

A Fresh Start

Lesson for June 25, 2023

Unit I: The Prophets Proclaim God's Power
Scriptural Background: Zephaniah 3:14-20
Printed Text: Zephaniah 3:14-20

Key verse: *"The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you;"* (Zephaniah 3:17 a, b, NIV)

London businessman Lindsay Clegg told the story of a warehouse property he was selling. The building had been empty for months and needed repairs. Vandals had damaged the doors, smashed the windows, and strewn trash around the interior.

As he showed a prospective buyer the property, Clegg took pains to say that he would replace the broken windows, bring in a crew to correct any structural damage, and clean out the garbage. "Forget about the repairs," the buyer said. "When I buy this place, I'm going to build something completely different. I don't want the building; I want the site."

Compared with the renovation God has in mind, our efforts to improve our own lives are as trivial as sweeping a warehouse slated for the wrecking ball. When we become God's, the old life is over (2 Corinthians 5:17). He makes all things new. All he wants is the site and the permission to build.

Ian L. Wilson.

In today's lesson, we see the same type of renewal. "God has the sovereign authority to call all nations of humanity into account and issue those who love Him a fresh start and renewal in His love (Pathway, Sunday School Publishing Board, June, July, August 2023, p. 21).

Key Terms

1. **Fortunes** (verse 20) – The restoration of honor to those who are redeemed. Captivity (KJV).
2. **Gather** (verse 19) – To remove; assemble; collect; bring together.
3. **Shout** (verse 18) – Give a blast; cry aloud.

Lesson Background

In Zephaniah 1:1, the author introduces himself as "Zephaniah son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah." Among the prophets, this is a unique introduction with its long list of fathers back to Zephaniah's great-great grandfather, Hezekiah. So why stop with Hezekiah? Most likely, the prophet wanted to highlight his royal lineage as a descendant of one of Judah's good kings. The reference to "this place" in Zephaniah 1:4 indicates that he

prophesied in Jerusalem, while his many references to temple worship display a strong familiarity with Israel's religious culture. All these factors paint the picture of a man who was at the center of Judah's political and religious world, a man whose close proximity to those in power would have given his shocking message an even greater impact.

The book tells us that Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of Josiah, the king of Judah from 640 to 609 BC (Zephaniah 1:1). We can begin to pinpoint exactly when Zephaniah prophesied by accounting for a few details in the text. First, in 2:13 the prophet predicted the fall of Nineveh, an event which occurred in 612 BC. Further, Zephaniah made frequent quotations from the Law (for example, compare 1:13 to Deuteronomy 28:30, 39), a document that remained lost in Judah for much of Josiah's reign. Therefore, Zephaniah more than likely prophesied in the latter part of Josiah's rule, after the king discovered the scrolls of the Law in 622 BC (2 Chronicles 34:3–7).

This all means that Zephaniah grew up under the reign of Josiah's predecessors: Josiah's grandfather, the evil king Manasseh, and Manasseh's son, the young and evil Amon. As a young man, the prophet-to-be would have been surrounded by the trappings of idolatry, child sacrifice, and unjust killings—strong influences on a young mind (2 Kings 21:16; 2 Chronicles 33:1–10). But Zephaniah grew into a man of God, able to stand before the people and proclaim God's message of judgment and hope to a people that had gone astray.

This book mentions the day of the Lord more than does any other book in the Old Testament, clarifying the picture of Judah's fall to Babylon and the eventual judgment and restoration of all humanity in the future. In this case, it refers primarily to God's impending time of judgment on the nation of Judah. Zephaniah saw in the day of the Lord the destruction of his country, his neighbors, and eventually the whole earth (Zephaniah 1:2, 4; 2:10). Zephaniah wrote that the day of the Lord was near (1:14), that it would be a time of wrath (1:15), that it would come as judgment on sin (1:17), and that ultimately it would result in the blessing of God's presence among His people (3:17).

Like the writings of many of the prophets, the book of Zephaniah follows a pattern of judgment on all people for their sin followed by the restoration of God's chosen people. Zephaniah's primary target for God's message of judgment, the nation of Judah, had fallen into grievous sin under the reign of their king, Manasseh. Zephaniah's prophecy shouted out for godliness and purity in a nation sinful to its core. The people of Judah had long since turned their backs on God, not only in their personal lives but also in their worship. This reflected the depth of their sin and the deep need for God's people to be purged on their path to restoration.

Those living in Judah had turned the worship of God into a fiasco. Not only had they built their own places of worship to revere other gods (called "high places" in the Old Testament), but they had begun to desecrate the temple, which at that time was the dwelling place of God (Zephaniah 1:9).

As modern-day believers in Christ, we, too, make a mockery of worship when we live in open sin. Do you come before the Lord with a false face, week in and week out, looking the part without acting it? Allow Zephaniah to remind you how seriously God takes your life and your relationship with Him. And if you have failed, remember the message of Zephaniah 3—God is always a God of restoration and hope.

