

MONDAY, 12/23

Read Zephaniah 3:1-9

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.

⁶ "I have destroyed nations their strongholds are demolished. I have left their streets deserted, with no one passing through. Their cities are laid waste; they are deserted and empty.

⁷ Of Jerusalem I thought, "Surely you will fear me and accept correction!" Then her place of refuge would not be destroyed, nor all my punishments come upon^[a] her. But they were still eager to act corruptly in all they did.

⁸ Therefore wait for me," declares the LORD, "for the day I will stand up to testify. I have decided to assemble the nations, to gather the kingdoms and to pour out my wrath on them—all my fierce anger. The whole world will be consumed by the fire of my jealous anger.

⁹ "Then I will purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him shoulder to shoulder.

Zephaniah is not an easy read. Three quarters of the book deal with God's judgment, which doesn't follow the pattern of your typical Advent devotions.

The first seven verses of Chapter 3 give you a taste of the images that precede it. God is displeased with Jerusalem. After reading the verses, you can tell why. The leaders harm those they're called to serve. The priests defile their holy calling. The city set apart for God has turned away from God and the life within it reflects the city's spiritual condition. As a result, God will come to set things straight—for not only Jerusalem, but the world.

Many people are troubled by passages like these on God's judgment. We prefer to sit in the passages about grace and salvation. However, it is important for us to understand God's judgment, whose purpose is to purify a world ravaged by sin. It is to make that which has gone terribly wrong, right again.

We can agree with God that there is plenty of wrong in the world. We want to see the world renewed, and so does the Lord. Verse 9 shows us that God's desire is to see broken people turn to Him. He wants this broken world to welcome Him and come under His gracious rule. God's hope for this is noted throughout scripture from beginning to end. The unfortunate reality is that not everything or everyone wants to serve Jesus as Lord. This rejection is what prompted Jesus to weep over Jerusalem. God had sent prophets like Zephaniah to warn the people so they would turn to Him. The people rejected the Lord and His prophets, even though the desire was for God to gather His people like a mother hen does her chicks. As Jesus' followers, we must take note of the reality of the coming judgment, God's heart for the lost, and the part we can play in sharing the Good News of salvation in Christ.

Sending prayer:

"Jesus, we know Your desire to save. In John 3:17, You said that You came to the world not to condemn the world but to save the world. You gave Your life for ours so that we could be reconciled to God. Redemption is Your desire, so I want to pray for those in my life who do not yet know You. I pray that You can open their eyes to see who You are. I pray that You might use me to be a witness to them. I want them to know the life that You have so graciously given to me. Amen."

TUESDAY, 12/24

Read Zephaniah 3:10-13

¹⁰ From beyond the rivers of Cush my worshipers, my scattered people, will bring me offerings.

¹¹ On that day you, Jerusalem, will not be put to shame for all the wrongs you have done to me, because I will remove from you your arrogant boasters. Never again will you be haughty on my holy hill.

¹² But I will leave within you the meek and humble. The remnant of Israel will trust in the name of the LORD.

¹³ They will do no wrong; they will tell no lies. A deceitful tongue will not be found in their mouths. They will eat and lie down and no one will make them afraid."

The Lord continues to give us a glimpse into what a renewed Jerusalem would look like. Rather than giving offerings tainted by sin-filled lives, His people will give God offerings backed by transformed lives. How do we know the people have been changed? They will no longer be given over to pride but will be meek and humble. They will have laid down their lies and deceit.

We would do well to take note of what God is telling us here. God is showing us what the character of His redeemed children ought to look like. As those who are being transformed, we too should be moving toward meekness and humility. We should promote what is true.

I want us to focus on meekness. Meekness is often confused or falsely associated with weakness. They are not the same thing. Weakness means you don't have the power to act. Meekness means you have the power to act, but you may choose not to. Meekness is power under control. In other words, you aren't a slave to emotions or knee-jerk responses. This level of control shows incredible strength of spirit only possible for those who are truly humble.

