

How to Draw Close to God

Zephaniah 3:1-8

Four Essential Steps

Charles Dickens began his novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, with the words, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness . . .” Dickens’s description points to the fact that people view the same events from different perspectives. Whether it was “the best of times,” or “the worst of times” depended on your point of view.

One of the blessings of the Word of God is that we possess God’s infallible viewpoint about the matters to which He speaks. And Zephaniah the prophet depicted “the worst of times” for Jerusalem and Judea. One of the worst kings, wicked Manasseh, ruled the land for fifty-five years. His successor was Ammon who was little better. Even the early days of the boy-king, Josiah, did little to change his prophetic perspective. One of the advantages we have in the Word of God is what it can teach us about our own times. The Scripture is **“a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart,”** (Hebrews 4:12). This means that we have the accurate record about the actions and attitudes of those ancient people. And using these words like a mirror, we can take a fresh look at our own society.

Every generation that has been willing to seek God’s face and listen to His words has greatly benefitted from these words. And make no mistake, there have been tremendous revivals as a result. This is why the psalmist prayed, **“revive us again: that thy people may rejoice in thee”** (Psalm 85:6). And the prophet Isaiah proclaimed, **“For thus says the high and lofty One that inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones”** (Isaiah 57:15). Consider what Zephaniah teaches about the warning signs in a society.

Warning Signs in Society

“Woe to her that is filthy and polluted, to the oppressing city!” Under its wicked kings, Jerusalem, “the city of peace,” had become morally corrupt, oppressing the weak. This woe was a pronouncement of judgment, a curse upon the capital of the nation. How could it be that God’s chosen city, where He had chosen for His name to dwell, would depart from the Living God?

Wicked Leaders

One commentator wrote, “When the Prophet called Jerusalem a polluted city, he meant briefly to show that the whole worship of God was there corrupted, and that no regard for true religion flourished there.”ⁱ Verse 2 reveals the causes of all this, and we shall return to this verse in a moment. Note the practical warning signs in verse 3-4: **“Her princes within her are roaring lions; her judges are evening wolves; they gnaw not the bones till the morrow. Her prophets are light and treacherous persons: her priests have polluted the sanctuary, they have done violence to the law.”** The courageous prophet specifically applied his message to violent political officials, corrupt judges and deceptive preachers.

Things haven't changed much, have they? Our own country is in the throes of continual political scandals. Our elected officials use their social media accounts like roaring lions. One author wrote, "Zephaniah is certainly joining Lamentations in condemning public officials who have destroyed the poor for their own financial and political benefit. The social justice accusation takes center stage in the charge of oppression (Hebrew. *yônâ*). Here we are dealing with violent actions against the weakest members of society."ⁱⁱ

In a mad grab for power, "princes" sometimes act like roaring lions. On the border of North Korea and China there is an inactive volcano named on Mt. Paektu. It last erupted in 946 A.D., with a blast a thousand times more powerful than the eruption at Mount St. Helens. It has not erupted since 1903, and an eruption is overdue. A team of scientists studied "North Korea's first three nuclear tests – in 2006, 2009, and 2013 – and found that any earthquake magnitude over 7.0 could cause a devastating eruption. And the earthquakes are getting stronger with each nuclear test - its 2006 test triggered an earthquake with a magnitude of 3.6, 2009 saw an earthquake with a magnitude of 4.4, while 2013's was 4.8."ⁱⁱⁱ And now there are fears that the most recent nuclear tests in North Korea have ruptured the magma chamber, and could produce a devastating volcano. In a mad grab for power, "princes" sometimes act like roaring lions. And all the while, our president exchanges threats with the North Korean dictator.

There are significant questions about our judges as well – including the highest court in the land. Like evening wolves, these defile the name by which they are called: "justices." Injustice has taken its victims, like wolves take their helpless prey. Just let this number sink into your mind: 59,115,995. That's the number of abortions in this country since 1973. Injustice has taken its helpless victims like evening wolves.

And so many preachers with Bibles opened before them have deceptively preached their own opinions. Religious leaders call evil good, and good evil. This is at the heart of all these other evils. Those who should be showing the nation how to draw near to God are deceptive and self-serving.

The Righteous Lord

But there is a warning sign for all these corrupt leaders in verses 5-7: **"The just LORD is in the midst thereof; he will not do iniquity: every morning doth he bring his judgment to light, he faileth not; but the unjust knoweth no shame. ⁶ I have cut off the nations: their towers are desolate; I made their streets waste, that none passeth by: their cities are destroyed, so that there is no man, that there is none inhabitant. ⁷ I said, Surely thou wilt fear me, thou wilt receive instruction; so their dwelling should not be cut off, howsoever I punished them: but they rose early, and corrupted all their doings."**

Though injustice abounded, the leaders in Jerusalem were mindless of the just Lord in their midst. Our nation's leaders have forgotten this as well. Verse 6 reminds you of the Lord's rule throughout history. He has cut off nations and destroyed cities. When you stop to consider the rise and fall of nations, you must remember Psalm 9:17: **"The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God."** It's important to note that this is a "wait for it" passage. When we get frustrated with corrupt leadership, we need to patiently consider verse 8:

“Therefore wait ye upon me, saith the LORD, until the day that I rise up to the prey: for my determination *is* to gather the nations, that I may assemble the kingdoms, to pour upon them mine indignation, *even* all my fierce anger: for all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of my jealousy.” Wait for the Lord. He is in control. His timing is perfect.

