

A HUMBLLED PEOPLE

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. The Lord saves the repentant (Zeph. 2:1-3).
2. The Lord restores the faithful (Zeph. 3:9-11).
3. The Lord purifies the humble (Zeph. 3:12-13).

Background Passage: Zephaniah

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

God saves and restores all those who repent and turn to Him in faith.

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

The prophet Zephaniah warned God's people to repent of their sins before the coming of the day of the Lord so that they might survive God's judgment. All who repent of their sin and trust in Christ can look to the Lord's return with hope and confidence instead of fear and dread.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because we have been purified of our sins in Christ Jesus, we live with expectancy of Jesus's return as we make Him known to others so that they too might turn from sin and fear.

GROUP TIME

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

SETTING: The prophet Zephaniah brought one major message to God's people: the day of the Lord was coming. That day was a day of judgment, but it was also a day of grace. God's people and the nations were faced with the reality of God's coming judgment, and Zephaniah's message called all people to repentance to find grace in the face of judgment. The Lord is patient, but His judgment does not delay. It comes soon, so the prophet's call was timely and urgent: Humbly come under the refuge of God's grace or be destroyed in your pride.

DISCUSS: What motivates you to get your vehicle's oil changed?
(being a responsible car owner; a cheap or discounted oil change service fee; fear of damaging my car's engine; fear of locking up my car's engine and putting myself and my family in danger)

DISCUSS: How regular are you with getting your oil changed?
Why? (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

TRANSITION: We might struggle with getting a vehicle's oil changed because we think we know better than the manufacturer, or we don't trust the service provider to be honest about the need for the work, or perhaps we fear the indignation of a worker who will know we have waited too long to have the work done. Each of these possibilities is related to pride, and if these describe our mind-set about an oil change, then the act of getting the oil changed necessarily involves a level of humility. The prophet Zephaniah called on God's people and the nations to humble themselves in repentance in order to be saved from the coming judgment of God against sin. All who come to God humbly, with the empty hands of faith, throwing themselves at the mercy of God, will find in Him a welcome and a refuge.

POINT 1

THE LORD SAVES THE REPENTANT (ZEPH. 2:1-3).

1 Gather together, yes, gather, O shameless nation, **2** before the decree takes effect—before the day passes away like chaff—before there comes upon you the burning anger of the LORD, before there comes upon you the day of the anger of the LORD. **3** Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, who do his just commands; seek righteousness; seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the LORD.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Zephaniah 2:1-3** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 1-2** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

The Lord graciously called His sinful people to gather together so they could hear the threat of His **judgment** and respond so as to be **saved** from it.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 3** commentary to emphasize the following idea (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

The only hope for salvation from God's judgment is to fall on God's **grace**. He calls on His people to seek righteousness and seek humility, and only the **humble** will repent and obey.

DISCUSS: Why does humility please the Lord? (humility is the opposite of pride; humility helps us acknowledge our dependence on God; humility reminds us that God is supreme and we are not; humility allows us to worship God for all that He is; humility reminds us of our sinfulness and God's grace)

TRANSITION: A day for God's judgment is coming, and on that day, He will reveal His glorious justice and His amazing grace before all humankind. This has been declared throughout Scripture, and nothing will hinder God's plan to display His holiness and mercy. Because of Jesus Christ and His loving sacrifice of Himself on the cross, those who humble themselves and come to Him in repentance and faith can await that day with confidence and joy.

NOTES

THE DAY OF THE LORD

The prophets used this phrase both to warn God's people to follow the one true God and to promise deliverance from their evil enemies. It described a day when God would show His sovereignty over all things and all nations, all good and all evil, for the sake of His glory. In the New Testament, writers continued to use this language to describe Christ's final victory and return, when He will judge unrepentant sinners and establish His eternal kingdom.

