

# OpenTheo

## September 18th: Zephaniah 3 & Matthew 13:44-58

September 17, 2021



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The Lord rejoicing over Jerusalem. Further parables.

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### Transcript

Zephaniah chapter 3. I'm going to read this to you. I'm going to read this to you. I'm going to read this to you.

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I'm going to read this to you. woe oracle, this time addressed to Jerusalem. However the hearer of the beginning of this woe oracle is not immediately told that the addressee is Jerusalem.

We might perhaps initially think that another of the cities of the nations is being

condemned. The addressee is described as rebellious and defiled and as the oppressing city. It is only in the next few verses that it becomes clear that Jerusalem is in view.

This alone serves to underline the ugly truth that Jerusalem has become like one of the pagan cities of the nations. So fully has she adopted their ways. There is a possibility of an arresting pun or wordplay raised by Thomas Rennes here.

The word used here for oppressors is elsewhere more commonly encountered as a noun, as dove or Jonah. This would give us city of Jonah which in the immediate context would make us think of Nineveh although the city being addressed is manifestly Jerusalem. Once again this would serve to accentuate the ambiguities of the addressee and the ways in which Jerusalem has become indistinguishable from the oppressive, idolatrous cities of the nations.

The city is condemned for its willfulness and moral corruption. The stubborn rebellion of Zion is displayed in its refusal to listen to counsel, discipline or correction and its resistance to the Lord whom she neither trusts nor serves. The condemnation of the people.

The rulers and authorities are compared to devouring predators who chiefly operate under the cloak of darkness. Jerusalem's officials are similarly creatures of violence who rather than guarding the people prey upon the vulnerable. From the civil authorities Zephaniah turns to the religious authorities.

Prophets are supposed to be faithful messengers of the Lord but have become untrustworthy and unreliable deceivers. Priests are supposed to be guardians of the holy and upholders of the law. However they profane what is holy, treating the things of God with little concern and doing violence to the law.

In sharpest contrast to the injustice of the authorities the Lord who dwells in the midst of Jerusalem is unwaveringly righteous and just, the light of his truth as dependable as the dawn. The shamelessness of the sinful leaders of Jerusalem is seen more fully against the foil of the Lord's righteousness and truth. The period running up to the destruction of Jerusalem was one during which the whole face of the region was dramatically transformed.

From the high water mark of the power of the Neo-Assyrian Empire with the overthrow of Thebes to the fall of Nineveh and Haran and the battle of Carchemish, the great powers of the region were dramatically changed. In all of this the hand of the Lord had been at work, fulfilling his word, bringing great nations low and raising up new powers in their place. Verse 6 describes the desolation and devastation left in the wake of this, the destruction of cities, their walls and their citadels, the desolation of their now empty streets and the depopulation of places that were once full of people.

Of course this was not the first time that the Lord had done this. The pages of Israel's histories were littered with accounts of the humbling and destruction of once proud powers. Reflecting upon current events and the events of the last few decades, in addition to the accounts of their longer term history, Israel should have recognized the hand of the Lord and humbled itself before him.

Each new reversal in the region was another warning to Jerusalem that its time would also come very soon. However rather than heed the warnings, at each warning Jerusalem had merely become more brazen in its sin, hardening its heart. In verse 8 the Lord announces that his judgement is about to come.

As in places like the book of Jeremiah, the judgement is described as a universal judgement about to fall upon all of the nations, notably including Judah. The whole earth will be consumed by it, even Babylon when its time comes. We might expect an elaboration upon the destruction that the Lord will effect, yet in the verses that follow we are surprised by a prophecy of salvation.

While the nations were in rebellion against the Lord, as Judah also was, the Lord is not merely going to bring them down as he has declared. On the other side of judgement he is going to effect transformation. In Genesis chapter 11 the nations' speech had been confused at Babel.

The people had been all of one lip and one speech but the unity of the people was used for the hubristic project of the building of the tower and city of Babel, designed to set up their dominion against the Lord's. The Lord here promises a sort of reversal of Babel, not merely in frustrating the Babelic projects of Assyria and Babylon, two nations associated with Nimrod and the original empire of Babel, but in accomplishing a true unity of the nations in the place of their false unity. The Lord is going to transform the lip of the peoples to a pure lip, one manifested in the united worship of the Lord.

It is not entirely clear where the Kush of verse 10 is located, whether it is Mesopotamian or the Nubian empire. It is most likely that it is the latter though, and the arrival of worshippers from such a great distance, from the very ends of the known world, would be an indication of the extent of the worship of the Lord and the way that it would spread over all of the lands. The daughter of my dispersed ones might be a reference to the exiles of Judah.

