Turning
Zephaniah 3:1-13

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Good Morning, welcome to Christ the King. If we haven't met, my name is Penny and I'm the senior pastor here and friends, it is great to be with you. If you are a guest or visitor, welcome. We're glad that you would join us. And we are in week three of a four-week series in the minor prophet Zephaniah. So if you have a Bible, you can turn to Zephaniah chapter three. Remember, if you're turning in your Bible, Zephaniah is near the end of the Old Testament. If you make it to the Gospels, you've gone just a little too far, you know, just go a little bit further back. And also you can follow along in the Bibles and the shares in front of you. The passage is found on page 789. Now we've been in Zephaniah for, again, this is the third week and we've mentioned that this is a minor prophet, one of the minor prophets. And our goal is over time to work our way through the minor prophets, kind of scouring them in here and there in between a longer series. And they're minor, not because they're of less significance, right? They're not less important than Isaiah or Ezekiel or Jeremiah. They're minor because of their size. They're just briefer. But though they are smaller than the major prophets, they are still of great significance.

They're of great importance to us because in these minor prophets, we're learning more about who God is and what he's doing on behalf of his people and how he's engaging in the world and working in our midst. And so, so far what we've heard from this minor prophet is that God is aware of the evil and the wickedness that surrounds us. God sees the injustice and the pain in this world and God is going to bring justice against the evil. He's going to bring judgment against the wicked. And we heard last week that he's going to do this to the nations, that those people who have risen up against the Lord, who have opposed him, who have hated his people, God is going to bring judgment and justice upon them. That's what we heard the last two weeks, right? Feels like that's all we've heard, isn't it? Lots of judgment, lots of justice. Well, now in chapter 3, we're going to hear something unexpected. We're going to hear something that we've been waiting to hear because in chapter 3, there is still more judgment, there is still more justice, but there's going to be a pivot. There's going to be a turn. So let's go ahead and read Zephaniah 3. We'll begin in verse 1 and read through verse 13. The prophet writes,

> “Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled, the oppressing city!
> She listens to no voice; she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the LORD; she does not draw near to her God.
> Her officials within her are roaring lions; her judges are evening wolves that leave nothing till the morning.
> Her prophets are fickle, treacherous men; her priests profane what is holy; they do violence to the law.
> 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.
> “I have cut off nations; their battlements are in ruins; I have laid waste their streets so that no one walks in them; their cities have been made desolate, without a man, without an inhabitant.
> 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.

> “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.
> “For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord. From beyond the rivers of Cush my worshipers, the daughter of my dispersed ones, shall bring my offering.
> “On that day you shall not be put to shame because of the deeds by which you have rebelled against me; for then I will remove from your midst your proudly exultant ones, and you shall no longer be haughty in my holy mountain.
> But I will leave in your midst a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the LORD, those who are left in Israel; they shall do no injustice and speak no lies, nor shall there be found in their mouth a deceitful tongue. For they shall graze and lie down, and none shall make them afraid.” (ESV)

Friends, this is the word of the Lord. Let me pray for us.

Heavenly Father, as we come to your word, we ask that you would meet with us, that you would guide us and direct us. Father, we need your help, for apart from the work of your Spirit, we would be blind to your beauty, we'd be hardened to your truth. And so we ask that you would work in our midst, and you would allow what is said and done, the words that I speak and the meditations of all of our hearts, that everything that is done this morning would please you. And so we ask for your help, and we ask you to be with us. We ask in the name of Christ. Amen.

