

Anger and Love Zephaniah 3

It's hard to deny that God's people deserved what was coming to them. After all, chapter 1 says that even though they continued to bow down before the Lord, they had actually turned back from following Him, preferring to worship false gods like Baal and Milcom instead. And as verse 2 of chapter 3 makes clear, they weren't really trusting in the Lord or drawing near to Him. Instead, as verse 7 says, they were eager to corrupt all their deeds.

And their leaders weren't any more faithful, even though they should have known better. No, verse 4 explains that the prophets, those who were supposed to be speaking the Word of the Lord to His people, were reckless and treacherous instead, assuring the people that the Lord wasn't going to punish them, no matter what they did. The priests, those who were supposed to lead the people of God in worship, were instead engaging in superstitious rituals they learned from the worshippers of false gods (see 1:9). And chapter 1 verse 8 reminds us that the princes of God's people, those who were supposed to model complete dependence upon God, were instead clothing themselves with foreign garments, placing their trust in alliances with the unbelieving nations all around them.

No, it's no wonder that God did exactly what Zephaniah said He would in chapter 3 verse 8: pouring out His anger, His burning zeal not only on His unfaithful people, but on all the unbelieving nations that surrounded them. And it all happened just as Zephaniah predicted: the Babylonian Empire ended up crushing the kingdom of Judah during its conquest of the entire Middle East. Yes, just as he said back in chapter 1 verse 15, the day of the Lord's judgment was indeed a day of wrath, of trouble and distress, of desolation and destruction, of darkness and gloom.

So much is as sad as it is clear, but what does any of this have to do with us? After all, according to our responsive reading from John chapter 3, hasn't Jesus come to show us, not God's wrath and curse, but God's redeeming love? Didn't Jesus say that God loves the world? Yes, Jesus assures us that He, the Son of God, didn't come to condemn the world, but to save the world. Jesus promises us that anyone who would believe in Him would have everlasting life. So, how can we square all the doom and gloom of the prophets with Jesus' warm words of welcome?

Well, some so-called scholars solve this problem by drawing a hard and fast line between the Old and New Testaments. They believe that human beings just made up the Scriptures, so they insist that in Old Testament times God's people had a rather bloodthirsty, primitive view of God. Just so, these so-called scholars believe that the New Testament writers' doctrine of salvation by grace through faith described the people's growing, evolving, more sophisticated understanding of God.

Others, who claim to believe in the literal truth of God's Word, agree that there is a firm division between God's Old Testament and New Testament people. They believed that, before the coming of Christ, folks were actually saved, not by trusting in a Messiah to come, but by keeping the Law of Moses. Thus, they believe that when the Old Testament prophets condemned their contemporaries for breaking God's covenant, they really don't have much to say to Christians. So, it's no wonder that many of their followers are content to carry around New Testaments, albeit with the Psalms and Proverbs thrown in. That's all Christians need to know, right?

Well, not according to the Old Testament prophet Zephaniah. For it turns out that he is speaking on behalf of the same God that revealed Himself in the New Testament to John. For in chapter 3 verses 14-17, doesn't Zephaniah also describe a God of love and grace? Doesn't he insist that the Lord has taken away His judgments against us? Doesn't he say that God will rejoice over us with joy and rest in His love for us?

No, we cannot say that God's Old Testament people were somehow worshipping a different God. We cannot even say that God's plan for saving His people has somehow evolved. For according to both John and Zephaniah, God is love, but He is also just. God is gracious, but He also pours out His wrath on those who reject Him.

But if Zephaniah presents us with a more nuanced view of God than the one many people expect to find in the Old Testament, a more careful look at John chapter 3 reveals the same complexity. For if John tells us that no one who believes in Jesus will be condemned, he also insists that those who don't believe in the name of Christ are in fact condemned already. And yes, John assures us that everyone who believes on, everyone who trusts in the Son of God has everlasting life. But John also says that those without such saving faith in Christ shall not see life: instead, he insists that the wrath of God will abide on them, the same wrath that Zephaniah describes so vividly.

So, the real mystery is not how God could somehow be a God of wrath in the Old Testament and a God of grace in the New Testament. No, given the words of both John and Zephaniah, the real question is how God could be both gracious and just, both wrathful and loving to His people throughout space and time.

Well, it might help us to solve this puzzle, if we look at a Hebrew word that we find in chapter 3 verses 2 and 7: "musar." In verse 2, Zephaniah says that God's people would not receive His musar, and the King James Version translates it as "correction." And in verse 7, God again calls His people to receive "musar," but this time it is translated as "instruction." The same word can also refer to education or discipline.

