

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
June 12, 2016

Lesson Text: Zephaniah 3:1-8

Lesson Title: The Consequences of Disobedience

Introduction

The prophet Zephaniah wrote to warn the people of Judah of the coming Day of the Lord. He exhorted and admonished the people of Judah to repent of their sins and seek righteousness (Zephaniah 1:10; 2:1-3). In so doing he exposed the false worship practices Judah had embraced from their former kings, Manasseh and Amon. By exchanging the worship of Jehovah for the worship of Baal and Molech, the society of Judah was corrupt and ripe for judgment.

In the second chapter of Zephaniah, the prophet announces coming judgment on peoples and nations other than Judah. The prophet condemns nations for their pride activities against God and His chosen people. Doubtless the people of Judah were glad to hear the nations that had long troubled them would be judged by God.

In our lesson text from chapter three, Zephaniah concludes his messages on judgment by prophesying again to Judah and Jerusalem. It is hard to imagine that Jerusalem, the holy city, where God was known, should be the city of such sinfulness. If God judges the surrounding nations, how much more will He judge the sins of Judah and Jerusalem. Everyone suffers the consequences of sin and disobedience (Galatians 6:7)

Consequences and the City of Jerusalem (Zephaniah 3:1-2)

Verse 1

“Woe to her that is filthy and polluted, to the oppressing city!”

Zephaniah’s prophesy against Jerusalem continues with a “woe.” “Woe” is a word in Scripture that often introduces judgment against individuals or nations (Isaiah 5:8-23; Amos 6:1). In this case it is directed “to the oppressing city,” which refers to the city of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem, Judah’s capital, is commonly called “the holy city,” but in Zephaniah’s day, the city was anything but holy. Zephaniah described her as “filthy and polluted.” “Filthy” and “polluted” are not references to what was on the *outside*, but rather what was on the *inside*. “Filthy” refers to the rebellious nature of the city and “polluted” refers to the desecration of the city (Jeremiah 4:17). The “city” had become “filthy and polluted” through participation in sin

and living in disobedience to their covenant relationship with God (Isaiah 59:3; Malachi 1:7).

Jerusalem is called “the oppressing city,” a reference to her violent mistreatment of the poor, weak, widows, orphans, and strangers. There was no other city in the world that had righteous states and judgments as this city had, and yet, because of disobedience, never was there a more unrighteous city than Jerusalem. She became known by what she had done.

Verse 2

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

Zephaniah goes right to the heart of Jerusalem’s problem by noting four areas of sinfulness. First, “she obeyed not the voice...” The “voice” is the voice of God. Any people, nation, and city will have trouble when they refused to obey the word of God. Judah’s problem was not failure to know the word of God, but rather failure to obey the word of God (1 Samuel 15:22). Second, “she received not correction...” The word “correction” means “discipline, instruction.” God had disciplined Judah through His Word and with His rod of correction but “she received not correction” (Proverbs 5:23; Jeremiah 7:21-28). Like a stubborn and foolish child, she bore her punishment but never changed her actions. Third, “she trusted not in the LORD...” Judah placed her trust in her idols and powerful nations such as Assyria and Egypt. Misplaced trust is no trust at all. Oh how quickly God’s people get into trouble when they no longer consider Him as the Source of their strength and salvation. Fourth, “she drew not near to God.” Judah was God’s nation. She existed to be “near to God” (Deuteronomy 4:5-7). Because of sin and disobedience, she now stands at a distance.

Consequences and the Leaders of Jerusalem (Zephaniah 3:3-4)

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.”

Zephaniah points an accusing finger at Jerusalem’s “princes, judges, prophets, and priests.” The “princes and judges” were like “lions” and “evening wolves,” meaning they prowled throughout the city looking for people to devour. “Princes and judges” were the civil authorities of that day. They settled legal disputes and the everyday affairs of society. Zephaniah’s point is the civil authorities who should have brought peace and stability to the lives of God’s

people were misusing their power to devour the people. “They gnaw not the bones till the morrow” means they were so greedy and sinful they devoured everything at once, a type of instant gratification.

Jerusalem’s “prophets” were “light and treacherous persons.” “Light” means there was no substance or truth in their teaching. Their prophesy was “empty” and could be quickly “blown away with the wind.” The “priests polluted the sanctuary” means the “polluted priests” defiled everything they touched. All the holy things in the “sanctuary” were polluted because the priests handling them were polluted. The worship, the sacrifices, everything associated with the “sanctuary” was defiled (Ezekiel 22:26).

