at Beaconsfield in Tasmania and how transfixed we were as people and as a nation on whether they would be rescued.

After a few days it seemed that nobody was even alive. And then it was a miracle it seemed that two people were even alive and then several days later that they were in fact rescued from there.

[1 : 0 6] Or go back a few more years. 1997 I think it was. The landslide at Thredbo. And our expectation that nobody could have survived such a disaster.

And yet of course Stuart Diver was plucked miraculously out of the rubble. Periodically we see pictures of disasters, whether it's a fire, an earthquake, a flood, a tsunami, a hurricane or whatever.

And we wonder how on earth anybody could survive. And frequently of course they don't. But every now and again we hear those miracle stories of somebody plucked alive from the wreckage of a train or plane or flood or fire or whatever it is.

Cast your minds back three weeks to the opening verses of Zephaniah. I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth says the Lord.

I will sweep away humans and animals. I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. If you try and picture what's being described there, you would say how on earth could anybody survive that description of judgment and devastation.

[2 : 1 9] Those opening verses as indeed much of the rest of chapter 1 into chapter 2 leave us virtually without hope that anybody may survive the judgment day of the Lord God Almighty.

It's the end of the world as we know it. Ending not with a whimper but with a bang. Ending not with a bang.

And then last week we saw a couple of times in later verses of chapter 2 verses 7 and 9 that beyond the judgment day and the devastation of the nations around about God, the remnant of God's people will inherit those lands and live in them.

Which holds out a slightly firmer hope that beyond this devastating picture of judgment, there will actually be a remnant of God's people to survive.

At the end of the 7th century BC, which is where these words come from, perhaps the years 620s and 610s BC, in the reign of King Josiah of Judah, Judah had been careering headlong into exile.

[3 : 57] And despite good King Josiah's substantial reforms of the nation and the casting out of places of idolatry and trying to curb immorality and bring back the nation under God's law, soon as he was dead, soon as he was dead, before his corpse was cold virtually, his sons on the throne in succession, the leaders of the nation reverted very quickly back to the apostasy and idolatry and immorality of Josiah's predecessors.

God's patience had run out. And the message of Zephaniah is, the people will not do anything, cannot do anything, that will avert the judgment of God.

It's now too late. And though there is, in chapter 2, verse 3, just that faint hope of seek the Lord now, the expectation is, they won't.

There are people who've stubbornly refused to seek the Lord. And so the judgment that is coming is inevitable and will not be averted. And indeed, just within 20 or 30 years of Zephaniah's words, Jerusalem was utterly destroyed by the Babylonians.

And the people fled, and many were taken to Babylon in exile. During this period, leading up to Zephaniah, God had given various warnings through different prophets that the people needed to repent and turn from their ways.

[5 : 28] The warnings were unheeded. God had brought disaster or judgment on neighboring nations by way of warning to his own people. Those warnings went, by and large, unheeded.

A hundred years before Zephaniah, the northern part of the kingdom of God's people, called Israel, was destroyed by the Assyrians. That was a warning for the southern part of God's people to heed the warnings and repent.

Such warnings went, by and large, unheeded. And the picture of judgment is of total devastation in this book that God will bring.

And yet what we find, quite clearly and strongly in these closing words of the book, is that out of the rubble of devastation, life rises again.

Out of the ashes of the conflagration that's described, hope stirs. For what we find in the scriptures as a whole, and here in particular, is that the same fire of God's judgment both punishes and destroys, but it also purifies.

[6 : 45] It serves two purposes at the same time. And so hope in the scriptures is never a hope that bypasses judgment, but it's a hope that goes through judgment to something better beyond.

Judgment is inevitable here. The day of the Lord is coming, but beyond it lies a purified and perfected hope, as we'll see today.

What we've seen in these last three weeks is that the focus of this book switches from the nations by and large to God's people Judah, back to the nations, back to Judah.

Sometimes the transitions are not always clear, as we saw in particular last week, for a deliberate purpose. Today's passage in verse 9 begins with a focus on the peoples or the nations by and large, but later switches back to the people of God of Judah.

So in verse 9, now comes a word of hope, even to the nations, not just to God's people. At that time, I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech that all of them may call on the name of the Lord.