Jesus was a great example of meekness and humility. At any point during His crucifixion, Jesus could have rescued Himself and made fools out of His enemies, but He chose to pray for them instead. Jesus had the greater goal in mind and the strength of spirit to maintain control even in the most difficult moments. While meekness is certainly not a virtue our culture admires, it is essential for Jesus' followers. We must ask the Lord to cultivate in our hearts a spirit of meekness and humility.

I wonder how you think of being meek.

I wonder what places in your life could benefit from your exercising meekness and humility.

Sending prayer:

"Jesus, You came not only to save us but also to show us what it means to live. You revealed a way of living the world had never seen. You valued qualities like meekness and humility. While the world had no value for such things, You showed us how powerful they can be. I pray that You work in my heart to make me humble and meek and that You would help me to have a deeper strength in my spirit. I want to be like You because there is no better way to be. Amen."

WEDNESDAY, 12/25

Read Zephaniah 3:14-15

¹⁴ Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem!

¹⁵ The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm.

Judgment gives way to joy. Beginning in this passage, that's what happens. Remember that God is a God of salvation. He is one who restores, who redeems and saves. God made His creation good, and He will see to it that it is made good once again. God's salvation is the reason for joy.

Let me ask you a question: Are you experiencing joy in your relationship with the Lord right now?

The knowledge that we have been given salvation in Jesus should cause us to rejoice. Jesus has freed us from sin. Shame is no longer our story. We have been set apart for life—and abundant life at that. In John 10:10, Jesus calls it “life to its fullest”. Along with this gift come others great gifts, such as peace and hope. Of course, salvation’s greatest gift is God Himself. It is to know, as Paul prays in Ephesians 3:18, the width, length, depth and height of the love of Christ for you. Those are just a few of the reasons why salvation should cause us to rejoice.

I wonder if you're experiencing joy in your relationship with Christ right now.

If you are not experiencing joy, then echo this prayer of King David in Psalm 51:12: “Restore to me the joy of Your salvation.”

Sending prayer:

“Holy Spirit, I pray that You free me to experience joy in my relationship with God today. Joy is a fruit of Your work within me. I pray that You release me from the things that rob me of Your joy. I have every reason to rejoice because You have been given to me. I am sealed for salvation and a child of God. I want to live in Your joy so that I may bring You glory. Amen.”

THURSDAY, 12/26

Read Zephaniah 3:16-17

*they will say to Jerusalem,
“Do not fear, Zion;
do not let your hands hang limp.
17 The LORD your God is with you,
the Mighty Warrior who saves.
He will take great delight in you;
in his love he will no longer rebuke you,
but will rejoice over you with singing.”*

Here the people of Jerusalem who have experienced the Lord's salvation are told to lay down their fears. Why are they to let go of their fear? They are to do so because God is with them.

Listen to the promises here in verse 17: “The Lord your God is with you, He is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing.” I wonder which one of those promises you most need to hear today. Read the verse again if you need to. Do you need to know the nearness of God who is with you? Is it His power to save and redeem that brings you comfort? Perhaps you could use His immense peace to still the fears stirring in your soul. Maybe you need to hear His voice singing over you, blessing you. I wonder what promise of God you most need to hear today.

Whichever one you needed the most, know that this promise is for you, too. The same God who spoke these words over His people so long ago is the same God who is speaking them over you today.

I wonder what these promises mean for you today.

I wonder how you can carry this promise with you throughout the day.

Sending prayer:

“Heavenly Father, I am so thankful for Your promises. I don't deserve to be loved in the way that You love me, but still You love me with a love that is beyond measure. I can have confidence and rest in Your care.

Continue to speak Your amazing truths over me through the Spirit You placed in me. I want to walk today in Your peace and with all the hope and joy that is available in Christ Jesus my Lord. Amen."

FRIDAY, 12/27

Read Zephaniah 3:18

¹⁸ *"I will remove from you
all who mourn over the loss of your appointed festivals,
which is a burden and reproach for you.*

One way to look at this verse is that Zephaniah is looking beyond the restoration of the exiles to the dawning of the new covenant when the feast and sacrifices would be fulfilled in the coming of the Messiah (Jesus). His comment about the burden of religions was more about the pitfalls of religion when left in the hands of those who seek to personally benefit from the rules they set for their congregations. Even Christ challenged religious leaders who created such rules so that they would be able to identify a believer from a nonbeliever based on certain behaviors (what is clean or unclean, work on the Sabbath).