“They have done violence to the law” means the “prophets” and “priests” had distorted the meaning of the “law” and failed to observe it themselves nor teach it to others. God expected his ordained leadership, the “princes, judges, prophets and priests” to take His Word and His law seriously. He also expected them to teach it to others and lead by example. Sadly, they failed in every area.

Consequences and the Lord of Jerusalem (Zephaniah 3:5-8)

Verse 5

“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.”

There was someone other than the corrupt princes, judges, prophets, and priests “in the midst” of Jerusalem. The “just LORD” was “in the midst” also. How could a just and righteousness God be in the midst of these wicked leaders and still remain righteous? In contrast to the wicked leaders of Jerusalem, God does no “iniquity.” God does no wrong, exercises justice, and never fails.

The wicked officials met “every morning” to transact their evil business. The “LORD” was there to “bring his judgment to light.” The wicked officials did their dirty work at “evening” and during the dark. The “LORD” executes His judgment “every morning” in the bright sunlight of day. “He faileth not” to “bring his judgment to light.” Day after day God gave the nation and the city of Jerusalem reminders that He was holy and could not tolerate sin, but He was ignored.

“The unjust knoweth no shame” means the wicked leaders were unmoved by the “LORD’S” daily revelation of their wickedness and His holiness (Jeremiah 3:2-3). They knew “no shame,” therefore they saw no need to repent or change.

Verse 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.”

When nations and individuals are blind to their spiritual condition, God speaks and acts in judgment. “I have cut off the nations” is a reference to God’s past actions against other nations who have refused to repent. God made “their towers desolate.” The corner “towers” used to secure their cities were made “desolate” or deserted and ruined. God “made their streets waste.” “Waste” means “dried up.”

The consequences of God’s judgment on the nations was visible. When God was finished in judgment, “none passeth by: their cities are destroyed.” It was hard to find a “man” or an “inhabitant” in the cities of the nation’s God judged. The desolations brought on by the Lord’s judgment on surrounding nations were to serve as warnings to Judah, meant to cause them to repent and turn back to the Lord.

Verse 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.”

God said, “Surely thou wilt fear me, thou wilt receive instruction.” God thought Judah would “surely receive instruction” and “fear Him” when they saw His hand destroy other nations. He trusted they would not have to be “cut off” in spite of all the ways He had “punished them.” But instead of producing fear and repentance, “they rose early, and corrupted all their doings.” Instead of being humbled and broken, they were all the more eager to make all their deeds corrupt.

The words “rose early, corrupted, and all their doing” reveals the people deliberately did corrupt and sinful deeds. Rather than contemplating the consequences for their disobedience, they were on the offensive in doing more wicked deeds. They were diligent to find times and places for their “corrupt doings.”

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.”

God calls the people of Judah and Jerusalem to “wait” for His coming judgment. There was coming a day when “the LORD” would “rise up to the prey,” that is, to carry out His judgment. The corrupt and wicked leaders of Jerusalem who had made the people their “prey” would find themselves to be “the LORD’S prey” in return.

God’s judgment, as stated in verse 6, will also include nations other than Judah. His “determination is to gather the nations” in order that He might “pour upon them” His “indignation, even His fierce anger.” The language of pouring out judgment is similar to that found in Revelation 16 concerning the vials of God’s wrath that are to be poured out upon the earth.

God also speaks of “the fire of my jealousy.” God’s “jealousy” should not be thought of in the way we think of someone being “jealous” or covetous of someone or something. God’s “jealousy” reflects His holy desire for what is right and His hatred of what is wrong. He is “jealous” in a positive sense for His people, desiring only what is good for them and despising anything that threatens their relationship with Him (Nahum 1:2).

Conclusion

The consequences of disobedience are very clear in our lesson text. That is why ignoring God’s Word or taking lightly what God has commanded is so serious. We cannot ignore God or disobey Him and expect to go unpunished. When God commands, we must obey. If we do not, we will suffer the consequences!

God wants His people to choose what is right and be faithful to Him. But at the same time, He allows people to choose whether or not they will obey. Judgment awaits those who disobey. Blessings are promised to those who remain faithful.

Amen.