[8 : 03] A pure speech. Not just meaning that they'll all have one language, the reversal of the Tower of Babel, but that their speech will mean they call on the name of the Lord to be saved.

For up to this point, by and large, the people of God and the nations around have not called on the name of God, have not called on the name of Yahweh. They've boasted in their own arrogance and pride, as we saw quoted last week in chapter 2 of the nations around about.

That's why they'll be punished. But God will change their speech. Not just changing words, but actually changing the intent behind the words.

So He'll change their speech so that they call on the name of the Lord, so that they express humility and dependence upon God, rather than independence and complacency and self-sufficiency.

That is, this change of speech described in this verse, 9, is not just about words coming from the mouth. It's actually changing the heart that produces the words.

[9 : 06] You see that at the end of verse 9 as well. The result of the pure speech will be they will serve Him with one accord. That is, their life will change because of what God changes on the insides of the peoples.

It will lead them to faith and dependence on God, thus humility. It will lead them to obedience as well. For what this passage is acknowledging, which is what the scriptures generally acknowledge, is that the heart of the problem of humanity is the problem of the heart of humanity.

That is, our insides need changing. And all through the history of the Old Testament, we see lots of external actions from God to try and change people.

He sends a flood. He gives promises. He gives His laws. He sends prophets. He gives kings and judges. He gives them victories. He gives them defeats. He brings rain. He withdraws the rain.

All of those things are on the outside. They don't change the insides of people. They're warnings that people ought to heed, promises they ought to keep and hold, and laws they ought to obey.

[10 : 22] But it doesn't change the heart. Not that God was just oblivious to the significance of the problem. Not at all. But in a sense, the ultimate futility of all those actions is helping us realize the depth of the problem and how deep-seated it is in the depths of our very hearts.

God now is promising on the nations in general a change in their hearts so that they will have faith in Him, they will call on Him, and serve Him.

Well, now we switch back, it seems, to the people of God, more specifically to Judah. The context here is anticipating the aftermath of the judgment, that is, the destruction of Jerusalem.

And when that event occurred 20 to 30 years after Zephaniah's words, many of the leaders of the nation were taken off to Babylon and others fled to other places, including Egypt and even beyond to Ethiopia.

Now, we're told, from beyond the rivers of Ethiopia, my suppliants, my scattered ones, shall bring my offering. That is, they'll come back.

[11 : 40] From being scattered around the Middle East because of the judgment, they'll come back. With my offering, meaning they'll come back faithful and they'll come back offering right sacrifice, as indeed they haven't been doing thus far.

We've seen in this book so far that God calls His people shameless. The beginning of chapter 2, gather together, O shameless nation. And then at the end of verse 5 of chapter 3, the unjust knows no shame.

That is, so deep-seated are they in their evil and apostasy, they boast in it and they're not ashamed of it. But now, we read in verse 11, on that day you shall not be put to shame because of all the deeds by which you've rebelled against me.

Shame will be dealt with and taken away along with the guilt of the wrongdoing. The central sin in Zephaniah is in fact pride.

We saw it last week in the nations, Assyria, for example, being boastful, Moab and Ammon being haughty against God's people in chapter 2. It's there implicitly about the people of God as well.

- [12 : 58] The fact that they don't call on the name of the Lord is a demonstration of their pride. God will deal with their pride. So verse 11 continues, For then I will remove from your midst your proudly exultant ones.

But it's not simply that God will punish the proud and leave the humble, although that's true, but more than that, he will change the proud into being humble.

So the end of verse 11 says, You shall no longer be haughty in my holy mountain. That is again, it's an act of God in the heart. It seems earlier on, yes, there is a call to be humble.

Chapter 2 verse 3, Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land. Seek humility. But an expectation they won't. Now the proud will be removed, but for some their pride will be changed into humility by God.

Again, that's the heart change that God is referring to in the same sort of idea as changing the speech back in verse 9. We see then that the perhaps of chapter 2 verse 3, perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the Lord's wrath, is in fact realized.

- [14 : 15] For verse 12 goes on to say, I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord, the remnant of Israel. That is, the perhaps is realized and fulfilled.

What is left will be a humble and lowly people. To an extent, they will have been brought down by judgment. Many of the proud will have been punished and taken away and removed.

And for those that are left, God will work in their heart to change their pride into humility. They won't survive the judgment because they deserve it through their humility. They'll survive it because of God's mercy in changing their hearts.

