

A Vision of Restoration

Bible Background • ZEPHANIAH 3

Printed Text • ZEPHANIAH 3:14–20 | Devotional Reading • PSALM 47

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: **DISCERN** the need for the just restoration of God's people; **PURSUE** trusting God for victory, hope, and renewal; and **CELEBRATE** the return of joy and God's glory in salvation.

In Focus

Truly, it was a day of rejoicing! People were singing and praising God. A few years earlier, Theresa had been diagnosed with kidney disease. The only cure was a kidney transplant. The doctors were not hopeful because her blood type was rare, and she was in her early thirties. Her mother and aunt were mighty prayer warriors, and the church was supportive, but she was not sure if God was going to answer this prayer with a new kidney. Theresa's father's faith was waning, but he tried to put on a good front for her.

One day her doctor called and asked if she could come to his office within the hour. As she rushed out of the office, she called her parents and asked if they could meet at the doctor's office. They agreed and were there as Theresa walked quickly up the stairs to the doctor's office. The nurse asked them all to take a seat in the doctor's office. The doctor walked in and Theresa could see the sparkle in his eyes. She started smiling herself and jumped with joy when he said, "Theresa, we have found your kidney match."

During prayer service, Theresa shared her wonderful news, and everyone began singing and praising God.

How do you celebrate your blessings from God? Identify ways you respond to God when God blesses you the way you want or when God responds in a different way?

Keep in Mind

"Behold, at that time I will undo all that afflict thee; and I will save her that halteth, and gather her that was driven out; and I will get them praise and fame in every land where they have been put to shame" (Zephaniah 3:19, KJV).

Focal Verses

KJV **Zephaniah 3:14** Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all the heart, O daughter of Jerusalem.

15 The LORD hath taken away thy judgments, he hath cast out thine enemy: the king of Israel, even the LORD, is in the midst of thee: thou shalt not see evil any more.

16 In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear thou not: and to Zion, Let not thine hands be slack.

17 The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing.

18 I will gather them that are sorrowful for the solemn assembly, who are of thee, to whom the reproach of it was a burden.

19 Behold, at that time I will undo all that afflict thee: and I will save her that halteth, and gather her that was driven out; and I will get them praise and fame in every land where they have been put to shame.

20 At that time will I bring you again, even in the time that I gather you: for I will make you a name and a praise among all people of the earth, when I turn back your captivity before your eyes, saith the LORD.

The People, Places, and Times

Zephaniah. The first verse of Zephaniah's book of prophecy identifies his father as a Cushite, or Ethiopian, descended from King Hezekiah. Because he mentions the presence of pagan priests, the worship of Baal, and the practice of astrology in Judah, Zephaniah's ministry probably began around the time of the religious reforms undertaken by King Josiah in 621 BC. His position among other prophets is unique in that he prophesied during a period of revival. Zephaniah's message is clear:

Judah's indifference and stubborn refusal to obey God would bring His wrathful judgment. This judgment would be threefold and would involve purifying, purging, and restoration. Zephaniah was a contemporary of Jeremiah and was one of the last prophets before the captivity.

Background

In Zephaniah 1 we learn that he is a prophet during the reign of King Josiah. Josiah led a religious reform that focused on serving the Lord alone and removing all other religious relics, attire, and practices. Many scholars assume that Zephaniah prophesied before Josiah's reform and perhaps while the king was a child (cf. 2 Kings 22:1).

According to Zephaniah, the day of the Lord is coming, and it is a day of judgment. God will judge the Children of Israel for worshipping foreign gods and mixing the worship of the Lord with other religious practices (Zephaniah 1:5–6). God will judge the princes, judges, priests, and prophets who lie, oppress, and eagerly increase corruption—despite all of God's warnings (3:3–7). God will judge the enemies of Israel who at one time have oppressed them. God will not spare the wicked. They will be cut off, ruined, and desolated. In the process, God will judge the whole earth. But there will be a remnant of humble people from near and far that God will bring together. This remnant shall serve the Lord and do no wrong.

It can be hard to read about God's judgment. What reactions do you have when you learn about it in Zephaniah?

