



HG189 *Zephaniah*
The Nations Will Be Judged

Zephaniah 2:4-15

Home Group Study Notes

3 November 2019 - James Van Cleef



PLEASE COMPLETE AS MUCH AS YOU CAN
ON THIS WORKSHEET IN PREPARATION
BEFORE THE MEETING!

*Don't forget to take your Bible to Home Group
with you, along with any previous notes and other
resources which might be helpful for your discussions.*



Welcome (10 mins)
Ice Breaker

When you were a teenager, was there anybody you wanted to be like? Did you dress like them? Did you try to speak like them? Did you imagine what your life would be like if you were them?



Looking Upwards (10 mins)
Worship

In your time of worship, you may want to sing Songs of Praise; listen to a Worship CD, as well as using Meditations; Bible Readings; Prayers ...



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Home Group Sermon

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Humans Love To Judge

It is a by-product of our democratic and consumerist existence. We judge everyone and everything. We judge politicians, civil servants, corporate executives, leaders (even in churches), celebrities, wannabes, and even our neighbours. We offer ‘expert’ opinion on restaurants, take-aways, and holidays. We click thumbs-up or thumbs-down, swipe left or right, friend and unfriend. We judge every day, especially when others do not think like us, dress like us, or look like us. We love to judge, especially when we can do it with anonymity.

Humans Hate To be Judged

We will not be told what we can read, view, or listen to. We hate being told what we cannot do. We will not be subject to intolerance from other people, and so ferociously cling to our independence. We want—demand—licence to act without consequence, and we love to condemn when others say different. We believe the adverts that say, ‘We write our own rules!’ And change them when they become inconvenient to our whim. What a contradictory state of affairs!

So, it is no wonder that when the Scriptures speak of God judging the nations, human response is often couched in questions like ‘Who is God to judge?’ or ‘As God doesn’t exist, why do Christians keep banging on about judgment?’ or ‘If God is love, then how can he judge?’ or, betraying really bad theology, ‘Am I not right in thinking that the wrathful God of the Old Testament has been replaced by the loving and non-judgmental Jesus in the New Testament?’

These questions are as old as the hills, and will continue to be asked. Even by people in the church. And the reason they will be asked is because a person’s understanding of God is misplaced or misdirected, as seen in Jonah when he was enraged and vexed that God would give pagan Gentiles a chance to repent, or outright rejection of God, as we find with Pharaoh, ‘*Who is the LORD that I should obey?*’ (Exodus 5.2).

What is at the root of these vexations and questions? If humans are created in the image of God (Genesis 1.26), and if God has set eternity in their hearts (Ecclesiastes 3.11), what has happened that caused this defiance? The answer: we have bought into the lie, the first and ancient lie, that we are autonomous beings—self-sufficient, self-contained, self-reliant—and we live in a world dominated by human individuality and rationality, which places us at the centre. We have become gods, and we have made God in our image. Worse, we live as though we have no need of God.

That is the great lie. So, what is truth? Listen to this:

'The stunning truth is that [the] triune God, in amazing and lavish love, determined to open the circle and share the Trinitarian life with others. This is the one, eternal and abiding reason for the creation of the world and of human life. There is no other God, no other will of God, no second plan, no hidden agenda for human beings. Before the creation of the world, the Father, Son, and Spirit set their love upon us and planned to bring us to share and know and experience the Trinitarian life itself. Unto this end the cosmos was called into being...'

C Baxter Kruger

The Nations Will Be Judged

So, why judgment? For Zephaniah, indeed as it is always, the judgment from God is a consequence of rejecting this invitation. God is neither capricious or erratically vindictive. Listen to the words of Jeremiah 11.17:

'The LORD of hosts, who planted you, has decreed disaster against you, because of the evil that the house of Israel and the house of Judah have done, provoking me to anger by making offerings to Baal.'

Israel's history is replete with their turning their backs on God, breaking covenant, and running after the gods of the nations. The prophets used strong words like adulterer and whore to describe the people whom God loved and vowed himself to in covenantal faithfulness. Let's say we knew of a couple, and one of them was being prolifically unfaithful to the other. If the one who was betrayed decided to walk away, we would likely agree with them and probably not chide them if they used harsh words. The other had broken all their promises, and neglected to love faithfully. Using human rationale and logic shouldn't we allow God to feel the same over Israel's unfaithfulness?

With regard to the nations, God's judgement is equally consequential to their choices. It might be argued, the other nations didn't know Israel's God, or his commands, so how could they be rightly judged? Paul answers that in Romans 1.18-25:

'For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.'

'Therefore God gave them up in the lust of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.'

Yahweh is no mere localised god whose jurisdiction ends at the border; he is the LORD Almighty, the creator of heaven and earth, the one who has his hand on all things. God is; and we are because he is. Moreover, he is the God who moves toward us, drawing us and wooing us so we find the fulness of life. Therefore, his judgement is just. And just as historical Israel/Judah faced God's judgment and were exiled because they broke covenant faith, so the historical nations Zephaniah prophesied against faced God's judgment because of their own sin, their arrogance and pride, their contempt, their idolatry, their defiance, their evil influence, and their abuse of God's people.

