

Zephaniah 3 • Restoration of Israel

Introduction

How many people will actually be able to stand before God and say they never heard of Him or the Bible or the message of the Gospel? We all have a choice to make about what we have heard and whether we will embrace Him or run away.

¹Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled,
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.

People's Behavior

[Read v.1-2]

Q: What is the biblical definition of "rebellion" according to these verses?

1. Giving no heed to the voice of God's messengers.
2. Rejecting God's instruction—His Word—on how to live.
3. Not trusting in God but something else.
4. Not drawing near to God but running away.

Q: Is rebellion something that comes about without ever having known or heard of God?

A: No. All of these characteristics of rebellion clearly describe having come in close enough contact with God to have heard His voice, heard His Word, become aware of His presence, and **THEN** rejecting Him for something else.

Q: How does God see the spiritual condition of the rebellious?

A: As "defiled". This describes something that was once pure and intended for use or service in the very presence of God but has become so polluted and filthy because of sin that God cannot allow it to exist in His presence. It's no longer fit for His presence.

Q: What is the final earthly condition of those that rebel and become defiled?

A: They become tyrants. Rather than being subject to, and therefore pure and ready for, God and His purposes, they become self-absorbed tyrants as they place themselves in God's place over others. They seek to rule in His place.

[Read v.3-4]

Q: What do each of these professions have in common? What was their function in Israel as a whole?

A: They were supposed to be the earthly representatives through whom God spoke and provided His Word. They were all supposed to point the way to God, encouraging a deeper commitment to Him.

Q: What is the net effect of their own rejection of God and not rightly carrying out their duties and responsibilities?

A: "They have done violence to the law." In other words, they have destroyed the good effects it was supposed to provide in directing the people to God's path—eternal life—and instead to the world's path of inevitable destruction.

[Read v.5]

Q: How is this speaking about the character and nature of God?

A: He cannot abide the tyranny, desecration, and forsaking of His Word that results from rebellion. Sooner or later His justice is going to act in accordance with their deeds.

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.
⁷I 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.

[Read v.6-7]

Q: To what or whom is God referring in v.6 as compared to v.7? What was the intended purpose of cutting the first off but not the second?

A: He is referring to the judgment He has brought on other nations as witnessed by Israel from their release from Egypt to the present time. Israel was supposed to learn and apply the right lesson so painfully learned by those nations of what happens to those that reject God and embrace another, but apparently did not.

Q: To what does God equate reverence of Him? How does He define it in v.7?

A: “Accept instruction”. It’s not just hearing His voice or familiarity with His Word, but putting it into practice. A teacher or parent can only provide instruction—they can’t make the student or child accept it. Their joy or disappointment with them is in direct proportion to the degree their instruction is followed and put into practice.

Q: Is this all the result of some kind of simple mistake or temporary quirk in behavior? Won’t they “grow out” of it or change as they learn more?

A: “...they were eager to corrupt all their deeds” indicates that this was a deeply ingrained behavioral problem, a persistent choice to pursue a lifestyle in direct contradiction to what they clearly knew was God’s preference.

Application

- *How do we justify not acting or doing something in accordance with what we know to be God’s Word? Do we see it in the same terms as God—as rebellion?*
- *How seriously do we take the fact that allowing sin to take root and becoming a permanent part of our life makes us unacceptable for God’s service and to be used by Him? Do we see our pursuit to be rid of all sinful behavior and predispositions as making our self pure and acceptable to Him?*
- *Have we seen the results of sin in others’ life and yet pretend that it will never happen to us? Are we learning the lessons God has provided in His dealings with others?*

⁸“Therefore wait for Me,” declares the
LORD,
“For the day when I rise up as a witness.
Indeed, My decision is to gather nations,
To assemble kingdoms,
To pour out on them My indignation,
All My burning anger;
For all the earth will be devoured
By the fire of My zeal.

God’s Response [Read v.8]

Q: What is being described by the use of such terms as “pour out”, “burning”, “devoured” and “fire”?

A: It’s the Old Testament picture of how something impure or defiled is gotten rid of by gathering it together and completely destroying it. In this case, it’s the result of God’s sense of justice expressed in v.5, that everything defiled must be removed from His presence and destroyed by fire—“by the fire of My zeal”.

⁹For then I will give to the peoples
purified lips,
That all of them may call on the name of
the LORD,
To serve Him shoulder to shoulder.

[Read v.9]

Q: What happened at the tower of Babel?

A: As a penalty for sin—most likely the worship of false gods/idols—the confusion of different languages was given.

Q: What happened in regard to language at the day of Pentecost when the Spirit first fell on Christ's followers?

A: Everyone heard the same Gospel in their own language.

Point: *It is with our mouth—our lips—that we give allegiance, praise, and confession, whether to the One True God or to another. “Purified lips” speaks of those wholly dedicated to God and no other.*

*Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be **of the same mind** with one another according to Christ Jesus, so that **with one accord** you may **with one voice** glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

—Romans 15:5-6

Q: How does this contrast with the condition of rebellion described in the first part of the chapter?

A: This is the opposite of rebellion—complete and unswerving devotion. God will not just dispense the justice His character demands to be rid of the rebellious, but He will also raise up a faithful remnant. It's the dual example provided by what happens to those who embrace faithfulness versus unfaithfulness.