So Kat and I recently finished watching the three-episode documentary on Matthew Perry. I'm curious, anybody watched that yet? Just no? Okay. Well, I mean, could it be more interesting? Anybody? Okay, so some of you, all right, some of you are familiar with who Matthew Perry is. For those who didn't laugh, that was Matthew Perry's tagline in the TV show *Friends*, because that's how we know of Matthew Perry, right? Matthew Perry is a famous actor. He was a famous actor, and he played the neurotic Chandler Bing on the hit series *Friends*. And he had a very successful career, even beyond working on *Friends*. He made movies. He was in other TV shows. He went from obscure actor to winning awards and garnering great wealth and fame. He was known all over the world. He was a very funny man. But alongside his comedy, alongside the laughter that he brought, there was great tragedy. See, Matthew Perry was afflicted with great addiction and chemical dependency, and he had depression, and he was lonely, and all of this led to his untimely death. And the documentary tells this story. Over three episodes, it tells of how he went from obscurity to fame and then to his death. And throughout the whole thing, what stood out to me was one line that Perry said. He was recounting a time before he was famous, while he was interviewing, while he was auditioning for the role in *Friends*, and he prayed to God. He was telling an interviewer, he prayed to God, and what he prayed was, *God, you can do anything you want with me, just please make me famous.* That's what he prayed. That's what he asked for. And that's what God gave him.

God gave him great fame. In fact, he prayed that prayer, and two weeks later is when he got the call that he would play Chandler Bing, the role that would change his life. And yet, though he garnered the fame that he desired, though he was one of the most famous actors in the world, it didn't cure his loneliness, and it didn't fix his pain. Because what Perry needed

was a transformation that fame couldn't give him. Now, we might think that by him going to God in prayer that he was actually turning to God, but the content of his prayer indicates that though he turned to God with his voice, he actually was turning his heart away from him. You see, he wasn't actually interested in the Lord, he was only interested in what the Lord would give to him. And it's something of that nature that we see in this passage, because that's what Judah is doing.

Turning Away from God

So, you remember in this time in redemptive history, Israel is broken up into two kingdoms. We have Israel in the north, and we have Judah in the south, and the prophet Zephaniah is speaking to Judah. He's ministering to them, and to every bystander, to every watcher, to every observer, it would have looked like Judah was turning to God. After all, they had prophets, they had priests, they were offering sacrifices in worship. We heard it in the reading that we had this morning. This is what they're doing. It looks like they're turning to God, but they're actually turning away from him. They're turning away from the Lord. Now, earlier, before the reading, I said that we're going to encounter something unexpected. And the unexpected comes in verses one through six, because in verses one through six, we have judgment, and we would think that judgment is coming upon the nations, right? That's what we've heard in chapter 2, that judgment and God's justice would come against those people who were rebelling against God. And so, as Judah's listening, I could imagine God's people thinking, *yes, finally, God is going to act against those evil people. Finally, God will bring justice upon them and destroy the wicked.* But now the unexpected comes, because God says that judgment is coming upon Judah. That's what verses 1-6 are describing.

Verse 1, we have this woe upon the rebellious, defiled, oppressing city. And it would be easy for us to think that this city is Nineveh that was referred to in chapter 2. But as we read on, it becomes clear that this is Jerusalem, the holy city of God. It becomes clear because in in chapter 3, the prophet refers to the prophets of the city, the priests in their midst, and that God is referred to as her God. And so what God is telling us is that the problem of rebellion, the problem of evil, it's not just a problem for the nations. It's not just a problem for those people out there. It's a problem for his people, the people here, that they are turning away from the Lord. And what's incredibly sad about this is that the people had every opportunity to turn back, and yet instead, they turn away. Do you see it in verse 7? God says, “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.” And so you see, God is giving them an opportunity to turn back. Yes, in verse 2, they didn't trust. They didn't draw near. But now, they've heard God's word of correction. They've heard it's time to come back to the Lord. And so what did they do? The end of verse 7, “but all the more, they were eager to make all their deeds corrupt.” It's incredibly sad.

