

3. Putting our house in order

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[0 : 00] And if we could have Zephaniah 3 open in front of us, that would be a help. A number of years ago, when I worked in Durham, mainly among students, students would often say in discussions, I would like to work with people.

I used to say to them, are you sure you want to work with people? Because people are strange, aren't they? We have, human nature is a very fickle thing.

We love being with people. We love interrelationships and so on. And yet so often, people, human nature, not least our own, seems to be so odd and so cantankerous sometimes.

And Zephaniah the prophet knew this only too well. One thing I discovered in the very early years of my ministry was something I did not expect to discover. I imagined if I preached the love of God and the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, people would love me.

They would love to hear that Jesus Christ loved them unconditionally. I will never forget the bristling indignation when that was preached.

[1 : 17] Of course he loves us. Don't you know that we are good workers for the church? We've been in this church for decades. Of course he loves us. Grace is terribly offensive to people.

But I found another thing. People used to enjoy sometimes perversely hearing judgment preached about. And the reason they loved this was because they always applied it to someone else.

Oh, I hope Mrs. So-and-so heard that. Or even worse, so-and-so should have been here today. That was exactly what he needed to hear.

Now Zephaniah has been preaching judgment. And the people he was preaching chapter 2 in their hearing would love chapter 2.

Woe to you, O Canaan, land of the Philistines. Oh great, that's what the Philistines need to hear. They deserve judgment. I have heard the taunts of Moab.

[2 : 17] Therefore, says the Lord, Moab shall become like Sodom. Oh, we hate Moab. They deserve judgment. And best of all, he will stretch out his hand against the north and destroy Assyria.

And will make Nineveh a desolation, a dry waste like the desert. But best of all, the great oppressing city, Nineveh on the Tigris, that city is going to be judged.

And people are rubbing their hands in glee. Oh, Zephaniah, you must come back. You're the kind of preacher we want to hear. We like this message of judgment. And he takes them off their guard in chapter 3 verse 1.

Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled, the oppressing city. Don't they imagine at that point he's still talking about Nineveh? But he's not. He's talking about Jerusalem.

He's talking about the very people who are rubbing their hands in glee at the news of destruction on the people they don't like. And this is made very clear in verse 5.

[3 : 20] The Lord within her, that's within the city, is righteous. He does no injustice. We're no longer talking about Nineveh and the Philistines and Moab. We are talking about God's own people.

His technique is brilliant, it's devastating, and undoubtedly got them to sit up and listen. Exactly the kind of technique the prophet Amos had used some centuries before, when he swept through all the enemies of Israel and Judah, and then came to them and said, as Nathan had said to David long before, you are the man, you are the people.

This is what he's saying. So, judgment, friends, is not about someone else. Judgment is about you. Judgment is about me.

This message is for us. We are the people. And in this city of Jerusalem, there are two separate agendas. There are the people who think they matter.

Verse 2. She listens to no voice. She accepts no correction. Otherwise, we have nothing to learn. We know it all. We've seen it all before.

[4 : 29] We understand it all. And then, verses 3 and 4. The people who ought to be leading them are leading them astray. Our officials are lions. Our prophets are fickle, treacherous men.

Our priests profane what is holy. There are two agendas. There's the agenda of those who think that they matter. But in verse 5, there is the agenda of the one who really matters.

The Lord within her is righteous. He does no injustice. Every morning he shows forth his justice. Each dawn he does not fail. But the unjust knows no shame.

We've got these two agendas. And back in chapter 1, verse 12, the Lord has said, I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the men who are complacent.

Throughout this little prophecy, Zephaniah has been moving between Jerusalem and the world because it's a universal message. But he nears the end of the prophecy.

[5 : 27] He is now concentrating on the city of Jerusalem. Like a good doctor, he is showing what is wrong. He is not going to prescribe aspirins for some wasting disease.

He is going to go right to the heart. Some drastic material is required here. And there are three things in particular, I think he says.

First of all, in verses 1 and 2, he says to the people, You have no integrity. You are not accountable to anyone except yourselves.

You have absolutely no integrity. Jerusalem is a place which needs radical reformation. Not a case, put one or two things right and everything will be fine.

This city is rotten. This city is decayed. This city needs radical, drastic reformation. The diseases have grown desperate and they need desperate remedies in order to put them right.

[6 : 29] They are behaving as if verse 5 is not true. Remember once again verse 5, The Lord is in you. Well, they are not behaving as if the Lord is in them, are they?

They are neglecting the whole of the revelation that God has given them. In our hymn earlier on, we sang God of Jubilee. Now, the Jubilee was established long ago by Moses in Leviticus 25, the year when debts would be paid, the year when the whole structure of Israel's society would be radically put right in the light of the law of God.