At-A-Glance

1. Zion Sings a Song of Joy
(Zephaniah 3:14–15)
2. God Sings a Song of Joy
(vv. 16–18)
3. Full Restoration (vv. 19–20)

In Depth

1. Zion Sings a Song of Joy (Zephaniah 3:14–15)

After nearly two and a half chapters of judgment, it is only fitting that Zephaniah would pen this song of joy and invite the Children of Israel to sing and rejoice. Just five verses prior, the prophecies of judgment turned into a message of hope. God's wrath is not the final word. God will give the people clean lips, and all of God's scattered children will worship and serve God on one accord. There will be peace, and they will have nothing to fear. This vision of unity and serenity invites the Children of Israel to praise the Lord because God acts on their behalf. God has removed any judgments against them. God has removed their enemies from oppressing them. And that same God is among them.

What song would you sing in response to how God has moved in your life?

2. God Sings a Song of Joy (vv. 16–18)

God's love restores the soul and spirit of the Children of Israel. In these verses, Zephaniah declares that there is a new day. This day is the day God will be a warrior who brings victory. This day brings God's rejoicing and renewal of God's people. Previously, the Israelites had undergone distress, anguish, and bitter cries (Zephaniah 1:14–15); now is the day of God singing. How great must this day be if it causes God to bring forth a song? He promises to

lovingly gather the mournful and remove their disgrace with His love.

Close your eyes and imagine how you would feel if God started singing over you. What would cause the Lord to sing today?

3. Full Restoration (vv. 19–20)

In these final verses, we are reminded that God's restoration is complete. While the previous verses deal with the remnant's spiritual, emotional, and mental wellness, these verses address their social location. They have been oppressed, cast away, and robbed of their fortune. They did not get to experience whatever goodness came with their identity. Instead they were mocked and shamed for it. Due to their social location, they were treated as inferior. God promises to do more than remove their oppressors. God promises to bring the remnant together, give them a good name, and restore their fortunes. In this final vision, there is no lack in the remnant. They are full relationally because God loves them. They have an identity, and they have a community of gathered people. They are full socially because those who were not able to help themselves are in God's care, and they have full access to their fortunes.

What makes our restoration complete?

Search the Scriptures

1. God promises to do a lot of things in these verses, yet the Children of Israel are only asked to do two things: sing and fear not. Why do you think that these are the actions the prophet and the Lord asked them to take?

2. How is God's forgiveness at work in this text? (v. 15)

Discuss the Meaning

In order to truly appreciate today's readings, one must read the entire book of Zephaniah. It is only then that the full weight of God's redemption and restoration is clear. Just when

it looked like there was no hope for redemption, God turns it all around and establishes a new world order with God, the King of Israel, in charge. The Lord creates a kingdom where there is no suffering, no oppression, no shame, no enemies, and no disaster. Even their enemies are turned away or have clean lips (cf. 3:9), and they are forgiven people. All of their idolatry is behind them. The Children of Israel can live free from fear. Their God has given them the victory.

How do we trust God to bring victory in our lives today?

Liberating Lesson

Zephaniah paints a complex picture of restoration. Many changes are necessary in order for God's children to be fully restored to a new day. God must turn from wrath, God's people must turn toward serving God only, God's people must turn away from oppressing each other, and enemies must turn away from oppressing God's people. It seems nearly impossible to believe that all of this change can come, especially when we have suffered for so long. Yet there are two lessons from this reflection. We as God's people can make different decisions that turn us in the right direction and make us active participants in our own restoration. Furthermore, Zephaniah reminds us that we do not act alone. God turns from wrath, God changes us, and God turns away our enemies. Restoration is only possible because God is in our midst.

How can we as a church participate in our own restoration? How has God changed us?

Application for Activation

1. Replace praise and worship with a traditional testimony and song service during a regular service to focus on responding to the Lord with joy.

2. Read Martin Luther King, Jr.'s book *Strength to Love*.

3. Plan a trip to your local museum that focuses on Black history and has a debriefing session on the impact.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Zephaniah 3:14-20

The book of Zephaniah begins with incredible descriptions of God's wrath, but it ends in almost indescribable joy. For those who heard the earlier words of the prophet, this final section of the book must have been nothing but mind-boggling. A bewildered remnant now realizes that God's displeasure with them is gone, and the tension between the Lord and the nations is now resolved. Here we find a message of hope and encouragement based on the knowledge that with God all things are possible and that God is the Lord in spite of human circumstances and situation. Now that

the judgment has passed, the people may sing for joy at the blessings and goodness of God.