They knew who was in their midst. They knew who had given them the glorious city. Like Matthew Perry, they knew who showered them with blessing, and yet they turned away. It's incredibly sad that they would hear this call back. They would hear this correction, and they would turn from the Lord. Now, before we start shaking our heads at the foolishness of Judah and of Matthew Perry for turning away from the Lord, we need to ask ourselves, are we? Are there ways that we're turning from the Lord? Now, we may not be as blatant in our evil or wicked deeds as we've read in Zephaniah, but are there subtle ways that we are seeking satisfaction apart from the Lord? Are there things that we are looking to the Lord for, and we're finding satisfaction in what he gives, but not in the Lord himself? And God does give

wonderful things, doesn't he? Gives us talents and abilities. He gives us a community and careers and wealth, and instead of acknowledging him for these and thanking him and turning to him in service, are we turning away from him? Are we clinging to the things that he has given and believing that they are enough and hoarding them for ourselves rather than using them for him? See, that's not just a question for the nations. That's a question for God's people. That's a question for us, for you and for me.

God Turning to Us

Now, the message of Zephaniah, chapter 1, chapter 2, the first part of chapter 3, is all about those who have turned away and how God will turn to them in judgment. And so, for us, it could feel like we're weighty. It could feel burdensome. It could feel like, is this all we will ever hear from this prophet? Judgment. Justice. But now we come to the turn. We come to a pivot. Because here's the unexpected turn that we hear in Zephaniah is that those who have turned away from the Lord, the Lord in his grace turns to them. God turns to us. We see this in the remainder of the passage. We see in verse 8, God says, “Wait for me.” Wait for me. I have seen the indignation. I've seen the injustice. I've seen the pain. So, I'm gathering the nations. I'm assembling the kingdoms. Yes, I will bring judgment. And God is telling us he will bring mercy.

He will bring mercy in the form of purifying his people. Do you see it in verses 9-10? “For at that time, I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord. From beyond the rivers of Cush, my worshipers, the daughter of my dispersed ones, shall bring my offering.” So, you see what's happening. There was a people who used to use their words to speak blasphemy, who used their lips against the Lord. But their words have changed because God has changed them. Instead of calling out against God and his ways, they're now calling on his name. They're using their mouths and their lips and their voices and their words in praise of the Lord. The Lord is changing them. He is changing the nations. That's who he's talking about here. Those people who were set for judgment, he is now bringing into his people. We know it's the nations because he speaks about those who are beyond the rivers of Cush. And so, what that place was, it was the part of the southernmost part of the Nile. And he's saying even the people who are as far away as possible, Zephaniah, those people that you can't even imagine who they are. They're so far from Jerusalem and yet these people among the nations who once hated God, God is transforming. God is changing. He is purifying so that they will now call on the name of the Lord for salvation.

Y'all, that is the mercy of God. That he is transforming the nations, that he is transforming us. Because y'all, this is our story. This is our story. We are the nations who once opposed the Lord's ways, who once uttered blasphemies, who mocked his word. Many of you know that I didn't grow up in the church. I didn't grow up reading the Bible. I didn't grow up hearing about the gospel. In the times that we did talk about religion or Christianity in my home or I was dragged to a church service by, well, I don't even know who those people were, but the people that would take me from time to time, I sat there and internally and sometimes externally laughed at what I perceived to be the absurdity of Christianity. That was my story. And I know that that's some of y'all's story too. That if we could go back in time and tell our past selves that we would be sitting in a church in Roanoke, Virginia, that I would be the pastor of a church in Roanoke, Virginia, I would think that you were an idiot. That's our story, isn't it? And maybe your story isn't quite that extreme. Maybe your story isn't quite that extreme, and yet the Bible tells us that all of us, all of us were wandering from the Lord.