This was not happening. Indeed, there is hardly any evidence throughout the Old Testament that Jubilee was ever really observed. And there are two things that lie at the heart of their lack of integrity.

First of all, they have a wrong relationship with God himself. Verse 2, second part of verse 2, She does not trust in the Lord. She does not draw near to her God.

They are totally neglecting the word of God. In the book of Deuteronomy, they were told to listen to the voice of the Lord. They were told to hear.

[7 : 46] They were told to learn. They were told to keep. And they were told to do. They were doing none of this at all. And they were unwilling to accept correction.

She listens to no voice. She accepts no correction. Many, many prophets had come to them, and they were being ignored. Now, one of the signs of a true prophet is that they say what people don't want to hear.

That doesn't mean if you say something that people don't like, that automatically makes you a prophet. It doesn't work in that direction. Nevertheless, the one thing a false prophet will never do is tell people they need to change.

The voice of a false prophet will always say, you're fine. In other words, the voice of a false prophet will lead to complacency, will lead to self-satisfaction, will lead to inward-looking parochialism.

We are fine. We are the people. That is the voice of a false prophet. And the tragedy is a parody of what God says. God has said, you are my people.

[8 : 53] But, in the books where that is said, there are certain characteristics that mark God's people. You see, when the relationship with the Lord goes bad, everything goes bad.

That is the root of it. She does not trust in the Lord. She does not draw near to her God. But, praying, if it is happening at all, is formal and fickle.

If they read the word of the Torah, they are not listening to it. Everything goes bad. So, that is the first thing. They have a wrong relationship with God. They don't listen to a voice.

And the voices here are clearly the voices of the prophets. We are sent to correct them and draw them back into the true way. But, because of this, the second thing is that all relationships have

gone bad.

It is fascinating, isn't it, in Genesis chapter 3, the first sin happens, not when Adam and Eve fall out with each other, but when they unite together against God.

[9 : 55] In other words, when the relationship with God goes wrong, everything else goes wrong. In our fellowships, in our churches, if our relationships with the Lord are wrong, then our relationships with each other are not going to be right.

They are going to be marked by, are they going to be marked by, they are going to be marked by exploitation. They are going to be marked by, what we can get out of other people. That is why a living fellowship must, first and foremost, be a fellowship which loves the Lord, which is open to his word.

Rebellious and defiled. Rebellious against God, and therefore defiled in the way they are living.

Society is corrupt. And obviously, if society is corrupt, people are exploited.

You see, that's why the prophets always link social justice and holiness. If my heart is right with God, then I cannot treat others in an exploitative way.

On the other hand, if I'm my own God, if I'm an idolater, which ultimately means if I worship myself, I'm going to exploit other people, am I not? There's no sense of accountability.

[11 : 10] She accepts no correction. This is a city where there is no number but one. Where there is no pronoun but me. Where there is no job but my job.

No family but my family. No church but my church. Me, me, me. That is at the heart of this corrupt city. And the reason it's at the heart of this corrupt city is because the life of the city no longer revolves around the Lord who is in the midst.

Instead of the Lord in the midst, there is an idol in the midst. It doesn't matter very much whether it's a wooden or golden idol because ultimately, the idol is self.

If I don't worship the Lord, I worship myself. Because all the pagan gods are essentially projections, aren't they? Projections of my fantasies. Projections of my fears. Projections of my hopes.

Now that's the first thing. They have no integrity because they no longer are open to the Lord. Now the second thing in verses 3 to 5 is they've no real leadership.

[12 : 20] Now, when a community has bad leadership, it's almost impossible to exaggerate the damage that does.

Read the scriptures. Read back in the first book of Samuel of how the corrupt leadership of Eli and his sons led the nation to the brink of disaster. Read through the books of Kings, the background against which the prophets are speaking.

And see how when leadership was bad, the nation went to the dogs. And notice the words that are used. Roaring lions and evening wolves.

Now back in chapter 2, verse 14, the Lord says, when Nineveh is destroyed, it's going to be filled with wild beasts. Jerusalem is worse because in Jerusalem the beasts have taken over even before the city is destroyed.

A sense of violence and cruelty. In 2 Kings 21, we read that King Manasseh, the dreadful king who succeeded Hezekiah, his great father, and then did all his reforms, we read this, Manasseh shared so much innocent blood that he filled Jerusalem from end to end.

[13 : 35] Violence and oppression is always a sign of a decadent society as is ripe for God's judgment. Indeed, it is a sign of society that God is already judging.

Read Romans 1, the terrible divine hands off. God gave them over. God, God in other words, underwrote what they were already doing.

Civil leadership had gone entirely corrupt. They were violent. They were evil. They leave nothing till the morning. Met a fear of wolves and lions devouring their prey and leaving only a heap of bones.

