

Our Hearts and God's Character in Nahum and Zephaniah

DARRELL DELANEY

When was the last time we truly examined our hearts? I mean, really looked inside? Would we find a heart that is truly devoted to God, or would we find all types of clutter in there that gets in the way of our true devotion to God? When we allow all manner of things to clog up our hearts and lives, many spiritual problems can occur. First and foremost, our loyalty to the God who deserves all glory, honor and praise. In this episode of *Groundwork*, we will see how two prophets, Nahum and Zephaniah, address how God feels about these types of compromises, and what he does about it. Join us today as we learn more about the character of God, and what he may require of us, next on *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney; and Scott, we are in part four of our six-part series on the minor prophets, and we have said that minor means not that they are less important...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

But because the books are smaller in nature, as opposed to Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel that have longer chapters. They are called the major prophets, and we call these books the minor prophets. We went through Obadiah, Joel, Amos and Micah; and today, we are going to go through the books of Nahum and Zephaniah.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Nahum in particular...and maybe Zephaniah...people are little more familiar with Amos and Micah...maybe less familiar with these two, so it will be good to dig into them. Nahum, we think, prophesied in the early 7th Century BC during the reign of King Manasseh of Judah. One of the ways I always remember, Darrell, what Nahum is about is the letter N: Nahum preaches against Nineveh; the same city that Jonah had gone to once; and whereas Jonah's preaching...despite the fact that it wasn't the outcome Jonah wanted...at that time, the people of Nineveh repented...maybe around 760 BC, but they relapsed; and so, now a little over a century later, Nahum is almost a sequel to Jonah, and he has to come and predict the upcoming destruction of Nineveh because of their complete rebellion against God.

DARRELL DELANEY

And in an earlier series, we did talk about the book of Jonah and how he reluctantly went to the people of Nineveh and said the message: Repent or God is going to destroy it. They turned around, and the book, because it ends abruptly, we assume that Nineveh just went and flew straight and went to the right way, and we realize that when we look at the book of Nahum they did not; and so, even though Nahum's name means *comfort*, everything in this book, or a lot of the things in this book, are not comforting to hear, because God is upset because they have violated his law, and he must address it through this prophet, and that is exactly what

he does.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It begins: The message concerning Nineveh came as a vision to Nahum, who lived in Elkosh. ²The Lord is a jealous God, filled with vengeance and rage. He takes revenge on all who oppose him and continues to rage against his enemies! ³The Lord is slow to anger but great in power; the Lord will not leave the guilty unpunished.

So, you are right; not a lot of comfort from the prophet whose name means *comfort*, but a lot of truth coming there.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, you know, I was thinking about how God is upset in this, and it talks about how the Lord will not let the guilty go unpunished, which harkens back to God's character displayed on the mountain with Moses in Exodus. A lot of people struggle with the fact that God shows this wrath...this rage...this frustration...this anger. He wants to destroy anyone who opposes him. The reason why I think a lot of people may struggle with it is because we got the God of the New Testament, and after the cross and after the atonement that is full of love and mercy, but they don't necessarily have to be opposites. God could be upset because he loves; he could be upset because he has been one who cares a lot. God could be jealous because he loves; and it is not the same as the jealousy that we have.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is often said that insofar as God gets angry, it is love offended. We have said many times here on *Groundwork*, anger and wrath are never core characteristics of Israel's God; only love and lovingkindness is; but when that love is offended, then there has to be some consequences.

He is called a jealous God. We have pointed this out before, too. Jealousy is not envy. Envy is a deadly sin and there is no such thing as good envy.

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Jealousy is not necessarily a sin. Jealousy is when you want to keep what is rightfully yours. Israel deserved to give God all their love, but they were giving it to false gods; and so, God rightfully wanted to keep what was rightfully his, which was his people's love.

DARRELL DELANEY

And all honor, all praise, all glory and all faithful love goes to God; and so, when it goes somewhere else, God has a problem with it; and the Assyrians in this passage, they are the ones who were known for their arrogance, for their cruelty, for oppressing other folks. They were actually doing everything that God said not to do; and God is interested in bringing about justice, but not only justice, he is interested in bringing hope as well.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Nahum 1:7, you know, shows what God's core characteristic is: The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him... (he is close to those who trust in him).

So, when we trust in God, we find all the goodness of God, just, you know...God is just waiting for an excuse to love us; and when we trust him, he will; but when God finds people not trusting him, or actively turning away from him, as the people of Nineveh were doing, there has to be some consequences.

