1717 BIBLE STUDIES

"Your Word Is Truth" (John 17:17)

OVERVIEW

Study: Minor Prophets (Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk)

Theme: Justice Will Come

Overview: This study explores three short but powerful prophetic books—Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah—that proclaim God's justice. Students will take heart that God has the power and the will to correct injustice, rest assured that the wicked do not truly escape, turn to Jesus to escape the corruption of the world, and rejoice that the Lord has taken away the punishment we justly deserve.

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.

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INTRODUCTION

Authors

Each book bears the name of its prophet. Nahum, whose name means "comfort," was from the village of Elkosh (Nahum 1:1). Habakkuk is identified simply as "the prophet" (Habakkuk 1:1). Zephaniah, whose name means "Yahweh hides" or "Yahweh is treasured," traces his genealogy back four generations to King Hezekiah (Zephaniah 1:1).

Audience

All three prophets spoke to the people of Judah. Nahum's oracle concerned Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, but it brought comfort to God's oppressed people. Habakkuk recorded his own dialogue with God about Judah's sin and Babylon's coming invasion. Zephaniah warned Judah and the surrounding nations of the coming Day of the Lord.

Date

These prophets ministered in the seventh century BC, in the final decades before Babylon destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC. Nahum prophesied between 663 and 612 BC, when Nineveh fell. Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of King Josiah (Zephaniah 1:1), and Habakkuk was a contemporary of Jeremiah.

Setting

Assyria had conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC and was notorious for its cruelty, but its power was shifting to Babylon. In Judah, idolatry, immorality, greed, and violence remained widespread despite Josiah's reforms. God would use Babylon to discipline his people, yet he would also judge the nations for their wickedness.

Theme

"The Lord will not leave the guilty unpunished" (Nahum 1:3). God is holy and just, and his justice will come—on Nineveh, on Babylon, on Judah, and on the nations. Yet the God who judges is also a refuge for those who trust in him (Nahum 1:7), the righteous will live by faith (Habakkuk 2:4), and the Lord "will rejoice over you with singing" (Zephaniah 3:17).

Why Study These Prophets?

The Minor Prophets are short in length but large in significance. These books correct a tame view of God by revealing his holiness, justice, and righteous wrath against sin, while pointing to the good news of salvation. They teach believers to trust God's timing when injustice seems to go unchecked, to resist the corruption of the world, and to rejoice in the God who justifies.

STUDY CONTENT

WEEK 1:	Nahum 1:1-15
WEEK 2:	Habakkuk 1:12-17; 2:1-20
WEEK 3:	Zephaniah 2:1-15
WEEK 4:	Zephaniah 3:9-20

WEEK ONE

LESSON AIM: **God has the power and the will to correct injustice, so take heart.**

STUDY: Minor Prophets (Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk)

THEME: Justice Will Come

LESSON TEXT: Nahum 1:1-15

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10; Psalm 89:5-18

POWER FOR JUSTICE

BY MARK SCOTT

Business, school, hospital, and government leaders all face a common challenge: enforcing the rules they have made. Making a rule and enforcing it are not the same. And it's hard to bring justice without the power to enforce rules. God does not have that problem. He can make the rules and has the power to enforce those rules.

Jonah prophesied around 760 BC for the people of Nineveh to repent. They repented. The city was spared from the justice of God for 100 years. But later Nahum came along (663–612 BC) and had to prophesy against Nineveh again. The people had become notorious for their brutality. We know less about Nahum than we do about Jonah. We know his prophecy concerned Nineveh, and that he had a vision concerning it, and that Nahum was from a village named Elkosh (v. 1). (Jerome the historian said Elkosh was in Galilee, but that is disputed.)

Great Patience/Great Power

Nahum 1:2-3a

Patience is one of God's greatest qualities. He is *slow to anger* (literally "longwinged"). But no one should think his patience is inexhaustible. His patience is in place to help us repent (Romans 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). But God's patience is matched by his *great power* (a word similar to "patience" here; it means "the ability to endure"). The Hebrews writer reminded us that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:31).