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"I tell you again that He cannot reject you—that would be to alter His whole Character and 'un-Christ' Himself! To spurn a coming sinner would un-Jesus Him and make Him to be somebody else, and not Himself any longer. 'He cannot deny Himself.' Go and try Him! Go and try Him."¹

—Charles Spurgeon
(1834-1892)

COMMENTARY

VERSES 1-2 / Zephaniah began his written word in chapter 1 with a broad view of God's judgment: The whole earth will find itself in the crosshairs of God's holiness. But in the opening verses of chapter 2, he narrowed his focus to God's people. The message of judgment remained, but it was tempered with an appeal from the Lord. In the face of the somber, dim reality that follows sin, there is a glimmer of hope for all who step inside the refuge that is God.

Zephaniah called God's people to **"gather"** so they could examine themselves in light of God's law. Gathering put the focus on the nation as a whole. Of course, the nation included individuals, but this was a message meant for the collective ears of Judah. In calling them to gather, the Lord addressed them with a less than inviting name. He called them a **"shameless nation."** "Shameless" seems bad enough, but the word "nation" holds just as much concern because it was typically reserved for the nations of the world, the non-Jewish peoples, the nations to whom God's judgment was coming. In one sense, Judah was no different from the rest of the world.

But of course, they were different. They were God's people, His chosen ones from of old. Though they had made themselves like the nations in their worship of other gods, God called them to gather despite their shame and undesirableness. This itself was a revelation of the grace of God. He called His people to Himself to reveal Himself to them.

The gathering was urgent because the necessary response was urgent. There wasn't much time left for Judah to come to her senses. It was as if Zephaniah were saying to them, "Choose this day whom you will serve" (Josh. 24:15).

The **"decree"** to which Zephaniah referred was the word, or promise, of judgment. It would come suddenly, this great day of the Lord. God was coming with burning anger. If they did not repent—and quickly—they

would find themselves overtaken by God's wrath. God's anger is fiery and all-consuming. On the day of the Lord, no one can stand before God on their own merit. We will either come under the shelter of His wings by humble repentance or we will be overtaken by the flames of God's justice. There is no third way.

VERSE 3 / The message to the gathered assembly used God's impending judgment as the springboard into His offer of grace. There was a way out, and it was simple—**"Seek the LORD."**

The call goes out to the people who have the poverty of spirit Jesus spoke of in Matthew 5:3—theirs is the kingdom of God. Those who forsake their own power, their own self-salvation project, their own self-righteousness, will find in God a welcome friend. They see their helplessness before the holy God and fall to their knees in repentance, seeking His kind face. To whom else shall they go?

To those **"humble"** souls, the Word of God is like oxygen to the lungs. They breathe it in and keep on breathing it in. They follow God and carry out what He commands. They do so not to earn their salvation but because they have already found it in God—He is the answer to their deepest needs. Like following the light in a deep, dark cave, God's Word is the lamp to their feet leading the way to safety (Ps. 119:105).

The humble **"seek righteousness"** and **"seek humility."** They look for it. They hunt it down. They forsake the pagan religions of their surroundings and devote themselves entirely to God, who is holy and just. They do what He asks. They bow low before Him because He has opened their hearts to His grace. They see God for who He is, and they see themselves for who they are.

Only through humility and faith in God can one hope to find concealment and reprieve from judgment, a refuge in the shadow of God's wings (Ps. 17:8). On the day of the Lord's anger, there is no safer place to be.

POINT 2

THE LORD RESTORES THE FAITHFUL (ZEPH. 3:9-11).

9 “For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord. **10** From beyond the rivers of Cush my worshipers, the daughter of my dispersed ones, shall bring my offering. **11** On that day you shall not be put to shame because of the deeds by which you have rebelled against me; for then I will remove from your midst your proudly exultant ones, and you shall no longer be haughty in my holy mountain.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Zephaniah 3:9-11** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 9-10** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

The Lord, in His grace, has promised to bring restoration to **His** people, which will include people from every tribe, nation, and **tongue**. Then they will **worship** the one true God together in purity.

