

Adult Bible Study Commentary
“The Consequences of Disobedience”
Zephaniah 3:6-8
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As we continue in the book of Zephaniah, our focus has shifted from reflecting on the corruption in Judah before the reforms of Josiah, and the religious renewal that accompanied those reforms, to the last chapter of the book that considers the failure of those reforms.

Josiah sought to rid Judah of the foreign customs and pagan deities that were considered abominable practices, namely Canaanite Baal worship and its accompanying sacred prostitution and child sacrifice. His reforms included religious practices based on the book of Deuteronomy, in which worship was centralized in Jerusalem and the pagan cults and priests were removed. Deuteronomy was the new “law of the land” and the covenant with the Lord was renewed. This effort, however, was short-lived.

In reviewing the first part of ch.3, it is clear that corruption still reigns. The officials are “roaring lions”, the judges are “evening wolves that leave nothing”, the prophets are “reckless”, the priests have “profaned what is sacred and...done violence to the Lord.”

In our lesson, which begins with verse 6, we see the response of the Lord:

I have cut off nations; their battlements are in ruins;
I have laid waste their streets so that no one walks in them;
Their cities have been made desolate, without people, without inhabitants.
I said, “Surely the city will fear me, it will accept correction.”

In Zephaniah, it has become clear that the Lord has tried in vain to correct the people. He has sent prophets, he has destroyed neighboring areas, and he has been faithful to covenant. But Judah has failed to heed those warnings and the rebellion has continued with crooked officials and judges and with the corruption of the offices of both the priests and the prophets. The passage concludes with verse 8, which is a call from the Lord to wait for the day when he gathers the nations and pours out upon them his indignation, when the earth will be consumed. Woe to those who are unrepentant!

Application

“I told you so...” It’s a phrase we have either uttered or we have heard someone say to us. Those four words ring harshly when we find ourselves in difficult circumstances. When we have tried to give a warning to loved ones or friends, only to see them persist in actions or behaviors that led to a less than desirable outcome, in our angst and desperation, in our desire to justify ourselves, or even out of some type of twisted glee, we may be guilty of saying, “I told you so...” Even worse, when we have continued to do things we know we should not do, not

heeding the counsel of others, and it finally catches up with us, we may find those close to us saying those same four words, “I told you so...”

It is frustrating to watch people act in ways that we are certain are not in their best interest (at least from our vantage point!). When we love and care about others, our own emotions can become involved in the situation at hand. We beg, plead, and implore others to change their course, in the hopes of averting what seems to be a collision course with self-inflicted adversity. And yet, when warnings go unheeded, it is only a matter of time before consequences for those actions are reaped.

In the book of Zephaniah, it is clear that the Lord’s patience for Judah is wearing thin. Chaos seems to reign and all segments of society are said to be run amuck. This grieves the Lord, who has tried to intervene, who has tried to shock the conscience of the people and to wake them up to the reality of their circumstances. Yet, the warnings go unheard.

The call to “wait for the Lord” is a bit unnerving. It is as if we are being told, “Just watch...they will get theirs.” This is not a declaration of the Lord’s action, as much as it is the consequences the people will reap upon themselves for their continued disobedience.

The implications of this passage penetrate into all aspects of our lives today. Do we like seeing the mighty fall – corrupt politicians going to jail, high profile business executives mired in scandal, those who are in positions of authority tainted by accusation? If you listen to the news media, it appears that we as a society do relish these moments. They are going to “get what’s coming to them!” we declare. But, in reality, we are all victimized in this type of mentality. The unrepentant perpetrators erode faith and trust, the people grow in cynicism and disenchantment, and the fabric of society that holds us together begins to unravel.

This is the world we live in today and the challenge for us, in the brokenness that exists all around us, is to take seriously the notion that you and I have been given the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18). In working for reconciliation, we avoid the “I told you so...” moments of life, by instead choosing to be present in the strains that present when adversity strikes. Choosing to offer encouragement, to participate in a ministry of presence, to share loving-kindness, instead of casting blame or passing judgment is a witness to the gospel and is countercultural in our day.

Tragedies – both man-made and those of natural origin – will continue until Christ returns. Rather than giving ourselves over to the second-guessing and assigning of blame that so many participate in during those moments in life, may we be moved to work instead for healing and reconciliation that helps us all to find new life, life anchored in the Lord, life that leads to abundant life.