

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 5, 2021
Zephaniah 3:1-8 (Foolish Rebellion)
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Intro

The LORD has indicted Judah for her sin. The day of the LORD is near. God will send Babylon as his instrument to punish unfaithful Judah. This near day of the LORD foreshadows a distant day of the LORD. A day when the rebellious nations will be punished and God will rescue the faithful remnant within Judah. There will come a day when Judah will plunder the nations and lie down in peace at night. The remnant's salvation comes through judgment. This morning Zephaniah's attention returns to rebellious Judah.

There's something we have in common with Judah. It's the problem of sin. This morning we look to Zephaniah to uncover our deepest problems. And to discover a path forward.

READ PASSAGE

PRAY

Body

Point 1: Faith and fear overcome our tendency to refuse correction and pursue sin (3:1-4, 7)

Understanding sin

Sin is lawlessness, breaking God's law. Violating God's commands. Doing what's forbidden. Like lying. Sin also occurs whenever we fail to carry out God's commands. Like failure to love our neighbor or honor our parents.

But sin goes beyond what we do. Sin is inside us. We sin because we have a sin nature. We aren't a blank slate that could go one way or the other. As if within mankind there's an equal propensity to do good as there is to do evil. No, our hearts are bent towards sin. We sin because we want to.

If we've been born again, we're no longer slaves to sin. The bent has been broken. While we still desire to sin, new desires exist because Christ dwells in us. I might desire to have my own way, but I also want to obey God. Speaking about desires, I'm saying sin occurs at the heart level. Sin isn't just outward actions like physical violence. Sin includes hatred, bitterness, selfish anger. Sin includes our thoughts, our words, our deeds. Corruption inside us produces external behavior. An outburst of anger reveals something within me.

Judah's rebellion illustrates the nature of sin:

Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled, the oppressing city! – 3:1

Woe = lament, mourn because of your sin and the distress it causes. Judah is rebellious, defiled, and oppresses its people. Rebellious expresses internal sin. Internal rebellion has external effects: defilement and oppression.

Defilement = a violation of moral or ceremonial law. Used elsewhere (Isa 59:3) for bloodshed or sin in general (Isa 59:3). Specifically here:

her priests profane what is holy; they do violence to the law. – 3:4

and I will cut off from this place the remnant of Baal and the name of the idolatrous priests along with the priests, ⁵ those who bow down on the roofs to the host of the heavens, those who bow down and swear to the LORD and yet swear by Milcom, – 1:4-5

The priests profaned what is holy by disobeying God's laws (given to Moses) on ceremonial sacrifices. They were guilty of syncretism = combining the Jewish faith with incompatible belief and practice. They worshipped the LORD along with pagan idols.

Oppression = violating people's rights. For example, mistreating and taking advantage of the widow, orphan, poor, and sojourner/foreigner. When God's law had built-in protections for these people. Taking advantage of those with no ability to protect themselves. Using people for one's own ends instead of caring for them. Failure to love your neighbor as yourself. Those in leadership were likened to dangerous animals that devoured their prey:

Her officials within her are roaring lions; her judges are evening wolves that leave nothing till the morning. – 3:3

Those who set policy (officials) and those who judged application of policy (judges) devoured the people under their care. The LORD cares about social justice! However, before going along with everything called "social justice," we need to let God's word determine for us what is just and right.

Why the rebellion? Why the defilement and oppression? 3:2 provides an answer:

She listens to no voice; she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the LORD; she does not draw near to her God. – 3:2

Rebellion ("listens to no voice...accepts no correction") is connected with not trusting in the LORD and not drawing near to God. In other words, **rebellion exists because trust doesn't**. Judah ("her God") doesn't draw near (e.g., prayer for wisdom or courage or perseverance, confess sin, seek God's word for guidance) because she doesn't trust God.

Likewise, 3:7 indicates that fearing God prevents rebellion and eagerness for corrupt deeds:

I said, 'Surely you will fear me; you will accept correction. – 3:7

Fearing God is connected with accepting correction. **Resisting correction exists because fearing God doesn't**.

