

Tale of Two Cities

Hebrews 4:12 For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

The more I study the text of the Bible, the more I can see the interconnections I call the Fabric of Scripture. But it is more than that. It is “living.”

This week we start on Zephaniah chapter 3.

Zephaniah 3:1 Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled, The tyrannical city!

Woe. This word signals a break with the previous text starting a new part of the Tribulation prophecies. Logically, Chapter 1, chapter 2 and chapter 3:1-7 belong to the Tribulation prophecies. Whoever made the chapter breaks understood that “Woe” started something new, but apparently didn’t understand what that was. If I had been deciding on chapter breaks, they might have chapter 3 start at what is currently 3:8 or 3:9.

We have encountered “woe” previously in our studies. I haven’t covered that word in any detail until now.

The word “woe” is a “particle” or an “interjection” depending upon your preference. It disrupts the narrative causing you to understand that something bad is about to happen. A question that needs to be asked is, if this is in the tribulation, then how is it related to the “Three Woes” of

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Revelation chapters 9-11? Or is it at all? Before attempting to address that, let's look at what a "woe" is.

There is an interesting article on Wikipedia that is worth reading concerning what an "interjection" is. Here is the first paragraph from the article:

"An interjection is a word or expression that occurs as an utterance on its own and expresses a spontaneous feeling or reaction. It is a diverse category, encompassing many different parts of speech, such as exclamations (ouch!, wow!), curses (damn!), greetings (hey, bye), response particles (okay, oh!, m-hm, huh?), hesitation markers (uh, er, um), and other words (stop, cool). Due to its diverse nature, the category of interjections partly overlaps with a few other categories like profanities, discourse markers, and fillers."

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interjection>

In certain contexts, what follows after "woe" is a description of the condemned behavior of the addressee. In this case, it is "the city." The question will be which city.

Other prophets have used this "woe" construction in their prophecies:

Isaiah 10:1 Woe to those who enact evil statutes And to those who constantly record unjust decisions,

Isaiah 10:2 So as to deprive the needy of justice And rob the poor of My people of their rights, So that widows may be their spoil And that they may plunder the orphans.

Isaiah 10:3 Now what will you do in the day of punishment, And in the devastation which will

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come from afar? To whom will you flee for help? And where will you leave your wealth?

Jeremiah 22:13 “Woe to him who builds his house without righteousness And his upper rooms without justice, Who uses his neighbor’s services without pay And does not give him his wages,

Ezekiel 13:3 Thus says the Lord God, “Woe to the foolish prophets who are following their own spirit and have seen nothing...”

This particular word is used only in the prophets with the exception of 1 Kings 13:30 where it is used to mourn the death of a “man of God.” There are many other “woes” in the prophecies. Woe can also be used by someone who has already experienced a loss as in a loved one. I did not cover that here since I am focused on the prophecies. It can be an “interjection” to garner the reader’s attention.

Notice that in the prophecies, the text does not say, “if you stop this behavior.” No. It is essentially saying because of your behavior which is described, you are going to be judged. Here is the TDOT which says this succinctly. “In other words, we are suggesting that in the hooy (woe) oracles the prophets were seeking to make the point that judgment is inescapable.” This is going to happen. Much like the book of Revelation. This is going to happen. You, as a person, can decide to be a part of the judgment or you can follow the logic of the next verse and be part of the remnant that survives into the Millennium.

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It is used twice in Zephaniah: once in 2:5 at the start of the prophecies against Israel's enemies and the second time here at the beginning of prophecies against Jerusalem.

So much for the first word of chapter 3.

Now for “**city**.” This word is used only twice in the book of Zephaniah. Here and in Zephaniah 2:15. As we will see, the reference here is to Jerusalem which is unnamed but described. In chapter 2, the city is named as Nineveh. This would suggest a comparison of the two is in order. In other words, the tale of two cities.

Just as a tangential comment, the Hebrew word for “tyrannical” has the same letters as “Jonah” the prophet to Nineveh. Zephaniah is having fun with words. More on that in a little bit.

