

Text: Zephaniah 2:1-3 (Pew Bible pg.933)

Text: "When God Disciplines His People"

INTRODUCTION

Open your Bibles to Zephaniah 2. In our study of the prophets (a study I've entitled "Profiting from the Prophets") our special historical helicopter has been hovering over a period of biblical history that is not that familiar to many believers.

- Some of the prophets had their ministries in the time when the Northern Kingdom (Israel) and the Southern Kingdom (Judah) existed alongside each other. They spoke to one or the other or both of the kingdoms, as well as to the surrounding nations.
- Some of the prophets had their ministry after the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722BC to the Assyrians. So their messages were targeted at the Southern Kingdom (Judah), as well as to the surrounding nations.

So the Northern Kingdom has fallen to the great world power called Assyria, but a new power is emerging on the world scene ... the great Babylonian Empire. They will crush the Assyrians a few years after Zephaniah's day, and then the Babylonians will become an instrument of the Lord to discipline His own rebellious people of Judah. It looms about 20 years in the future, but the Lord showed it to Zephaniah. And that is what I want to talk about today ... "When God Disciplines His People." Let's just start with Zephaniah 2:1-3. Read text.

Does it surprise you that God disciplines His children? It shouldn't. The Bible speaks repeatedly of this activity in the lives of His people.

Deuteronomy 8:5 - Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you.

Job 5:17 - "Blessed is the man whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty.

Hebrews 12:7 - Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?

Our sovereign Father works through the various circumstances and trials in our lives to discipline us. His love is tender love, but sometimes it is tough love.

ILLUSTRATION – I read somewhere recently about a talented young 11-year-old golfer ... a tall, blond kid who could hit the ball a mile. He competed with kids much older than he was ... and beat them. He had a beautiful swing and the confidence of an adult. But he also had a hot temper. One day he hit a bad shot and threw his club as far as he could. His father, who was playing with him, walked over, picked up the club, handed it to his son and said, "Here's your club. The next time you do that will be the last time you set foot on this golf course." That young man was Jack Nicklaus. If you know anything at all about the game of golf, you know the name Jack Nicklaus. You have to wonder what would have come of this man, whom many believe to be the greatest golfer in history, if his father had simply let him get away with that kind of behavior. Or what would have come of

this young man if his father, with no warning or no second chance, would have kicked his son off the course that day. Jack Nicklaus' father knew how and when to administer discipline in his son's life.

And if an earthly father knows how to do that, how much more does our heavenly Father know how and when to administer discipline in our lives as His children. The Lord always sees fit to discipline the people whom He loves. We often misunderstand this, but the Bible shows us that God's discipline is ...

1. EVIDENCE OF HIS CONCERN

ILLUSTRATION – Children who grow up without parental discipline often live with the suspicion that their parents don't really care. And they have every reason to feel that way. A parent who isn't concerned enough to discipline their child is not much of a parent.

And God's discipline of His people is evidence of His concern for and interest in their lives.

Hebrews 12:8 - If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons.

Now go back to the very first verse of Zephaniah:

Zephaniah 1:1 - The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah, during the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah:

Now this verse shows us two important things: Zephaniah had royal blood running through his veins. Apparently he is the great-great grandson of the illustrious and godly King Hezekiah mentioned in II Kings and II Chronicles. The prophets were not just prophets. They were patriots. And this shows us that the man had great concern for his country because God had great concern for His country. The other thing is that Josiah is the king during this time. Remember that.

Now go to Zephaniah 2, the passage we started with. In v.1 there's a tender invitation for the people to gather and turn back to God. Note the references to "before" in v.2. Also note that the Lord is concerned that they not perish ... "perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord's anger" (v.3). All this is evidence that God cares.

There are those who think that God isn't concerned or involved or interested in the way they live their lives. They're like the Jews mentioned in...

Zephaniah 1:12 - At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps and punish those who are complacent, who are like wine left on its dregs, who think, 'The LORD will do nothing, either good or bad.'

They thought, “Surely God is not going to hold us accountable for our sin. He’s not going to do anything.” Is it any wonder that the world doesn’t take God more seriously when they don’t see His people taking Him seriously?