Surely a wise person familiar with God's judgments on the nations would fear God. Judah didn't. The result?

But all the more they were eager to make all their deeds corrupt. – 3:7

Lacking a fear of God, the people were eager to sin. No fear = eager to sin.

In short, I'm saying that trusting God and fearing God is critical to overcoming sin. When trust and fear are absent, sin is desired.

Application

Let's take this to the level of the Christian's battle with sin. Having the Spirit, we are a people who wrestle with a mixture of good and bad desires.

I've said, **Man's nature is to refuse correction and pursue sin.** And I've argued that rebellion, and sin that arises from rebellion, stems from a lack of trust and a lack of fear. So, our struggle with sin can be reduced to a lack of trust and a lack of fear. Because sin remains in us, there remains a bent toward rebellion and autonomy. A bent towards rejecting God and desiring what God doesn't will, even when the Spirit's moving on us to live pleasing to God. The internal battle is a battle for faith and fear.

Faith = trusting God. Trusting that he's good so his ways are good. Trusting that he's honest and dependable so we can trust his promises. Trusting that he's wise so his ways are best. In every case!

Fear

If we trust God's promises we don't fear rejection. John Frame puts it like this: "If you believe in Jesus, you cannot doubt that his promises are true. And if you believe in him, you cannot doubt that those promises apply to you, because they apply to everyone who believes." If we believe Jesus' promise of eternal life, we're not afraid of the day of the LORD. We trust Jesus died for our sins (past, present, and future). We believe Jesus purchased our forgiveness. We believe we're declared righteous, not guilty because Jesus suffered as our substitute.

But Philippians 2:13 commands us to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." Trembling isn't mere respect. It's a word used in Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible to depict the fear the nations had when Israel came to town to take the promised land. So what is it that we fear?

Fear of pride. Fear of hardening our hearts. Fear of the consequences of sin in this life (e.g., adultery). Fear of God's discipline (e.g., David's discipline for sin with Bathsheba was the death of their child). Fear of running from God (e.g., Jonah). Fear of dishonoring God with my conduct. Fear of hindering the church's witness in the community. But not fear of God's rejection.

Fearing God = respect and honor that brings peace and frees us from fear of circumstances, enemies, death, and everything else.

Fear is a function of trust. We only fear if we trust. We trust what God says about himself and how he deals with us. We trust what God says about sin. The damage it brings and how wicked it is. Fearing God, we don't treat sin casually.

It's through **faith and fear** that we **overcome our tendency to refuse correction and pursue sin.**

Illustrations

Words. Whether in the church or in personal relationships, words can create division and conflict. Someone says something contrary to my convictions or theological understanding. How do I respond? I might be tempted to rashly say what I really think. In faith I remember that “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” I fear the possibility of creating division. I fear hardening my heart. I fear God’s discipline.

That’s faith that fears pursuing sin.

In regards to correction. A child receives correction for laziness. Are there excuses? Comparison with the laziest kid they know? Anger? Intentional, rebellious laziness? Or will they respond positively with gratitude and become more diligent? Faith would say God’s word is true. And what it says about laziness is true. That laziness is detrimental to my good. Fear is afraid of developing lazy habits and winding up a sluggard. Fear of not honoring God. Fear of neglecting duty God has for us.

As a parent reading, “*Fathers do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged*” (Col 3:21). Faith says obedience is always beneficial. God’s ways lead to a healthy relationships and a healthy home. Fear says I can ruin my children. Fear ponders the consequences years of provoking will create.

You get the point. Faith and fear are how we come to faith. And they’re how we live the Christian life. As we trust God and fear him we’ll **overcome our tendency to refuse correction and pursue sin**. Points two and three support the first point.

