

Unit III: Called to God's Work of Justice

The Return of Joy

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 47

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Zephaniah 3

PRINT PASSAGE: Zephaniah 3:14-20

Key Verse— 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)

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“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.” (Zephaniah 3:19, NIV)

Lesson Aims

As a result of experiencing this lesson, you should be able to do these things:

- Discern the need for the just restoration of God's people.
- Aspire to trust God for victory, hope, and renewal.
- Celebrate the return of joy and God's glory in salvation.

*Key Terms

Restore (verse 20)—Hebrew: *shub* (shoob): to reverse; to “turn back” (KJV).

Singing (verse 17)—Hebrew: *rinnah* (rin-naw’): a ringing cry; rejoicing; shouts of joy.

Zion (verse 16)—Hebrew: *Tsiyyon* (tsee-yone’): a mountain in Jerusalem.

*(Word Study Supplement—Refer to page 2)

Introduction

Discontentment and unhappiness characterize the lives of many people in the world. From the secular point of view, this emotional state can be attributed to a failure to obtain and keep things and specific people in their lives. The more some people acquire, the unhappier they become because the desire to get more takes over their lives. The root of this emotional challenge lies in not understanding the difference between happiness and joy. Happiness depends on circumstances, whereas true joy is a sense of well-being based on an intimate relationship with God, despite external circumstances. God's chosen people, Israel, experienced a lack of joy because of their failure to remain faithful to God and the requirements of His covenant with them. When Zephaniah ministered to them, they were facing God's judgment and subsequent exile for their sins against Him. Princes, priests, prophets, and the



The Biblical Context

Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of the last godly king of Judah, Josiah. Little is known about Zephaniah, but he traces his genealogy back to King Hezekiah, which would make him of royal blood and a distant cousin of Josiah's. When Zephaniah ministered, military power in the region had been transferred from the Assyrians to the Babylonians. This occurrence provided Judah with some degree of independence after a half century of domination by the Assyrian Empire. The moral and spiritual conditions in Judah were deplorable. Immorality, the practice of astrology, insincerity, apostasy, cruelty, and infidelity were among the sins committed by the people. With his ascendancy to the throne in Jerusalem, Josiah initiated extensive religious reform after reading the Book of the Law found while repairs were being made to the Temple in an attempt to reverse these sins. It was prior to Josiah's revival efforts that Zephaniah prophesied, denouncing these sins and warning of the coming "Day of the Lord," an imminent time of judgment. His prophecy also looked beyond judgment to blessings and restoration for God's believing remnant.

people in Jerusalem were ripe for judgment. In exile, they would experience unhappiness or a joyless existence because of their separation from Jerusalem and the Temple, which represented God's presence among them. However, because of God's great faithfulness to His promises to preserve them as His chosen people, God revealed His plans to restore them and the joy that comes from being rightly related to Him. Lives without God as their center of focus will continually be joyless.

ANALYSIS OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT

Jubilation for Future Deliverance

(Zephaniah 3:14-15)

KJV

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.

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.

Zephaniah's ministry focused on the coming judgment, "the Day of the Lord," upon Judah and their enemies in chapters 1–2. Prior to the last seven verses of chapter 3, Zephaniah pronounces woe upon Jerusalem. His announcement of the coming time of joy looks at the postexilic period of the nation to the millennial age. In anticipation of this time, Zephaniah exhorted the citizens of Jerusalem to sing, shout aloud, be glad, and to rejoice (**verse 14**). He uses honorable names to identify them as God's chosen people: "daughter of Zion" and "daughter of Jerusalem." Zephaniah lists three reasons for their rejoicing (**verse 15**). The first is because the Lord had taken away their punishment. We can probably identify with the effects this statement had on the faithful among them who were aware of the sins that characterized their city and who also shared the guilt with the rest of the people. To hear from a loving parent that just punishment had been lifted was a cause to rejoice. The second reason for their rejoicing was that God was going to cast out all their enemies. This had been

God's covenant promise to Abraham and was repeated in the Mosaic covenant. Climatically, shouts of joy will arise because their Redeemer, the promised Messiah, will be present among them and be their shield from any evil in the future. As God's people today, these specific promises to Israel can be applied to our relationship with God. As a consequence, our personal and corporate worship should be characterized by spontaneous jubilation in joyous singing and exuberant praise because our sins have been forgiven; we have been saved from the condemnation of sin; our enemies, Satan and death, have been defeated; we have the promise of divine protection; we have His presence in us; and one day, we shall enjoy eternal fellowship with Him face-to-face.