What Should We Do While We Wait?

Kenneth Barker commented, “Every generation faces this issue: how can we reform our social order? How can our nation become a better people? Zephaniah implies an answer: ‘true society arises from committed obedience (not rebellion) and from personal holiness (not defilement)... Social reformation arises from a return to God and to individual moral integrity. To seek to reform society in the hope that this will produce high standards and good people is to put the cart before the horse; it is converted and godly individuals that make good society.’”^{iv}

Hosea 2:15 reminds us that God gives the valley of trouble for a door of hope. Would you agree that wherever you look in society, there is trouble? There is a door of hope in this passage, because we can see exactly how our society has descended into greater and greater corruption. By reflecting on the mirror of the Word of God, we can see the steps that led to the corruption of Jerusalem. And we can reverse them. By God’s grace, we can reverse the influence of this curse. We can reverse the steps and help others to do the same. Verse 2 can show us the way to the door of hope in the midst of the valley of trouble:

Four Essential Steps

“She obeyed not the voice; she received not correction; she trusted not in the LORD; she drew not near to her God.”

1. Listen to the Lord

The word translated “obey” here is the word [*shama*], meaning “listen” or “hear.” For instance, in Genesis 3:8, Adam and Eve “heard” the voice of the Lord walking in the cool of the garden. In Zephaniah 2:8, “I have *heard* the reproach of Moab.” The first problem with the people in Jerusalem is that they did not listen to the Lord with the determination to obey Him.

If you can see your society in the mirror of the Word of God today, then consider this carefully. It’s time to start listening to the Lord. We are so distracted by our media, and the “talking heads” expressing all sorts of vain opinions. But this has only led us to corruption. It’s time to be still and know that He is God. It’s time to carefully consider what the Lord is saying to us in His Word.

Perhaps this is in your devotional time of Biblical meditation and prayer. Or perhaps it is the careful exhortation of a fellow believer. My wife shared a principle with me on Monday morning that I will never forget as long as I live. She told me about her morning devotions for about two minutes, but I will never forget those precious two minutes. She shared this one phrase, the last phrase in Psalm 18:35. David praised the Lord with these words: **“Thy gentleness has made me great!”** Wow! That made a huge impact on me. Just think of it: God’s gentleness has made us great! As believers, we are now called, “the children of God.” We are great in God’s sight! And how did that happen? His gentleness has made us great! His goodness has led us to repentance

(Romans 2:4). Jesus, who is meek and lowly in heart (Matthew 11:28-30) has offered you eternal rest for your soul. By His meek and lowly death on the cross, and rising again from the dead, He has caused you to be blessed with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ” (Ephesians 1). To draw near to the Lord, we must first listen to Him. Read your Bible. Pay attention to the preaching of the Word. Take heed to what your teachers teach in Sunday School today. And follow the words carefully when one of your fellow-believers shares what he or she has been learning from the Lord.

2. Accept Correction Proverbs 15:5, 32

The people of Jerusalem did not accept correction. To “reverse the curse,” we must do this. We must accept the reproof and correction of what we have listened to from the Lord. Proverbs 15:5 reminds us that “he who regards reproof is prudent.” But he who refuses instruction despises his own soul (Proverbs 15:32). Listen to the Lord and make changes in your life.

3. Trust in the Lord

No one lives without trust. You have chosen someone or something to trust in. But if you will listen to the Lord and obey His correction, you will find that your faith will grow. You will trust Him. This “faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God” (Romans 10:17). Cultivate your trust by taking the time to listen to the Lord and following His instruction.

4. Draw near to God

The people at Jerusalem did not draw near to the Lord, for they did not trust Him. And the result was that their society descended into corruption. They tried to establish their own security, and failed miserably. But according to what Jesus taught us in John 15, you and I can learn to draw near to the Lord and abide in Him. This is what we must do while we wait for Him to return.

The warning signs in our society abound. Will you take Zephaniah 3 to heart and draw near to God? May the Lord use you to help others drawn near as well.

Pastor Gordon Dickson, Calvary Baptist Church, Findlay, Ohio

ⁱ John Calvin and John Owen, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 4 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 262.

ⁱⁱ Kenneth L. Barker, *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, vol. 20, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 474.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sean Martin, “China closes park as North Korea’s missile testing threatens to cause volcano ERUPTION,” *Sunday Express*, accessed at <http://www.express.co.uk/news/science/855707/North-Korea-Kim-jong-un-world-war-3-nuclear-mt-paektu-volcano-eruption-earthquake>

^{iv} Op. cit. Kenneth L. Barker, 474–475. Citing Motyer 3:942.