DISCUSS: What are some ways our speech is tainted by the effects of sin? (we use our words to wound and hurt our fellow image-bearers, which is an offense to God, in whose image we were created; we tell lies; we give lip-service of our faith but then act as hypocrites; we express worship to our various idols instead of the one true God)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 11** commentary to emphasize the following idea (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

On the great day of the Lord, God’s people will recognize God’s **grace** and forgiveness as He removes all **external** and **internal** influences that lead to sin and shame.

DISCUSS: Why is pride such a devastating attitude and sin? (because pride leads to rebellion against the Lord and His commands; because pride puts us in competition with others and even with God; our pride distracts us and others from the glory that is due to God alone)

OPTIONAL QUESTION: Recall the following question from the Day 4 devotion: **How does the example of Jesus’s humility inspire you to humble yourself today?** (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

TRANSITION: In these verses in chapter 3, Zephaniah takes us deep into the loving heart of God for those who are undeserving. God’s grace gets the final word, and His work in the world shines in and through His holy people forever.

NOTES

CUSH

A nation south of Egypt, possibly Ethiopia, where some Israelites fleeing Judah were exiled. In this text, Zephaniah may have been referring to those from afar, those at the ends of the earth—Gentiles. These would become true worshipers bringing an offering, possibly even bringing God’s people back to the Lord at Jerusalem.

“MY HOLY MOUNTAIN”

Refers to Jerusalem, where God resided in His temple. It represented God’s presence with His people. In the New Testament, Jesus ushered in a new kingdom, being present with His people as they awaited the “New Jerusalem,” the holy mountain where one day Christ will return to fully establish His kingdom.

COMMENTARY

VERSES 9-10 / After God comes on that great day of the Lord to right all wrongs, He will bring to fruition His work of grace among all the peoples of the earth. It is this note of grace that rings most loudly in this passage. It directs our attention to the ultimate end of this world when all the humble of the earth will find the peace they long for in the presence of the one true God.

After God does His work of judgment against the nations and even against the rebellious people of Jerusalem (2:4–3:8), He will restore what has been undone by rebellion and sin. Where will this transformation begin? With the **“speech”** of the peoples. This seems an odd place to start, but the Bible places immense importance on what we say. Jesus taught us that out of the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks (Matt. 12:34). Proverbs 18:21 tells us the tongue holds the power of life and death. The apostle James compared the tongue to a raging fire that when used improperly sets everything ablaze (Jas. 3:6). We may think our words matter little, but God says they matter much. What we say isn’t just what we blurt out; it’s a reflection of who we really are, what we really think deep within.

There is a phrase often heard today when a controversy breaks out: “The silence is deafening.” It’s often used to point an accusing finger at a party one thinks ought to speak out. While it isn’t necessary to always speak out on every possible matter, there is a certain truth in the phrase. God’s people should praise Him. The worship of God should be a constant sound upon our lips. You can tell a Christian, at least to some degree, based on the way he or she speaks of the Lord. But what about one who never praises? The silence is indeed deafening. That God cleanses our mouths and opens our lips to praise Him is a sign that we are God’s redeemed children.

The Lord purifies and restores the mouths of His people for a purpose. He opens them to praise His name in word and action. This is the opposite of God’s judgment at Babel,

where human speech was altered to cause confusion (Gen. 11). Now, in this perfected world, all peoples will praise God in one accord. They will call on Him and serve Him together in peace and unity. Like a great army arrayed for battle, God’s people made up of believers from every tribe, nation, and tongue will move together gladly, praising God all the day long.

As God does His purifying work in Judah, He gathers His people from all around the world—those **“dispersed”** by judgment and exile and those to whom they have been dispersed and who have believed in the Lord through the exiles’ testimony. This new world with God will include people **“from beyond the rivers of Cush,”** which would have been considered the ends of the earth in Zephaniah’s day.² The Lord has heard their faith-filled prayers and now brings them to Himself that they may worship Him as He has directed. God’s people may speak different languages, have different cultures, and wear different kinds of clothing, but in Christ, they are one with God and with one another, shoulder to shoulder, praising their Lord together with purified speech.