And here, I think any parent or teacher would instantly understand the point Zephaniah is trying to get across. For when we face surly students or unruly children who are bound and determined to do things their own way in spite of our warnings, haven't we experienced the tension between anger and love? For we've all had to administer disciplinary consequences to those children, perhaps putting them in time out or detention because of their misbehavior. And if that isn't enough to get their attention and bring them back into line, we might even have to give them a swat on the backside.

But why does education and instruction necessarily involve correction and discipline? Why do we administer justice to our students and children, even in a sometimes painful way? Don't we get angry at their misbehavior precisely because we love them? Aren't we trying to protect them from much worse consequences down the road, consequences which their rebellious behavior will necessarily bring down upon them?

That has certainly been true in my own experience. For example, even the most pious of my CHA cadets would often have preferred to nap in my class rather than to pay attention to my Bible lessons on passages like this one. But if they got what they wanted, if they slept through my class or other classes, they would not have learned what they needed to know to graduate. And that, of course,

would have meant that their prospects for employment or higher education would have been greatly limited. So, regardless of their desire to be slack, real life was coming. Graduation day was coming, and it was my job to help them get ready for it – whether they were willing or not.

That's why I had to enforce the school rule against sleeping in class – even if that meant handing out demerits that required them to march around the campus carrying a rifle. My justice was thus motivated by concern for them, even if my sleepy students couldn't understand that at the time. Yes, the reason I got angry with their laziness and disobedience was because I loved them enough to want them to do better: for if I hadn't cared enough about them to get angry with them, I would have been indifferent about their prospects for success.

And that's the same sort of warning Zephaniah was giving to God's people. For in their case, it wasn't graduation day that was coming, but the Great Day of the Lord. Yes, in chapter 3 and verse 8, God insisted that He Himself was coming to visit His people. And on that Day, He said that the whole earth would be devoured by the consuming fire of His zeal. And the last verse of chapter 1 adds that this fire would be nothing less than the burning passion of God's jealousy. In other words, it would be the jealous love of God that would bring about that Great Day of the Lord.

And now I hope we can see the connection between God's need to correct and purify His people on the one hand and the love and mercy that He extends towards them on the other. For just as John tells us, the coming of the Lord will not be good news for everyone. And Zephaniah agrees: on that day, the unbelievers who have taunted and reviled God's people will be destroyed: the unbelieving nations will be cut off, and their cities will be laid waste, as God pours His indignation out on them.

But why will God pour out His anger? Because of His love for His people. So that the remnant of His people will have their fortune restored, so they can inherit the ill-gotten gains of their enemies. Yes, the same fire that will burn up those who continue to rebel against God will purify His people so that they will stop telling lies and call on the name of the Lord instead. Yes, the Lord, the victorious warrior will conquer all His enemies on that Day so that He can exult over His people with joy, so He can be quiet in His love for them, so that He can give them renown and praise among all the peoples of the earth.

And we know how the Lord has already accomplished so much of this, don't we? For in our responsive reading, John reminds us that, in the days after their Exodus from Egypt, a plague of venomous serpents came upon God's people because of their unfaithfulness to Him. They were thus receiving the consequences of their rebellion against God; you might say they were getting a foretaste of the Great Day of the Lord that Zephaniah predicted. But even while the Israelites were suffering in the wilderness, Moses lifted up a bronze image of a serpent on a pole so that everyone in the camp could see it. And God promised that anyone who looked to the serpent would be saved.

This, John says, points us to the saving, purifying work of Christ. For it was because of His jealous love for His people that the Father poured out His anger on Jesus so that His people would not have to experience the consequences of our rebellion against Him. And those who humble ourselves before God, looking only to Jesus' perfect sacrifice on the cross, those who admit our sin and trust in Him are not only declared not guilty according to God's perfect justice. For as we believe in Jesus, we actually believe into Him, becoming one with Him. And that means we are filled with His purifying Spirit, the Spirit Who burns away from within us all of our proud and arrogant ways, making us the humble and lowly people God has created us to be, the sort of people that are fit to live with our loving Lord forever.

Yes, that's the reality we find in both the Old and the New Testaments, in both John and Zephaniah: the wrath of God and the love of God are simply two aspects of the same cross of Christ. And since the Lord has already visited His people – dying for us, rising for us, ascending to Heaven for us – we know that He will come again. And on that Great Day of the Lord we will once again see the same two aspects of God's jealous love: His determination to purify a people for Himself so that we might live with Him forever.

And so the question for us is not how God can be both angry at sinners and love them at the same time. No, the more urgent question is this: when that Day comes, will the fire of the Lord consume us along with our pride and arrogance and rebellion against Him? Or will we be the humble and lowly people who take refuge in the name of the Lord, the people over whom God will exult with joy, as He rests in His love for us?