Philistia (vv4-7): a constant adversary to Israel, especially during the time of Judges. They worshipped Dagon, Baal-Zebub, and Ashtoreth, the great fertility goddess, and drew Israel away through the allure of sexual freedom. Prophetically, Philistia is a symbol of wickedness

Moab & Ammon (vv8-11): both were constant antagonists to Israel. Moab enticed Israel into sexual immorality and idolatry. Both hired Balaam to curse Israel; instead they were cursed and Israel blessed. Both had incestuous beginnings (see Genesis 19.30-38). And Solomon married women from Moab and Ammon who led him away from God...

Cush (v12): a name for Egypt and Ethiopia, but really powerless and weak, a false-hope. God had triumphed over Egypt at the Exodus, so it is unthinkable to look to them for help...

Assyria (vv13-15): used by God to bring judgment over Israel—God's hired razor (see Isaiah 7.17-25; 8.4-8), Assyria was nevertheless morally unclean, and full of pride. Assyria, like Babylon, was a tool in God's hand that thought it could take control, and represents all powers opposed to the rule of God

That Was Then: This Is Now

But none of these empires exist now, and the days of Zephaniah are long gone. What relevance do these words hold for us today? Perhaps we need to see the nations as typologies of current and universal attitudes and behaviours that are at odds with God, that reveal the rejection of his invitation to Trinitarian life.

Let's agree that we will not likely find followers of Dagon or Baal today, but we can agree that idolatry, contempt, pride, worldliness, sexual immorality and evil influence are prevalent, and not just in the 'world' but also among those in the church. Again, these are by-products of that ancient lie that we are autonomous and have no need of God. And they stand us in active opposition to God. If we live like this, what will we find?

- We will be abandoned (v4)
- We will be captive to sin and wander aimlessly without orientation (v5)
- God will hear our complaints, our contempt, our mocking (v8)
- We will face a perpetual desolation (v9)
- God will expose the powerlessness of other 'gods' and the futility in trusting them (v11)
- The proud will be humbled... (v15)

God's laments that his perfect love and his desire that all find their true being in him is spurned, as he says through Ezekiel, *'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways...'* (Ezekiel 33.11). So, we have to remember that the prophetic word of judgement is a desire to purify, not exterminate. But the consequence of judgment is determined by our choice.

God's judgment is compassed by his love, his holiness and righteousness. God cannot not love, cannot not be holy or righteous, so his judgments are always within the boundary of his nature. Therein, we find grace: *'In wrath remember mercy.'* (Habakkuk 3.2)

We see this desire clearly expressed in the NT. Remember our study on 1 John? *'If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.'* (1 Jn 1.8-9)

The Good News of Jesus Christ is foremost a declaration of hope: there is life in Jesus. He has reconciled all things through his blood. He came to save. He is the resurrection. He is the first and last. The Gospel now is given to draw people to Jesus, for them to be able to truly see, and have their minds renewed in him.

Finally, if revival is a real desire of ours, then the words of Zephaniah stand as an invitation for radical examination by the Holy Spirit, and challenge us to offer ourselves in whole disclosure: is my heart true? Do I need of forgiveness? Do I need to forgive? Am I lost? Have I become indifferent, so much so that 'this' is nothing more than routine? Come, Lord Jesus, and renew. Amen.

Emmanuel Church Text for 2019

*But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light,
we have fellowship with one another and the blood
of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin.*

1 John 1:7



Looking Upwards (40 mins)

Bible Study

Read the text for this study, and any references given, then answer the following questions. You may find it helpful to listen to the sermon and/or read through the sermon notes as you do so. Discuss some, or all, your answers with your Home Group and, remember, these questions are only a guide to start your discussions.

1. Read Matthew 18.15-20. We know we are not to judge others. But how do we deal with sin in the community of believers? Is challenging sin the same as judging?

2. The great Welsh revival hymn, Here is love, has a line that reads: '*And heav'n's peace and perfect justice kissed a guilty world in love.*' (William Rees, translation by William Edwards). If this is how God is toward the world, then how should we be toward the world? Do we see this in our church?

3. Israel and Judah gave in to many influences that drew their hearts away from God. What contemporary influences might draw our hearts away from God?

4. God used other nations to bring judgement upon Israel and Judah. What are ways God might bring correction when churches lose their way?

5. The Good News of Jesus Christ is a declaration of hope for the whole world. How do we model hope in a seemingly hopeless world?

6. How can our religious traditions and practices stand in the way of genuine revival?



Is there anything you most want to put into practice as a result of this study?



Looking Inwards (15 mins) *Caring For Each Other*

Reflecting on your life at the moment, is there anything you would like to share with other members of your home group which you feel is appropriate (this is an opportunity to share, not something you have to do, however, 'It's the sharing that enables the caring!') for:

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?



Looking Outwards (15 mins) *Concern For Others*

Is there anything concerning someone in your: family; circle of friends; neighbours or church, which you would like to share (please be sure not pass on anything that is confidential or which you think the person concerned would not wish to be shared) for:

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?

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