

June 22, 2025
Return: The Danger of Complacency
Zephaniah 1:1-18
Vernon Advent Christian Church

Introduction...Theme... We have come to the Book of Zephaniah, the 6th book in our series on the minor prophets. Again, we have been going through these books chronologically, so we have passed from the prophets who God sent to warn the Northern Kingdom of Israel of their coming judgement from God by the hand of the Assyrians, bookended by, first, the warning to Nineveh and their repentance in Jonah to, then, the pronouncement of God's coming judgement on Nineveh for their wickedness and their destruction as we finished up Nahum last week. And, now, we come to the prophets that speak out against the sin and rejection of God of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, with its capital city of Jerusalem, starting with the book of Zephaniah this morning.

Now, Zephaniah lived during the final decades of the southern kingdom, when King Josiah had attempted to bring about real change in the land by removing idols and restoring the temple to the worship of Israel's God alone (2 Kgs. 22-23). By that point, however, Judah was already too far gone, as the worship of other gods was too entrenched in the people's lives. Josiah's pride led him to a tragic death on the battlefield (2 Chronicles 35:20-25), and so Jerusalem was set on a collision course with Babylon, then next great empire after they defeated the Assyrians. Zephaniah had seen all this coming and had been warning the leaders of Jerusalem for years. This book is a collection of his poetry and a summary of his message.

A key phrase we will come across a lot in this book is Zephaniah's use of the phrase, "the day of the LORD." It's used this way only three times, but 14 other times, he uses the phrase "the day" referring to this day of the Lord and all within a few short chapters. Zephaniah emphasizes that the Day of the Lord will be a time of wrath, distress, and destruction for those who have turned away from God. This includes not only the enemies of Judah but also Judah itself, due to their idolatry and disobedience. While the Day of the Lord involves judgment, it also holds a promise of restoration and blessing for those who seek God. Zephaniah speaks of a future where God will, once again, dwell among His people, bringing them peace and joy.

Like Nahum, Zephaniah has a three sections. The first focuses on the day of the Lord's judgment coming for Judah and Jerusalem (Zeph. 1:1-2:3), our focus today, while the second looks at the day of the Lord's judgment on the other nations and Jerusalem once more (Zeph. 2:4-3:8). The third section explores the hope that remains for the nations and Jerusalem on the other side of judgment (Zeph. 3:9-20). And so Zephaniah forces us to hold two aspects of God's character at once, his justice and his love, this is something we have been doing all along throughout our look into the minor prophets, to see that together they contain the future hope for our world.

Being complacent is an interesting thing to think about. We all experience complacency in some ways in lives? We typically become complacent about things that we become used to. We become unconcerned and comfortable about certain things in our

lives, oftentimes, without even realizing it. Merriam-Webster defines complacent as, “marked by self-satisfaction especially when accompanied by unawareness of actual dangers or deficiencies.”

Sometimes we hear about a sports team becoming complacent after winning a championship in which they are now satisfied with winning and do not push as hard for the next season. This happened to the 2018 Red Sox... And we all know about the affects of complacency in a marriage, taking for granted the relationship, which leads to future problems.

But Zephaniah comes on the scene and proclaims God’s message against Judah because the people have become complacent about their sin. They have become satisfied in their sin and unconcerned about it or about God. And the prophet is going to show them the problem and what needs to be done. We going to break ch. 1 down into 3 parts and read each section as we come to them, so you can remain seated today as I read the first six verses of Zephaniah 1 as we consider the dangers of complacency in our lives. [Read vs. 1-6]

The first verse of Zephaniah’s prophecy tells us a little more about the prophet then we get in other books which helps with placing it in the timeline of writing. We are told that Zephaniah’s great, great grandfather was the righteous king, Hezekiah, we read about in 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles and Isaiah, known for his faith, his religious reforms, and his leadership during a difficult time in Judah’s history. Then we read, he preaches God’s message during the reign of another righteous king, Josiah, who takes the throne at only eight years old, and when he becomes of age, he, like Hezekiah, begins another work of religious reform by tearing down all the idolatrous worship centers of the people. This puts us around 625 BC, about 40 years before the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC.

But, despite the fact that his prophecies come during the reign of a righteous and godly king, the prophecy of Zephaniah is not a hopeful one. Zephaniah begins by speaking about a coming global judgment. And the imagery in vs. 2-3 reminds us of the flood in Noah’s day where God wiped everything off the face of the earth (Gen. 6:7). The world is pictured as worthy of a severe judgment. But the focal point of the message is regarding the judgment against Judah and its capital city, Jerusalem (vs. 4).

What have the people of God done that is bringing such a severe judgment against them? Notice in vs. 5, while mentioning the worship of Baal, the Canaanite fertility god, we are also told that the people bow down and swear to the Lord but then also do the same toward Milcom, another form of the name ‘Molech,’ the Ammonite god mentioned in the OT. Worship of Molech was particularly abhorrent because it often involved the sacrifice of children, making it a cruel and barbaric practice. The picture is that the people had a divided and hypocritical heart. The people bow down to the Lord and pledge their loyalty to him but they have turned back from following the Lord (vs. 6). They do not seek the Lord or inquire of him.

