

“Renewed in God’s Love”

Background Scripture: Zephaniah 3:14-20

Devotional Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:12-21

Zephaniah 3:14–20 (NIV)

¹⁴ *Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, daughter Jerusalem!* ¹⁵ *The 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.* ¹⁶ *On that day they will say to Jerusalem, “Do not fear, Zion; do not let your hands hang limp.* ¹⁷ *The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.”* ¹⁸ *“I will remove from you all who mourn over the loss of your appointed festivals, which is a burden and reproach for you.* ¹⁹ *At that time I will deal with all who oppressed you. I will rescue the lame; I will gather the exiles. I will give them praise and honor in every land where they have suffered shame.* ²⁰ *At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home. I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes,” says the LORD.*

LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Fact:** To study Zephaniah’s prophecy of restoration of a remnant.
- **Biblical Principle:** To be assured of God’s Word and that He keeps His promises.
- **Daily Application:** To resolve to stand on the promises of God!

INTRODUCTION

Nobody Wants to Do It!

A task that no one wants to do is to notify the next of kin that a loved one died in a traffic crash or a similar incident. A veteran of 30-plus years in law enforcement said that this was the worst part of his work. These situations are especially stressful when there are multiple deaths.

Old Testament prophets also had the unwelcome task of bringing bad news. Their task involved not news of deaths that had happened, but deaths that were to come. And reactions to the prophecies differed. At one extreme was wholesale (large quantities) repentance (example: Jonah 3:5–9). Much more common was the other extreme of rejection of the message and persecution of the prophet (example: Jeremiah 38:1–6).

Zephaniah was a prophet like others in bringing news both good and bad. How he was treated is unknown to us. But his prophecies still bear study today.

LESSON CONTEXT

The prophet is identified in Zephaniah 1:1 in terms of the name of his father. That was a normal way to identify a person more specifically. But that designation is part of a listing found in no other writing prophet: the four generations of those who came before Zephaniah. Zephaniah was a great-great-grandson of Hezekiah. The prophet rebuked members of the royal

family (Zephaniah 1:8), and it has been suggested that his being of royal blood gave him more grounds to condemn his cousins.

Zephaniah 1:1 also features the name of “good” King Josiah, during whose reign (from 640 to 609 B.C.) Zephaniah prophesied. The flagrant iniquity that is condemned throughout most of the book seems to indicate that the reforms of Josiah had not yet taken place. The revival began after the Book of the Law was found in 622 B.C. by Hilkiah the priest while doing repairs to the temple (2 Chronicles 34:8–15). A possible time for the book of Zephaniah is, therefore, in the late 620s B.C.

Judgment, punishment, and hope are three topics frequently found in the writings of the prophets. Judgment indicates that God has compared His announced expectations with the obedience of the people, nation, or nations being considered. Punishment is pronounced on those found guilty. Hope often follows when the punishment has accomplished its purposes. All three topics are present in the book of Zephaniah.

The prophet is primarily concerned with Judah’s continued rebellion against God (see 2 Kings 22:1–23:28). The first two chapters of the book of Zephaniah describe a coming Day of the Lord, in which Judah is to face judgment and punishment for idolatry. The punishment promised was to be a tool of God for purifying His people.

The prophecy presents us with a sharp change of theme beginning in Zephaniah 3:9, where restoration of a remnant takes center stage. The current study reviews the final verses of Zephaniah, where a hopeful theme resounds.

Praises to the Lord: Zephaniah 3:14–17

After God’s promise of taking away trouble, the people of Israel will call on Him, serve Him, and have nothing to fear (Zephaniah 3:8-13). When the cause is removed, the effect will cease. In view of such restoration, peace, and security, Judah and Israel can confidently rejoice and praise the Lord. The nation is exhorted to give heartfelt expression to singing, shouting being glad, and rejoicing because of all that God has done for them (v. 14).

This verse under consideration stands in sharp contrast to Zephaniah 3:11, which addresses wrongful rejoicing because of pride. Future rejoicing *with all your heart* was to have an entirely different basis as a response to the fulfilled promises of the Lord. God’s people were not forgotten, and times of joy and happiness lay ahead. Indeed, when the first wave of returnees from Babylon laid the foundation for the second temple, their rejoicing was heard far away (Ezra 3:11–13).

1. Who is called to rejoice in response to the fulfilled promises of the Lord? (Zephaniah 3:14)

What Do You Think?

What prevents you from singing and shouting for joy more frequently?

Digging Deeper

What other verses encourage you to overcome these barriers to more joyful worship?

The prophesied Day of the Lord and its attendant *punishments* would be a thing of the past (see Zephaniah 1:7–10, 14–16, 18; 2:2–3).

The punishment of oppression was the consequence of the nation’s sinful choices, but God would not allow those consequences to destroy completely. Instead, like a parent considering a punishment to be sufficient, He will end it (compare Isaiah 40:1–2). God’s affirmation of His faithful remnant in this regard is to be the cause for the joyful celebration noted.

2. What other reasons did Zephaniah give for rejoicing? (Zephaniah 3:15)

What Do You Think?

Does accepting the reality that God has taken away judgment for your sins dismiss feelings of guilt? Why or why not?

Digging Deeper

How will you patiently bear the consequences of past behavior (examples: health issues, broken relationships, legal problems)?