Lesson In Depth

I. Renewed by God (Zephaniah 3:14-17)

Zephaniah 3 deals with the wickedness and restoration of Judah. Verses 1-7 concentrate on a pronouncement against Jerusalem. God proclaims both judgment and restoration for the Jewish people in verses 8-13, and the prophet describes rejoicing because of the restoration in verses 17-20. This is the focus of this week's lesson.

Sing, O daughter of Zion! In light of the glorious promise of restoration, Israel should sing and shout with joy. God will save and redeem them from both their enemies and their iniquities.

Be glad and rejoice with all the heart, O daughter of Jerusalem: The location of the two nations. For now the children of Israel and of Judah shall be together, and seek the Lord their God, and the true Messiah, and find him. And shall embrace him, profess and serve him; which will be matter of great joy.

And this will be sincere and hearty, and devoid of all hypocrisy. Several terms are used, describing the people of the Jews, to comprehend them all. And several words to express their joy, in order to set forth the greatness of it, as their happy case would require.

The joy of the daughters of Jerusalem is the fact that they have been restored. People from all over the world will come to worship there. This promise of the coming greatness of Jerusalem is spoken just after the prophecy of Jerusalem's destruction. The victory of the Lord over sin, and the promise of the restoration of Jerusalem, should make them rejoice in their hearts.

The basis for rejoicing in verse 14 is that Israel's day of judgment is past and her King is residing in her midst. His departure just prior to Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of the temple is graphically depicted (in Ezekiel chapters 8 to 11). But He will return as Lord and Messiah, a fact so glorious that it is repeated (in verse 17).

The Lord hath taken away thy judgments: Both outward and inward. Not only exile, poverty, contempt, and reproach among the nations of the earth, but hardness of heart, blindness of mind, impenitence, and unbelief, to which the Jews are now given up, in a judicial way.

But at this time these shall be removed, through the goodness of God unto them, and the power of divine grace upon them. They will be brought to a sense of sin, and an acknowledgment of it; their iniquities will be pardoned; and, the cause being removed, the effects will cease. And all calamities, corrections, and punishment, will end. And they will be put into the possession of their own land and enjoy all the privileges of the church of God. And so, will have just reason to sing, shout, and rejoice.

He hath cast out thine enemy: That is, the Lord has removed the enemy that was in possession of their land, and so made way, and prepared it for them. He has swept him away, as the word signifies, with great force, with much ease, and like so much dirt and filth.

He stood in their way, nor could they have easily removed him; but the Lord did it or will do it. Though it may be by instruments, by means of the Christian princes. This is to be understood of the eastern antichrist, the Turk, now in possession of the land of Israel; but shall be obliged to depart from it, when this prophecy shall take place, for a reason following.

The King of Israel, even the Lord, is in the midst of thee: That is, the Lord Jesus Christ, the true Messiah. One of whose titles is the King of Israel, of the spiritual Israel, King of saints, both Jews and Gentiles.

In whose hearts he rules by his Spirit and grace. And to this passage the Jews in Christ's time seem to have respect, allowing this to be the character of the Messiah (Matt. 27:42; and also, Nathanael; John 1:49).

Now at this time Christ will be in the midst of the converted Jews, by his spiritual and gracious presence, as their King, to reign over them, to whom they will be subject. And to protect and defend them and deliver them out of the hands of all their enemies. And so he is in all his churches and will be to the end of the world.

Thou shalt not see evil anymore: The evil of affliction or punishment; the evil of captivity, disgrace, and contempt. This shows that this prophecy does not respect the Babylonish captivity, and deliverance from that. For since that time, they have seen evil by Antiochus Epiphanies, in the times of the Maccabees; and by the Romans. And have had a large and long experience of it; but when they are converted and returned to their own land in the latter day, all their afflictions and troubles will be at an end, they will know them no more.

They are forgiven and restored.

Revelation 12:10 *“And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night.”*

In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, fear thou not: Do not be afraid of any enemies; neither outward ones, the armies of Gog and Magog, or the Turk, who will threaten, and will attempt to dispossess them of their land, now returned to it. Nor inward and spiritual enemies, sin, Satan, death, and hell, being all vanquished and subdued by Christ. This will be said, not by the enemies themselves, who will confess they have no power to stand before the mighty God, but either by the prophets of the Lord, or by the people themselves.

Encouraging one another, every man his neighbor, by the Lord himself, as the Septuagint and Arabic versions supply it, “the Lord shall say to Jerusalem”. This will be said at the time of the Jews' conversion, when reinstated in their own land, and shall be threatened with another remove from it, which they will have no reason to fear.