14 Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all the heart, O daughter of Jerusalem. 15 The LORD hath taken away thy judgments, he hath cast out thine enemy: the king of Israel, even the LORD, is in the midst of thee: thou shalt not see evil any more.

Zephaniah 3:14–17 functions as a prophetic response to the divine declarations in the preceding verses. The command to rejoice was used by town heralds calling the city to rejoice when messengers from the battlefield brought the good news of victory and deliverance. The term *ranan* (Heb. **raw-NAN**, “sing”) represents a joyous shout. The verse contains four imperative verbs that are similar in meaning (“sing,” “shout aloud,” “be glad,” “rejoice”) and three vocatives that refer to the people of Israel in general and Jerusalem in particular (“O Daughter of Zion,” “O Israel,” “O Daughter of Jerusalem”). The redeemed people should be glad and rejoice with all their heart. Their praise must not be perfunctory. They have real cause to rejoice.

In verse 15, the three reasons for rejoicing are given: (1) The punishment and the enemy have been turned away. “Judgments” refers to the punishment of the Lord’s sentence of condemnation against the city. These are the judgments that have fallen upon Israel through all her history. (2) The enemy is cast out. This prediction and promise are in the singular. The “enemy” is not specified but may refer to those who collaborated with the Assyrians in the past, but it most likely refers to all Judah’s enemies. However, the chief enemy of Israel was sin in conduct and sin in the heart. God’s salvation from sin here is total. There is nothing now to alienate the Holy One; atonement has been achieved. (3) The Lord is king in the midst of

her. He is there to protect, and therefore Israel need have no more fear. The idea of the Lord as King is common in the Old Testament. Early in Old Testament history, Israel praised the Lord, who “will reign forever and ever” (Exodus 15:18). The Lord manifested himself as “king over Jeshurun” (Deuteronomy 33:2–5). Gideon would not accept the people’s desire to crown him king because “the Lord will rule over you” (Judges 8:23).

16 In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear thou not: and to Zion, Let not thine hands be slack.

What a difference the presence of God makes! It gives peace of heart. So, “in that day” refers to the day when the judgment is complete and God’s blessings completely manifest. Then Zion, a synonym for Jerusalem that specifically refers to the temple mount, will have no reason to fear. The expression “do not let your hands hang slack” is unfamiliar to our culture. In Hebrew thought, the hand symbolized strength or power. Letting the hands hang slack referred to a feeling of weakness or powerlessness, a sense of discouragement. Slack hands are a symbol of despair and an indication of the loss of power (Deuteronomy 32:36), so now with Yahweh in their midst and with nothing to fear, let the fallen hands be lifted up.

17 The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing.

Here is the real basis of courage and hope. The Lord is in the midst of His people. When His people slide into idolatry and sin, He withdraws Himself from them (cf. Ezekiel 11:22–24). The word translated “mighty” is *gibbor*, (Heb. **gih-BORE**), an adjective usually used as a noun, often translated “hero” or “warrior” (cf. 1:14). It is used most frequently

with military activities to describe one who has already distinguished himself by performing heroic deeds. In this case, the Word speaks of God who is a warrior who brings salvation. In other contexts as well, God is called by the name “mighty God” (*’el gibbor*, **EL GIBBORE**, cf. Isaiah 9:6; 10:21). Here the Divine Warrior has declared peace. He will save. He will issue no more battle cries. He will wreak no more havoc. His people have no reason for fear except a healthy “fear of the Lord” (3:7, 15–16). He has accomplished his purpose. He has vanquished the proud. The holy, humble remnant now seeks him in righteousness.

The rest of the verse is a vivid description of God’s love for his people. Here we have an expression of the deepest joy and satisfaction of God Himself in His love for His people. God is ecstatic over the return of His wandering people. He is portrayed as rejoicing over them with singing. The last three lines should be taken together with the general sense that God delights in the people whom He has redeemed.