DARRELL DELANEY

And so, you know, it could be very easy for us to fret when we notice that it looks like evil is winning in the world. When we turn on the news and we see bad things happening, we could say: Well, where is God? I mean, I realize, too, in my own personal life that when my mom struggled with addiction, I was wondering

where was God when she was struggling with these things; but I do realize that even though God didn't cause those challenges that she has in her life, he did work in spite of them, because he showed me that it is a place where you can learn to be compassionate for people who suffer through different addictions and different problems; but he also showed us what it meant to trust him when he didn't have a quick-fix answer for some things; and I believe God has a date on the calendar when he will address certain things. It just won't happen immediately.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and so, what we see in Nineveh...and God, in Nahum 2 and 3...I mean, he says at different times: I am your enemy; I am your enemy; which is a terrible thing to have to read, but God is saying: Look, in the longest possible run, I am going to right all wrongs; I am going to correct all injustices in the world; that is in the long run, but every once in a while, we get kind of like sneak previews of that; and you know, that we have individual instances of God doing that in a specific situation; and though that is terrible to see, the good news there is that it reminds us that God has a justice, and at the end of the day, evil is not going to win; bad things are not going to be the final word; bad people are not going to finally get away with everything; victims are going to be elevated and healed; and what happens to Nineveh is just like a small example of God's ultimate goal to restore the whole world to the goodness and the delight and the flourishing that God intended when he created this world.

DARRELL DELANEY

And the beautiful thing is that theme keeps showing up, not only in this book, but also in the book of Zephaniah, which we are going to get into next. So, stay tuned.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney; and Scott, we are now going to move into the book of Zephaniah, who is another prophet. He is actually prophesying during the time of King Josiah in the 7th Century [BC]. He is actually doing this at the time of the southern kingdom of Judah; and they have been moving away from God for a long time; and they are actually doing some of the same things that Nahum was talking about Assyria was doing, which was worshipping other gods and moving away from God with their hearts.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, Zephaniah is working not too long before the 587 BC destruction of Judah and Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians; and basically, Zephaniah is here to tell Judah why that bad thing is going to happen: You have sinned. You have turned completely away from your covenant obligations for the law of God. Like the other minor prophets that we have looked at, like Micah and Amos, they have trampled against the poor; they are full of injustice; and worse yet, we find out very specifically here in Zephaniah 1, they have actively turned to false gods, and to some terrible ones at that.

DARRELL DELANEY

It says in Chapter 1 of Zephaniah: The word of the Lord that came to me, 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: ^{2a}“I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth...” declares the Lord. ³“I will sweep away both man and beast; I will sweep away the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea— and the idols that cause the wicked to stumble. When I destroy all mankind on the face of the earth,” declares the Lord, ⁴“I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem. I will destroy every remnant of Baal worship in this place, the very names of the idolatrous priests—⁵those who bow down on the roofs to worship the starry host, those who bow down and swear by the Lord and also who swear by Molek, ⁶those who turn back from following the Lord and neither seek the Lord nor inquire of him.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, it is a little hard to know in this passage, Darrell, what to make of his saying he is going to sweep away every living thing from the earth, because after the flood, God said he actually was never going to do that again; but this seems to be an image to get Judah's attention that, look, God is a God of justice, and don't think that *you* will be spared the wider judgment of God just because you fancy yourselves as the people of God.

You know, we get that image in Jeremiah, where the people would go to the temple and they would just repeat it over and over: This is...

Scott Hoezee/

DARRELL DELANEY

The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Like we are safe here, you know, as long as we come to the temple, God won't see the bad things we do, and Zephaniah is here to say: He has seen it; and worse, he sees that your worship is hollow as an empty rain barrel, because you are trying to worship God at the same time you are worshipping Baal; and worse, you are worshipping a god named Molek, and we know from ancient Near East, Darrell, that Molek worship often involved what has got to be about the most horrifying thing we could think about, and that is child sacrifice; and if that was actually happening in Israel, wow, that is the polar opposite of what God called his people Israel to be.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is definitely the opposite of that. Worshipping other gods goes against God's Ten Commandments. I mean, the first one is: I am God; there are no other gods before me. I am the God who brought you out of Egypt; and then, no graven images; no anything made from man to be worshipped and to be honored. Only God gets that honor and glory; but that word of them worshipping other gods was not just an indictment on what Judah was doing, but it was an indictment on all the surrounding countries in the wider world of Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Ethiopia, and Assyria. God will not tolerate being disrespected or usurped by anybody else. He is the God who needs to be worshipped, and God is very serious about worship.