God is concerned and He is going to intervene. One generation after Zephaniah’s prophecy, Jerusalem will fall to the Babylonians. They will invade the city and carry off many exiles. They will return and destroy the city and the great Temple. Zephaniah called this the “day of the Lord’s anger.”

So God’s discipline is evidence of His concern. Next, God’s discipline of His people is...

2. EVIDENCE OF HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS

You see this sharp contrast between the righteousness of God and the unrighteousness of the people. Look at how the Lord describes His people in Zephaniah 3:2.

Zephaniah 3:2 - She obeys no one, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the LORD, she does not draw near to her God.

They obey no one. They don’t accept God’s correction (discipline). They don’t trust the Lord. You see, they’re living as though there were no God ... practical atheists. They call themselves the people of God but they don’t draw near to Him in prayer and in worship.

A few verses later you see the contrast. His people are unrighteous, but...

Zephaniah 3:5 - The LORD within her is righteous; he does no wrong. Morning by morning he dispenses his justice, and every new day he does not fail, yet the unrighteous know no shame.

Do you see why God is disciplining His people? It is evidence of His righteousness and holiness. He cannot stand by and simply watch while His people live lives totally compromised with evil. There’s no shame. The Lord, in essence, is saying, “This has gone far enough. If I allow you to continue in this lifestyle then my holy, righteous Name will be dragged through the mud. And if I don’t intervene you will think that I’m just like you are ... unrighteous.

ILLUSTRATION – A few months ago I was invited on a quail hunt with some guys. One evening we were sitting around the campfire when some other men joined us and a conversation began that soon turned more and more vulgar. Most of them didn’t know who I was or what I did. Soon one of the guys who invited me figured out a way to tone down the conversation. He said something like, “Mike, you’re a Baptist pastor, what do you think about that?” And there was this look that came over the face of one of the guys who had been right in the middle of the beer drinking and the swearing and the vulgar stories. I could see that he was trying to recover. He said, “Oh, I’m a Baptist. I go to _____ Baptist Church. Do you know my pastor _____.” I thought, “Yeah I do know him, and I wonder if your pastor has any idea that you sit out in the congregation on Sunday, but the rest of the week you’re living like the devil.” I sat there wishing that he hadn’t told me that. I could understand that kind of behavior coming from a guy who wasn’t a believer. But why did he have to admit to everyone around the campfire that he was a church-goer? Did he have

no idea the reproach he was bringing on the name of the Lord? It's like he was embarrassed that he had offended me, a pastor. I wanted to say to him, "Hey buddy, it's not me you should be worried about. If you are a believer (and I can't imagine one acting like that), you have bigger problems than just offending a pastor. You are trifling with a righteous God."

God's discipline is evidence of His concern, His righteousness and it is...

3. EVIDENCE OF HIS PURPOSE

We see the purposes of God in all this in the way He will deal with His people. This is what God is after...

Zephaniah 3:9 - "Then will I purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him shoulder to shoulder.

Zephaniah 3:10 - From beyond the rivers of Cush my worshipers, my scattered people, will bring me offerings.

Zephaniah 3:11 - On that day you will not be put to shame for all the wrongs you have done to me, because I will remove from this city those who rejoice in their pride. Never again will you be haughty on my holy hill.

Zephaniah 3:12 - But I will leave within you the meek and humble, who trust in the name of the LORD.

The purpose of God in all of this discipline is to purify for Himself a person and a people who will reflect His glory and His righteousness.

ONSCREEN - Now God's discipline takes two forms:

- **Discipline can be correcting to teach us what is wrong.**

Now if we are discerning we can look back on our lives and see times when things have happened to us that God either permitted or initiated that were God's way of saying to us, "That behavior or that attitude in your life is sin, and you won't learn to hate it unless I punish you." Yes, God isn't averse to calling discipline "punishment."

And many times this discipline is really just the consequences of our disobedience. It might take the form of financial problems because we've been careless in spending money or incurring debt. Or you have to pay a huge fine because you broke the law. It might even take the form of illness that is the only way God can get our attention when He's trying to correct something that is wrong in our lives.

