



"Complacency is a deadly foe of all spiritual growth."
—A.W. Tozer

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Have We Settled on Our Lees?

Not too long ago, in doing some tidying up around the house, I came across a bottle of red wine that we had opened for a dinner party who knows when. Being moderate in such things, we had not finished the entire bottle, and I had re-corked it and put it aside, intending to finish it fairly soon. But "fairly soon" had never come. While pouring the soured wine down the drain, I noticed that an unexpectedly large amount of sediment had collected in it, coating the entire bottom of the bottle. Seeing it, I was glad I had decided not to sample it before emptying the bottle.

Now for something altogether different—though the two subjects will merge in due course.

Sometimes a modern translation of the Bible really helps to clarify a scripture or passage. The archaic King James English—the "thees" and "thous"—trips up some people, while others misunderstand how certain words were used back then. For instance, we use the word "tongue" in the sense of the physical organ in the mouth that helps us to form speech as well as to taste food, but back in the time of Shakespeare, it was the primary word for what we call "language." Such a simple error has spawned a major Protestant denomination—Pentecostalism, which elevates [speaking in](#)

[tongues](#) far beyond God's intent (see [1 Corinthians 12:4-10](#), 28-31)—and has led thousands of people astray.

However, at other times, modern translations err in trying *too* hard to make the text understandable. Occasionally, the translators interpret a phrase rather than translate it literally, as occurs in [Zephaniah 1:12](#): "And it shall come to pass at that time that I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and punish the men who are settled in complacency, who say in their heart, 'The LORD will not do good, nor will He do evil.'" What does this verse literally say? ". . . I will search Jerusalem with candles, and punish the men that are *settled on their lees*. . . ." What does it mean to be "settled on one's lees"? Is it relevant to us? Could we be guilty of it?

Understanding this figure of speech requires an overview of Zephaniah. Some have called him "the prophet of the Day of the Lord," which is the subject and main theme of his entire book. First, he describes that time in detail, showing that it will affect everybody and everything—nothing will escape it completely. In chapter 2, he calls on us to [repent](#) "before the LORD'S fierce anger comes upon you" (verse 2), then describes God's judgment on surrounding nations. Chapter 3 begins with a denunciation of Judah and its atrocious sins, but [God](#) promises in verses 8-13 that a remnant of faithful people will see the coming of [Christ](#) and the Millennium.

Zephaniah, then, is a book about our near future. God includes it in His Word to provide a wake up call to His people who have fallen asleep. He wants to save us however He can, and if He has to scare us to death to do it, He will! He prefers that we remain awake, watchful, and diligent, but if we start to drowse, He *will* throw cold water in our faces! Zephaniah is mainly composed of denunciations and threats—God is not being gentle! One commentator, George Adam Smith, writes of Zephaniah, "No hotter book lies in all the [Old Testament](#)!" It is like the kick of a booted drill sergeant at dawn!

Yet, even in Zephaniah's name a sense of hope remains: It means "The LORD has hidden." In [Zephaniah 2:3](#), God promises that He will make a way of escape for the godly remnant: "Seek the LORD all you [meek](#) of the earth, who have upheld His justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility. It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the LORD'S anger." In [Zephaniah 2:1](#), He calls

for His people to "gather together, O undesirable nation," and in [Zephaniah 3: 8](#), to "wait for Me . . . until the day I rise up for plunder." In other words, He advises us to fellowship with other faithful people and wait patiently for God to do His work.

Now that we have some background, what does "settled on their lees" mean? As one may have guessed, it is an expression derived from winemaking. *Lees* are what we call "dregs," particles of solid matter that fall to the bottom of the vat or jar or bottle during fermentation. Back in ancient Israel, they liked to leave their wine on the lees to make it stronger, but there was a time limit to how long they could leave it there. Good wine left on its lees becomes stronger and more flavorful, but if left too long, it can become thick and syrupy—to put it bluntly, it will be ruined. So, a diligent winemaker would periodically pour the wine from one vat to another, straining off the lees.

The illustration shows that a person settled on his lees was at least slothful, maybe even complacent, indifferent, and apathetic. Bad wine left on the lees becomes harsh and bitter. We can certainly understand the metaphor here. What happens to a person who lives with his sins? Does he not become worse? Sin's addictive quality causes him to plunge deeper and need more or worse [sin](#) to satisfy him. For example, a person who broods in smoldering anger over some supposed [offense](#) eventually becomes bitter and hateful.

Notice that those who are settled on their lees say, "The LORD will not do good, nor will He do evil" ([Zephaniah 1:12](#)). They believe in God's existence, but they limit His ability to participate in their lives. They think He is powerless to do *anything*, good or evil. This is similar to the thought expressed by the [Laodiceans](#) in [Revelation 3:17](#): "I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing." Neither one needs God, they think. This attitude produces slothfulness, complacency, indifference, spiritual [carelessness](#), and destruction, as [Zephaniah 1:13](#) shows.

When stretched too far, any metaphor breaks down, but generally, the lees symbolize a way of life. For a righteous person, his godly way of life will make him stronger, but he must take care not to become complacent even in this because he could turn thick and apathetic. The solution, then, is to drain off the wine, as it were, into a new vessel periodically. Biblically, this is called "putting on the new man." We must be evaluating ourselves often,

replacing worldly values with godly ones (see [Colossians 3:1-17](#)). To use a modern expression, we cannot be "resting on our oars" spiritually; we should never become satisfied with our spiritual progress.

What do we have to show for our spiritual lives right now? Or, have we settled on our lees? The Master Winemaker is [waiting](#) to pour us into heavenly vessels of honor and glory, so let us not disappoint Him by producing an inferior vintage.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Don't Be Indifferent \(1995\)](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

We need to be sober and alert, realizing that we don't have an infinitude of time to prepare for Christ's second coming. We cannot allow ourselves to become surfeited with the world's distractions, being lulled off to sleep as the foolish virgins, wasting our precious time. We need to exercise steadfast faithfulness, exercising vigilance as we approach the Day of the Lord in order that we don't let it take us by surprise. Living righteously on a continuous basis will put us in the right attitude, keeping us prepared for this event, causing us to properly have love for His appearing. Sorrow, fear, anguish, and dread characterize those who are unprepared.

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[Are You Teachable?](#)

by Staff

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