Gordon Bridget explains that burden of religion was something Christ addressed when He said, "Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me." Then Jesus goes on to say, "I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matt 11:28-30). To follow Jesus and submit to His teaching is not a burden. As Paul said the Christians in Philippi, "I can do everything through Him that gives me strength" (Phil. 4:13).

As Christians, joy comes from knowing that, regardless of our sins, Jesus believed that we are worth the sacrifice He made on the cross. He chose to show us the way to His Father instead of taking credit for the miracles and the healings He performed. Because of His choice, we can tell a false religion from the true religion.

I wonder how many Christians can tell the difference between a Christ-led religion versus false religion. What do we need to know about the character of God or the ministry of Jesus to be able to tell the difference between the two?

Sending Prayer:

"Gracious God, I am in Your hands. Shape me as You see fit. Mold me according to Your will so that I can serve You and others best. Amen."

SATURDAY, 12/28

Read Zephaniah 3:19

¹⁹ *At that time I will deal
with all who oppressed you.
I will rescue the lame;
I will gather the exiles.
I will give them praise and honor
in every land where they have suffered shame.*

God holds a special place for those who are considered weak, sick, or oppressed in some way. We see God intervene on behalf of the Israelites when they were enslaved in Egypt. We see God send healing to those who were hurting, broken by sin, or isolated from the community, especially through Jesus. Jesus was the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the captives, and to release prisoners from the darkness. In Zephaniah's prophecy, God says that He will give them praise and honor in every land where they were put to shame.

But all of this healing and standing up for the oppressed has its price. We know the joy of having such a protective and willing God who cares for us when we are at our weakest point. In both Testaments, we also know that those who represented God most faced persecution, imprisonment, and martyrdom.

I wonder what it takes for us to do as Jesus did for others, regardless of the consequences to our own lives. What would you be willing to do so that someone who doesn't not know Jesus can learn who He is from you?

Sending Prayer:

"Lord Jesus, I cannot imagine my life without You in it. What must I do so that others can come to know You through my actions or words? Show me how to make the biggest impact on the greatest number of people. Amen."

SUNDAY, 12/29

Read Zephaniah 3:20

*²⁰ At that time I will gather you;
at that time I will bring you home.
I will give you honor and praise
among all the peoples of the earth
when I restore your fortunes
before your very eyes,"
says the LORD.*

Here Zephaniah is alluding to a time when God will come with judgment and salvation and bring the remainder of the believers home to heaven. It's a time when God will have achieved all that He had hoped for when it came to His creation. It will be in this moment that the past and present will come together to be renewed as it was originally intended. A new humanity will be formed from the old humanity; a new creation will be transformed from the old creation.

Jesus taught his disciples to look forward to heaven. He told them they should trust in God and trust also in Him. He said that His Father's house has many rooms and that He would make a place for us there (John 14:1-3). Hebrews also describes what is happening, claiming that the Old Testament saints lived their lives in the light of the future hope of heaven. All of these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they saw them and welcomed them only from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead they were longing for a better country (Hebrews 11:13-16).

Gordon Bridger found that Zephaniah wants his readers to be confident in what God will do for them in the future, including the promise that God will bring the remnant of believers into the New Jerusalem, God's heavenly home. There is joy in knowing what is in store for us as believers. But C.S. Lewis warns that "today, in this moment, is the chance to choose the right side. God is holding back to give us that chance. It will not last forever. You must take it or leave it now."

I wonder what it takes for us to realize that, with each action or each word spoken, we are making that choice.

Sending prayer:

"You know my heart, Lord. I can see Your face when I say prayers of thanksgiving. I can see Your face when I ask You for mercy and forgiveness for what I have done. Thank you for showing Your face when ever I need You. Amen."