VERSE 11 / This promised gathering of God’s people will be unlike the previous one in chapter 2. There, God brought shame upon the sinful nations, but here, God’s people find their shame taken away by God. They were sinful, yes, but they are His, and that makes all the difference in the end. They had rebelled against God, but God has forgiven them.

Not only has God rained forgiveness down upon them, but He will also rid them of any defiling influences, both external and internal. The arrogant will be removed, and those who remain will themselves never be **“haughty”** again. No one will ever again try to live a life without God. Instead, they will always look to Him alone for all they need and desire. The diverse people of God will be pure and they will worship the Lord forever. In a word, it will be heaven.

POINT 3

THE LORD PURIFIES THE HUMBLE (ZEPH. 3:12-13).

12 But I will leave in your midst a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the LORD, **13** those who are left in Israel; they shall do no injustice and speak no lies, nor shall there be found in their mouth a deceitful tongue. For they shall graze and lie down, and none shall make them afraid.”

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Zephaniah 3:12-13** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 12** commentary to emphasize the sanctifying work of God through the Holy Spirit to take arrogant, rebellious people and make them humble, holy, and faithful to the Lord (*the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

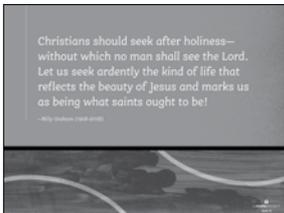
ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #75: *Sanctification:* After we are justified by faith, declared to be in right standing with God through the righteousness of Christ, we undergo a **lifetime** of sanctification where we are continually made more like **Christ** through the work of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:16-26; 2 Thess. 2:13). Scripture speaks of sanctification as a present position (we have already been sanctified) and as a continuing **process**. Sanctification affects the whole of a person, transforming one’s heart, mind, and **character** to reflect that of Jesus.

DISCUSS: Read the quote on **PACK ITEM 9: THE BEAUTY OF JESUS**, and then ask: **What should sanctification look like in this world plagued by sin?** (a desire and striving to be humble and lowly as Christ was on earth; a quickness to repent of sin; grief over sin in self and others that leads to personal repentance and a desire to share the gospel with others; a growing joy to obey the commands of the Lord)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 13** commentary to emphasize the following idea (*the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

The Lord has promised a day when His people will be marked by perfect **purity**, holiness, and **peace** because He has made them so.

NOTES



THE REMNANT

Refers to those left over after judgment. Though some Israelites believed God would save all His people, the prophets warned them that only the few who followed in the Lord’s ways would be saved. In the New Testament, this referred to all those who would believe in Jesus Christ. Though Christ died for all, only believers will be saved.

COMMENTARY

VERSE 12 / Part of God’s message in Zephaniah is hope that when the day of the Lord comes, there will be grace for the sins of believers. Everything impure will be removed from the land, and that includes everything impure in them. In the new world God is creating, only beauty will remain. Everything that defiles must be burned away so that the ground is fertile for all the good God will grow there.

Verse 12 gives us the flip side of the coin of God’s judgment in the world. In verse 11, God promised to remove the arrogant, but then He promises to **“leave”** a people—**“I will”** do it. This is God’s work. In His good judgment, He will leave something behind. He will choose to save a remnant. He will choose to leave some people—people who at one time had rebelled against Him (3:11)—to enjoy His new land. This is part of what makes God God. He is sovereign over all, and His sovereign choice is to be feared and praised.

So what will God leave in this new world? He will leave **“a people humble and lowly.”** These are the people of Isaiah 66:2 who are humble and contrite in spirit and who tremble at God’s word. These are the God-fearers from all the nations. From our perspective, these are the believers, the Christians.