SCOTT HOEZEE

As we have seen in other programs in this minor prophet series here on *Groundwork*, Darrell, when worship takes place in the context of injustice, not only does it not please God, it makes him sick to his stomach. It is worse than not having worshipped at all, and that is what he is accusing them of here. They are worshipping the starry host, right? The Bible clearly teaches we worship the *creator* not the *creation*, but they are messing that one up, too. Are they doing anything right on the worship front? It doesn't really sound like it; and I think, Darrell, you know, we could wonder about this ourselves. I saw a cartoon one time of two guys, kind of looked like they were thugs, kind of not so good-looking guys leaving church; and as they are going down the front steps of the church, the one guy says to the other: Well, at least on the good news front, I ain't made no graven images lately. Also, we might think we don't worship Molek or Baal, but you know, Tim Keller wrote a good book called *Counterfeit Gods*, where he pointed out: No; but there are other things that can mess up our pure devotion of worshipping God alone.

DARRELL DELANEY

If we think about it, anything that takes our time, attention, and resources away from God...it could be good things...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

They don't necessarily have to be evil things, Scott. Like I could scroll on my phone for six hours. That does not mean it is productive. It doesn't mean that that phone is evil, but it does mean that my heart is not fully devoted because I am distracted. So, I need to go through my life, and I would recommend that we pray about this: So, God, what in my life is taking time, attention and resources away? Maybe I work too many hours at work; maybe I don't spend enough time with the people who I care about or the people... I am not even available for God to serve him. This is a way to actually examine ourselves to see where our worship heart really is, because we don't want to just go through the motions.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and since we want to finish up looking at Zephaniah in this part of the program before we do some practical considerations in the third part of this program, let's just touch on, Darrell, briefly another major theme in Zephaniah, where he keeps predicting what is called the Great Day of the Lord. He mentions it fifteen times in the book of Zephaniah: The Day of the Lord. We might call it Judgment Day. We often kind of, in a popular way, refer to it that way. This is the ultimate time when God is going to undo all wrongs; and it is a two-sided coin...the Day of the Lord. I mean, it is a day of judgment, on the one hand. God has to address sin, but it is also a day of restoration, where a merciful God heals and forgives and redeems; and even though Zephaniah, like Nahum, has just got a lot of doom and gloom in this third chapter, wow, there are some great things here:

¹⁴Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem! ¹⁵The 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.

Darrell, you know, when I read those words, it shows how Zephaniah, even with the judgment that is necessary to speak, it is on the trajectory to the cross, right? We are headed toward the cross of Jesus Christ, where God ultimately and finally will take our punishment away from us...the one we deserve...and puts it on the shoulders of his Son, Jesus Christ; and really, this Day of the Lord that Zephaniah talks about fifteen times in his book is heading us straight toward Golgotha.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; in humility we are to receive that gift of restoration through Christ, and we are excited that God has already thought out that plan, and he has laid that plan into motion; but as we wrap up this episode, we want to get into some practical applications from the two books. So, stay tuned.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Darrell Delaney, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this fourth episode in a six-part series on the twelve minor prophets. We are hitting nine of the twelve in this particular series, and we are hitting two of them. We have been journeying in this program with the prophets Nahum and his words of judgment against Nineveh principally; and Zephaniah and his words of judgment against Judah; but also, as we just saw, Darrell, Zephaniah also has major themes of hope that God is aiming finally for an ultimate restoration of forgiveness; that God is going to take our punishment and take care of it some other way. We just said that ultimately as New Testament people we now know that that some other way was through the incarnation and then the death of God's own Son.

DARRELL DELANEY

And because God has done that, he is actually empowered us and incorporated us into his plan; and I think that is one of the things we could see as a practical application of the book of Nahum, is to understand that we are called to be agents of transformation, ministers of reconciliation in our current situation and in our context. We may see brokenness in relationships; we may see gossip; we may see discrimination and we may see inequity, but we are called to step into those spaces and use the voices that God has given us to speak truth to power to bring grace and mercy and love into that situation, using the power of Christ to do so.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And as we wrap up this program, again, a major theme in Nahum and Zephaniah, but maybe even more in Nahum is justice; and today, too. Justice, by the way, and righteousness are very similar in the Bible, and that is what we are called to be. In our lives, Darrell, as disciples of Jesus now, we are supposed to be conduits of God's justice. We are supposed to be people who ensure fairness in life, that we treat others with respect. We seek reconciliation when there is conflict. We try to avoid any kind of discrimination. We really want to see, in the Church, and hopefully, if the Church can set the example, maybe wider society will catch on, too, to create, really, a community—a culture of equity and kindness.

