

IT COULD BE YOUR FAULT Zephaniah 1

Our son-in-law Michael is now serving as a flight instructor at Naval Air Station, Meridian, Mississippi. There he teaches young pilots fresh from basic flight how to fly a fighter jet. In a recent conversation he expressed dismay that his students, all college and flight school graduates, could be as dumb as they are. He told us several examples of ineptitude that have amazed him. One example featured a student who is near the end of his 18 month training. One of the last steps in their training is carrier qualification. This student was doing his first catapult launch off a carrier. The catapult accelerates an aircraft from standing still to 145 knots in 2 seconds in the ridiculously short space of 150 feet, which is about the width of a football field. It is imperative during a cat shot that the pilot keep his hands off the controls of the airplane until it is flying and well off the deck. But so much is going on during a launch. The pilot has to make sure the plane is correctly configured, he communicates with controllers and the deck crew, he has to push the throttles to maximum and put his head back against the headrest. The roar of the engines at maximum thrust is immense and then comes the most violent acceleration he has ever experienced. It is second nature to grab the stick in an effort to gain control of what feels like total chaos. Though this pilot had been trained carefully not to do that, nature took over. Obeying his natural instinct he grabbed the stick and yanked back as the plane took off. The result was he pulled its nose up to near vertical and put the aircraft into a stall. He was fortunate to narrowly recover before the plane crashed into the sea. The air boss wanted no part of this guy attempting to land the plane on the carrier. He ordered him to fly back to land immediately.

Sometimes things that seem so natural that they are irresistible in fact are the exact wrong thing to do. Today we are going back more than 2600 years to look at Zephaniah 1 and we will see one of those natural reactions that people had then and that we still struggle with today. Zephaniah ministered near the end of the seventh century B. C. during the reign of Josiah, one of the few good kings of Judah. The prophet traced his own ancestry in verse 1 back to Hezekiah. Though that was a common name in Israel it is likely that this was the Hezekiah who was another good king of Judah. So Zephaniah was of a noble family. Josiah came to power after a long stretch of total unfaithfulness by Judah's kings and her people. His advisors found a copy of the books of Moses which had been totally ignored and forgotten by Israel. As a result he led a reformation, a turn back to God's law. It is possible that Zephaniah was involved in that reformation. His preaching may have been a call to obedience to it, or it have helped instigate the movement. His words call on us to beware of making a natural mistake. Let's look at Zephaniah 1.

A VERY BAD DAY WAS COMING

Laurie and I were at the theater recently and saw a trailer for a movie coming out later this year that is based on a children's book that I thought was hilarious. The book was *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* by Judith Viorst. On the day in question poor Alexander woke up with gum in his hair, his best friend deserted him, he got no dessert in his lunch, the dentist found a cavity that had to be filled, they had lima beans at dinner, there was

kissing on TV and his mom made him wear his railroad train pajamas, which he hates. Alexander decides he wants to move to Australia. It was a very bad day indeed.

Zephaniah said in his time a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day was coming that would make Alexander's bad day look like child's play, which it actually was. This very bad day would max out the disaster meter, as you can see in verses 2-3. The Lord says, "I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth." Verse 3 says both humans and animals will be wiped out. It sounds like this is going to be total annihilation, but remember that sometimes prophets used hyperbolic language. In other words, sometimes total destruction actually means "really bad."

For instance, at the end of verse 3 Zephaniah quotes the Lord as saying he will "cut off man from the face of the earth." He's going to completely wipe out the human race. But notice that in the line before he said, "the wicked will have only heaps of rubble." So wicked people will still be around, but they will be surviving in piles of rubble. If the wicked are still around then all human life is not extinguished.

In verse 14 Zephaniah says, "The great day of the Lord is near, near and coming quickly." Verse 15 says, "That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom." Are you getting the picture? If not the prophet gets graphic at the end of verse 17. "Their blood will be poured out like dust and their entrails like filth." God is going to show up and people are going to be slaughtered. It will be gruesome.