And to Zion, Let not thine hands be slack: This implies weak, remiss, hang down through fear of mind, and fainting of spirit. And so unfit to meet the enemy or perform duty. But, on the contrary, pluck up a good heart, be of good courage, fear not the enemy, be vigorous, active, and diligent, in the performance of the service of the Lord.

This is said about the natural Israelite, and to the church (Zion), spiritual Israel. There will be nothing to fear because the Lord will be with His own.

“Fear thou not. What! Not a little? No, Fear thou not. But surely, I may show some measure of trembling? No, ‘Fear thou not.’ Tie that knot tight about the throat of unbelief. ‘Fear thou not’: neither this day, nor any day of thy life. When fear comes in, drive it away; give it no space. If God rests in his love, and if God sings, what canst thou have to do with fear?” (Spurgeon)

The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy: As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride (Isaiah 62:4), the Lord will exult over His people with gladness and song, resting in quiet ecstasy over His people in whom is all His delight (Deuteronomy 30:9; Isaiah 54).

The might of man cannot be compared to that of God. God created the world, and all that is in it. He controls everything.

Acts 4:12 *“Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.”*

Revelation 21:3 *“And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God [is] with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, [and be] their God.”*

The love that God has for man is agape love. It is love that is so great, that God sent His Son to die on the cross to save our souls. There is joy in heaven over one sinner who receives Christ as his Savior.

II. Renowned for God (Zephaniah 3:18-20)

Them that are sorrowful for the solemn assembly: Unable to celebrate the appointed feasts (Exodus 23:14-17), while in exile, the godly remnant sorrowed. But the Lord will remove their sorrow, giving them praise and fame (verse 19). Those who were sorrowful of losing daily fellowship with God at the temple will be brought again and restored.

At that time: The time of the return of the King, Messiah, when the Jews will be regathered and become a source of blessing to the world, fulfilling Israel’s original destiny (Deuteronomy 26:18-19; Isaiah 62:7).

Behold I will undo all that afflict thee: When the Messiah shall gather all together, He will undo all afflictions and deliver us from the burden of sin. And all the antichristian states that have afflicted the Jews, or shall attempt to distress them at the time of their conversion. And will be fulfilled at the time of the pouring out of the seven vials of God’s wrath upon them, which will issue in the entire undoing and ruin of them. Especially the seventh and last of them. Which, when poured out, will clear the world of all the enemies of Christ, his church, and people.

And because this will be a wonderful event, and of great moment and importance. Hence the word “behold” is prefixed to it, as exciting attention, as well as a note of admiration and emphatic declaration or statement.

And I will save her that halteth: That has sinned, and is weak in faith, and cannot walk, at least but haltingly. Which is like a lame and maimed sheep, of which there is danger of its being left behind and lost.

But the Lord here promises he will take care of such, and save them from all their sins, and from the hands of all their enemies. And bring them through all difficulties and discouragements into his church, and to their own land. They shall none of them be lost, even the meanest and weakest of them, any more than the healthful and strong.

And gather her that was driven out: Even everyone that was scattered abroad in each of the nations of the world (See Micah 4:6-7).

And I will get them praise and fame in every land, where they have been put to shame: Being converted, they shall be spoken well of everywhere. They shall be praised for their ingenuous acknowledgment of their sins. For their sincere repentance of them; and for their faith in Christ.

And for their ready submission to his Gospel and ordinances. And the fame of their conversion shall be spread everywhere; and they shall be in great credit and esteem in all Christian countries, where their name has been used for a taunt and a proverb. And so, “instead of their shame”, as R. Moses interprets it, they shall have glory and honor in all places.

This is speaking of Israel’s restoration to their land. It also, speaks of restoring her reputation as God’s people in all the world. God will destroy the enemies of Israel, and all of God’s people, including the church. This last destruction of the enemies of God, and His people, occurs just before Jerusalem is totally restored.

At that time I will bring you again, even in the time that I gather you: That is, at the time that the Lord will gather them in the effectual calling to himself and to his church, he will return them to their own land. And, as soon as the Jews are converted, they will not only be gathered into Christian churches, but will be gathered together in one body, and appoint themselves one head. And will go up out of each of the lands wherein they have been dispersed, and enter into their own land, and possess it. At the same time, they are made partakers of the grace of God, they will enjoy all their civil privileges and liberties (see Hosea 1:11).

For I will make you a name and a praise among all people of the earth: This is repeated from the preceding verse (Zephaniah 3:19), for the confirmation of it. And in connection with the following clause, to show when it will be.

When I turn back your captivity before your eyes, saith the Lord: Or “captivities”; meaning not the several captivities of the kings of Judah in Babylon, as of Manasseh, Jehoiakim, Jeconiah, and Zedekiah. But the two-fold captivity of this people, literal and spiritual.

Their present outward exile from their own land, captivity, and dispersion among the nations. And their spiritual captivity or bondage, to sin, Satan, the law; and the traditions of their elders. From both which they will be delivered at one and the same time; and which will be notorious and manifest.

