

Zephaniah 3:1-7

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/zeph/zeph-3/zephaniah-31-7/>

Zephaniah pronounces judgment against Judah and her wicked rulers, prophets, and priests. God sent them ample examples of nations being disciplined for evil, but rather than learn and repent, Judah eagerly pursued wickedness.

After Zephaniah pronounced judgment against Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Ethiopia, and Assyria (Zephaniah 2:4–15), he appears to turn his attention back to Judah. The prophet previously denounced Judah’s capital city of Jerusalem for its idolatry and lack of spiritual concern for God (Zephaniah 1:4–13). The prophet made it clear that the LORD had frequently delivered His covenant people from hostile powers. Yet, they refused to obey His covenantal laws, breaking their covenant vow (Exodus 19:8). For this reason, consistent with the covenant provisions, they would fall under the judgment of God.

Chapter 3 opens with this lament:

*Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled,
The tyrannical city! (vs 1).*

It is important to remember that chapters breaks and verse locations were not in the original text; they were added much later. This statement about the *tyrannical city* could speak of Nineveh. The previous verse (of the previous chapter) speaks of Nineveh, as

“This is the exultant city
Which dwells securely,
Who says in her heart,
‘I am, and there is no one besides me.’”
(Zephaniah 2:15)

This was part of Zephaniah’s pronouncement of judgment upon the Assyrian Empire, and its capital city Nineveh (Zephaniah 2:13). So the phrase *the tyrannical city* would seem to fit better with Nineveh than with Jerusalem. But beginning in 3:1, it seems the narrative shifts from Nineveh to Jerusalem.

It may be that Nineveh is intended to be included in 3:1. However, Zephaniah 3:2 tells us the prophecy is pivoting to Jerusalem, as it asserts:

*She heeded no voice,
She accepted no instruction.
She did not trust in the LORD,
She did not draw near to her God (vs 2).*

Other than the last line of verse 2, the text of vv 1-2 could apply directly to Nineveh, and may. Prophecies often have multiple fulfillments. Jonah was dispatched to Nineveh to warn it to repent, and it did, for a season (Jonah 3:5, 10). For a time, Nineveh put her *trust in the LORD* (Jonah 3:5). But then Nineveh turned back to its wicked ways (Nahum 3:1). So God judged it (Nahum 1:1, 2:13) and it fell to a coalition led by the Babylonians, with Nineveh being burned in 612 BC.

However, these verses appear to primarily refer to Judah's capital city of Jerusalem, as the last line of vs 2 says *She* (the exultant city) *did not draw near to her God*. This seems to mean that Zephaniah has turned his attention to Jerusalem, because the prior line references the *LORD* as being *her God*. The Hebrew word *LORD* is a translation of "Yahweh" which is God's covenant name with His people.

As Zephaniah described the downfall of Jerusalem, he began with the interjection *Woe* (vs 1) which speaks of despair and agony. The term translated as *woe* is "hōy" in Hebrew (Amos 6:1; Nahum 3:1). Sometimes, it is translated as "Alas!" (Amos 5:18). Ancient Israelites used it as a mourning shout at funerals (Jeremiah 34:5; 1 Kings 13:30).

Here, Zephaniah *used woe* to announce the funeral of Jerusalem, a city which he described as *rebellious, defiled, and tyrannical*.

The adjective *rebellious* speaks of someone who opposes authority. In the book of 1 Samuel, for example, Saul opposed the authority of the LORD. Instead of destroying all the plunder from the enemy's camp, as the LORD had commanded, he kept the best of the livestock and brought King Agag (the king of the Amalekites) back as a prisoner (1 Samuel 15). Saul's disobedience and stubbornness caused him to suffer several adverse consequences. Judah, too, would suffer the consequences of her rebellion because the LORD is a just and holy God.

Not only was Jerusalem *rebellious*, but also, she was *defiled*. The adjective *defiled* speaks of that which is unclean or impure. In the book of Isaiah, the prophet told the people that their iniquities separated them from God, "for your hands are defiled with blood and your fingers with iniquity" (Isaiah 59:3). In our passage, Jerusalem was impure because her citizens polluted the land by their wicked actions. Their covenant with Him required that they love one another (Leviticus 19:18). Instead, they adopted the pagan culture of exploitation and self-seeking.