Obadiah spoke of this kind of devastation for Edom because of their pride and Nahum pictured it for Ninevah because of their violence and cruelty. Of course the core of their problem was they did not worship the true God. Zephaniah will say in chapter 2 the day of the Lord was coming for Judah's neighbors at every point of the compass. That made the people of Judah really happy. It would be kind of like if an NFL guru on ESPN spoke of the upcoming season and said, "For the Raiders it is going to be darkness and gloom. Picture Sherman's march to the sea with the Raiders playing the role of Atlanta." Charger fans would be thrilled.

However, Zephaniah totally shocked the ancient Hebrews with his message. The stunning, absolutely unexpected message of this prophet was that Judah's neighbors were not the only ones facing God's wrath. In verse 4 the Lord says, "I will stretch out my hand against...wait for it...Judah!" This horrific destruction was about to fall on God's people as well!

When the prophets railed against enemy nations the ancient Hebrews said, "Yeah, the day of the Lord is coming. That's great. You go get them Lord. You make those people pay for how they've treated us." Zephaniah comes along and says to Judah, "I'm talking to you. The day of the Lord is coming for you!" But what does he mean by the day of the Lord?

Laurie commented when we saw a college baseball game on television about the sound today's metal bats make when they hit the ball. I said, "Yeah, I hate that sound. Back in my day using

wood bats we heard the crack of the bat on the ball.” “Back in my day” means “in the time when I was playing baseball,” which was a period of years. So it is with the day of the Lord. It is his time. Zephaniah is saying, “the Lord is going to have his day.” The day of the Lord is the time when God acts decisively in history. But when is the day of the Lord?

In Acts 2:20 Peter quoted the prophet Joel speaking of the day of the Lord and referred it to something happening that day, the day of Pentecost, 7 weeks after the resurrection of Christ. Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 5:2, “you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.” So the day of the Lord is a future event. Peter agreed in 2 Peter 3:10, “the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire.” So the day of the Lord is that yet future time when after Jesus comes back God judges everything and creates a new heavens and a new earth.

Zephaniah spoke of the day of the Lord as a time when God would judge Judah, which happened back in 586 B.C. Peter spoke of it as occurring during the feast of Pentecost in the first century. Yet Peter and Paul wrote of the day of the Lord as a future event. Is this one of those contradictions in the Bible people talk about?

No, this is not a contradiction. The day of the Lord refers to a time in human events when God intervenes to act in a decisive way. There have been a number of days of the Lord. When God judged the northern kingdom of Israel that was the day of the Lord. When he judged the nations surrounding Israel, those events were days of the Lord. When God judged Judah, the southern kingdom, that was the day of the Lord. When Jesus entered history, rescued us through his death and resurrection and sent his Spirit to live in us that was the day of the Lord. In the future when the whole complex of events that surround the return of Jesus finally occur that will be the day of the Lord. There is not just one day when God acts in a decisive way in human events. Thus there is not just one day of the Lord.

In summary, Zephaniah’s message began with awful news for Judah. The day of the Lord, which they thought only meant death for their enemies, in fact meant disaster for them as well.

JUDAH EARNED THE BAD DAY

By Spiritual Compromise

God was going to judge Judah because they persisted in worshiping idols. You see this in verses 4-5. The Lord says, “I will cut off from this place every remnant of Baal, the names of the pagan and the idolatrous priests – those who bow down on the roofs to worship the starry host, those who bow down and swear by the Lord and who also swear by Molech.”

The people of Judah were worshiping Baal, Molech and the stars. In other words, they were bowing down to pretty much every supposed deity they heard about. The God of Israel came in last in the deity race. He ended up in the “also ran” results in the newspaper.

There are a couple of interesting statements in verses 8-9. The Lord promised punishment for “all those clad in foreign clothes.” Clearly God takes a dim view of people who wear designer clothes imported from Italy and France. Actually we could all be in trouble here. I may have clothes from O’Neill, Quicksilver, Tommy Bahama, Ralph Lauren and Levi, but the labels say my clothes were made in China, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Mexico, Nicaragua, Honduras, pretty much everywhere except the good old USA. So doesn’t that mean they are foreign clothes? So is God upset with me because I haven’t been buying clothes made in America? Hey, it’s not my fault. No one in America seems to be making and selling clothes these days.

