



HG190 *Zephaniah*
God Will Restore His People

Zephaniah 3:1-20

Home Group Study Notes

24 November 2019 - Revd Dr Stephen Dray



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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The early verses of this book introduce us to a prophet who, apparently, is a first cousin of the king. Zephaniah is, then, a prince. It also appears that his ministry was one that was not so much encouraging the reformation that took place under his cousin Josiah but of criticising it for being, ultimately, only interested in the ‘externals’ of living before God. Yet, precisely because they were members of a renewed or reformed community (as they viewed it) his hearers might easily have heard Zephaniah’s words as addressed to others (an ongoing failing when listening to the words of God!)

Thus, as Zephaniah begins his initially ‘anonymous’ last oracle it would be understandable that his hearers lulled themselves into thinking that he is speak against others. However, very quickly it becomes apparent that, in fact, God is addressing them.

This becomes very clear in verse 2; the offending party is the ‘LORD’s people’. LORD translates God’s personal name, the name by which Israel knew him as their personal God. And here he speaks against them! This complacent people, believing themselves to be ‘the spiritual elite’ had, in fact, refused God’s will for them (2a), become defiled by sin (1) and the problem was ‘top down’; rulers, prophets, priests were out of step with the Spirit, living for themselves and not the LORD (3-5).

The consequence (now as then) was that in their community life God’s people had become indistinguishable from the world. However ‘orthodox’ the leadership, their messages and their ministries were treacherous, profane, dangerous (3,4) for they lulled themselves and God’s people into a false sense of security. Zephaniah thus, emphasises that the greatest enemy to the church and the individual believer is the enemy within; especially in fellowship who think they are ‘there’!

5a reads rather like the first line of a hymn: perhaps one that was frequently sung at one of the great festivals. If so, Zephaniah takes words that had so often been used to offer false assurance, and turns them on their head. The LORD is among his people all right: and ready to avenge their sins (8). The tragedy was, and is, that the people of God are so often blind to this obvious fact. Zephaniah bid his contemporaries look at the evidence (6) and not test his longsuffering to the limit (7) by sin exaggerated by the evidence all around them.

The prophet is, therefore, stressing that the knowledge of God's presence among us can be a great reassurance, but it is not only that. It is also a powerful challenge to live authentic Christian lives: for our lives are lived as before him.

So we come to the end of the prophet's words (9-20). Thus far Zephaniah's various addresses have been a sustained and fiery message of judgement. Only brief shafts of light have appeared among the storm-clouds and they have been quickly overclouded once again.

But the question naturally arises, if the LORD is against his people, what of the faithful among them? Is there no hope? In his final words, the prophet turns to address these people and their questions.

He begins by reminding them that the failure of the professing people of God is not God's final word for that is a word of grace! God will, he says, one day have a worldwide people (10), radically renewed (9a), serving him truly (9b) in loving and mutual service (9c). However much his people fail God's purpose and plans do not change!

What, then, seems impossible will be achieved by God as he roots out the pride which is the root of all sin (11) and creates a people utterly dependent on him (12). Such will discover that such a self-denying church issues in 'heaven on earth' (13).

Zephaniah then adds that this restoration is as certain as it will be glorious (14-17). These verse are largely in the past tense, a technique the prophets often used to emphasise the certainty of their words: as far as they were concerned the events could be described as something that was already past!

Moreover, the picture offered is a beautiful one. As the people rejoice in the removal of their reproach so God delights in them with the satisfied silence of a captivated lover and the exuberant singing of the person who is so happy that he cannot remain silent (17). The LORD will be as happy with them as they are with him!

But this is not his last word. Finally, he says, the LORD's restoration of his people will be soon (18-20, esp. 19). Zephaniah describes the present deformed, dispossessed and marginalised people (19) enjoying soon ('at that time' carries such a force, 19) a genuine and meaningful life (18) which is visible to the world (19). And, lest we still have doubts he adds two final assurances: verse 20 repeats the substance of verse 19 and concludes with the solemn assertion, 'says the LORD'.

One cannot read these verses without feeling that ultimately they point to a reality that lies beyond the present world. This is so often true of the prophets' predictions. Yet, even so, what was prophesied here did come to pass (at least partially) in the return from the Exile: and God's ways are no different today. Throughout history he has cleansed and renewed his church. So, for those who do genuinely seek him from the heart, there is assurance. Zephaniah stresses that worldwide renewal remains the LORD's plan.

But all of this is revealed against a solemn reminder: what is described here is only true of a remnant (13). Many among the professing people of God will miss the blessing.

So, Zephaniah is insistent that the failure of the people of God is not the end story. He stresses that those who truly seek him and live for him will 'rest in his love'. But lying behind even these assurances lies a warning, for all the outward show (especially in worship) are we under his blessing or curse?

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. Zephaniah spoke to a people who thought they had got it right. They had abandoned the pagan worship of their ancestors. They thought they were where it was 'at' and, clearly, must be living under his blessing. As we examine our contemporary church (including Emmanuel) how do we think we are 'better' than others and to what extent is the difference 'skin deep'?

2. Reflect on some of our triumphal worship songs. Can we really sing them so confidently in the light of this passage? If not, how should we respond?

3. What does a 'religion of the heart' look like? Does Zephaniah offer any clues?

4. When we ‘walk with the LORD in the light of his word’ what is the ‘glory he sheds on our way’ as far as Zephaniah is concerned?

5. What are your expectations of the future of the church, or church, in the light of Zephaniah’s prophecy?

6. The book of Zephaniah has been a short but challenging book in many different ways. What, out of all that we have studied through this series, really sticks in your mind? What has strengthened your faith the most? What has challenged your faith the most? What has inspired your faith the most?



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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