The city of Jerusalem was *also tyrannical*. The adjective *tyrannical* speaks of someone exercising power cruelly or arbitrarily. It refers to violent acts done to someone else (Jeremiah 50:16). This refers to an abuse of authority. In Judah/Israel's covenant with the LORD they had vowed to follow His ways, in which the strong protect and help the weak. Instead, Jerusalem had adopted the pagan culture which included a moral justification to exploit others and seek sensual pleasure at their expense.

Accordingly, leaders and the wealthy oppressed the people and took advantage of the less fortunate (Amos 8:4). This was a clear violation of God's covenant law, which required care for others. For instance:

- The covenant law required the poor to be allowed the opportunity to be sustained while in duress, then restart their lives, and have the option of working to get out of poverty (see commentaries on 15:7-11, 15:12-18).
- The covenant law forbade taking advantage of the poor, even while having a work requirement for them (see commentaries on Deuteronomy [24:10-13](#), [19-22](#)).
- This was summarized by the basic requirement to love one's neighbor as one's self, and treat others like you'd want to be treated (Leviticus 19:18). Jesus said the entire law and prophets were summed up by this verse and by Deuteronomy 6:5, which provides the moral rationale to love others: it is a manifestation of loving God.

The *rebellious* city of Jerusalem was heading in the wrong direction. *She heeded no voice; she accepted no instruction* (vs 2). The people of Jerusalem had God's covenant. They had God's instruction (Hosea 8:12). But they did not listen to God. They did not listen to the prophets.

Interestingly, it appears that the people of Judah did listen to Zephaniah, and followed King Josiah, who reigned during the time of Zephaniah's ministry. They followed God all the days of Josiah (2 Chronicles 34:33). As a result, God did relent of His judgment on Judah during that season (2 Chronicles 34:26-28).

This revival of faithfulness was triggered when a copy of the law was discovered during a renovation of the temple and read to Josiah (2 Chronicles 34:14-21). This however shows that God's law had fallen into obscurity, and the *voice* of God and His *instruction* was not even heard in the time leading up to Josiah. Sadly, after the reign of Josiah, Judah returned to its wicked ways (2 Chronicles 36:5). The culture had apparently decayed past a tipping point, and it "reverted to the mean" of wickedness, which is the culture being described here by Zephaniah. Judah fell into judgment shortly afterward, and was conquered by and exiled to Babylon.

Zephaniah spoke about Jerusalem to refer to the inhabitants of the *city*. Since the citizens of *Jerusalem* refused to hear the law and accept correction, they refused to listen to their Suzerain God. Jerusalem thought she was self-righteous and did not need God's presence because *she did not trust in the LORD* (vs 2).

The verb *trust* means to feel secure or to be unconcerned. To *trust in the LORD* means to believe that His ways are for our best, for our good (Deuteronomy 10:13). The prophet Jeremiah made that clear when he stated, "Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD and whose trust is the LORD. For he will be like a tree planted by the water that extends its roots by a stream and will not fear when the heat comes. But its leaves will be green, and it will not be anxious in a year of drought nor cease to yield fruit" (Jeremiah 17:7).

To listen to God and follow His ways is the true path to human flourishing. The people of Judah had instead believed the lie of "I know best." This of course will lead to a competition among all the "I's" with the predictable result that the strong exploit the weak.

Because they were serving themselves, the people *did not draw near to her God*.

To *draw near to God* means to seek Him and His ways. As James says in his epistle:

“Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.”
(James 4:8a)

The Suzerain (or Ruler) God had established a covenant relationship with Judah (and Israel), taking them as His chosen people out of all the peoples of the earth (Exodus 19:4–6). He gave them specific ways they could seek Him. Unfortunately, the people of God rebelled against Him.

The northern kingdom of Israel’s disobedience caused God to judge her severely by allowing the Assyrians to capture her in 722 BC (2 Kings 17). The kingdom of Judah observed this, and still rebelled. Jerusalem, too, would suffer the same defeat because she had no intention to approach God “with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith” (Hebrews 10:22). However, apparently due to the ministry of Zephaniah and the leadership of King Josiah, Judah did repent, and spared judgement for a time (2 Chronicles 34:33).