Fortunately that’s not Zephaniah’s point. He was using the idea of wearing foreign clothes as a way of saying, “adopting the culture of foreign nations.” Israel adopted their styles, but that wasn’t the issue. It was adopting their values, their morals, their beliefs, their religion and their practices, completely losing their distinctiveness as a holy people set apart for the God of Israel. They were clothing themselves in a foreign culture.

We get a glimpse of the adoption of foreign thinking in the statement, “I will punish all who avoid stepping on the threshold.” What is that all about? When I was playing baseball in my high school and college days I always made sure when I took the field not to step on the chalk baseline. I don’t know why. I didn’t have any superstition that it might bring bad luck if I did. I just scrupulously avoided it for no reason other than tradition. Was this some kind of tradition like that? No, there was a little more to it.

There is a humorous story in 1 Samuel 5 about a time when the Philistines captured the ark of the covenant of Israel. They took it to the city of Ashdod and stuck it in a temple to Dagon, one of their gods. The next day the idol of Dagon had fallen over and was lying on the ground. They set it back up, but the following day it had once again fallen over and this time its head had fallen off and was lying on the threshold. Verse 5 says, “That is why to this day neither the priests of Dagon nor any others who enter Dagon’s temple at Ashdod step on the threshold.”

It became a Philistine tradition to avoid stepping on the threshold out of superstition that was related to the worship of Dagon. The people of Israel were so compromised that they had bought into the superstition. They sort of believed in Yahweh, the God of Israel, but they also worshiped Molech and Dagon and many other of the local Canaanite gods, especially Baal.

The worship of Baal was a constant failing for Israel. It shows up in Numbers 25:3, Judges 2, 3, 6, 8, 10, 1 Kings 16 and so on. You might recall the incident when Elijah the prophet had the big contest on Mount Carmel with prophets of Baal. That was around 250 years before Zephaniah prophesied. Baal worship had crept into Israel even before Elijah, so you can see that this was a persistent problem.

Baal was supposedly a god who ruled over fertility. The local pagans thought if you wanted an abundance of crops and kids you had to convince Baal to give it to you. Israel wanted the good

stuff of life. They wanted abundance, both of crops and kids (which was an important good thing back then). Since they bought the idea that Baal was the god of fertility, meaning abundance, then they'd better give him his due. In their minds worship was about doing whatever was required to get the gods to give them what they wanted.

Let's review the Ten Commandments. Exodus 20:3-4 says, "You shall have no gods before me. You shall not make an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath." Exodus 19:8 says when Moses set before the people what God had said they responded, "We will do everything the Lord has said." That was their commitment. No other gods, no idols. How were they doing on that commitment? They had totally compromised it. It was long gone.

The Israelis were taught by God's Law that he is the creator of all, sovereign over all creation. The very fact that they worshiped another "god" was a statement that they didn't believe it. They treated the Almighty like some local deity at best.

By Spiritual Complacency

The spiritual compromise occurred because the people of Judah first became complacent in their pursuit of their own God. Verse 12 lays it out. God says he will search Jerusalem with lamps and will punish those who are "complacent." He describes them as "wine left on its dregs." This is a reference to sediment that gathers at the bottom of a vat as wine is being aged.

We know about complacency. We've all seen it. I think the symbol of complacency should be a yawn. The motto of complacent people is "whatever." I've had those times in ministry when I came up with a good idea and two people showed up for an event. Everyone else yawned. Someone recently said to me that the most recent novel I wrote and published should be made into a movie. Yeah, I envisioned going up to Hollywood and offering the rights to the story at auction. Talk about complacency. No one would show up. Yawn. That's the kind of enthusiasm Israel showed for worshiping and serving their own God.

