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# THE LOOKOUT

**AUGUST 2023**

## Unit: Minor Prophets (Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk)

### Theme: Justice Will Come

**Overview:** People cry out for justice when justice has been violated. Perhaps that indicates we all have an innate sense of fairness, honesty, lawfulness, and integrity built into us by our Creator. We seem to know that no one gets away with behaving unjustly forever and that only a fair and impartial judge can judge correctly. We all want justice—until it is imposed upon us. Then we want to avoid justice at all costs. The pre-exilic, seventh-century prophets Nahum, Zephaniah, and Habakkuk will help enlighten us that God will someday right all wrongs—even wrongs we have committed against him.

## HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.

Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery**.

Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

WEEK OF AUGUST 20, 2023

**LESSON AIM:** **Be wary of the corruption of the world and turn to Jesus as a means to escape it.**

**UNIT:** Minor Prophets (Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk)

**THEME:** Justice Will Come

**LESSON TEXT:** Zephaniah 2:1-15

**SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT:** Zephaniah 1; 2 Peter 1:2-9

## JUSTICE DISPENSED

BY MARK SCOTT

The world is on a collision course with the God of justice. If God did not punish sin, he would be untrue to his word and his nature (Romans 3:26). God is just; he cannot be unjust. But Jesus saves us from that collision. He is the ultimate rescuer. Through Jesus we escape the corruption (judgment?) in the world (2 Peter 1:4). But in the prophet Zephaniah's era, God's remnant had yet to deliver Jesus the Savior to the world.

Zephaniah's name means either "Yahweh hides" or "Yahweh is treasured." He might have been from the royal line, as Zephaniah 1:1 connected him with the kings of Judah. In fact, he is the only prophet whose genealogy goes back four generations. He prophesied shortly after good King Josiah's reforms, when Judah's faith was already turning to seed (609–604 BC). His major theme seemed to be, "Justice will be dispensed when the Day of the Lord comes."

**Justice Dispensed to Judah***Zephaniah 2:1-3*

The judgment theme of Zephaniah 1 continued into chapter 2. The prophet summoned the people of God to huddle up (*gather yourselves together*). In a world of shame and honor, Zephaniah called them a *shameful nation*. God wanted them to repent before the *decree* (statute or ordinance) took place; this probably referred to the day of the coming judgment on the nation.

This day would be terrible because it would give display to the *anger* (snorted nostrils) of the Lord. It would pass quickly *like windblown chaff*, but it would be severe. God's people would be wise to *humble* themselves (become lowly) before the Lord. If they would embrace the Lord's *commands* (*mispat*, i.e., justice), *seek righteousness* (standards), and *seek humility* then they would be *sheltered* (hidden or concealed—like the meaning of Zephaniah's name) on the *day of the Lord's anger*. Jesus is the only real "yom kippur" (day of atonement). He is the one who "covers" us.

**Justice Dispensed to the Neighbors***Zephaniah 2:4-15*

God's people had been placed amid some corrupt neighbors. God intended that Israel would be a light to the nations (Isaiah 49:6). They failed in that mission, for the most part. Instead of Israel influencing the nations,

the nations influenced Israel. So, the prophet also had to pronounce judgment on the corrupt nations that surrounded Israel. In announcing these judgments, Zephaniah moved from west to east and then from south to north.

**Philistia (west):** The Philistines were basically "sea people" (most likely from Crete) who had settled on the western edge of the land of Israel. They occupied five major cities on the west coast—four of which are mentioned in the text—Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, and Ekron. Gath is the only city not mentioned (1 Samuel 6:17). God predicted a time when the cities would be left *abandoned* and *in ruins*. In the end, the land would be given over to God's *remnant* (residue or remainder), and God would *restore their fortunes*.

**Moab and Ammon (east):** Moab and Ammon were among Israel's closest neighbors. But they failed to care for Israel when Israel was making its march toward the Holy Land. In fact, they opposed Israel. The Moabites, remember, started from an incestuous relationship (Genesis 19:30-38). These people *insulted* (reviled) Israel and *made threats* against them. God promised that Moab and Ammon would become like the ancient cities of Sodom and Gomorrah—i.e., weeds, salt pits, and a *wasteland*. God's people would be allowed to take advantage of Moab and Ammon by plundering them, inheriting their land, and destroying their idols.

**Cush (south):** The *Cushites* (descendants of Cush—Genesis 10:6 and 1 Chronicles 1:8) lived south in the Upper Nile. That area is now southern Egypt and Sudan. The brief word of judgment to them is that they would be slain by the sword.

**Assyria (north):** Assyria had long since conquered the northern tribes of Israel (722 BC), and their power was shifting to Babylon, but that nation also was judged. The Assyrians had been especially cruel in their deportation of the 10 northern tribes and in their occupation of the land of Israel. So, God decided to *stretch out his hand* (a metaphoric way to speak of his powerful judgment) against Assyria and Nineveh. The land would shrivel, the desert animals would inhabit the buildings, and the cities would be exposed.