The description of this city in chapter 3 contains three words that were obviously carefully chosen by Zephaniah with the aid of the Holy Spirit. They are unusual and to some they are ambiguous.

Rebellious. This word is ambiguous in the Hebrew. The best translations use “rebellious” like the New American Standard 1995 here. It can also mean “to be contentious.” Zephaniah may have used this word because it sounds like the word for “bitter” used of the sons of Israel during the test of “No Water.” Or more correctly, “the test of bitter water.” The word bitter there is very close to the word for rebellious in our current context. Coincidence or expert poet? I go with expert poet.

The word for rebellious uses the same letters as “bitter” that reminds us of Israel's sin of unbelief, lack of trust in Exodus.

**Exodus 15:22 Then Moses led Israel from the
Red Sea, and they went out into the**

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wilderness of Shur; and they went three days in the wilderness and found no water.

Exodus 15:23 When they came to Marah, they could not drink the waters of Marah, for they were bitter; therefore it was named Marah.

Exodus 15:24 So the people grumbled at Moses, saying, “What shall we drink?”

What do we see here? Lack of faith, lack of trust in the God that brought them out of Egypt. In that same chapter, Exodus chapter 15, immediately prior to this test, the sons of Israel had sung a song of praise to God for His deliverance from the Egyptians. Remember what the apostle Paul said,

1 Thessalonians 5:16 Rejoice always;

1 Thessalonians 5:17 pray without ceasing;

1 Thessalonians 5:18 in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.

In the past couple of years at Spring Valley Bible Church, I have begun to understand the value of suffering in learning about who God is and His plan for individuals. He provides everything we need, not necessarily everything we want. When I suffer, I sometimes struggle to understand why I am suffering and what it is that I need to learn or to do with what I learn. But I have learned to listen and look. There is a purpose. In today’s social environment this is an important lesson to learn.

Defiled. In the Hebrew there are two roots using the same three consonants. One can mean stained, defiled, polluted. Some experts say

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that this verb is actually derived from another root with a different set of consonants. In any case, here, defiled is an acceptable translation. BUT, the primary word from this root means redeemed. Coincidence? Or expert poet. You know where I stand. The word for rebellious uses the same letters as bitter.

This defilement, here in verse 1, could also mean redeemed. A double meaning. The logical question is how can those in the Tribulation be redeemed? Israel, in Zephaniah has already been called a “goy” nation (Zephaniah 2:1). The goy are usually the Gentile unbelievers who are cursed to go to Torments. But God called them goy because those in unbelief have become a nation of unbelievers. So what is the way out of that situation. Same for everyone. Believe in the Messiah/Christ for salvation. We will have to wait until the next verse for specifics.

What we can ask here is how did God, in the past, deliver a goy nation? Jonah gave the gospel to the despised Assyrians, even in the city of Nineveh. Wait! Did we just get a judgment on Nineveh in chapter 2? Yes. So we have a nuanced link to Nineveh here. Let’s look at the final of the three words.

Tyrannical. The Hebrew word means to oppress or maltreat. Certainly the Assyrians were cruel in victory. Nineveh has been dealt with in chapter 2. Now Jerusalem, unnamed here, is so characterized. But Zephaniah was able to sneak the name of Jonah into the word he used for “tyrannical.” I am going to read the entire chapter 2 of the book of Jonah. It is something to hear.

**Jonah 2:1 Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his
God from the stomach of the fish,**

**Jonah 2:2 and he said, “I called out of my
distress to the Lord, And He answered me. I**

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cried for help from the depth of Sheol; You heard my voice.

Jonah 2:3 “For You had cast me into the deep, Into the heart of the seas, And the current engulfed me. All Your breakers and billows passed over me.

Jonah 2:4 “So I said, ‘I have been expelled from Your sight. Nevertheless I will look again toward Your holy temple.’

Jonah 2:5 “Water encompassed me to the point of death. The great deep engulfed me, Weeds were wrapped around my head.

Jonah 2:6 “I descended to the roots of the mountains. The earth with its bars was around me forever, But You have brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God.

Jonah 2:7 “While I was fainting away, I remembered the Lord, And my prayer came to You, Into Your holy temple.