¹⁰From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia
My worshipers, My dispersed ones,
Will bring My offerings.

[Read v.10]

Q: Why is this not merely referring to the return of Jews to Israel? What indicates that something even greater is occurring?

A: God does not refer to them simply as Jews or tribes but as “My worshipers”. It speaks of a physical return **IN CONJUNCTION** with a spiritual return. They will be pure and consecrated and therefore “*will bring My offerings*”, an indication that they will have the right spiritual condition to serve in His presence.

¹¹In that day you will feel no shame
Because of all your deeds
By which you have rebelled against Me;
For then I will remove from your midst
Your proud, exulting ones,
And you will never again be haughty
On My holy mountain.

[Read v.11-13]

Q: How will God address the issue of the spirit of rebellion?

A: The rebellious will be removed—purged—so that those who remain will have the right attitude and heart. God will work spiritual renewal.

Q: What will be the natural instinct of the spiritually renewed according to v.12?

A: “...they will take refuge in the name of the LORD.” Whereas the rebellious sought to run away and embrace other things in God's place, His true worshipers will seek to never leave His presence or ways.

¹²“But I will leave among you
A humble and lowly people,
And they will take refuge in the name of
the LORD.

¹³The remnant of Israel will do no wrong
And tell no lies,
Nor will a deceitful tongue
Be found in their mouths;
For they will feed and lie down
With no one to make them tremble.”

Q: What does God specifically call this group of people?

A: “The remnant of Israel”. This is not speaking of the church but of the spiritual restoration of Israel, that after a physical return to the land is effected, a spiritual cleansing will ensue to create “My worshipers” (v.10).

Q: How does v.13 fulfill v.9?

A: This is the result of having been given “purified lips”.

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Application

- *In considering what God is doing in your life, what things might be attributed to His making you properly prepared and acceptable for His service? What behaviors and cares for the world need to be burned away by His righteousness?*
- *To what do you give lip service? Is your speech more consumed by the things of God or the things of this world? Do you realize that both the quality and quantity of your speech is a measuring stick of your faithfulness?*
- *Do you aspire to merely be a follower or to the higher calling of being a worshiper?*

¹⁴Shout for joy, O daughter of Zion!
Shout in triumph, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter of Jerusalem!
¹⁵The LORD has taken away His
judgments against you,
He has cleared away your enemies.
The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your
midst;
You will fear disaster no more.
¹⁶In that day it will be said to Jerusalem:
“Do not be afraid, O Zion;
Do not let your hands fall limp.
¹⁷The LORD your God is in your midst,
A victorious warrior.
He will exult over you with joy,
He will be quiet in His love,
He will rejoice over you with shouts of
joy.

Restoration [Read v.14-17]

Q: Why does God refer to the spiritually returned Israel as “Zion” or “Jerusalem”?

A: After Solomon’s reign, when Israel was divided into the Northern and Southern kingdoms, the center of worship in Jerusalem (a.k.a. “Zion”) was still located in the Southern Kingdom. The kings of the Northern Kingdom set up a false system of temples, worship and even priesthood in an attempt to prevent the people from going to Jerusalem and/or recognizing the Southern Kingdom as having supreme religious authority.

During those times—and as a result of final judgment executed on the Northern Kingdom by its being carried away into exile by Assyria—**TRUE** worshipers from all tribes migrated to Jerusalem, which effectively became the place of residence for the faithful remnant of **ALL** the tribes of Israel.

The use of “Zion” or “Jerusalem” describes the faithful remnant of Israel as a whole, even though every tribe is represented. It’s a powerful illustration that God is first and foremost concerned with the condition of one’s heart.

Q: What is the true sign of Israel’s return?

A: “*The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst*”. The physical return is a prelude to the true sign: Israel’s spiritual renewal, a unified commitment and complete devotion to Jesus Christ.

¹⁸I will gather those who grieve about the appointed feasts—

They came from you, O Zion;
The reproach of exile is a burden on them.

¹⁹Behold, I am going to deal at that time
With all your oppressors,

I will save the lame
And gather the outcast,
And I will turn their shame into praise
and renown

In all the earth.

²⁰At that time I will bring you in,
Even at the time when I gather you
together;

Indeed, I will give you renown and praise
Among all the peoples of the earth,
When I restore your fortunes before your
eyes,”

Says the LORD.

[Read v.18-20]

Q: What does it mean “those who grieve about the appointed feasts”?

A: With the destruction of the temple and their dispersal throughout the world, it was impossible to celebrate the feasts or to precisely serve God in accordance with Old Testament Law. “Those who grieve” is an indicator of the right heart possessed by the faithful remnant who care more for the things of God than their self, desiring to see His service completely restored the way it should be.

Q: When does God restore Israel’s place and standing?

A: When they are no longer “Israel” but “Zion”, a spiritually renewed people dedicated to Him alone.

Overall Application

*Are you more a part of a group or His church? Have you gone from being part of “Israel” to a committed member of “Zion”? How is the Spirit appealing to your heart in terms of being consecrated solely for **HIS** praise and service?*