God is *jealous* (in fact, Exodus 34:14 says Jealous is one of God's names). He is an *avenging* God—a concept mentioned three times in three verses. God is filled with *wrath* for his foes and enemies. He will not leave the guilty unpunished (i.e., he will not "clear" the guilty).

His Way/His Creation

Nahum 1:3b-6

To illustrate God's power in justice, Nahum's vision consisted of aspects of creation (nature). The point is this: If God has his way with creation, then he also has the power to have his way with the people of Nineveh in justice. Those parts of creation are whirlwinds, storms and clouds, water, mountains, flowers, land, fire, and rocks.

God can pack a punch in a *whirlwind* (tempest) and *storm*. Metaphorically, *clouds are the dust of his feet*. He can dry up bodies of water (Exodus 14:21; Joshua 4:21-24). *Bashan* and *Carmel* are mountains east and west of Galilee; in other words, his power knows no width. The power of God is so great that the *blossoms of Lebanon fade* (this would be to the north). Larger mountains and smaller hills melt away while land masses shake. The question is rightly asked, "Who can withstand his indignation?" His power is like *fire*, and *rocks* are shattered before him.

Wicked Plans/Fulfilled Vows

Nahum 1:8-12a, 14

This section underlines the brutal wickedness of Nineveh. The people *plot against the Lord*—this is mentioned twice in this section. The people of Nineveh devise *wicked* (worthless) plans. They have many *allies*, but they will be destroyed. The Ninevites were idolatrous in worshipping *images* in the temple of their gods.

Therefore, God will fulfill his vow to bring them to justice with his power. God will *make an end* of them and pursue his foes into the realm of darkness. God will not have to act twice (he will not come a second time). They will become *entangled among thorns* (confused), become *drunk from their wine*, and be *consumed like dry stubble*. They will not be able to *perpetuate* their name (i.e., they would cease to exist; in fact, neither Xenophon the historian nor Alexander the Great knew where Nineveh was only two centuries after it fell). God would prepare Nineveh's grave because they were so *vile* (cursed).

Noble Character/Peaceful Promise

Nahum 1:7, 12b-13, 15

The one who can enforce the rules, however, can also bring peace to people suffering under the oppressors. The Lord is *good*. In fact, he is a *refuge* (stronghold) for those who trust in him, which would be the surviving remnant of Judah. He *cares* for those who trust in him. God punished Judah, but now he would punish Nineveh for their treatment of God's people.

God challenged his people to look to the mountains for *good news* (another way of saying, look for the messengers coming back from the battle—cf. Isaiah 52:7; Romans 10:15). This news would break forth in *peace*. This would allow Judah to celebrate their faith in their typical *festivals*. God has the power to enforce his justice, but he also has the power to proclaim peace.

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GOD'S HOLINESS AND JUSTICE ARE MAJOR ISSUES

BY DAVID FAUST

The last 12 books of the Old Testament are known as the Minor Prophets, which might imply these books are somehow inferior. Who wants to play baseball in the Minor Leagues if you could play in the Majors? What actor wants a minor role in a movie if he could be a star?

We call these books the Minor Prophets because of their small size, not because they are unimportant. All 12 books, when combined, equal less reading material than the book of Jeremiah. The ancient Hebrews lumped them all together as one large book, though they were written by 12 different authors.

Big Lessons from Little Books

The Minor Prophets are short in length but large in significance. Here are four benefits of reading these books:

1. They help us appreciate the contributions of lesser-known servants. Characters like Nahum, Zephaniah, and Haggai aren't well-known like Moses and Jeremiah, but in God's eyes no one is insignificant. Small contributions matter.

2. They remind us to respect the gift of conciseness. Don't you appreciate writers and speakers who express themselves effectively in a few words?

3. They show us how to exercise the art of confrontation. The Minor Prophets pull no punches. They speak the truth in love while boldly confronting sins like injustice, hypocrisy, complacency, materialism, idolatry, and corrupt leadership.