Apparently speaking of the time prior to Josiah’s reform, Zephaniah asserts that Jerusalem’s civil leadership was corrupt thoroughly: *Her princes within her are roaring lions* (vs 3). The *lion* is a ruthless, almost unstoppable killer, taking from the flock at will. It lies in wait to catch its prey. But even when not actively hunting, its roar always causes fear (Amos 3:8). Zephaniah compared the princes of Jerusalem to *roaring lions*, greedy to take advantage of the people. Similarly, the prophet compared Jerusalem’s *judges* to *wolves at evening* (vs 3).

Wolves are ravenous and savage (Genesis 49:27, Acts 20:29). They devour and destroy their prey (Ezekiel 22:27). They are nocturnal predators that lie low during the day and begin to hunt at dusk (Habakkuk 1:8). Usually, *they leave nothing for the morning* (vs 3).

In Jerusalem, the *judges* acted like *wolves* because they abused their authority and preyed on those whom they were supposed to serve. Perhaps they accepted bribes from the people to render false justice. In any event, they were corrupt and did not dispense justice with fairness. Instead, they robbed the people to satisfy their appetites.

This could be describing the culture in Judah under King Manasseh. Manasseh was more wicked than even the Amorites (2 Kings 21:11).

“Moreover, Manasseh shed very much innocent blood until he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another.”
(2 Kings 21:16a)

Under Manasseh, the leaders of Judah became like ravenous wolves and predatory lions, seeking prey to devour.

Sadly, Jerusalem’s religious leaders were no better: *Her prophets are reckless* (vs 4). The term for *prophet* is “nābî” in the Hebrew language. Its primary meaning is “proclaimer” or “forth-teller.” The term “nābî” describes someone who was a spokesman for God to His people. But the same term can be used for true and false prophets alike, as evidenced in Jeremiah 6:13, 27:9, and Zechariah 13:2.

In Zephaniah's day, the *prophets* in Jerusalem were *reckless* or insolent, meaning that they showed an arrogant lack of respect for the people. They were *treacherous men* (vs 4). Their job was to lead Judah to ways of righteousness. Instead, they were the opposite, being men that were *treacherous*. The *prophets* of Judah were not trustworthy. This likely means the prophets spoke things to please and be rewarded by the bloodthirsty rulers, and actually provided a moral authority for their wickedness. In thus doing, they were undermining the office of prophet.

In addition to the civil rulers and prophets being corrupt similarly, Jerusalem's *priests have profaned the sanctuary* (vs 4). The verb *profane* means to treat something sacred or holy with irreverence or disrespect. It can refer to several evil practices. We are not told specifics, but the general description is that these priests *have done violence to the law* (vs 4). This would indicate that instead of following God's ways, serving and loving others, they were instead exploiting their position and influence for personal gain.

God's covenant law states directly that authority is to be used to serve justice and advance flourishing among all people. It is not to be abused for personal gain. For example, the qualification for judges they should appoint:

"You shall not distort justice; you shall not be partial, and you shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the righteous. Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, that you may live and possess the land which the LORD your God is giving you." (Deuteronomy 16:18)

Zephaniah might have put the priests last, because their failure to teach the law to the people properly has perverted the entire country.

The term *priest* is "cohen" in Hebrew. It refers to the Levitical priests of Judah, whose task was to minister to the people of God, acting as a mediator between God and His covenant people. The *priests* were also commissioned to teach God's covenant law to the people (Deuteronomy 33:10). They had failed in their assigned task, and it led to corruption.

It is interesting that Zephaniah describes the priests as having done *violence to the law*. *Violence* here translates the Hebrew word "hamas." "Hamas" can also mean "to do wrong." Some translations render it so that the priests "violate" or "break" the law. They are supposed to be the upholders and teachers of the law. Instead they are violators, and lead people by a bad example.

In contrast to the civil and religious leaders of Jerusalem, *the LORD is righteous within her* (vs 5). He remained faithful to His covenant. While Judah broke their covenant vow, God was faithful to keep all His promises. *He will do no injustice* (vs 5) because He is "righteous and upright" (Deuteronomy 32:4).

God does no wrong, and *every morning He brings His justice to light* (vs 5). The phrase *every morning* is literally "in the morning, in the morning" in the Hebrew text. This repetition emphasizes the constancy of God's righteous actions. His deeds are consistent with His character. *He does not fail*. He is just "in all His ways" (Deuteronomy 32:4). *But the unjust knows no shame* (vs 5).