The middle phrase has presented a particular difficulty. The phrase expresses the renewal of the relationship between God and His estranged lovers. Such a conceptualization would draw on the well-known tradition of Israel/Zion as Yahweh’s bride to portray God’s return to His long-forsaken bride (see Hosea 2; Jeremiah 2; Ezekiel 16). Yahweh joins the people’s singing and soothes them with divine love. This amazing love of God for human beings is inexplicable. Human minds would never dream up such a God. Human actions or human character could never deserve such love. In the core of His being, God is love (1 John 4:8). Zephaniah thus sings the prelude to the kind of love Jesus reveals on the Cross, a love that “surpasses knowledge” (Ephesians 3:19). How can this not cause God’s people to praise! Surely the greatest reason for them to offer praise is found here.

18 I will gather them that are sorrowful for the solemn assembly, who are of thee, to whom the reproach of it was a burden.

Only Yahweh speaks in 3:18–20. At this point, He summarizes His acts of grace by saying He will deal with Israel’s oppressors and bring her scattered people home. The prophecy’s plot is now also complete. Jehovah will demonstrate His love for the pious of Israel by gathering them together to Himself. But before this can be done, Judah must be scattered among the nations in judgment at hand. Through this refining experience, those would be restored who yearn for the presence of Yahweh, and to whom scattering from the presence of the Lord was considered a great reproach or disappointment. The prophet pictures a day when all of the sorrows associated with the people’s sin and judgment would be removed. Their sorrow might refer to sorrow over the loss of Jerusalem as well as the feasts associated with it. Whatever grief the prophet sees among the people of God, he promises relief. The enemy’s destruction will vanish. Worship opportunities will be purified and renewed. Social injustice will disappear from Israel’s agenda. God’s elect people will participate in joy and thanksgiving in God’s appointed times of worship. People will rejoice, and God will be glorified.

19 Behold, at that time I will undo all that afflict thee: and I will save her that halteth, and gather her that was driven out; and I will get them praise and fame in every land where they have been put to shame.

God announced that He was about to do something about Jerusalem’s oppressors. He would deal with those who would afflict His people: they would not escape the fire of His wrath. The use of “all” for the oppressors widens the picture and points to include everyone who had ever afflicted Zion, including Assyrians and Babylonians, as well as neighbors who took advantage of Jerusalem when the Babylonians

attacked (Isaiah 60:14; Nahum 1:12). The people would no longer suffer oppression because the Lord would gather them and bring them home (3:20). Those who “halteth” who are the lame, and those “driven out,” referring to the banished or exiled, indicates the state of the people in a hapless, helpless, and homeless condition. As the Lord has made a promise to make of these a “strong nation” (Micah 4:6–7), so now He will make of them a “praise” instead of the shame they had been and that had been brought upon them. Thus, a change in status would also result in a change in reputation. Israel had been profaned by the experience of their exile. God promises this experience would never happen again. What a loving Savior God is, who turns mourning into dancing, sorrow into joy, and weeping into laughter.

20 At that time will I bring you again, even in the time that I gather you: for I will make you a name and a praise among all people of the earth, when I turn back your captivity before your eyes, saith the LORD.

With some slight change in wording, the first part of the verse closely repeats the promise made in the preceding verse. This is probably to give emphasis to God’s determination to accomplish that which he has purposed. In language reminiscent of other promises of restoration from exile (Amos 9:14–15; Ezekiel 36:34–37), God promises to restore the fortunes of the people of Israel. He would again make them prosperous in the land. The restoration would occur “before your very eyes,” that is, in your own day. The use of the personal pronoun “I” is striking (vv. 18–20). God takes personal responsibility for Israel’s redemption and restoration. He would fulfill His promise so that all would see it. God would return the people to their land, and the people would experience praise and renown rather than shame and reproach.

The book ends where it began with a scene of the reversal of the whole world order. It began with devastating overthrow. It ended with the blessings of God’s people being returned to the land. God’s restoration of the nation in chapter three is as complete as His destruction of the world in chapter one. He is now a judge who pardons. The promise of Zephaniah will find its immediate fulfillment in the return from the seventy years of exile. At that time the people will be rescued and their reputation restored. In some sense, however, the fulfillment better describes the glorious promise of the Messianic age when the Lord promised through His Son to “take great delight in you ... quiet you with his love, [and] ... rejoice over you with singing” (Zephaniah 3:17).

Sources:

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Say It Correctly

Jeshurun. ye-SHOO-run.
 Zephaniah. ZEH-fuh-NYE-uh.