4. They remind us to trust God with the future. The Minor Prophets reveal that no matter how bad things become, there is still hope when we turn to the Lord.

God's Less Popular Attributes

Nahum's name means "compassion" or "comfort," but his prophecies were hard-hitting. He predicted God would unleash his wrath on the mighty city of Nineveh. About 150 years earlier, Jonah's preaching led to a far-reaching revival there, but when Nineveh fell back into rebellion and cruelty, Nahum didn't mince words. He said, "The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. . . . The Lord will not leave the guilty unpunished" (Nahum 1:2-3).

We hear a lot of talk about justice today, but seldom does anyone mention that justice is rooted in the nature of God. And we certainly don't hear much about God's wrath—his righteous indignation toward sin. In his book *Knowing God*, J. I. Packer wrote, "To an age which has unashamedly sold itself to the gods of greed, pride, sex, and self-will, the church mumbles on about God's kindness, but says virtually nothing about his judgment."

As a result, we have settled for a tame, lame, less-than-biblical concept of God. Many today view God as an easygoing Grandpa in the Sky—a jolly nonjudgmental Santa Claus. But it's not our job to tell God who he is. He tells us who he is. Scripture reveals that God doesn't ignore evil and dismissively wave off injustice.

There are things we don't enjoy thinking about, but we need to think about them anyway. Unpleasant truth is truth nonetheless. God is holy and he cannot tolerate sin. Thankfully, he is a gracious, loving Father who doesn't want to condemn the world (John 3:17), so he sent his Son to save us "from the coming wrath" (1 Thessalonians 1:10). Nahum caught a glimpse of this good news. He wrote, "Look, there on the mountains, the feet of one who brings good news, who proclaims peace!" (Nahum 1:15). And there's nothing minor about that.

Personal Challenge:

Have you ever praised God for his wrath (his righteous indignation toward evil and injustice)? Write or say a prayer and praise the Lord for being holy, just, and fair. Ask him to help you have righteous anger, not the sinful kind, and to show mercy toward others, leaving vengeance in the capable hands of God.

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Over the past week, with whom did you share your (and God's) bad news/good news story?

2. How do you feel about people who pull no punches (that is, speak directly to an issue)?

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

3. What emotions does this passage evoke in you? (Do you sense different emotions in different sections?)

4. What do you learn about God from this passage? (What do you learn about his power? About his grace?)
   - What do you learn about yourself?

5. If God has the kind of power and sovereignty described in this passage—and he does!—what does that imply for us humans? (How then should we act toward God?)
   - What encouragement do you take from this passage?

6. You are describing God's nature to someone who does not know him, does not know him well, or has some distorted image of him. How would you use the teachings from this passage to give them an accurate portrayal of God (including his great power and his patience, his justice and his mercy, his righteous condemnation and his grace)?
   - Who in your circles needs a more accurate (biblical) view of God (you don't need to use their name if you don't want to), and how will you approach a conversation with them?

7. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

8. How can God help you this week to have righteous (not sinful) anger and show mercy toward others, leaving vengeance in the capable hands of the Lord?

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Habakkuk 1:12-17; 2:2-20**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK TWO

LESSON AIM: **Though some seem to escape justice, rest assured their wicked deeds betray them even now.**

STUDY: Minor Prophets (Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk)

THEME: Justice Will Come

LESSON TEXT: Habakkuk 1:12-17; 2:1-20

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Psalm 7:10-17; Matthew 12:18-21

WHERE IS THE JUSTICE?

BY MARK SCOTT

A silly outline for Habakkuk's oracle might look like this:

1. Hello (Habakkuk 1:1-4)?
2. No Way (1:5-11)!
3. Say What (1:12–2:1)?
4. Chill (2:2-20).
5. Whoa, Dude (3:1-19)!

Habakkuk allows us into his prayer closet. First the prophet says, "Hello! God, are you paying attention?" God replies, "No way! Yes, I am paying attention, and I am going to do something about it by using Babylon." Habakkuk says, "What? You're going to punish Judah by using a nation worse than Judah?" God says, "Chill. Babylon will get theirs." Finally, the prophet says, "Whoa, I didn't see that coming. God you are awesome!"

