

Seek (and you shall find)

Zephaniah 3:1-5

Rev. Mona Chicks

3 *Woe to the city of oppressors, rebellious and defiled!*

2 *She 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 within her
are roaring lions;
her rulers are evening wolves,
who leave nothing for the morning.*

4 *Her prophets are unprincipled;
they are treacherous people.
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.*

PRAY

On my car, I have a decal that says, "Proud of my Eagle Scout." Rose Hill Church has a special place in my heart, since it was pivotal in my son earning his Eagle rank from the Boy Scouts Troop which meets here. So thank you for being gracious hosts and making an investment into the Boy Scouts. You are making a difference in the lives of young boys like mine.

There are other things that I'm proud of, too, though. I'm proud of the work that I do and the way that I do it. I'm proud of what I have accomplished in my education, ordination, and ministry. I'm proud to be the mom of a really smart kid and how that fact reflects on me – I mean, he's really smart so that must mean I am, too, right?

I'm proud of all these things, but what happens when we are too proud? The Bible gives us some pretty clear indications – and that's what we're going to be looking at today. Pride that leads us to rely on something other than God.

ON WHAT DO YOU RELY?

Some of us rely on money to help us feel secure.

Or perhaps it is on having things that make us feel important.

Or maybe it is our education, job, or accomplishments, which make us feel purposeful.

Some of us may rely on a relationship (or series of relationships) to make us feel wanted.

What is it for you?

The Bible is full of stories of God's people who have come to rely on something other than God to give them a sense of security and identity.

That's the situation we find ourselves in as we study the book of Zephaniah. Let's take a look.

WHO WAS ZEPHANIAH?

Everything we know about Zephaniah comes from the opening verse of the book of his prophecy. We know that Zephaniah was the great-great-grandson of someone named Hezekiah. Some scholars think that this is the same Hezekiah who had been king of Judah between 715 and 686 BCE, but not everyone agrees. King Hezekiah was the father of Manasseh, of whom we will hear more later. I tend to think that this Hezekiah mentioned as Zephaniah's ancestor was significant to the people in Judah, otherwise Zephaniah's lineage would not have been included. Since Zephaniah's prophecy spans during Hezekiah's grandson Josiah's reign, between 641-610 BCE, the dates line up well enough.

Bottom line is this: We don't really know who Zephaniah was, other than he was a prophet sent from God to warn Judah of coming judgment.

ZEPHANIAH'S CONTEXT

At the time of Zephaniah's prophecies, Israel in the north has been exiled in Assyria, while in the south Judah was under the vassalage of Assyria.

There had been prophetic silence for about 75 years between times of Isaiah and Micah at end of eighth century BCE and time of Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Jeremiah ca 626 BCE.

The King at the time, Josiah's, grandfather was Manasseh. Manasseh's reign mostly coincided with the very height of Assyria's power. Judah was under the rule of Assyria, even if they had not yet been taken into exile. Manasseh was known for allowing worship of pagan gods (called syncretism). Worship of Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, was all but forgotten or diluted by the worship of gods from neighboring countries – it was practically extinct. Manasseh even allowed worship of other gods in the Temple. Manasseh was a bad guy in God's eyes.

When Josiah became king he began reforming the Israelite religion. These are known as the Deuteronomic reforms. Six years later, a copy of the Torah was found in the temple. What does that tell you about the religious practice of the Judahites at this point in history – they, SURPRISE!!, found the Torah and start trying to live by it.

Josiah was one of the few truly good kings in the history of the divided kingdoms. We read about Josiah's reign in 2 Kings 23...

Josiah also got rid of the mediums and psychics, the household gods, the idols, and every other kind

of detestable practice, both in Jerusalem and throughout the land of Judah. He did this in obedience to the laws written in the scroll that Hilkiah the priest had found in the Lord's Temple. Never before had there been a king like Josiah, who turned to the Lord with all his heart and soul and strength, obeying all the laws of Moses. And there has never been a king like him since. 2 Kings 23:24-25

Zephaniah's prophecy presupposes maintenance of temple-worship, so it is likely that Josiah's reforms had begun, but were met with limited success.

It is clear that Zephaniah was writing at same time as Jeremiah. The descriptions of the sins of Judah are closely correlated between Zephaniah and Jeremiah.

If we follow the story from 2nd Kings, we see that even Josiah's goodness in bringing Judah back to worship Yahweh wasn't enough. And this was the context of Zephaniah's prophecy.

Even so, the Lord was very angry with Judah because of all the wicked things Manasseh had done to provoke him. For the Lord said, "I will also banish Judah from my presence just as I have banished Israel. And I will reject my chosen city of Jerusalem and the Temple where my name was to be honored. 2 Kings 23:26-27

THE FORM OF THE PROPHECY

Zephaniah's prophecy comes in three phases:

- Threat to judgment (ch 1)
- Call to repentance (2:1-3:8)
- Promise of salvation (3:9-20)

Threat to judgment:

In chapter one we see the judgment on the whole world (de-struction of Creation – listen for the themes of creation and the flood narrative).