The most important reason for rejoicing was that: *the Lord*, the real *king of Israel*, will be with the people. In the ancient Near East, the presence of a king was essential to the well-being of his people. An absentee ruler could not judge disputes. People might think, *While the cat’s away, the mice can play* (compare Matthew 24:48–49). A ruler who was present and active could be expected to provide some degree of protection and justice. So when Zephaniah describes God as a king present *with* His people, the prophet is telling a powerful story of God’s protective rule (compare Isaiah 54:14; Zechariah 9:8–9). The text thus serves to provide encouragement for those who would be oppressed in the still-future Babylonian (Chaldean) exile.

This language of presence foreshadows significant New Testament themes. God’s promise to dwell with His people was fulfilled in Jesus. As the incarnate Word, He physically lived among people (John 1:1–18). Before He ascended, Jesus promised that “where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20). The indwelling of the Holy Spirit for the Christian is a blessed reality (Romans 8:9–11; 1 Corinthians 6:19; 2 Timothy 1:14). The promise here is also a reminder of Jesus’ final words, as given in Matthew 28:20: that He would be with His people—always!

3. What was the most important reason for rejoicing rather than fear? (Zephaniah 3:15b–17a)

What Do You Think?

What spiritual practices do you lean into when you need to overcome fear or anxiety?

Digging Deeper

How does the assurance of God’s presence ease the burden of overcoming these things on your own?

The image Zephaniah paints is that of a victorious king. Having defeated the enemy, God’s entire focus shifts to His utter *delight* over once again being with His people, providing and caring for them (compare Isaiah 62:4). The phrase *he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice*

over you with singing may seem curious at first. It should be understood as God's shifting from a mode of active wrath to one of steady love. In that mode, the Lord will no longer punish the people (compare Hosea 14:4). The cycle of joy is thereby complete: as God's people will celebrate their restored relationship with Him, God will celebrate being present with them. Our God is also a "singing" God. God the Father sings to the Jewish remnant entering the kingdom (Zep. 3:17). God the Son sang at the close of the Passover Feast, and then went to the garden to pray (Matt. 26:30). God the Spirit sings today through the hearts and lips of Christians who praise God in the Spirit (Eph. 5:18-21).

4. How would God celebrate His feelings and presence among the people? (Zephaniah 3:17b)

What Do You Think?

How would you approach life differently if you wholeheartedly accepted that God rejoices over His people?

Digging Deeper

What prevents you from joining in God's joy over His people?

Promises of the Lord: Zephaniah 3:18–20

During the seventy years of captivity in Babylon, and then during their worldwide dispersion among the Gentiles after A.D. 70, devout Jews were not able to celebrate their appointed feasts (Lev. 23). Since the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, the Jewish people have had no temple, altar, priesthood, or sacrifice (Hosea 3:4-5), therefore the people sorrowed.

God's promise is that His scattered people will be gathered, His lame people will be rescued, and His sinful people will be forgiven and no longer bear the shame of their wicked deeds. "I will bring you home" (see next verse, Zeph. 3:20) is God's gracious promise, and He will keep it. Where once the Jewish nation brought shame and disgrace to God's name and were poor witnesses to the Gentiles, now Israel will bring honor and praise to the Lord their God and reveal to the Gentile nations the glory of His name. Israel will receive honor from the Gentiles and give the glory to the Lord.

5. What did God promise to restore? (Zephaniah 3:18, 19)

The book of Zephaniah ends in a positive way. This is a vivid contrast to the first chapters of the book, which provide both a scathing denunciation and the promise of punishment. As Zephaniah again referred to *at that time*, he reinforced the link between the promises.

Ultimately God will restore His people, and all wrongs wrought against them will be righted. The restoration will mean blessings, not only for them, but for the redeemed of all nations of the earth. This prophecy was only partially fulfilled in the restoration that followed the Babylon captivity; but it will ultimately and fully be fulfilled in the restoration following the Great Tribulation when God returns to the earth, puts down every enemy, regathers His people, and reigns over them for a thousand years!

6. What will the people's restoration mean? (Zephaniah 3:20)

CONCLUSION

An Irony of Prophecy

Fulfilled prophecy is partly intended to validate a prophet and His message. In the Bible, however, quite often the original recipients of a prophecy did not live to see the fulfillment. That is the situation with the prophecies in the lesson. The original recipients of this message lived in the time of Josiah (Zephaniah 1:1). He was slain in battle about 609 B.C. The destruction of the temple did not take place until 586 BC and the return from exile did not begin until 538 B.C. So the people who first heard this prophecy did not understand the significance of what was being promised. Later, the people in captivity in Babylon *did* understand, and they are described as weeping when they remembered Zion (Psalm 137:1).

The return of the captives from Babylon was a rare event in history. What happened to them was noticed by other nations: almost 50,000 people were so sincere in their faith that they made the four-month trip back to the land God had promised to their forefathers. The people who returned were never seriously tempted again by idolatry. The Babylonian captivity was not pleasant, but it had positive, long-lasting results. People finally learned that God meant what He had said in the first of the Ten Commandments: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). The current study is therefore a lesson about hope, and this hope is backed by the assurances of God himself.

Jesus promised that He would come again, and He added that the time is unknown (Matthew 24:36, 44). Almost 2,000 years have passed since Jesus made those statements. He then added that the important thing is to be ready. God keeps His word, so ... be ready!

PRAYER

Almighty God, we are thankful for the people who taught us about You. We are grateful for their examples of faithfulness and for the faith of others through the centuries. Today we rededicate ourselves to be faithful until the end—the end of our lives or the end when Jesus comes to gather His people. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Resolve to stand on the promises of God—today and all the tomorrows!