The people of Judah paid no attention to what their God had commanded them to do. The Law of God had literally disappeared. They were so uninterested in it they lost it. They had no idea where it was and certainly had no idea what it said, and they didn't care. They were worshiping all kinds of gods and idols even though God said that was never to happen. They totally ignored the economic laws God gave. For instance, every 50 years all debts were to be forgiven and all lands returned to the family that originally owned them. We have no record that Israel ever obeyed that law. They did not faithfully pay their tithes. They also did not keep the Sabbath consistently. They paid cursory attention to making sacrifices, but their "sacrifices" were always animals they didn't want anyway. They didn't keep God's moral laws either.

How did they become so complacent? They thought "the Lord will do nothing, either good or bad" says verse 12. Let me put it another way. "God is irrelevant." Don't know where that God guy is, but he's no factor in my life. I've never seen him do anything for me. I've never seen him

punish any bad guys either. So maybe he's out there somewhere but he's either weak or not interested.

When you think like that you're going to become complacent. Do you know how many people live in San Francisco? One million. In the larger Bay Area the population is 7 million. And they are sitting right on top of the San Andreas Fault. Hey it hasn't done anything. So they give assent to the fact that it could be a problem, but they don't really live like it. Oh, they have strict building codes for new structures. But if that puppy pops, it's going to be epic. The destruction is going to be unimaginable, and it will be their fault, if you get my meaning. There are millions of complacent people living right on that fault. That's what happens when you think it won't do anything. That's what happened to Israel.

It is totally natural to want life to be good. This is the natural response to life that I mentioned in the introduction. Who doesn't want their life to be as good as possible? The ancient Judeans were as human as anyone. They figured that having lots of crops, lots of money and lots of kids would make life good. The absence of those things would make life bad. They wanted life to be good and so that was what they pursued. ***When you pursue abundance thinking it is the key to the good life, worshiping God isn't going to be a passion for you.*** Worship then becomes a means to an end. You will only do it if you think it will give you what you want.

I've seen this happen in many ways. There's the person who is convinced life will be good if he or she can have the successful career or business they envision. There's the young person who knows for sure that being accepted and popular is the thing that is the heart of the good life, or perhaps that future as a star athlete or entertainer. They may believe God is out there, maybe even that Jesus is Lord, but since that's not what will give them life they're pretty complacent about him. Yeah, believe, maybe go to church when it's convenient, but that's not the passion.

Years ago while serving in a ministry to students at Long Beach State University I saw a stark example of this. I had the chance to talk with a young guy on the baseball team there about Jesus. In the course of the conversation he asked, "Will believing in Jesus help me be a better baseball player?" He had heard several major league players who were Christians talk about their faith. He added two and two and got the wrong number. He figured it was believing in Jesus that gave them major league ability. I told him that faith in Jesus could give him better perspective and maybe a more positive attitude, but no, it wouldn't automatically improve his baseball skills. He immediately lost interest. He didn't care about God. He cared about baseball. That was the key to happiness. If Jesus could help him in what mattered he'd believe in him, otherwise forget it.

You put your zeal and resources into that thing that is your passion, the thing you believe will bring you life. If that is not the Lord then worship will, at best, be perfunctory, if it exists at all. You might attend church sometimes, but you will only do so out of some sense of duty when something more important or more desirable doesn't get in the way.

How does that compare with Deuteronomy 6:5, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength”? Israel tipped their cap to God then passionately pursued abundance. The results were predictable. They weren’t really worshiping God at all. They didn’t get the abundance they wanted. Obviously you can’t count on God to give you what you want. So they ended up with, “The Lord will do nothing, either good or bad.”

Israel made two terrible mistakes. First, they believed abundance in this world was what mattered. They thought the most important thing is to have a good life now, and that what gives the good life is abundance. Both of those premises are wrong, dead wrong. Second they believed that worship was just about getting what you want. ***They didn’t want to serve God, they wanted to use him.*** And in their minds God had not given them the things they wanted. So they moved on to other gods.

My wife has a gift. It is the gift of shopping. She’s good at it. She has some stores that she favors, but honestly she is unfaithful when it comes to stores. She goes from one to another just looking for what she might like and she’ll buy it there without a hint of guilt over how another store might feel about that. That’s how Israel approached worship. They would go from god to god just looking for what they wanted. Forget faithfulness.