This was an unhappy, desolate, terrifying city. The kind of place you couldn't walk in for fear of being mugged, for fear of being robbed. This is the kind.

And this is the sort of thing that's so much a feature of our own society today, isn't it? Violence, all the sign of a nation, of a community that's forgotten God.

[14 : 33] And when you read the flood story in Genesis 6, you find one of the main reasons for the judgment of the flood was that the earth was filled with violence.

See, you begin by, don't you, by forsaking God. You begin setting up yourself as an idol. And then for a while, this is fairly harmless.

Well, it's not all that harmless. Fairly harmless, though, in the sense that you simply look down on people and despise people. Now, it's not very long if that's the attitude before there's going to be violence.

Anything that stands in my way is going to be suppressed. But secondly, religious leadership has gone bad. Verse 4, her prophets are fickle, treacherous men.

Her priests profane what is holy. They do violence to the law. See, it's not enough to claim to speak for God. Many, many people came in the Lord's name.

[15:32] Read the book of Jeremiah and find how often the word prophet is mentioned there. And interestingly, almost every time it refers to false prophets.

The verb prophesy is used about Jeremiah himself, but the noun prophet is often used of false prophets. And why were they false prophets? They were false prophets because they were not speaking the word of God.

Remember the important thing is this. In the Old Testament there is no authority greater than, no authority which can be bypassed like that of Moses. Moses is the great authority in the Old Testament.

The prophets are raised up not to give their own ideas, but to preach the word of God. The word of Moses in the Pentateuch, Genesis to Deuteronomy. These were the words of the Lord these were the words applied to the new situations of the time.

That was one reason you recognized a true prophet. He spoke in the terms of Moses. That's why so often the prophets are called men of God because that's the word that's used over and over again of Moses.

[16:40] He is a man of God. And later on in the New Testament when Paul says to Timothy calls him man of God, Paul is saying to Timothy, Timothy you'd better preach the scriptures and remember that of course is preaching Moses and the New Testament writings added to it the testimony of the prophets and the apostles.

You see, there's a great danger of speaking lies in God's name. How do we know that our preachers are telling the truth? Well there's only one way we're going to know.

Are our preachers faithful to this book? Are we preaching the word of God? We read in Acts 16 that Paul preached in a place called Berea and it's said that they searched the scriptures daily to find out if what Paul was saying was true.

The prophets were not speaking the words of God. The priests were corrupt as well. And remember the priests had two jobs. One job was to offer sacrifices, to point forward to the Lamb of God taking away the sin of the world, to point to Calvary itself when all the sins which had been forgiven would be atoned for.

It's an important thing to remember. In the Old Testament God forgave sins. God used the sacrifice but until the Lamb of God gave his life at Calvary those sins were not atoned for.

[18:06] They were looking forward to that sacrifice which could never be repeated and to which nothing can be added. But they had another task as well. Their task was to preach the law of Moses, to preach the word of God.

And God raises up the true prophets. He raises up Isaiah, Elijah, Zephaniah, Amos and others when the priests fail to teach the word of God. At the very end of the Old Testament period Malachi is still saying the priests offer corrupt sacrifices and they're not preaching the word of God.

They are corrupt and they are corrupting. Bad leadership is utterly disastrous because bad leadership will destroy the church. That is why there is so much condemnation of false prophets and false teachers.

That is why in the New Testament Jude and Peter and John and Paul and others are so savage in their criticism of false teachers.

False teaching is not a kind of harmless eccentricity that the church would be better without. False teaching will destroy the body of Christ. false teaching will take people to hell.

[19:15] That is what false teaching will do and that is why false teaching must be suppressed at all costs. But there's another element in this no real leadership.

Verse 5 shows that they're despising true leadership. They have the leader in their midst. They have the Lord in their midst. Remember that's been God's intention right from the beginning. right from the time when he walked in the Garden of Eden. The time when he told Moses make a tent so I can live in the middle of my people. Here he is once again in the middle of his people.

Here we have true leadership. What does true leadership do? True leadership is righteous. True leadership does no injustice. Notice both the positive and the negative.

Not just righteous but actually not actually not doing what is unrighteous. people often say nowadays you must never be negative you must only be positive.

[20 : 17] Now fallen people do not think the way God does. It's terribly easy to be all this positive and never point out to people what's wrong. And that's what has to be done.

Every morning he shows forth his justice. He is totally faithful and consistent. Each dawn he does not fail. There will never come a day when this leader will fail.

Never come a day when his mercies will not be shown. The book of Lamentations says new every morning are your mercies and Zephaniah is saying that here as well. He is totally committed to his people.

So there is no integrity. There is no leadership. And finally there is no vision. No seeing into reality. Verses 6 to 8.