Habakkuk and Jeremiah were contemporaries. As such, Habakkuk was trying to get Judah ready for Babylonian captivity, which ultimately occurred in 586 BC. God's people were steeped in idolatry, immorality, greed, and violence. God revealed to Habakkuk that he was going to bring justice to Judah but that he was going to do so via the nation of Babylon. This confused Habakkuk, for he struggled with God's sense of justice.

God's Got This

Habakkuk 1:12-17

Habakkuk had a problem with the seeming inactivity of God in ignoring Judah's evil (1:1-4). He must have wondered, "Is God asleep?" But when God revealed his plan to punish Judah via the wicked nation of Babylon, Habakkuk suddenly had a problem with the activity of God (1:5-11). God had to remind the prophet that the Lord's justice was in place, and he was in total control.

Habakkuk was aware that a holy God could not look on evil or stand in the presence of sin. God is eternal and cannot tolerate wrongdoing. Habakkuk's sense of justice begged the question, "How could God use Babylon to punish Judah since Babylon was so evil?" Scripture used the word *wicked* (given to misery or mischief) to describe that nation. Babylon worshipped the fish gods. Archaeologists have found carvings, drawings, and mosaics of such. Notice the fishing vocabulary in the text (*fish*, *sea*, *sea creatures*, *hooks*, *net*, and *dragnet*). Like a net full of fish that is dumped out, Babylon was dumping out its destruction on the nations of the world. Habakkuk needed assurance that God would do something about it. But none of Babylon's wickedness had escaped the watchful eye of God—as Habakkuk 2 shows.

Babylon Will Get What For

Habakkuk 2:1-20

To help Habakkuk with his "justice dilemma," God informed the prophet of the evils of Babylon. The time eventually would come when God would punish Babylon for their wickedness. God wanted to be very clear about the revelation of Babylon's destruction. They would "get theirs." This message of judgment would be made public (*made plain on tablets*). Even a *runner* (herald) would be able to read it as he ran. Babylon would be *puffed up* with unholy desires (i.e., desires that are not upright). But God's people (*the righteous*), in contrast, will *live by his faithfulness*. This significant text later is used by Paul in Romans 1:17.

The bulk of Habakkuk 2 concerns the sins of Babylon. A careful reading of it shows that the Babylonians broke almost all the Ten Commandments. Specific sins reappear in a rhythm. For instance, stealing and materialism are mentioned in verses 6 and 9. Bloodshed (murder or violence) is mentioned in verses 5, 8, 12, and 17. Drunkenness is mentioned in verses 5, 15, and 16. Idolatry is mentioned in verses 18 and 19 and implied in other verses. There are at least five "woes" to Babylon and their leaders (in vv. 6, 9, 12, 15, and 19). Things do not look good for them.

God's retribution against Babylon will set the record straight in terms of justice. The *creditors* (the people who charge interest) will rise up against Babylon. They will make them *tremble* (quiver or quake). They will become *prey* for other nations. Said more bluntly, "Because you have plundered many nations, the people who are left will plunder you." The violence Babylon inflicted upon others will be returned in kind (v. 17). Babylon's worthless idols cannot save them, for those idols cannot speak, come to life, or give guidance.

In contrast to Babylon's punishment, God's people must live by faith (v. 4), fill the earth with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord (v. 14), and have a respectful silence before the Lord in his temple (v. 20). God responded to Habakkuk's complaints about justice. God's answers differed from what Habakkuk expected. Habakkuk's perspective of justice had to change. But in the end, he could say, "Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior" (Habakkuk 3:18).

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WOULD EVERYONE PLEASE BE QUIET?

BY DAVID FAUST

Composer Wolfgang Mozart once observed, "The music is not in the notes, but in the silence between." The problem is, I'm not good at being silent. What about you?