DARRELL DELANEY

And when we do that, I mean, Christ says it in Matthew 25, that when you do this for the least of those, you do it for him. So, you are actually ministering to the Lord while you let your light shine in that way; and I think also...as we pull from Zephaniah...I think the importance of humility, knowing that it is God who made us and not we ourselves...he is God and we are not...he deserves all our true devotion. That is one thing, but the other thing is that when we do mess up...not *if* but *when*...when we make mistakes, we are supposed to confess those to God; confess those to one another; so that we can be brought back into fellowship and relationship with one another. It takes humility to admit you are wrong and that you messed up. That is all God wanted. He wanted them to admit they were wrong so he could bring them back.

SCOTT HOEZEE

These messages of justice and judgment that we have seen in both Nahum and Zephaniah, and we have seen throughout the minor prophets in this series, tough to hear, and tougher yet when we, as we have been doing, and we must do when we turn the camera on us...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And say: Hey, we are the ones. It is like Nathan with King David: You are the man! You know, and so, I am the man. That is tough, and it does take humility to say: Okay, yes; I admit it. I need to lean into my identity as a new creation and not do what I have sometimes done, and that is gone the other way and sinned. So, it does take humility to do that. In humility we are gentle with other people because they fail the same as we do—the same as I do. We want to live under the lordship of Jesus Christ; and Paul talks about that a lot in the New Testament, including Colossians 3.

DARRELL DELANEY

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³For you died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. ⁵Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. ⁶Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. ⁷You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. ⁸But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. ⁹Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge of the image of its Creator.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we are, as Paul says in another place in Corinthians, we are ambassadors for Christ. We represent Christ wherever we go. In the books we studied today, Nahum and Zephaniah, the people forgot that. They forgot that they were supposed to be ambassadors for God...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

For Yahweh, the God of Israel, to other nations. Instead, they acted just like the other nations. So, they couldn't provide, you know, a witness to God when they were acting just like the people who didn't even know God and hadn't been called by God to live better. We know God; we have been called; we have been baptized, right? So, when Paul says, you know, you have been raised with Christ there in Colossians 3, that is pointing to baptism...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You were raised as a new creation. You are now a representative of Christ to those around you, and that should mean that you do stand up for the rights of others; you stand up for justice; you stand up for fairness; you stand up for equality. These are not political issues; they are gospel issues...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Deeply biblical issues; because what they all combine to achieve, if we could actually do it perfectly, would be shalom. You know, that wonderful shalom that is God's goal for all creation.

DARRELL DELANEY

And that shalom means that nothing is missing and nothing is broken, and everyone has what they need; and that has always been God's ultimate goal, to bring us back to shalom that was broken in Genesis 3, and just went downhill from there. He has been warning and trying to get people's attention to bring them back to him so that he can be the one to restore them, and that is one of the messages that both Nahum and Zephaniah are trying to get to us, that we have a God who cares, who is intervening in our situation; and he wants us to come back to his plan, and the way he does things so that he can use us to be agents of transformation.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; when we opened this program, Darrell, you mentioned when was the last time we really looked into our own hearts? When did we do a heart check to see if we are worshipping God purely, serving God purely, or if there are other things that are cluttering up our lives, getting in the way of undistracted worship, getting in the way of being an ambassador for Christ; and I think that is really what God is calling us to do. It is called, you know, also...to go back to Paul...it is called our daily dying and rising with Christ. We die with Christ because we have sins always to repent of, so we die to that all over again; and then we rise to newness of life, hoping that God not only will forgive our sins on an ongoing basis, which he does, but that on an ongoing basis, God, by his Holy Spirit, will call us back to our better selves, which is the new creation in Christ.

So, Nahum and Zephaniah remind us that is God's goal, and it has to be our goal as well, and by the Spirit, we can do it; thanks be to God.

DARRELL DELANEY

Well, thank you for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We hope you will join us again next time as we study the prophetic books of Haggai and Zechariah.

Connect with us now at groundworkonline.com to share what *Groundwork* means to you, or to tell us what you would like to hear discussed next on *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

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