And then verse 13 goes on to describe this humble, lowly remnant. They shall do no wrong, utter no lies, nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths.

The description there reflects the character of God himself. Back in verse 5, God is the one who does no wrong and is righteous. Now the purified remnant will do no wrong and will be righteous in effect.

- [15 : 24] That is, what God will do is change the hearts of his people, or at least the remnant of his people, so that they reflect the character of God himself. It's the activity of God to purify his people so that they become like him.

What God is promising in these words is astounding. It's astounding because nobody deserves it. It's astounding because it is so significant a change in the hearts and minds of people.

It's astounding because it applies to the peoples generally as well as to the nation of God's people. That is, it's not just Jew-specific, it's inclusive of other peoples of other nations.

It's not universal in the sense that every single person will be changed, but it shows a breadth and depth of God's mercy that is quite striking and astounding.

It reminds us that all our hope depends on God, not on ourselves, not on our humility, not on our obedience, for in the end we can't do what God demands of us.

- [16 : 39] In the end we're proud and we need God to bring down the proud and change us into lowly people, humble people, and as he so often promises then, to lift us up.

as a result of this change, the end of verse 13, using the shepherd-type picture, they will pasture and lie down and no one shall make them afraid.

The result of this purified remnant of God's people beyond judgment will be no fear. And in fact, two more times in the verses that follow, no fear is emphasized.

But the verses that follow have a different note. They're an exhortation to praise. It's like a little psalm in effect, verses 14 to 17. One of the striking things about these verses and this psalm is that it's before the event.

That is, the promise is there that beyond judgment God will purify the hearts of his people, make them humble and lowly, and they will serve him with one accord and be righteous and so on.

[17 : 54] Even before that happens, Zephaniah now urges his people, God's people, to sing aloud, O daughter Zion, shout O Israel, rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem.

That is, this is not a psalm to sing after the event, put it in your shelves and wait, sing it now, rejoice now, exult now in the greatness of God even before he does what he promises to do.

It underscores the certainty of believing in God's promises, that it's not just a vague, dreamy act of the future that may or may not happen, you can be confident it will, so let's praise God even now for what he will do in the future.

The little psalm grounds the rejoicing in what God is doing in two things in verse 15, he's taken away the judgments against you and turned away your enemies, that's the first, and the second is that the king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst, which is a striking note given that the sons of King Josiah were so bad, it's a reminder that the real king is God, and he is in your midst.

Even perhaps in exile, he is in your midst. He's not limited to the Jerusalem temple, which is about to be destroyed by the Babylonians. And again, we find the message, no fear.

[19 : 19] The end of verse 15, you shall fear disaster no more. Verse 16, on that day it will be said to Jerusalem, do not fear, O Zion, do not let your hands grow weak, the Lord your God is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory.

And from the fearful and terrifying picture of God that the early chapters of this book have portrayed for us, the psalm ends in verse 17, with a picture of tender love from God.

He will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love, he will exult over you with loud singing. And again, that's a striking picture.

We're used to the Bible telling us to sing our praises and rejoice in God, we're probably less used to the Bible telling us that God will rejoice in us.

God will delight in us, he will rejoice in us, not because we merit that, but because finally by his grace we will have been perfected in his image and in his character.

[20 : 31] We will be the people he intended us to be when he created humanity on the sixth day. So our rejoicing in God will be matched by his rejoicing in us.

A very striking picture of joy indeed. The final verses, in effect, 18 to 20, are a bit like a little summary of today's passage.

One of the things to, and here we find God as a shepherd in effect, who's gathering up the strays and the lame and the outcast and bringing them back to the land.

One of the things that we need to note in these verses is the emphasis on God's action. God is speaking these words and he says, I will do this, I will do that.

I will remove disaster from you so that you'll not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. I will save the lame.

[21 : 37] I will gather the outcasts. I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home. At the time when I gather you, for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.

All of this is God's work. It's not Israel's work. It's not our work. It's all God's work. I will do it. I will do it. I will do it, says God.

Notice again the emphasis on the internal change, the change from shame to praise and renown. The internal change with shame and guilt taken away and now God's people become the object of praise and renown in the world.