Perhaps the image is of the nations coming to Jerusalem, not now to make Jerusalem a sacrifice, as in chapter 1, but to bring Israelites once exiled as tribute to the Lord. In that time the character of Jerusalem would be transformed. The once proud and rebellious city, humbled on account of its iniquity, would now be freed of its shame and populated no longer by the haughty, but by a humble and lowly people, a godly remnant that would seek the Lord and find security in him as their shepherd.

In contrast to the current rulers of Jerusalem, they would not be corrupt or unjust, and as the Lord promises concerning the nations, their tongues would also be changed, their now truthful speech corresponding to the pure lip that the nations would be given. After the judgment and their restoration, Jerusalem and Israel will have reason for celebration and rejoicing. The slate will have been cleaned, the sentence concluded, the enemies removed.

The Lord will once again be in the midst of his people as their true and mighty king, giving them security, safety and strength, releasing them from the tyranny of fear. Not only will Jerusalem be rejoicing in the Lord, however, the Lord will be rejoicing over Jerusalem. We encounter similar imagery in Isaiah chapter 65 verses 18 and 19.

But be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create. For behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and be glad in my people.

No more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress. The meaning of the expression the ESV translates as, He will quiet you by his love, is variously understood. Some take it as the ESV translates it as a reference to the Lord's soothing of his people.

Fanny Snyman takes it to refer to the Lord's refraining from reacting in judgement to his people. Renz takes it to refer to the Lord's joy in the silent contemplation of his people, not merely in the exuberance of loud song. Verse 18 is extremely difficult to translate and to understand, leading Adele Berlin to call it unintelligible.

However, as Snyman argues, in context the general meaning seems to be fairly apparent. There will no longer be cause for sorrow at the festivals. As the Lord has saved the people and raised them up, they will no longer suffer the reproach of the nations.

Indeed, as the following verses declare, for Jerusalem's former shame will be given glorious renown and praise, as their fortunes are reversed and their reputation exalted. A question to consider, how might this chapter be seen as a fulfilment of the Lord's purpose in calling Abraham? Matthew chapter 13 verses 44-58 The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has, and buys that field.

Again the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had, and bought it. Again the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers, but threw away the bad.

So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from

the righteous, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Have you understood all these things? They said to him, Yes. And he said to them, Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old. And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there.

And coming to his hometown he taught them in their synagogue so that they were astonished and said, Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? Are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things? And they took offence at him. But Jesus said to them, A prophet is not without honour, except in his hometown and in his own household. And he did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief.

At the end of Matthew 13 Jesus is concluding his body of teaching on parables. The parables address Israel's history and the way that the kingdom comes. I've noted that we find pairs of parables and sometimes even triplets of parables.

They are intended to be read alongside and in conversation with each other. The first of the parables here is the parable of the treasure. And the treasure found in the field is an unexpected find, in a field that belongs to some other party.

The person who finds it must buy the field from an owner who does not know the value of what he possesses. The kingdom in this parable is valuable above all else. The man who finds it must sell all that he has to obtain it.

The treasure of the field eclipses the value of everything else in his possession. He willingly surrenders all other possessions, priorities and property to get this one field. It's the only thing that matters.

It completely changes his attitude to his life and all else is counted as nothing in order that he might gain the kingdom. It calls for unreserved and complete self-investment. And the purchase of the man is characterised by joy, a joy that utterly overwhelms any sense of loss of the rest of his possessions.

And alongside this parable of the treasure we find the parable of the pearl of great price. It's a counterpart but there are also differences. The parable of the pearl of great price involves a treasure not that's to be found in a field but one associated with the sea.

And now it's a merchant that finds this treasure. The focus in this parable is not primarily on the treasure but upon the finder. In the first parable, the parable of the hidden treasure, the kingdom of heaven is likened to treasure hidden in a field.

But in this one the kingdom of heaven is likened to the merchant in search of fine pearls. The first parable emphasises joy, surprise and hiddenness but the second doesn't even though it has seeking as a key element. The second focuses on the surpassing character of one particular example of a group of things being sought.

So he's seeking for pearls and he finds this one particular pearl, a pearl that is of greater worth than any other. And so he begins by seeking for pearls more generally and he ends up in possession of one particular pearl. The parables have different nuances.