Unfortunately, this type of thing has been going on since they made their way into the promised land. You see God’s people would never say that they had rejected Yahweh, their God, they just were helping him out by the worship of all these lesser gods for things like their crops and good fortune. This is called syncretism, but as we looked at in the book of Hosea, God calls this spiritual adultery.

Think about this amazing picture. They physically worship the Lord. Their mouths say the right things, declaring their loyalty to the Lord. But they do not follow the Lord. They do not seek him and they do not inquire of him. This is the first picture of complacency, it leads us to becoming superficial in our worship.

You keep performing acts of worship and you keep saying all the right things about your loyalty to the Lord, but you do not follow him. You claim that the Lord is your God but you do not inquire of him. This is not a problem that is just about the people of Judah but is a constant threat for all God's people through all time. We do the same every time we put other things, or let the pursuit of other things, in the place of our true worship of God.

Jesus gave the same warning to people in his day about what it meant to follow him. "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far away from me. In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." (Mark 7:6-7)

God is warning us that it is easy to say all the right things. It is easy to look the part when we gather together. It is easy to pretend. This is especially worthy of thinking about considering that this prophecy comes when Josiah is repairing the temple and making spiritual reforms. God needs our hearts to be fixed, not just doing certain things or not doing certain things, but truly placing God first in our lives and worshipping him alone. May God help us.

Vs. 7-12 continue the picture of coming judgment on Judah which leads into the second picture of the people's complacency, which is that it leads to carelessness. [Read] In vs. 12, we see that the complacent are those "who say in their hearts, 'The Lord will not do good, nor will he do ill.'" There is an amazing visual picture that is given here that can be lost in translation. The English Standard translates the phrase of those God will punish simply as those "who are complacent." The NASB reads, "Who are stagnant in spirit," and the NIV reads, "Who are like wine left on its dregs." The Hebrew phrase gives the imagery that comes from wine making, where the wine, if allowed to remain on the sediment too long, will turn into a thick syrup. The picture we get here is that when we become stagnant, or complacent, in our faith we're like thick wine that has been left for too long and is longer good to use.

The people have settled down comfortably. They are comfortable in life and had settled into their habits and into their sin. And this comfortableness has led them to carelessness.

Remember that the sin of the people is they say that they follow and worship God, but they do not seek him, inquire of him, or follow him. And as we know from experience, the same is true of us. What happens is that we become so comfortable and satisfied and complacent in this world that we lose our zeal and fervor for the Lord. We become stagnant. We stop caring about the lost. We do not care about each other. We just "perform" our worship duties on Sundays and hurry home back to our comfortable lives. And we think that we do not need anyone or anything else.

The reason we continue to do this is described in the rest of vs. 12. We do not believe God is going to do anything about it. God does not do good to me and God does not judge me. The belief is that the Lord is alive, but he is not active. Now, even though none of us would actually say this ourselves, at least out loud, sadly, and far too often, it is implied by the way we live our lives.

And we continue in our complacency and lack of zeal because we think God is not going to do anything about it. So we settle in and become preoccupied with this life, with our jobs, with our family, and with our wealth and lose all regard for the Lord. And all the while, we still “worship” God while we do this. This is the heart that Zephaniah is condemning.

Well this, then, leads to our third and final point this morning, complacency leads to a false sense of security [Read vs. 13-18] In vs. 13, Zephaniah essentially tells the people that their plans will come to nothing. And, then in vs. 18, he tells them that their wealth will not save them from the coming judgment. Part of the people’s complacency is that they think they will keep on carrying out their plans tomorrow like they did today and their wealth that they have built up will preserve them through any difficulty. Wealth is a relative term...doesn't matter how much to have, but how much you trust in what you have. It is not wrong to plan for the future, in fact scripture encourages us to do so, but we are only able to carry out our plans because God allows it. The point is that we become complacent because we trust in our plans and we trust in our wealth. Neither of these will save us when God brings judgment.

Back to vs. 13, God says that he is not going to allow them to enjoy any of God’s blessings. They think they are rich but God is going to have them plundered. They think they have their houses to enjoy but God is going to have their houses laid waste. They think they will build their houses but God is not going to allow them to move into them. They plant their vineyards but they are not going to enjoy any of the fruit. We are only able to enjoy any of our job, wealth, family, and stuff because God allows it.

But the terrible picture of complacency is that all of these blessings of wealth, career, family, and possessions, they all can steal our hearts so that we no longer seek the Lord. We say that we do, but we do not. We are pursuing our stuff, our wealth, our careers, and our families first. Our excuse for why we are not active for the Lord is because we have work obligations, family obligations, and other things to do or take care of in our lives. And somehow, we think this is acceptable to God. Again, may God help us.

So, a complacent faith declares allegiance to the Lord but does not follow the Lord or inquire of him. A complacent faith says that God does not do anything, neither good nor bad. A complacent faith believes that our plans will continue on because of our own power and our wealth will rescue us from any trouble.

How do we go about fixing the problem? Well, the fix is not more “religion” or empty worship. Israel was already worshiping God and saying that they were loyal to God. What did God want? Back to our theme verse, “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? God doesn't want more “religion” and empty worship, he wants us to have a relationship with him.

We can put an end to a stagnant faith and our complacency when we forget about doing what we think would appease God and simply seek a relationship that is pleasing to God. Let us pray.

Benediction: May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your heart and strengthen you in every good word and deed. Amen (2 Thess. 2:16-17)