These are not pretty pictures. The only way to hide from the coming Day of the Lord was to be "hidden" in Jesus. ■

## APPLICATION

### THE CRUMBLING HOUSE

BY DAVID FAUST

*That must have been a beautiful house when it was first built, I thought. While away from home on a speaking trip, I left my hotel room for a morning walk, and that's when I noticed the crumbling house.*

Perhaps about 75 years old, the three-story structure sat atop a grassy hill. Its unique architectural design featured covered porches and decorative windows, and its roof included elegant gables and a turret-like tower with a circular top.

Sadly, though, the house had fallen into disrepair. It looked abandoned, as if no one had lived in it for years. Some of its fancy windows were broken. The yard was littered with fallen tree limbs and an odd assortment of random vehicles and other junk. A red pickup truck sat unused in the driveway and two old cars were parked helter-skelter in the yard with their tires sunk into the ground. The front lawn featured a green above-ground gas tank, a yellow hydraulic lift, and a weather-beaten pontoon boat. A rusty metal wagon wheel leaned against the front porch.

I wondered, *What made a home that once looked classy and inviting become so ugly and empty?*

#### Your Life Is Like a House

Jesus told a story about a wise man who built his house on a rock while a foolish man built on sand (Matthew 7:24-27). Like houses, our lives need to be wisely constructed and carefully maintained. To illustrate the cost of discipleship, the Lord explained that before starting a building project, you should make sure you have enough money to finish it (Luke 14:28-30). Paul and Peter compared the church to a house or temple where Christ is the foundation and believers serve as the building blocks (1 Corinthians 3:9-17; Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:4-8).

It's sad when a beautiful house falls into disrepair, but it's worse to see a family, neighborhood, church, or

nation crumble from neglect. Jesus warned that "every city or household divided against itself will not stand" (Matthew 12:25). The landscape of history is littered with fallen leaders and the rusty remnants of once-powerful governments.

#### Without Upkeep, There Will Be a Downfall

The Philistines were formidable foes of the Jews, but the prophet Zephaniah foresaw what was coming. Eventually the major cities of Philistia would be "abandoned" and "left in ruins" (Zephaniah 2:4). In its heyday, Assyria was a dominant military and economic force, but eventually onlookers would lament, "What a ruin she has become, a lair for wild beasts!" (2:15).

Zephaniah didn't want the same thing to happen to God's covenant people. He warned them, "Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord's anger" (Zephaniah 2:3).

Organizations and relationships need regular maintenance and upkeep. It's not enough to have a glamorous and expensive wedding; a husband and wife must work steadfastly to keep their marriage strong. Seasons of prosperity shouldn't be taken for granted. The lasting health of a business, church, or nation requires constant vigilance.

"Unless the Lord builds the house," the psalmist reminds us, "the builders labor in vain" (Psalm 127:1). If there is no upkeep, there will be a downfall. And without God's blessing, even a beautiful building eventually will crumble to the ground.

**Personal Challenge:** What relationship in your family, neighborhood, or church needs you to do some "maintenance" or repair work right now? **L**

## DISCOVERY

BY MICHAEL C. MACK

1. How specifically have you been a herald (a messenger or one who proclaims good news) to the people around you this week?
2. Do you think God should punish people who disobey him and don't believe in him? Why or why not?

Ask two people to read aloud **Zephaniah 2:1-15** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passage.

3. Compare and contrast God's message to the people of Judah (vv. 1-3) with his message to the other nations (Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Cush, and Assyria).
  - How is God's justice applied to both?
  - How does God call them to respond (if at all)?
4. God called his people to seek the Lord, righteousness, and humility (v. 3). How can these actions help bring someone to repentance and into a right relationship with God?
5. When God judged and punished the nations, how would the remnant of his people (Judah) benefit?
6. What do you learn about God as judge from this passage? (*Also see Deuteronomy 32:35; Romans 12:19; Hebrews 10:30.*)
7. What do you learn about humanity? (*See especially v. 11; cf. Romans 14:11; Philippians 2:10-11; Revelation 15:4.*)
8. These nations were on all sides of Judah. God had told his people he would "make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6; also see Matthew 28:8). God wanted his people to influence the nations (peoples) around them, but often, other nations influenced God's people toward idolatry, sin, and shamefulness. How do you see people today conforming to the pattern of this world rather than God's ways and standards?
  - What will you change (repent of) so you can "let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16)?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."
10. What do you need from God this week to either (a) allow God to judge and avenge or (b) be an influencer rather than the person being influenced with the people around you?

**For Next Week:** Read and reflect on **Zephaniah 3:9-20**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. ■