Whereas God acted with uprightness, the people of Judah were crooked and perverse. They practiced wickedness without even considering that they were doing wrong. They knew *no shame* as they rendered God's law powerless to help them and others through their neglect and disobedience. God made a covenant with them only for their good (Deuteronomy 10:13). The purpose of the law was to give His people a way to live that would lead to flourishing for all. This is God's standard—His design. The meaning of *justice* is to align with God's standard for human flourishing.

When a society loves, serves, and tells the truth to one another, it will flourish. Instead, Judah had ignored God's ways, and sunk to pagan exploitation. The leaders perverted justice, and used their influence to extract and corrupt.

The righteous God now spoke to explain some of His forceful actions against the nations and cities that had not acknowledged Him: *I have cut off nations. Their corner towers are in ruin* (vs 6). The LORD reminded His covenant people that He destroyed (*cut off*) the pagan *nations*, bringing them to their knees. He ruined their battlements and *made their streets desolate, with no one passing by*. Indeed, *their cities are laid waste, without a man, without an inhabitant* (vs 6).

This illustration of wickedness being judged had occurred with Judah's neighbor, the sister kingdom of Israel. Josiah began to reign around 640 BC. Israel was conquered and its people exiled by Assyria in 722 BC (2 Kings 17:5-6). Not only had the neighboring kingdom been disciplined, but many others (Isaiah 37:12-13, 18). Judah saw it, but were not giving it proper heed. They were not learning from the example of others (1 Corinthians 10:11).

Such actions were to serve as a warning for Jerusalem and her inhabitants to bring them back to God. That is why He *said*, '*Surely you will revere Me, accept instruction so her dwelling will not be cut off*' (vs 7). The people should see these examples, the moral cause-effect of wickedness. They should understand that following God's ways will protect them from the destruction all around them. But instead they chose to ignore the lessons, preferring to follow their own appetites.

The particle translated as *surely* is used to emphasize the thought. The verb *revere* means to fear God; that is, to believe He is who He says He is, and obey His commandments because they are for our good (Deuteronomy 10:12-13). The term for *instruction* occurred earlier in vs 2. It describes the desired effect of God's punishment on Jerusalem—to create an illustration of the cause-effect of wickedness.

God's desire was to see Judah repent and turn from its wickedness, so He could bless them, according to His covenant promise. The result, God stated, is that *her dwelling will not be cut off according to all that I have appointed concerning her* (vs 7).

The Suzerain (Ruler) God of Israel wanted to correct Jerusalem's evil behavior so that the city would not experience destruction on the day of His judgment. If they repented from their evil deeds, the LORD would gladly forgive them. But rather than learning from the example of others, *they were eager to corrupt all their deeds* (vs 7). They were not willing to change their

evil ways to follow God. Instead, they were *eager* to pursue wickedness. They apparently did not even hesitate to consider.

Therefore, they would be *cut off*. If they were going to follow the pagan ways of exploiting others, then God would give them over to those who would exploit them, as He did for the pagan nations. During Zephaniah's ministry, Judah did turn, and repented. They followed God during the reign of Josiah, and God delayed His judgement. But shortly after Josiah's sons assumed the reign of Judah, wickedness resumed, and God's judgment was implemented (2 Chronicles 34:33, 36:15-21).

Biblical Text

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The tyrannical city!
²She heeded no voice,
She accepted no instruction.
She did not trust in the LORD,
She did not draw near to her God.
³Her princes within her are roaring lions,
Her judges are wolves at evening;
They leave nothing for the morning.
⁴Her prophets are reckless, treacherous men;
Her priests have profaned the sanctuary.
They have done violence to the law.
⁵The Lord is righteous within her;
He will do no injustice.
Every morning He brings His justice to light;
He does not fail.
But the unjust knows no shame.
⁶“I have cut off nations;
Their corner towers are in ruins.
I have made their streets desolate,
With no one passing by;
Their cities are laid waste,
Without a man, without an inhabitant.
⁷“I said, ‘Surely you will revere Me,
Accept instruction.’
So her dwelling will not be cut off
According to all that I have appointed concerning her.
But they were eager to corrupt all their deeds.**