The Lord says, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10), not "Be loud and pretend that you are God."

In John's vision of God's dwelling place, "there was silence in heaven for about half an hour" (Revelation 8:1), but here on earth we're seldom silent for five minutes—even in church. Does your congregation spend much time worshipping together in silence? Are there times in your services for quiet prayers that say, "Father, we love you because . . ."?

Do you build quietness into your daily schedule? The Bible says, "Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life" (1 Thessalonians 4:11), but how can we do that in hectic times when so much is going on? Does the Lord really expect us to shut off our TVs and laptops, power down our cell phones, quit talking so much, and be still in his presence? Yes, I believe he does.

Questions Abound

The prophet Habakkuk asked God a good question: "How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?" (Habakkuk 1:2). Has your patience ever worn thin and you asked the Lord, *When will this problem finally be resolved? How long will it take before you respond to my prayers?*

In his frank dialogue with the Almighty, Habakkuk had more complaints to express. "Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?" (v. 3). Maybe you have asked questions like those, too. *Lord, why is there so much injustice in the world? Why don't you intervene and fix everything?*

Sometimes the answers don't come until we stop talking and listen.

Silence Is Golden

According to Mark Twain, "The right word may be effective, but no word was ever as effective as a rightly timed pause." Habakkuk 2:20 is a rightly timed pause. In the middle of his questions and complaints, Habakkuk paused and wrote, "The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him."

When the Lord spoke, his answers weren't what the Jewish people wanted to hear. God's justice would be satisfied, but the divine plan included allowing the Babylonians to attack Jerusalem and take the Jews into exile. God's revealed message "will not prove false" (Habakkuk 2:3), but while awaiting its fulfillment, his people must live by faith (v. 4).

It's difficult to hear God's voice when our lives are noisy and cluttered. "In quietness and trust is your strength" (Isaiah 30:15). When we come before the Lord in hushed reverence, we discover God is faithful even when life is unfair, and he can be trusted even when nothing seems to be going right.

After Habakkuk got his questions off his chest, he wrote, "Though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior" (Habakkuk 3:17-18). We can offer that kind of prayer, too, if we quiet down enough to recognize that the greatest treasure isn't money in the bank or food on the table, but the joy of the Lord in our hearts.

Personal Challenge:

This week, set aside an hour to be silent and listen to the Lord.

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Over the past week, did you have any conversations with someone who does not know God, does not know him well, or has some distorted image of him? If so, how did you use God's Word to give them an accurate portrayal of God?

2. When have you had to wait on God for an answer?

Ask two people to read aloud **Habakkuk 1:12-17; 2:1-20** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passage.

3. With what questions was Habakkuk wrestling?
   - In your own words, how did God answer him?

4. As you look at this passage as a whole, how do you see God's ultimate control of the circumstances?

5. God had appointed Babylon to punish Judah for their evil. Why was that a problem for Habakkuk?
   - How did Habakkuk view his role and responsibility in God's plan?
   - How was his relationship with God intertwined in that?

6. How is the enemy (Babylon) described?
   - How would God bring retribution on them? (See, for instance, 2:6-8, 14.)
   - Why could their idols not save them?

7. What do you learn about God's sovereignty from this passage?

8. What do you learn about yourself? (What do you learn about the need to wait patiently—and perhaps silently—for God to act?)

9. How specifically will you be a herald (a messenger or one who proclaims good news) to the people around you this week?

10. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

11. What do you need from God to be able to wait on him, trust his timing, and allow him to be in complete control of your life this week?

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Zephaniah 2:1-15**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK THREE

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

STUDY: 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.

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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?

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

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.)
   - What do you learn about humanity? (See especially v. 11; cf. Romans 14:11; Philippians 2:10-11; Revelation 15:4.)

7. 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)?

8. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

9. 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.