Jonah 2:8 “Those who regard vain idols Forsake their faithfulness,

Jonah 2:9 But I will sacrifice to You With the voice of thanksgiving. That which I have vowed I will pay. Salvation is from the Lord.”

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Jonah 2:10 Then the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah up onto the dry land.

Then, Jonah got with God's plan and gave the gospel to the people of Nineveh. All he actually had to do was announce God's judgment on an unregenerate people. They understood they needed humility before God.

Jonah 3:4 Then Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk; and he cried out and said, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown."

Jonah 3:5 Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them.

They believed. That was the answer. Trust God. Trust Him for salvation. Trust Him for everyday spirituality. And so it is for us now. And so it will be for people in the Tribulation.

Zephaniah 3:2 She heeded no voice, She accepted no instruction. She did not trust in the Lord, She did not draw near to her God.

Verse 2 is, for me, one of the most important verses if not the most important verses in the book of Zephaniah. Here is spirituality. Although particulars of spirituality are different between the Old Testament and the Church Age, the basics are not: Faith. Trust. But Zephaniah has given us a scenario:

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She heeded no voice. Literally, “Not she listened to (the/His) Voice. Whether it is the gospel or spiritual information, the first action is to listen. Often, in this type of context, the word means to listen and take action or “heed.” It is related to faith. You listen and act on information from someone you believe. The daily action of the believer is to listen to Bible Doctrine from a Bible teacher you trust. An idea that is repeated in the fabric of this verse is trust and knowledge. Here you listen because you trust and thereby gain information.

She accepted no instruction. The Hebrew word for “accepted” has a range of meanings from “take,” “grab,” “accept.” While “accept” is OK, if you are a believer intent on growing quickly, as believers in the Tribulation will have to be in order to survive, it is likely to be “grab.” The noun from this verb can mean “instruction” or “teaching.” It is not used here but shows that the verb that is used meshes beautifully with the noun that is used. In the Hebrew the word for “instruction” can mean to discipline, chasten, admonish. The TDOT leans more toward “instruction” or “knowledge.” Paraphrasing from the TDOT, so as not to confuse you with technical details, this noun can be used for a body of knowledge to be assimilated.” Also, this noun “as the body of knowledge to be learned...can take on the meaning of a necessary quality that is needed to master the problems of life. One is urged to acquire (this noun) at any price (Prov 8:10; 23:23).¹”

Proverbs 8:10 “Take my instruction and not silver, And knowledge rather than choicest gold.

Proverbs 8:11 “For wisdom is better than jewels; And all desirable things cannot compare with her.

¹ TDOT, Volume VI, page 131.

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Leviticus 26:18 If also after these things you do not obey Me, then I will punish you seven times more for your sins.

She did not trust in the Lord. Here is the key: trust, faith, belief. For most people in the Tribulation, they will not trust God. They will have their own personal agendas that do not include God. So, at the end of the Tribulation, God's continued plan into the Millennium will not include them.

She did not draw near to her God. Here is the goal of our lives: relationship with God. We have a relationship with God the Father which starts with a faith dependence on the Holy Spirit who takes us to Jesus Christ who takes us to God the Father. This intimate treasured relationship with the creator of the universe.

All these things the unbelieving Jews in Jerusalem will fail to do. Each one of the phrases starts in the Hebrew with the word "not."

Zephaniah 3:3 Her princes within her are roaring lions, Her judges are wolves at evening; They leave nothing for the morning.

Zephaniah 3:4 Her prophets are reckless, treacherous men; Her priests have profaned the sanctuary. They have done violence to the law.

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Zephaniah 3:5 The Lord is righteous within her; He will do no injustice. Every morning He brings His justice to light; He does not fail. But the unjust knows no shame.

Zephaniah 3:6 “I have cut off nations; Their corner towers are in ruins. I have made their streets desolate, With no one passing by; Their cities are laid waste, Without a man, without an inhabitant.

Zephaniah 3:7 “I said, ‘Surely you will revere Me, Accept instruction.’ So her dwelling will not be cut off According to all that I have appointed concerning her. But they were eager to corrupt all their deeds.