In this present world, we are surrounded by the opposite of meekness and humility. Pride and arrogance move all around us—and in us—day by day, infecting this world with a sense of grandiosity. Everything that’s wrong with the world springs from that wrong sense of self. Believers struggle with these same temptations. The only difference is Christians instinctively hate that desire within themselves. Because they have been justified by faith in Christ and are being sanctified by the Holy Spirit, believers in Christ long to be meek and humble as He is, and one day God will make them completely so.

When God does His work in the end, the humble of the land will **“seek refuge in**

the name of the LORD.” How can one “seek refuge” in a name? It all depends on the name we’re talking about, of course. The Lord’s name is unlike any other, proclaiming who He is: **“I AM WHO I AM”** (Ex. 3:14). The provider (Gen. 22:14). The healer (Ex. 15:26). The banner waving over His people (Ex. 17:15). He is peace (Judg. 6:24) and our never-failing righteousness (Jer. 23:6). He is present, available, redeeming, restoring, protecting, overshadowing, saving, purifying, sanctifying, and glorifying. The name of our God is greater than any other, and every knee will bow to it and every voice will praise it (Isa. 45:23; Rom. 14:11; Phil. 2:10-11). There is no other refuge.

VERSE 13 / **“Those who are left in Israel”** will be a new people. Their sins will be behind them. Once upon a time, they did wrong and told lies, but no more. Once they were a deceitful people, twisting their words in the ears of others to get what they wanted, but that will be gone too.

Upon former fields of battle and war, believers will now rest and lie down unafraid. These are the green pastures and still waters the great Shepherd leads His people to (Ps. 23). Not only are they the sheep of His pasture but they share in His character. They have become like Him by His cleansing grace. No wrong will ever be done again. No false words will ever be spoken again. Peace will reign forevermore and praise will spring forth from their mouths (Zeph. 3:14-15). Faith will lead to good works. Humility will lead to peace. Openness will lead to love. No more sin. No more fear. Paradise will be regained.

Here, God rejoices over His people with gladness and quiets them with His love. His people will never doubt Him again. They will have no need to. They will feel so settled and secure in His embrace that they actually open up to accept the kind of love God gives—love that delights in them with singing (3:17).

MY RESPONSE

Because we have been purified of our sins in Christ Jesus, we live with expectancy of Jesus's return as we make Him known to others so that they too might turn from sin and fear.

NOTES

HEAD:

Forgiveness is a difficult thing to accept. We deeply believe we ought to atone for our sins. So we try and try to clean ourselves up and we never feel the peace we think we should. Then in our sin, we blame God for not accepting us. The reality is God's forgiveness is free because of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Jesus atoned for our sins, and we don't need to. We can accept with the empty hands of faith His amazing offer of full forgiveness. That is a difficult reality to get into our thick heads, but it is the wonderful truth of the gospel. All you need to do to be saved is nothing! Just accept God's free gift in Christ, trust Him, and rejoice.

What are some ways you might be trying to earn your own salvation?

HEART:

When the gospel really lands on our hearts, we open up in new ways—sometimes in unexpected ways. We find peace overcomes anxiety and joy overcomes despair. When we realize we're not going to hell anymore because Jesus lived, died, and rose again to save us from our sins, we become new people with a new purpose and joy. But how often do we allow the good news to permeate our hearts? Here is the news God wants you to hear and believe today: Jesus Christ did all that is needed to be done for us to be saved. And God will fully and finally forgive you for every wrong you've ever done or will ever do because Jesus has paid for it all. You will have peace with God through the cross of Christ. Accept it and live!

What are some ways you will respond to the truth of the gospel?

HANDS:

When the forgiveness God offers settles on our hearts, we become new people with a new purpose. We no longer live for ourselves because we're done needing to prove ourselves to anybody. We have freedom we couldn't get anywhere else. When the gospel captures our hearts, we long to spread it to others. We are now caught up in God's mission in this world to save sinners. We have the message of God's grace for sinful people because of our wonderful Savior. Share it with someone!

With whom will you share the good news of Jesus Christ this week?