WEEK FOUR

LESSON AIM: **Be glad and rejoice because the Lord has taken away the punishment we justly deserve.**

STUDY: Minor Prophets (Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk)

THEME: Justice Will Come

LESSON TEXT: Zephaniah 3:9-20

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Romans 8:1-2; Psalm 28:6-9

JUSTIFIED

BY MARK SCOTT

A theological dilemma in the biblical story is this: How can God punish sin (and thereby stay true to his promise and character) and yet absolve the sinner? The answer is that he had to act on people's behalf when they could not act on their own. God himself had to become the one who is just and the justifier of those who put their faith in Jesus (Romans 3:26). The result of this salvific act was release from condemnation (Romans 8:1-2).

Were it not for God justifying people, the book of Zephaniah would be terribly negative. Without this closing section, this prophetic work would be entirely doom and gloom. The good news is that God will justify (i.e., make right) the nations as well as Israel. Because of whom God is and what he did, punishment can be removed. So, what do justified people look like?

They Look Humble

Zephaniah 3:9-13

Our lesson text starts with the word *Then* (v. 9). It is a big word. After God announces all his judgments, then he steps in to cleanse those who call on his name. He will clean up the profane speech of the nations so they might call out to God to save them. They will be united in this (*serve shoulder to shoulder*). As far away as the rivers of Cush (the upper Nile in the land of Sudan and Ethiopia), people will come to find God.

God will remove the *boasters* (those who swell with self-importance) and the *haughty* (exalted or high ones). Jerusalem is the *holy hill* on which this will take place. Indeed, the cross is a death blow to pride (1 Corinthians 1:22-25). In place of the formerly proud, God will leave the *meek and humble* (poor and needy). These people, having experienced justification, will have clean speech (since what comes out of our mouths reveals who we really are) and peace and safety (*eat and lie down and no one will make them afraid*).

They Look Glad

Zephaniah 3:14-17

Justified people have a song in their hearts and a skip in their steps. The prophet challenges the people to *sing* and *rejoice* (shout for joy). They sing because God will take away their *punishment* (i.e., *mispat*, the judgments against them). And he also will turn back their enemy. Zephaniah foresees a time when Assyria and Babylon will no longer bother Israel.

Fear will be cast aside. No longer will hands *hang limp* (a sign of defeat and despair). God will save. God will act as a *Mighty Warrior* (valiant or strong). These will be things to sing about. But Israel will not be the only one singing. God himself will sing. Verse 17 puts it beautifully: "[God] will take great delight in you." By virtue of his justification, God will choose to no longer rebuke them. And perhaps best of all, he will rejoice over them with singing. Like a mother singing sweet lullabies over her child, so the Lord will sing over his justified people. (Can you hear it? "He has made me glad; he has made me glad; I will rejoice because he has made me glad.")

They Look Hopeful

Zephaniah 3:18-20

Zephaniah looks toward the future when Israel will go *home*. Many evangelical scholars believe this refers to literal Israel returning to their homeland in the special millennial reign of Jesus from Jerusalem. Other scholars believe its primary reference is to the return of the exiles from Assyrian and Babylonian captivity before the initial coming of Christ. Still others spiritualize the text and suggest that *home* simply means being forgiven.

To whichever one it refers, we are told that God will take away any mourning concerning the loss of the Jewish festivals. Those festivals were not just celebrations of the people's faith but also the means of being justified before a holy God. If their festivals are taken away, it must mean there is a new means of justification (Romans 3:21-26; the whole book of Hebrews). During this special time, after the Messiah's coming, God will *rescue the lame* and *gather the exiles*. He will give them *praise and honor*, he will *gather* them together, and he will bring them *home*.

God's people, Jews and Gentiles, will then become the envy of the whole earth. God will *restore their fortunes* (literally from their captivity). For the Jew, "going home" means to the land of Israel. For the Gentile, it means to the church (i.e., being included in the chosen people of God). For the Christian, it means going home to God to the land where there is no more night (Hebrews 4:9-10; Revelation 22:5).