Well, a few decades after Zephaniah spoke these words, 20 to 30 years perhaps at the most, Jerusalem was destroyed. People were taken off 1,500 kilometers away to Babylon.

Others fled to Egypt, beyond to Ethiopia and to other parts of the Middle East as well. The exile had begun. But another 70 years after that, still less than a century after these words, the Babylonians were in turn conquered by the Persians who had a much more benevolent attitude to conquered peoples and allowed them to return home.

[22 : 55] That included the conquered Jews. And so some of them in 538 BC went back to Jerusalem and some perhaps from other parts of their exile also returned back to Jerusalem.

What do we find in that time? If you read the Old Testament parts that relate to that period like Haggai, Zechariah, Ezra, Nehemiah, Malachi, we don't see a fulfillment of Zephaniah's words.

We don't see God rejoicing in his people. We don't see them serving him with one accord. We don't see them demonstrating the character of God with justice. We don't see the nations whose heart is changed and whose speech is pure.

Could it be a hundred years later that God's words in fact were not being fulfilled? That somehow they'd fallen apart and been forgotten or God had changed his mind?

The return of the people to Judah and Jerusalem did not bring about the fulfillment that is described in these verses here. Verse 20 begins, at that time I will bring you home.

[24 : 07] when they came back to Jerusalem when they even rebuilt the temple when they resettled in the land and a few more years later had a wall built around Jerusalem again many of them probably thought well we've come home and these words have not been fulfilled but they hadn't come home they'd come back to the land but it's actually not home because the real home is with God not in Jerusalem not in Judah not really on this earth another 500 years later another man came on the scene and he announced prepare the way of the Lord make straight your paths for him he quoted from another Old Testament prophet that was speaking about the return from exile in his words he demonstrated that the exile actually was not really over even though people had gone back to Jerusalem because the real exile is an exile from God and the real return is to be brought home to God those words were spoken by John the Baptist as he prepared the way for

Jesus Christ as John the Baptist announced the end of exile Jesus came to accomplish it by dying and rising from the dead the end of exile you see is not just to go back to the land the end of exile ultimately is to go home to God and that's what Jesus Christ death and resurrection seeks to accomplish for on the cross he took all our guilt and shame as Zephaniah anticipated in effect he took on himself all the sins of the world and out of the judgment of God against all the sins of the world many were made righteous by the purifying and powerful blood that he shed on the one hand there is an act of judgment against sin at the same time an act of purification for sinners and so out of the judgment of the cross rises the hope of resurrection the time of pure speech begins from then notably seen perhaps on the day of

Pentecost when many call on the name of the Lord and are saved the time of the changed heart stems from the cross of Jesus Christ a powerful death that is powerful enough to change us on the inside as say Paul explains in Romans 2 or Colossians 2 our consciences are cleansed by the power of the blood of Jesus as the writer to the Hebrews explains and all of this is God's action for which we contribute nothing and deserve nothing that's the fulfillment of what Zephaniah is looking forward to even if he didn't understand that himself it's not looking forward to a hundred years in the rebuilding of a temple it's looking forward to a greater act by God in changing the hearts of people and so home is to be with God not on this earth although yes we're in the presence of God by his spirit but perfectly in his presence in his heavenly home this one act of judgment both punishes and purifies your dross to consume and your gold to refine as the hymn writer puts it when through fiery trials your pathway shall lead his grace shall sustain you with all that you need the flames shall not hurt you his only design your dross to consume and your gold to refine and that's what's being promised in these verses that the dross of pride and haughtiness and sin will be consumed and through the judgment

God will purify us to be humble and lowly to call on his name and to serve him with one accord so then Zephaniah urges his people to praise God for this future act for us that act has begun on the cross and in the resurrection it's begun in the giving of God's spirit to change our hearts it'll be perfected finally on the day of his return when we will be finally and perfectly remade in the character and likeness of God himself so if Zephaniah and his audience had reason to sing aloud to God and rejoice in him how much more have we and as we are called to sing aloud and rejoice and exult remember that God delights and rejoices in us and in a sense our praise of him as he rejoices in us is an anticipation of that final day when we will arrive home with God as we've sung already in the first hymn this morning there God's highway shall be seen where no roaring lion nothing evil or unclean walks the road to

Zion ransomed people homeward bound all your praises voicing and see the Lord with glory crowned share in his rejoicing amen