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"A natural man's confessions run through him as water through a pipe. They do not affect him at all. But true confession leaves heart-wounding impressions on a man. David's soul was burdened in the confession of his sins: 'as a heavy burden they are too heavy for me' (Psalm 38:4). It is one thing to confess sin—and another thing to feel sin's wounds."³

—Thomas Watson
(c. 1620-1686)

POINT 1: THE LORD SAVES THE REPENTANT (ZEPH. 2:1-3).

+ COMMENTARY

“A positive charge is given to the humble (RSV, JB, NIV; ‘meek’, AV) of the land, Israel, God’s chosen land and nation (cf. v. 1). These are the people who in poverty of spirit (cf. 3:12; Isa. 11:4; Amos 8:4; Matt. 5:3) rely on God rather than on their own power or machinations for vindication. They are humbled in that they know that they are helpless, so they are called to seek three things (cf. the threefold repetition of ‘before’, v. 2). Firstly they are to seek Yahweh, their covenant God. It is his wrath and judgment that his day will bring on those who, like some in Israel, do not seek him (cf. 1:6). Also, in contrast to those who have abandoned him, the humble are to live godly lives, marked by ‘practising justice’ (do what he commands, NIV; cf. RSV, JB). In Scripture, justice is often accompanied by righteousness (cf. Isa. 1:21; 9:7; Amos 5:24), which is also to be sought, as is further humility, submissive obedience to God (cf. Num. 12:3; 2 Sam. 22:36; Ps. 45:4; Prov. 15:33). All of these positive, pious attributes are to be sought instead of the headstrong paganism which is rampant, but even then salvation, being sheltered from the destruction of Yahweh’s wrath, is not assured. God can save, but he can also punish, so hope is held out to the pious, but it is not guaranteed. For even the most pious are among those who have broken God’s law, to which they are called back, so Yahweh’s decision to save is ultimately and finally a decision of grace.”⁴

+ OPTIONAL DISCUSSION

The Old Testament is not alone in speaking of the day of the Lord. The New Testament speaks of it as well. For example, in 2 Peter 3:10-14, the apostle writes of that coming day. It sounds like an Old Testament prophet speaking to a people who must heed the message and respond quickly. This day of the Lord has not come upon us yet, but as we read about it, we must respond with even more urgency, for we are closer than anyone in the Bible was during their time.

Read over 2 Peter 3:10-14 and consider the message in light of Zephaniah’s. Ask group members how we should respond knowing the day will come so suddenly and almost unexpectedly.

EXTRA

POINT 2: THE LORD RESTORES THE FAITHFUL (ZEPH. 3:9-11).

+ COMMENTARY

“This promise probably relates to a literal regathering of the people in their own land, as the ending verses of Amos also do. But like the opening sections of Zephaniah, which refer to a limited historical judgment upon Judah as well as to a universal eschatological judgment upon all persons, this text too undoubtedly has a double meaning. On the one hand, there is the historical regathering. The prophet speaks of ‘this city,’ and later on of ‘Zion,’ ‘Israel,’ and ‘Jerusalem’ (v. 14). On the other hand, there is reference to a greater gathering of people of God in the heavenly Jerusalem, for in this company there will be no one who does not worship and serve the Lord, no one who is proud and not humble, no one who deceives another or lies. In this life there is always a mixture, even in the most sanctified of gatherings. But the mountain of the Lord will be occupied only by those who have ‘clean hands and a pure heart, who [do] not lift up [their] soul[s] to an idol or swear by what is false’ (Ps. 24:4).”⁵

+ COMMENTARY

“Terrible as the judgment of the world will be, it will also usher in the era of full restoration. Starting from 3:9, the prophet enumerates some promises and blessings in this period when all Jews and Gentiles will be believers. One of these is that God will purify their lips so that the words they speak are pure in that they come from a pure heart of love for God (see also Isa 6:5-7). The unified world will call on the name of the Lord (3:9a) and worship and serve him shoulder to shoulder or ‘with one accord’ (3:9b; see also Jer 32:39). The previously scattered believers will gather from as far away as the rivers beyond Cush (or Ethiopia), which was then considered the end of the earth (3:10a; see also Isa 2:1-4). They will come to worship God together and to present offerings in gratitude for their salvation (3:10b; see also Ps 72:10).”⁶