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THE BEST SINGING VOICE OF ALL

BY DAVID FAUST

Earlier this year, *Rolling Stone* published a list of the 200 greatest singers of all time. Familiar names like Whitney Houston, Frank Sinatra, Adele, Barbara Streisand, Dolly Parton, and Johnny Cash made the list, but controversy arose because the selection team omitted great singers like Celine Dion and Judy Garland while including pop stars like Taylor Swift and Billie Eilish. The golden-voiced tenor Andrea Bocelli didn't make the list, but Bob Dylan—with his eccentric singing style—came in at No. 15.

Atop the list at No. 1 was Aretha Franklin, who described her mission as a singer like this: "Me with my hand outstretched, hoping someone will take it."

Connecting With Our Hearts

Music educates and entertains. It stirs our emotions, shapes our moods, and communicates ideas. Music impacts our everyday lives. We listen to it while driving in our cars, shopping in stores, or relaxing at home. It enhances movies, starts and ends TV shows, and fires up crowds at sporting events. Music makes weddings more festive, parties more fun, and funerals more poignant. It can make us think, laugh, cry, and sing along.

Music stamps itself in our memories. Do you remember songs that were popular when you were in high school? Senior adults tap their toes to tunes recorded in the 1940s and '50s. The raucous 1960s spawned both patriotic songs that encouraged love for country and anti-war ballads and rock music that expressed bitter frustrations with the government.

Music touches something deep in our souls. It's not surprising that throughout history, worshippers have used "psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit" to express our love for God (Colossians 3:16).

Beautiful Voices

Some of the world's greatest singers never receive any public acclaim. They don't appear on *American Idol* or *The Voice*, or perform in recording studios, theaters, and cathedrals. You may have heard their beautiful voices, though. A young mom whispers the tune of "Jesus Loves Me" as her baby falls asleep in her arms. A teenager with fresh faith and a bright future stands and praises God with all his heart at a CIY conference. An aging woman whose mind is fogged by dementia smiles and nods while her husband sings her a hymn.

Faithful saints like these have praised God with music down through the ages—in good times and bad. David wrote psalms and played the harp. Jesus sang with his disciples at the Last Supper (Matthew 26:30). Paul and Silas sang in prison (Acts 16:25).

When God created the universe, "the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy" (Job 38:7). The prophets predicted a majestic concert in the messianic age with nature itself serving as the worship choir. "The mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands" (Isaiah 55:12). And there will be new songs to sing in heaven (Revelation 5:9).

The Minor Prophets feature bold, in-your-face calls to repentance, but they also offer hope. Zephaniah says, "The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing" (Zephaniah 3:17).

The best singing voice of all belongs to the God of grace.

Personal Challenge:

What is your favorite song of praise? Sing it to the Lord right now!

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Since the last time we met, how have you been an influencer for God rather than being influenced away from God by others around you?

2. When have you been so glad and jubilant that you celebrated by shouting out loud and maybe even singing?

Ask two people to read aloud **Zephaniah 3:9-20** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passage.

3. What were some of the things God promised to do for his people? (Look for the phrases, "I will" when God was speaking and "he will" when others were speaking.)
    - How did Zephaniah encourage the people to respond to God for what he had done for them?

4. What descriptions of God do you see in this passage? What do you learn about him from that?

5. What do forgiven, justified, restored people look like, and how do they live?

6. Try to imagine God rejoicing over you—yes you!—with singing.
    - What do you imagine that looks and sounds like?
    - How does it make you feel?
    - What do you do in response?

7. Whom will you tell about your God who saves, loves you, and takes great delight in you? How can you retell what you've learned from this passage to them?

8. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

9. Look back over this passage again at all the "I will" promises from God (or "he will" statements from others). Pick just one that you want to ask God to do in your life. (Allow a few minutes for everyone to pick their statement.) What do you want to ask God for?

For Next Week: This week's lesson brings this unit of study to a conclusion. Look for additional "1717: Your Word Is Truth" studies, for use with your Sunday School classes, small groups, or personal studies, at ChristianStandard.com.