The statement “the Lord will do nothing” really meant, “God’s not giving me what I want.” So the decision was to look elsewhere. Go to a different store until you find one that will give you what you want. You see the outcome at the end of 3:6. “They were still eager to act corruptly in all they did.” They worshiped the amoral and immoral gods of the cultures around them and they began to resemble them.

IMPLICATIONS

Thank you so much for the history lesson I did not want. Excuse me while I yawn. Why should I care that Judah was complacent, compromised and was going to be judged? That’s a valid question. In response I will ask one of my own. Why do you suppose God had these prophecies put into written form? Why didn’t the prophets just preach their message to those people some 2600 years ago? He made sure it was written because he wanted it passed on. He wanted people in subsequent centuries, people like us, to learn from Judah. What happened to ancient Judah can happen to us.

Avoid the error of Judah by:

RECOGNIZING THE DANGER OF COMPLACENCE AND COMPROMISE

Here is a mission statement from a well-known college that explains what its goal for its students is. “Let every student be plainly instructed and earnestly pressed to consider well that the end of his life and studies is to know God and Jesus Christ.” That college was Harvard. Would you say it is fulfilling that mission today? Obviously compromise occurred there. Harvard got focused on

something other than their stated goal. Something became more important than worshiping God and the result was they ended up compromising the founding objective.

That can and does happen to us as well. When we get focused on something other than knowing and glorifying God compromise starts occurring. It can be anything. Money, acceptance, reputation, success, pleasure, a particular circumstance in life. When that thing becomes the thing we think we must have it becomes our idol. Instantly we are on the compromise freeway going downhill and accelerating.

I recall a pastor who was focused totally on ministry success. That's one you can put a holy label on. Hey, I care about advancing the kingdom of God and that's what God wants, right? But it is a very small step to "I am going to be successful. I am going to have a big church and be famous." The pastor I saw who went down that road blew up relationships and eventually imploded. I don't know if he ever saw that what happened was he was never really focused on glorifying God. He thought what was necessary for real life was the "success" he envisioned.

Throughout my ministry I have pondered the question, why is it some believers in Jesus are committed, active, passionate, and some are so seemingly apathetic? There are two realities I don't think anyone would deny. One is that many, many Christians seem to be wearing foreign clothes. It is awfully hard to differentiate them from the people of this world. They pursue the exact same things, meaning they have the same values and priorities. All too many have only marginally different moral and ethical behavior. They are compromised. The second reality is there are an awful lot of complacent Christians. Why do churches have to try so hard to get people to be faithful to worship? Why do they universally have to pull teeth to get people to volunteer for ministries (especially Children's Ministry)? Why will people put up with incredible inconvenience to attend a football game but will balk at attending church if there's any inconvenience involved? Why does church always lose out if it competes with soccer, volleyball, baseball, fill in the blank?

Here's why: people have started with the same premises as Israel. They don't believe God will give them what they want, and what they want is success, riches, and so on for themselves and their kids. So they're not real passionate about him and they compromise to get what they want. If you see compromise or apathy in your life spiritually I guarantee you that there is something you've focused on that you think you must have and you don't think God will give it to you.

MAINTAINING A RIGHT VIEW OF WORSHIP

One of the major problems Israel had was their shopping spree view of worship. They believed that worship is about getting what you want. Deuteronomy 28:1-2 says, "If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations on the earth. All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the Lord your God." Then he lists the blessings of lots of kids and an abundance of crops and livestock and victory over enemies and so on.

The people of Judah said, “I want those blessings. I need those blessings, so I will worship God.” Listen to the thinking there. What is the passion? It is the blessings, not worshiping God. They saw worship as a means to an end.

A young engaged couple came to see me years ago. They had been to our church a couple of times. They were planning their wedding and needed someone to officiate. They wanted someone Christian. So they came to see me. They talked about how much they loved the church and how they really wanted to get plugged in to the church because they knew how important that would be for their marriage. They spoke of how much they looked forward to getting involved in our church. I didn’t say this to them, but I didn’t buy any of it. It was obvious to me that it went like this: “He leads a church. We want him to perform our wedding. He will do weddings for people who are in his church. Therefore we must convince him we will be part of his church.”