² *"I will sweep away everything
from the face of the earth,"
declares the Lord.*

³ *"I will sweep away both man and beast;
I will sweep away the birds in the sky
and the fish in the sea—
and the idols that cause the wicked to stumble."*

Cf. vv 2-3 language of "sweep away" – people and animals alike, birds of the sky and the fish in the sea. (reverse Creation order)

And in the very next verse (verse 4), in case we were hoping to be saved from this disaster, God's chosen people, Judah and Jerusalem, are included.

I will crush Judah and Jerusalem with my fist and destroy every last trace of their Baal worship.

Do you get the feeling that God is mad?

Have you ever felt so angry that you wanted to break everything in sight? For me as a parent, it most frequently happened when I would give my son instructions for the millionth time which he would ignore for the millionth time and we would have to manage the consequences together.

God did this, too, in the story of Noah's Ark, when he flooded the world because the people wouldn't listen. This is God's version of, "don't make me turn this earth around!" I feel a little vindicated in my anger at my child when I read that story, but perhaps it isn't the best model for how to parent. After all, moms and dads know that if you break it you have to clean it up. But I really understand how God felt when he flooded the earth.

And here we are again – thousands of years later – and God has the same complaint against his chosen people. They don't listen. They don't comply. They are ignoring me when they know what happens.

Can I get an amen? Are you feeling how frustrated God is at this point?

God has tried four ways to correct his faithless people:

1. Prophets
2. Covenant law
3. Preserving the order of the natural world
4. Destroyed various nations

Did any of this work? Zephaniah says no.

But, in typical God fashion, we do get to make a choice. We have the option to repent, to turn back and change our ways. God always gives the option.

You see, if you are relying on God, your heart belongs to God. It's like Jesus says in Matthew, 'where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.' God wants to be your treasure. That's each and every one of us, right? We all have things that distract us from God and cause us to lose sight of God. And God is hurt and frustrated when we continually value things that have no heavenly value. And so we are called to repent.

Exhortation to repentance

Zeph 2:3 / 3:11-13

"Seek the Lord, all who are humble, and follow his commands. Seek to do what is right and to live humbly. Perhaps even yet the LORD will protect you – protect you from his anger on that day of destruction."

The whole focus of Zephaniah's prophecy is on the Day of the Lord – which is a day of destruction. In other places in Scripture, this is considered a good thing – when Israel's and Judah's enemies will be extinguished from the earth. But in Zephaniah there is a distinctly threatening tone to it. We saw earlier that God's anger isn't turned just towards other people – God's anger is turned toward his children and everyone else is at risk of being swept up in it.

Zephaniah's prophecy says that our only hope is NOT Obi Wan Kenobi ("help me Obi Wan Kenobi,

you're my only hope!"). Our only hope is humbling ourselves before our creator.

Humility is mentioned several times in this prophecy because it is pride that is the downfall of God's people.

Pride causes us to rely on things that are not God. Humility causes us to rely on God.

The sins of the nations (including Judah) in Zephaniah:

- pride of wealth (v 5, 14) coastline (which means shipping), businesses, and buildings
- pride in their power (v 8, 10) armies & invasions
- pride in their independence, security & sovereignty (v 15)

Prov 16:18: *Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.*

Doesn't that sound like how Zephaniah is describing the nations? Their pride will be their downfall – they are relying on things that are not God. Are we? Is our nation? What do we need to humble ourselves over?

God's promise is that if we come back to rely on God and not on all the things that give us pride, we will find what we need.

Matthew 7:7 says, *Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.*

God promises that if we seek God, we WILL find God. Jeremiah (Zephaniah's counterpart), says it this way:

You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. Jer 29:13

Note: All your heart. Not part of it. Not whatever is left over after you are seeking wealth, power, independence.... Whatever it is for you that is keeping you from relying on God fully.

Jesus says it this way:

Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness... (Matt 6:33)

RESULTS OF REPENTANCE/ PROMISE OF SALVATION

God promises three results if we learn to rely on God: humility (3:11-12); obedience and righteousness (3:13). Notice that obedience and righteousness follow humility. Humbling yourself to rely on God will create obedience and you will take on God's righteousness. Righteousness is an outgrowth of seeking God, it is not a path to God. Jesus makes it clear in the Sermon on the Mount that we cannot do it on our own.

I was at the bedside this weekend of a dear woman who has been one of the spiritual directors I work with at our church. She has been instrumental in helping so many people to seek and find God. Though she could not respond, she could hear me, so I told her over and over again what a faithful servant she has been, and how Jesus is celebrating over her. She squeezed my hand and raised her eyebrows. She heard God's promises to her – the same promises she'd been teaching for decades, she heard proclaimed over her as she lay there dying.

The central point of the book of Zephaniah is this:

God rules as King. But who rules Judah's life? Can she construct for herself a world without God and get away with it? Who rules our lives?

Is it bad to feel good about getting that degree or earning that award, building that big fat retirement account or driving a fancy car? No, of course not. But when we rely on those things for our identity and security, that's when we know that we have moved into the realm of pride.

Humble yourself. Lean on God – rely on God fully for your identity, for your security, and for your hope. Lean not on your own understanding. And he will make your paths straight.

PRAY