All of us were turning from his ways. All of us were in rebellion against our God. We were his enemies, but God in his mercy, but God by the work of Christ change and transformed us. That's what God is doing. He is calling people from the nations. He is purifying a people for himself. The scope of God's work has always been the nations. It was never to be limited to a little sliver of land in the Middle East. It was always to expand out into the four corners of the earth to places that Zephaniah had never heard of and would never see. The scope of God's transformation has always been the nations, and we're going to sing of it in just a few weeks, because in a few weeks we're going to be in the season of Advent, and we're going to sing all those Christmas carols and those songs that we sing only one time a year, right? We've been waiting for it, and we're going to sing those songs, and one of the songs we're going to sing is joy to the world, and my favorite line in joy to the world, and one of my favorite lines of any Christmas hymn is when it says, "he comes to make his blessings flow as far as the curse is found. As far as the curse is found." How far is the curse found?

The curse of sin has come upon every nation and every people and every tongue, and the blessing of Jesus, the blessing of the Son, the transformation of Christ extends as far as the curse is found. That's what God is doing. That is the promise that he is making in Zephaniah 3, that he has taken a people that use their words in defilement against the Lord, and he's purifying them. He's changing them. He's transforming them. He's forgiving them. You see, that's what the Lord does. He turns to us to purify, but he turns to us to forgive. You see it in verses 11 – 12: "On that day, you shall not be put to shame because of the deeds by which you have rebelled against me, for then I will remove from your midst your proudly exultant ones, and you shall no longer be haughty in my holy mountain, but I will leave in your midst a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord." Y'all, this is amazing. This is amazing because what God is saying is, he's not saying that our sinful deeds, our shameful acts are not sinful or are not shameful. They are. He's saying that as sinful and as shameful as they are, they will be forgiven. That's what it means when he says, you shall not be put to shame because of the deeds by which you have rebelled against me.

You see, that is the glory of God's promise. That is his grace, that all who trust in the Lord, who turn to him in faith, God forgives our rebellion and he puts aside our shame. So that the apostle Paul can say in Romans chapter 10, that if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For everyone who believes in him shall not be put to shame. Y'all, that's beautiful, isn't it? That we're not put to shame. We're not put to shame because Christ took the shame of our sin on himself and in its place, he gave us his grace, his mercy, his forgiveness. That's what God is doing. That's what he's promising. He's turning to us to forgive us, to purify us, to transform us. Listen to how the passage ends: "They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord. Those who are left in Israel, they shall do no injustice and speak no lies, nor shall there be found in their mouth a deceitful tongue. For they shall graze and lie down and none shall make them afraid." There is a day coming when what the prophet just spoke will be what we experience forever. Right? We know that he's not talking about this day right now, not yet, because, well, there's still lies and there's still deceit and there's still fear, right? But there is a day coming, a day coming when our speech will be completely pure, when we will be only given over to worship, when we will have nothing to fear and we will dwell in the refuge of the Lord forever.

That is the day that awaits us. And yet, as we await that final transformation, we live in light of that transformation today. One theologian put it this way. He said that "we're to be the

advance sign to the world of the new creation, the new heaven and earth reality which God plans to make." And I'll add that God has already begun in us. Because God's transformation work, though it will find its completion in the day of the Lord when Jesus returns, he has already begun that change today. He's reforming us and remaking us. He's making us purer. He's forgiving our sins and making us more and more into the image of his Son. Friends, isn't that glorious? That the judgment and justice of the Lord is being replaced with his forgiveness and grace. That for all those who have turned away from God in our sin, God turns towards us and transforms us by his grace. Friends, let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you. Thank you that that is the good news of the gospel. That you are taking those who are in rebellion, those who are sinning, those who are turned away from you. You have turned us towards yourself because you have turned towards us. And so we pray, Father, that you would be at work in our lives, that you would root out sin, that you would purify our tongues, and that you would continue to transform us as we await the day when you will return, when Jesus will come in glory and we will be transformed completely. We long for that day. And so we ask, Lord Jesus, come quickly, but until you do, let us rest in you. Let us put our hope in you. Let us look to the founder and perfecter of our faith, knowing that you are the one who forgives and you are the one who transforms. And so fix our eyes on Christ, we pray. And God's people said together, Amen.