And when God takes us through this kind of correction we need to remember...

1 Corinthians 11:32 - When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.

ILLUSTRATION - Remember we're told in the first verse of the book that Josiah was the king of Judah during Zephaniah's ministry. That's important information because of something that happened while Josiah was king, possibly related to Zephaniah's message. There's a story of God's correction in II Kings 22-23 and again in II Chronicles 34-35. Josiah became king when he was just eight years old. Boys and girls imagine that ... being a king or queen when you're just eight years old. From an early age Josiah loved the Lord and was faithful to Him. As a young man he went through the land destroying all the pagan altars as he called God's people to faithful worship. But also during this time he noticed that the Temple was getting run down so he commissioned some workers to repair the temple. While they were repairing the Temple they made an amazing discovery. They found the Book of the Law of Moses, presumably hidden under some rubble. There it was hidden away in the Temple. And if it was hidden away it means that it hadn't been read to the people of God for years and years. And if it hadn't been read to the people of God for years and years, that means there were likely matters where they were not being obedient to the Lord. When this was reported to King Josiah his heart was broken. He said, "Great is the Lord's anger against us because our fathers haven't obeyed the Word of the Lord." So the Book of the Law was brought out and it was read before all the people the way it should have been all along. And the people renewed their commitment to follow the ways of the Lord.

Zephaniah was probably a partner with Josiah in the revival that came to the people of God when they recovered the Scriptures, read it and were corrected by it in the ways they had been disobedient.

God will use painful circumstances sometimes to correct us when there's wrong in our lives.

- **Discipline can be perfecting to teach us what is best.**

Hebrews 12:11 - No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

John 15:2 - He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.

Yes, God will use painful circumstances in our lives to perfect us when He desires us to grow to greater fruitfulness in our lives. He knows that our faith will only grow if we endure trials.

These trials can take many different forms. It might come through illness, or it might come through the loss of a job, or in an accident, or a rebellious child, or persecution for righteousness. We may pray, "Lord, why is this happening to me?" And we're encouraged when we learn that He is perfecting us through this trial.

Question: How do I know if something that has come into my life is for correcting or for perfecting? Suppose it is an illness. Is God correcting me, like punishment, or is He perfecting me? Answer: If you will listen God will show you.

ILLUSTRATION – What would you think of a parent who suddenly walked into their child’s room and with no explanation began to spank them. And then without a word, they walked out of the room. Now what kind of parent would do that? A good parent, or even a not-so-good parent, knows enough to explain to a child why their getting a disciplined. Well don’t you think that God would do much better than that? That’s why I say that if you will ask God and listen, He will show you what He is after in your life ... whether it is correcting or perfecting.

So when God disciplines His people it is evidence of His concern ... of His righteousness ... of his purpose and it is ...

4. EVIDENCE OF HIS DELIGHT

You see all of this is an expression of God’s tender love for His people. God is saying, “I love you, but I love you too much to leave you where you are or to let you go on living your life in this way.”

Proverbs 3:11-12 - My son, do not despise the LORD’s discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.

What is left when God has finished His discipline in our lives, when we have felt His heavy hand upon us? There comes a time when we can sing.

Zephaniah 3:14 - Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem!

Zephaniah 3:15 - The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm.

Zephaniah 3:16 - On that day they will say to Jerusalem, “Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp.

Zephaniah 3:17 - The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.”

There comes a time when the discipline is over and the delighting begins. God forgives and restores and renews.

ILLUSTRATION – I recall times when our girls were little and one of them had to be disciplined for what they had done. They might have been sent to their room sobbing in tears. But we knew that the discipline wasn’t complete until one of us walked into their room and pulled their little sobbing bodies into our arms and quieted them and spoke words of love over them: “Sweetheart, I love you. Do you understand that? I love you.”

And if an earthly father or mother knows how to do that, how much more does our heavenly Father know how to do that.

CONCLUSION

The words of Jesus to complacent believers and churches:

Revelation 3:19 - Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent.