

# 9 God's amazing grace

(3:5–8)

So far in Zephaniah's prophecy there has been an almost unending catalogue of gloom, but now, for the first time, we spot a glimmer of light. This is revealed when the character of the city of Jerusalem, in all its wickedness, is vividly contrasted with the holiness of God.

One of the best-known verses in Habakkuk's little prophecy makes a very serious point about the holy character of God: 'Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong' ([Hab. 1:13](#)). Therefore, because much evil had been done in Jerusalem, we would expect the Lord to act quickly to remove the city from his presence. Remarkably, instead of doing this, the Lord gently reminds his people of his gracious presence with them, even though they have been so rebellious. Perhaps Zephaniah himself is perplexed as he passes on this statement: 'The LORD within her is righteous; he does no wrong' ([3:5a](#)). It is the phrase 'within her' that is so surprising. Their powerful God is not hovering on the outside of the city waiting to see whether the people will amend their ways; no, he is right there in the midst, just as he has always been with his people. Despite their terrible disobedience, God tells Jerusalem that he has not deserted it.

How gracious is the Lord to us! He does not act like some petulant employer, parent or friend who threatens to have nothing more to do with us because we have displeased him by our conduct or failure to act. Instead, just as the Lord informed Jerusalem that he was within her and promised to remain there, so the Lord has promised to be with his chosen ones today (see [Deut. 31:6](#); [Heb. 13:6](#)).

We can learn two important lessons from this. Firstly, regardless of our conduct, God does not change his character; he may change his actions, but not his nature. Secondly, he is, always has been and will continue to be 'righteous'. However much he is provoked, he will do no wrong.

Yet the Lord is not idle; he is active and continues to dispense justice to the city (because he behaves in right ways—in other words, he is righteous, v. 5). The few Judeans who remained faithful to the Lord would have known the truth of this. Commentary on the words of verse 5 has been included in a good number of Christian hymns and songs, such as:

Great is thy faithfulness!  
Great is thy faithfulness!  
Morning by morning new mercies I see.  
All I have needed thy hand hath provided;  
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!<sup>1</sup>

And:

<sup>1</sup>Thomas O. Chisholm, 'Great is thy faithfulness', 1923.

New every morning is the love  
Our wakening and uprising prove;  
Through sleep and darkness safely brought,  
Restored to life and power and thought.<sup>2</sup>

Justice is the keynote of all God's activity. He never fails to dispense his blessings, even to those who do not deserve them. In hot countries, important business was conducted in the early morning before the rays of the sun blazed down. By saying 'Morning by morning he dispenses his justice', the prophet may be referring to those judges who were still faithful to the Lord and who sat at the city gates to mediate justice for the people. They had been consistent in their fairness, doing this work every morning. Certainly verse 5 speaks of God's common grace, which he pours out on all people. The sunshine and the rain fall equally upon those who are righteous and those who are wicked (see [Matt. 5:45](#)).

With this assurance of the Lord's presence and his continual grace 'every new day', one would expect that the people would be so overwhelmed with gratitude that they would hurry to make amends for their bad behaviour—but no. They remained unrighteous and continued to have no shame about their conduct.

Unsaved people who will not be deterred from selfishness and evil actions continue to live with the thought that they are immune from God's displeasure. Some are content merely to know that the Lord is around and that he is a righteous God. Such people would not call themselves atheists or agnostics, yet they have no desire to be intimate with God or to take too much trouble to obey his laws. They claim to be Christian people, and so they believe that everything will turn out all right in the end. They think they will 'muddle through' until they get old, and then perhaps they will turn to 'religion'. How foolish such people are! They forget that it is not only the old who die. Disease, accident and warfare are no respecters of age. Death will strike all people down, whether they have made appropriate preparations to meet their God or not. In these days in the West, when far more people are comparatively well off, such people continue to 'build bigger barns', not realizing that the Lord may demand their life at any time (see [Luke 12:16–20](#)).

## **The warnings given to Jerusalem (vv. 6–8)**

The people of Judah only had to look around them to see that the Lord had already been active in cutting off nations; so many of them had been destroyed. Even those cities which had apparently secure strongholds had been destroyed (v. 6—Zephaniah may have been referring to the corner towers of the cities), and their once-busy streets had been left devoid of people. Who had done this? Zephaniah tells the Judeans that it is the Lord: 'I have cut off nations ... I have left their streets deserted.' The evidence is there before the eyes of all who pass by, especially these citizens of Jerusalem. If they take the trouble to look, they will observe that no one is left in those cities that God has demolished.

They will then know that God is serious when he says that he will punish those who persist in their wickedness. In verse 7, the Lord reasons like a human being: 'After you have seen what I have done to those wicked, unrepentant cities around you, surely you will fear me and accept correction!' He says

<sup>2</sup> **John Keble**, 'New every morning is the love', 1827.

to them, ‘If you repent (that is, accept correction and all that goes with it), then your dwelling will not be cut off, nor will all my punishments come upon you.’

Anyone with a modicum of sense would be able to see the wisdom in the Lord’s argument and would eagerly rush to the Lord with gratitude and a sincere desire to turn from wicked ways and return to God’s paths. But these people, God’s own chosen people, although eager, were not willing to do the right thing. Instead, they acted ‘corruptly in all they did’. They did not even turn aside from some of their wickedness; rather they continued to act corruptly in *everything* they did.

‘There are none so blind as those who will not see’ is an old saying that is still true today. Some people do not want to be confused by facts. Nothing will bring them to their senses, and they persist in their foolish ways. They behave like those of Peter’s day and say, ‘Where is this “coming” he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation’ (2 Peter 3:4). Those people of New Testament times conveniently forgot that things have not gone on just as they had since the beginning of creation. Peter forcefully reminded them that they were blind and deaf; the Flood came and destroyed all living things that were not inside the safety of the ark. Those people of earlier times chose to ignore the judgement that God had brought upon the cities that surrounded them.

Sadly, so many people carry on today without giving any heed to God’s laws or his commands. Like these Judeans of old, they believe that ‘The LORD will do nothing, either good or bad’ (see 1:12). Yet the evidence is all around us that we will not live for ever. As morals decay and crime and violence are on the increase in our day, the warning is clear that God will bring judgement upon unrepentant sinners. The call goes out for sinners to turn back again to the Lord and find rest in him, which is the only place where true and lasting peace can be found.

This section ends with God’s announcement of a final and complete judgement upon sin and sinners (v. 8). The Lord will stand up to testify; he will assemble all the nations and their kingdoms so that he may pour out his wrath on them. ‘The whole world will be consumed by the fire of [his] jealous anger.’

For many, this will be the end, but the final verses of Zephaniah’s prophecy tell us of God’s fire that purifies as well as consumes (v. 9).

#### FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Study what the Bible says about those who persist in wickedness: 1 Samuel 12:24–25; Isaiah 26:10; 59:7.

2. Why do some Christian people refuse to take heed of God’s pleadings and his warnings? (See Luke 19:41–44; Luke 13:34–35; Lev. 26:31–32; Ps. 69:25; Micah 3:9–12.)

3. What use can we make of God's many calls to return to him? (See [Isa. 55:1, 6](#); [Amos 5:4–5](#); [Matt. 11:28](#); [John 7:37](#).)

#### TO THINK ABOUT AND DISCUSS

1. The civil, judicial and religious leaders of Jerusalem were specially selected for judgement ([3:3–4](#)). Why were they held accountable for 'the city of oppressors'? Will church leaders today be held similarly responsible?

2. Why do people fail to take notice of the warnings of God's judgement upon today's society?