There is a narrow self-focus in Jerusalem and in Judah. It's so easy isn't it to become so obsessed with our own cabbage patch.

[21 : 20] It is alleged that when the Titanic went down the Aberdeen Press and Journal reported the event as Aberdeen woman lost at sea. And it's so easy to become that way.

I remember being in Shetland and saying apologies to any Shetlanders present. Seeing a wonderful map where Shetland filled the whole of the picture and a tiny tiny Scotland even tinier England disappearing into the north.

C.S. Lewis has a wonderful comment on this in one of his stories. A woman with the wonderful name of Mrs. Flussfers and Mrs. Flussfers is met by a visitor to Giantland where she lives.

And the visitor said I didn't know about this until I came to Giantland. Came to Giantland said Mrs. Flussfers isn't everywhere Giantland.

These people in Jerusalem are being parochial. They are not learning from their history. They are not seeing what God is doing. In verses 6 and 7 God's judgment in past and present history.

[22 : 31] The kind of things they could have read about in their history have cut off nations. Their battlements are in ruins. The great Assyrian empire was about to fall as a result of God's judgment.

Egypt had long declined from its days of greatness. They had no doubt read the great story told us in 2 Kings 18 and 19 of how God had rescued the city from the Assyrians and destroyed the Assyrian army.

But they didn't want to learn. I have laid waste the streets so that no one walks in their cities have been made desolate without a man, without an inhabitant.

Probably going right back to the great exodus event itself and their rescue from Egypt. And verse 7, call for repentance. I said, surely you will fear me.

You will accept correction that your dwelling would not be cut off. fear is the renewal of reverence.

These people were no longer trembling before the word of God, no longer trembling before his throne, no longer saying, holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is filled with his glory.

[23 : 43] They were not accepting correction, they were not obeying the word of God. Indeed, they were doing the opposite, all the more eager to make all their deeds corrupt. Someone said, those who do not learn from the past, they're fated to repeat it.

And this is what's happening here. They've learned nothing from the past. There is a wrong way of using the past, that is, living in it and pretending that nothing has changed. There's a right way to use the past, and in particular, there's a right way to look at God's blessings and God's judgments in the past.

Praise him for all that is past. But secondly, in verse 8, he looks to the future. And as he approaches the final part of the book, he widens out the horizons again.

Therefore, wait for me, declares the Lord, for the day when I rise to seize up my prey, for my decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms. God will intervene decisively.

Remember, I've called this series God Will Be God. and the world will know it. And that's pointing forward to that day when God will be known throughout the world.

[24 : 56] And the metaphor here again of fire, in the fire of my jealousy, all the earth will be consumed. I've already pointed out, I think, how through scripture you can trace that from the gates of Eden itself, with the burning sword, keeping the way to the tree of life, the burning bush, to the fire descending on Sinai, to the day of Pentecost, and Peter in his second letter speaking of the day

when the elements will melt with a fervent heat.

He will intervene. In other words, notice what he's saying. He's not saying things will get better. He's not saying, oh, we've been through these times before, and things will gradually improve.

Things will not gradually improve. Something decisive will happen. As being said, there is nothing wrong with the Church of Scotland that the Second Coming can put right.

This is the kind of thing that's being said here. God is going to intervene decisively. He is going to be God and the world will know it. He will come to judge the world.

In the fire of my jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed. You read some of the great Psalms like 96 and 98. God, when God comes to judge the earth, there is rejoicing.

[26 : 16] We come to the rejoicing next week, but at the moment it is the trembling. There will be both trembling and rejoicing. In the fire of my jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed.

See, the message in the gospel is not, would you like to meet Christ? The message is you're going to meet him whether you want to or not, and he will be your judge. God has appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man that he has appointed.

And this is what's being said to Jerusalem. First of all, they're going to be judged some 50, 60 years later when the Babylonian armies destroy Jerusalem and take them away into exile.

But that's really just a kind of trailer of the main event which is future to us as it was to them. And we know that event will happen because Christ has come once.

he came once to take the fire of God's judgment for all who believe in him so that when he comes again we will be ready to meet him.

[27 : 21] When the last trumpet sounds we will be able to stand before him clothed in his righteousness and saved from the fire of God's anger. And that is the only thing ultimately that will cause radical revival and reformation in the church.

It will not be caused by doing a little bit better by saying I've really got to try harder but by realising as Zephaniah says the day is coming when we will stand before him.

The day is coming when the fire as Paul says will burn up all the wood, hay and stubble and only the gold, silver and precious stones that he by his spirit has built into our lives will survive.

And you see the practical nature of this. The more firmly we believe that Jesus Christ will return to wind up the affairs of this world and bring in a better one, the more urgent it is that we engage in all lawful and worthy activities until he comes.

Amen. Let's pray.