They both emphasise the value of the kingdom and the appropriate action that must follow is emphasised, this selling of everything to obtain this one thing. But the first one seems to have a focus more upon the land. We can think about the parable of the treasure perhaps as a parable concerning Israel.

There is this great treasure, the treasure of the covenant, hidden in this field, this field of Israel and yet this hidden treasure of the covenant and the kingdom is not valued by the people who own it, is not truly recognised for what it is. But the person who recognises it, whether that's a faithful Jew or whether it's Christ himself or whether it's some Gentile proselyte, that person recognising the true value is willing to make the necessary sacrifice to obtain it. The parable of the pearl of great price may be speaking more from the perspective of a Gentile God-fearer or some other person who's coming upon the treasure of the covenant of Israel.

Among all these other nations there is this one particular pearl of great price and when he discovers the value of the covenant, when he discovers the value of the kingdom of Israel, he's willing to sacrifice everything to obtain it. And so as we've recognised already, paired parables need to be read alongside each other recognising that they are both similar and different. They have slightly different shades of nuance, they emphasise different facets of the kingdom but placed alongside each other they'll often reveal more than if they're read in detachment from each other.

The parable of the dragnet follows and even though the parable of the dragnet is not next to the parable of the wheat and the weeds, there seem to be a great many similarities between them. Sorting of good and bad, weeping and gnashing of teeth, the angels, the end of the age, division, all these sorts of things. But there are differences.

There's no enemy involved in the parable of the dragnet. There's almost an entire focus upon the negative punishment. We do find background in the Old Testament as well.

You can maybe think of Habakkuk chapter 1 verse 14 to 17. Here nations and peoples of the Gentiles are compared to fish in the sea and the Chaldeans are going through with their hooks and their dragnets and bringing people out. The imagery of the dragnet and the hook here is a negative one.

It's one of actually overcoming or defeating people. Related imagery could be found in Ezekiel chapter 32 verse 3. It's a reference to Egypt in the midst of the seas. But there are positive uses of the language of the dragnet too and of fishing.

In chapter 47 of Ezekiel verses 9 following So the dragnet can be used as a symbol both of blessing and of judgment. As in the case of the pearl of great price as a sea parable this relates chiefly to the Gentiles as distinct from Israel. So Israel has gathered a great many people from the nations who believe in or have pledged adherence to the God of Israel and they are going to be divided too.

This is the parable of the dragnet. Jesus concludes this body of teaching by speaking about the scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven. Once again Jesus is giving a saying that explains his use of parables.

There are three blocks of parables here each with an explanatory statement and this is the one in this particular body. It particularly relates to the disciples who will become teachers in the kingdom and they are to bring out both old and new things. Now we can see this maybe as bringing out truths from the Old Testament and maybe bringing out new truths of the gospel but it could also be a reference to what Jesus has already spoken about.

He's spoken about things that righteous men and prophets long to see and hear and also to things hidden since the foundation of the world. The things that the righteous men and prophets long to see and hear are the things that are new that Christ is bringing about through his ministry. But the things hidden from the foundation of the world are treasures that have been there all the time.

The oldest things of all but yet they've never truly been revealed. So maybe what they're bringing out are not just the new things that are being accomplished by Christ but the very old things that are being brought into the light by Christ. When we read the Old Testament as Christians we're not just bringing out truths that have been known since time immemorial.

We're revealing something about what is old in the light of Christ. The old treasure that has been hidden is being disclosed and now people can see its true value. Following this teaching Jesus spends time teaching in the synagogue of his hometown and Jesus has already challenged the primacy of biological family ties at the end of the previous chapter.

And here his hometown's presumed familiarity with him and his identity prevents them from seeing him. They just see him as the one that they're familiar with as the son of the carpenter. They know his family and his relatives.

They know his mother his brothers and his sisters and they cannot see beyond that.

They cannot see that this man from Nazareth could be anything more than a mere carpenter's son. We should recognize here the ongoing themes of hiddenness that have been in this chapter are once again at play in their failure to recognize who Christ is.

Also the themes of division. People are being divided on the basis of their failure to or ability to recognize Christ. And here in Jesus' own hometown there are people who are hearing but not understanding, seeing but not perceiving.

A question to consider. There are two key parables in this section that speak of selling everything in order to obtain the kingdom. Jesus has already taught concerning our relationship to wealth in the Sermon on the Mount and here he returns to themes that invite reflection upon economic attachments and commitments and priorities.

How could we reassess our economic values in the light of the teaching of the parable of the Pearl of Great Price and the treasure in the field?