Point 2: God never fails to do what is right (3:5)

Explanation

The LORD within her is righteous; he does no injustice; every morning he shows forth his justice; each dawn he does not fail; but the unjust knows no shame. – 3:5

God loves what is good and hates sin. He keeps his word and doesn’t commit fraud. He’s faithful to his people. He punishes sin. God does these things because of who he is. God desires these things because of who he is. Everything God does is in accord with his perfectly righteous and just being. So what he decides is always just. God never fails to act justly because he doesn’t change.

On the other hand, unjust man is shameless. Because he doesn’t trust and fear God. The fruit of shameless living is oppression. Trampling on others for personal gain. Committing acts of violence and fraud (1:9). Failure to love one’s neighbor.

Because of what he is, enslaved to sin, man often desires what is unjust and so acts unjustly. Because of what he is, holy and untainted by sin, God desires what is just and always acts righteously.

Application

We trust God because of who he is. Perfect desires, perfect decisions, perfect actions, perfect consistency. That's why we trust him.

God doesn't abuse us, steal from us, or use us for personal gain. No, he gave his Son for our benefit. Jesus, in dying for our sins, revealed the self-giving Trinity. We trust a God who gives, keeps his word, is merciful, remains committed to us when we sin, and transforms our hearts so that more and more we desire what he desires.

Point 3: The day of the LORD makes rebellion foolish (3:6-8)

Explanation

There's the near day of the LORD:

I said, 'Surely you will fear me; you will accept correction. Then your dwelling would not be cut off according to all that I have appointed against you.' But all the more they were eager to make all their deeds corrupt. – 3:7

Had Judah repented Babylon wouldn't be coming. Given what Israel had seen God do the nations (3:6), Judah should have repented. But faith and fear were absent, so Judah was eager to sin.

Sin is senseless. It's of no profit for a child to be lazy. It's of no profit for a father to provoke his children. But logic isn't enough. We need a new heart with new desires. We need faith and fear.

One theological issue I have to point out. In the 1980's and 1990's there arose a movement called Open Theism that asserted God's knowledge is dynamic and not fixed = parts of the future are unknown to God. They use 3:7 as a proof text. They would say, here's a clear example where God thought something would happen and it didn't.

My brief response is that God did know in advance Judah wouldn't repent. That's why, in Deuteronomy 4 and 28, God told Israel about how they would be scattered to foreign nations, and this would bring about their repentance (Deut 4:25-31; 28:45-57, 64-68).

God knew what he would do. And what Judah would do. What's going on here is God's pointing out the foolishness of Judah's failure to repent, not his inability to know the future.

There's the distant and final day of the LORD:

"Therefore wait for me," declares the LORD, "for the day when I rise up to seize the prey. For my decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out upon them my indignation, all my burning anger; for in the fire of my jealousy all the earth shall be consumed. – 3:8

Therefore = in light of the near day of the LORD, wait for the distant day of the LORD when all the nations will be judged. After all, that's the day when the faithful remnant will plunder the nations and dwell securely without fear of invasion again (2:7, 9). The salvation of the faithful remnant comes through the judgment of the wicked. As those who trust and fear the LORD we wait expectantly for that day. We look forward to the end of sin, sin inside us and sin outside us.

Non-Christian

How to respond to God: fear and faith. How not to respond to God: rebellion.

Sin is both disregarding God's commands and the condition of our heart. We desire the wrong things because our heart is sinful. Rescue from our sinful condition, and the punishment our sin earns, comes through faith and fear.

In faith we trust that God is good and we are not. We trust in God's mercy not ourselves. We trust Jesus to take the punishment our sins have accrued. In fear we honor God as holy. We learn how to live pleasing to God in the strength he supplies.

Is your rebellion weighing on you? Is your defilement weighing on you? Are you feeling ashamed? God is merciful. And mercy is found in Christ alone. Given God's stance towards sin it's foolish to remain rebellious.

Conclusion

Faith and fear overcome our tendency to refuse correction and pursue sin. Trusting God and fearing him is how we do battle with sinful desires. **God never fails to do what is right.** Knowing who God is helps us to trust God. **The day of the LORD makes rebellion foolish.** Fearing God we wait expectantly for the day of the LORD.