What were they passionate about? Their wedding. They weren’t passionate about the church. They saw it merely as a means to an end. So they tried to use it to get what they really wanted. I gave it to them because they were believers and marriage is a good and godly thing. But as I suspected, after the wedding I never saw them again.

If a person is using God to obtain some end, he is not worshiping God. He is worshiping an idol. This is the horror of the health and wealth gospel. The real goal is to be healthy and wealthy, not to know and glorify God. The idea is to use God to get what you want. Yes, I’m talking to you, Joel Osteen. Aside from the fact that it is not true and will not work, it is idolatry and it inevitably leads to complacency and compromise.

Yes, but aren’t you guilty of the same thing? You want forgiveness, acceptance from God and eternal life so you believe in Jesus so he will give you those things. How is that different? This is where the infinite brilliance of God’s plan comes in. I don’t worship Jesus to get those things because he has already given them to me. This is the miracle of God’s grace. I worship God because he has already given me what I want, not to convince him to give it to me. Our worship is not an attempt to manipulate God into giving what we want, it is a response of gratitude because he’s already given it. This is why Paul made such a huge point of clarifying that the gospel is by grace through faith. If we don’t get that we immediately start trying to earn something from God. We begin to use him for something we want, and when we do that complacency and compromise will come.

CLEARLY IDENTIFYING WHAT MATTERS

There were some wealthy, influential Christians in the first century, but not many. In 1 Corinthians 1:26 Paul said of the Corinthian Christians, “Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.” Despite what the health and wealth people claim, that is not the norm for followers of Jesus. Throughout history they have

been persecuted. They are an oppressed minority most of the time. The Bible says that following Jesus with all your heart is far more likely to get you persecution and hardship than it is to get you wealth and success in the world's eyes.

So we are faced with a question: which matters most to you, knowing and serving God even if it means hardship, loss and a difficult life, or pursuing and having the good things of this world? When you think about what matters to you eventually going to run head on into the question of whether eternal life is real or not. If you just take into account this life now, serving God and worshiping him is not going to be a good deal. If what matters is that you have a happy life with your share of the good stuff of this world the math of serving God is not going to work. It works perfectly if it produces eternal reward. So we must decide, is a good life right now what matters most, or is serving God regardless of the cost what matters most?

I don't really relish having that kind of choice to make. Our natural inclination, that strong self-preservation instinct, kicks in and tells us to get our "best life now." Get a good life for yourself right now because this is the only one we know. Grab for that stick and get control of this chaotic airplane.

But the Scripture tells us to set our minds on things above. It calls on us to love the Lord with all our strength. In other words, that's what matters regardless of the cost. But it is so easy to think we can never be happy without the stuff of the world. Here's the secret truth: the stuff of the world makes life easier, it can make it more pleasant and certainly more convenient and it can be fun in the short run. But it cannot give us the life it seems to promise. Consider Tom Brady, New England Patriots quarterback. He is famous. He is successful, acknowledged by all to be a lock for the Hall of Fame and to be one of the best 4 quarterbacks in football, possibly the best, he's handsome, he is ridiculously rich and he's married to a supermodel. Yet in an interview on *60 Minutes* he said, "There has got to be more than this. Why do I have 3 Super Bowl rings and still think there's something greater out there for me? A lot of people would think, 'Man, you've reached your dream. This is it.' Me, I think, 'God, there's got to be more than this.'" He was asked, "What's the answer?" He responded, "I wish I knew. I wish I knew."

What is most important to you? Is it to love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your strength? Is it to glorify him, obey him and serve him, regardless of what the cost in this world might be? If not, you are on the road to complacency and compromise and the end will not be pretty. You are sitting on a fault and it could go off any minute. And you are pursuing a mirage, that seeming oasis out in the desert that promises water to slake your thirst and give you life, but you will never get there, for it is an illusion.

Or you can choose to be one of the few who say, "Whatever life may bring, whether riches or poverty, health or sickness, my God is glorious, and my life will be about knowing and serving him. I will do that with all my heart, because that's all that really counts."