What their eyes will see with pleasure and admiration; and which may be depended upon will be done, since the Lord has said it. Whose purposes, promises, and prophecies, never fail of their accomplishment. He is God omniscient and knows with certainty what will be done. He is God omnipotent and can and will do whatever he has determined, promised, or said should be done. God will gather His people from all over the world and bring them to Jerusalem. This is speaking of that great gathering in the end times when all of God's people come home.

In the spiritual realm, this is speaking of all the believers in Christ. In the physical, this speaks of all the true Jews from all over the world coming home to Israel. God keeps His promises. "Saith the LORD" means there is no question about this happening. God said it, it will be.

Lesson Summary

This lesson emphasizes a strong note of joy. Israel is called to sing and shout for joy. Indeed, even God "will rejoice over you with singing." After two and a half chapters of unrelenting judgment, Zephaniah's prophecy ends with a call to overflowing joy. God is going to do something so marvelous that his people will sing with joy unbounded.

What made the world so dark in Zephaniah's day? The world as they knew it was coming to an end. The northern kingdom of Israel had been wiped off the pages of history two generations before and there was danger in the air in Judah. True, King Josiah was trying to reform Judah before it was too late. But was it too late? An army of wild Scythians from southern Russia were sweeping down from the north and, while that army was stopped by Egypt, the thunderstorm of Babylon was building off in the distance.

Zephaniah announces that the storm is going to break, not in spite of God's intervention, but because of it. God's people had hoped that "the day of the Lord" would come soon and they would be delivered. But here in Zephaniah, God's prophet says that the coming day of the Lord would bring judgment not only, or first, on the nations, but on Judah. "The great day of the Lord is near—near and coming quickly (1:14)."

Yes, Yahweh will gather the "nations... to pour out my wrath on them—my fierce anger. The whole world will be consumed by the fire of my jealous anger (3:8)." And that will include Judah. For them, too, the day of the Lord "will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom....(1:15)."

But before that terrible day of the Lord comes, God invites his people to return to him. "Gather together, gather together, O shameful nation, before the appointed time arrives and that day sweeps on like chaff before the fierce anger of the Lord comes upon you.... Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility, perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord's anger (2:1-3)."

In our text the cycle of bad news that has run for two and a half chapters has been broken. In a dark world, God's people are invited, no, commanded to sing for joy.

Why? Because the God who threatened to come upon the world and his people in wrath has come in a very different way. Yes, he did come upon Judah exactly as promised here in Zephaniah. They were dragged off by Babylon and scattered among the nations. But that wasn't the end of the story. He brought them back to their land, to God's land. But that wasn't the end of the story either because it wasn't the same as before. Life was still dark and difficult. "Where is the God of justice?" (Malachi 2:17)

Our text in Zephaniah will help us sing for joy, precisely because they show us the coming God even as we live in darkness. No, Messiah isn't named, but God appears here in the various roles that Messiah will fill. In verse 15, God is the pardoning judge. "The Lord has taken away your punishment" that God had so terribly threatened in prior verses. In the remainder of that verse God has come as the divine warrior who "has turned back your enemy." And the God who seemed absent in the midst of Israel's dark days is back. "The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you..." That image of Immanuel, of God with us is repeated in verse 17. This text ends with God as shepherd dealing with the wolves and false shepherds who oppressed his flock (verse 19). He will "rescue the lame and gather those who have been scattered." The shame of God's defeated people will be replaced by "praise and honor in every land where they were put to shame." In every way, God will come and "restore your fortunes... (verse 20)."

No wonder Israel is called to rejoice and be glad, to sing and shout. So are we, even when the world is dark. This prophecy helps us see the coming Messiah in brighter tones. He is the One who satisfied God's justice, so the Judge can pardon. He is Christus Victor who has defeated the principalities and powers who ruin human life. He is Immanuel who filled the empty spot at the center of life. He is the Good Shepherd who gathers all his lost sheep into the fold. He is the creator God who will restore his whole creation, so that we can glorify God and be glorified by him.

What a great text for the dark days in a world where God seems absent and inactive. Zephaniah assures us that appearances are deceiving. "The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save." Because God has come in Christ, the comforting promises of verse 17 are true for us today, even when the world is dark. "He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing." No wonder Zephaniah repeats the words we hear over and over in the Christmas story. "Do not be afraid, O Zion, do not be afraid... the Lord your God is with you."

What is this week's lesson saying?

- God is abundant in his grace to sinners who deserve only judgment.
- God has taken away our judgments and dealt with our enemies (Zephaniah 3:15).
- God is in our midst, so we no longer have to fear (Zephaniah 3:15).
- God loves and delights in his people (Zephaniah 3:17).
- God will gather all of us who are weary and worn out (Zephaniah 3:18-20).