+ ILLUSTRATION

There are only a few times the Bible takes us up into heaven. One such place is in Isaiah 6. The prophet is given a vision of the throne room of God whereupon God is praised for His holiness. Before that glorious sight, Isaiah sees how filthy he is because of his sin, and he sees how filthy Israel is for their sins. He is a man of unclean lips who lives among a people of unclean lips (Isa. 6:5). Now, of all the sins he could have confessed in that moment, it is the sins of the mouth that come first. He pronounces woe upon himself for being a man of unclean lips, not unclean thoughts or unclean actions or unclean anything else—unclean lips. The sins of the mouth are significant to God. That is something to think about for a while. What does God do in response to Isaiah’s cry of woe? He sends a seraph to cleanse Isaiah’s mouth with a burning coal. He is purified by fire. His speech is cleansed to bring God’s word to a disobedient people. His sins are forgiven. This forgiveness that Isaiah experienced is the kind of forgiveness Judah would experience as God restores the pure speech of the people in Zephaniah 3:9. It is a restoration of the proper voice that rejoices to praise God. We can use our mouths for so much evil, but God can change them to speak so much good.

POINT 3: THE LORD PURIFIES THE HUMBLE (ZEPH. 3:12-13).

+ COMMENTARY

“The hopeful note for the Hebrews sounded at the beginning of chapter 2 and the subsequent oracles against the encircling enemies of Judah, climaxing with condemnation of the Assyrian capital, would have been well received by Zephaniah’s audience. But without warning, the urban object of Zephaniah’s wrath has changed from Nineveh to Jerusalem (vv. 1-7). Caught by surprise, the prophet’s audience faces a choice: either take back support of his indictment or admit its validity. Zephaniah characterizes Jerusalem as covenantally rebellious and morally unteachable. He portrays her political and judicial leaders as ravenous predators, her prophets as reckless traitors, and her priests as abusers of the Mosaic law. God lives in the midst of this moral decay but remains uncompromisingly righteous. The people, though shamefully exposed by the light of his purity, fail to repent—even after the Lord makes instructive examples of other sinful nations. To purge the world of sin, God will carry out global judgment, but he will leave a remnant who, purified of pride and deceit, will never again profane Jerusalem, the mountain city made holy by the Lord’s presence in the temple (v. 11). If Zephaniah begins on a note of utter despair, the book ends with great hopefulness. The prophet calls Zion/Jerusalem to joyful celebration as he portrays the redemptive purge as accomplished fact. The restoration will consist in God’s gathering of the exiles and returning them home, where they will command global admiration. All who humbly turn toward God, Hebrews and Gentiles (v. 10), the weak and the ‘outcast,’ will find a welcome reversal of fortunes (vv. 19-20).”⁷

+ ILLUSTRATION

The Bible often refers to God’s people as sheep. It is well documented how unintelligent and needy sheep are. They can’t really take care of themselves. They can’t shear their wool. They wander off easily and have no natural defenses against wolves or other predators. They require a shepherd to care for them and lead them in the path they should go. Sheep are a perfect illustration for God’s people. We are just as needy, and we need a shepherd to take us where it’s good for us. Enter Jesus. He is the Good Shepherd who takes us to the right pasture, beside the still waters and into the green pastures in which we flourish (Ps. 23). But there is a remarkable difference between us and sheep. Zephaniah tapped into it in 3:12-13. Sheep will never be more than sheep. They cannot be transformed into anything greater. But we can be. The end of Jesus’s shepherding is not merely our safety but our conformity to His likeness. He leads us to the well-watered pastures and recreates us such that we look like Him. How can this happen? Because He is God. As He transforms us into who we should be, we start to look like Him.

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