 **What Do You Think?** How can we ensure that our worship is always motivated by who God is and what He has done for us?

The Promise of God's Presence (Zephaniah 3:16-17)

KJV

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*.

NIV

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*.”

Jubilation for future deliverance will be magnified because of the presence of God among His people. There will be no reason to be intimidated nor to grow slack in their work for Him (**verse 16**). Their demoralization because of their present condition will be removed, and they will be strengthened because of God's presence among them. When we think of God's presence within and among us, we should be constantly motivated to praise, adore, and serve God with uplifted hands and lives. It is one thing to take delight in others, but it is especially refreshing and encouraging when we are aware that others take delight in us. Picture the overwhelming effect on the faithful among the people when Zephaniah told them that God would delight in them despite their sin and rebellion against Him (**verse 17**). Again, the nation would be the object of His great love and He will rejoice over them. God Himself will be singing with delight because His chosen ones will receive their promised inheritance under His blessing. We are commanded to delight in the Lord, and if we do we can expect to receive the desires of our hearts according to His will for us (see Psalm 37:4). This is an assuring promise, but it pales when we consider the fact that our God delights in us as His children.

 **What Do You Think?** How does your knowing that you have a loving Father who loves you unconditionally and takes delight in you personally affect your perspective on life?

A Promised Transformation (*Zephaniah 3:18-20*)

KJV

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.


NIV

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.

The expression “You never miss the water until the well runs dry” is a metaphor for the notion that one has taken something for granted. Further, the expression suggests a failure to appreciate something while it was plentiful and that it will continue to go unappreciated until it is plentiful again. For those pre-exilic Jews to whom Zephaniah prophesied, the appointed feast had become burdensome and ritualistic. As a result, this expression would become their reality. During the coming days of captivity away from the Temple in Jerusalem, the inability to participate in these feasts would be a source of sorrow for them. In the last three verses of Zephaniah, God told the people what He wills for them in several “I will” statements, the first of which assures them that He will remove their sorrow caused by their inability to enjoy the appointed feasts (**verse 18**). In addition, He promised to remove all their oppressors, rescue all who had been incapacitated by their foreign oppressors, gather the scattered remnant, and give them a favorable reputation (**verse 19**). **Verse 20** summarizes Israel’s blessings as God’s chosen people: He will regather them to their Promised Land inheritance and give them a favorable reputation among all the nations of the world. At that time, Israel’s intended mission of becoming a blessing to all nations will be fulfilled. This God-directed transformation will occur “before [their] very eyes.” Physically, some to whom Zephaniah prophesied would not see the fulfillment of this “I will” of God because the prophet looked beyond the restoration from Babylon and the people’s return to the physical Zion (Jerusalem)—he looked toward the spiritual Zion (New Jerusalem). The guarantee of this transformation is Zephaniah’s closing declaration, “Thus says the LORD.” God gave His word. All else will pass away, but the Word of our immutable God stands forever (see Isaiah 40:8).

 **What Do You Think?** What steps can be taken to ensure that corporate worship does not become lifeless and ritualistic as it had to Zephaniah’s audience?

A Closing Thought

Zephaniah closed his prophecy with words of encouragement to those who were facing imminent defeat and exile in Babylon because of the faithfulness of God to His covenant, despite their disobedience and punishment. He promised future restoration to the nation, physically and spiritually. The current deplorable moral and social conditions around God's people often make it a challenge to be joyful, but we have the guarantee of His word of a better future for His people.

Your Life

You may be tempted to ask why it appears that God is keeping quiet about the evil around us in our neighborhoods and communities. Like a good parent, He desires that we learn patience and trust Him to act in His own set time and way. He knows when the time is ripe for His intervention. Resolve to remain faithful to Him and to remember that He has not forsaken us and has promised a joyous future for His own.

Your World!

The daily occurrences and reporting of so much evil in our world can make it so commonplace that it is possible to become desensitized to its effect on the lives of others. Yet, God expects His followers to work diligently and intentionally to alleviate evil, oppression, and injustice while pointing people to Him for spiritual restoration and hope for a better future.



Closing Prayer Dear God, we thank You that we have hope for a better future characterized by joy and peace. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Conclusion

(Preparing for Next Week's Lesson)

Next week, the prophet Zechariah delivers a message of hope for a new day for Israel in which peace and justice will reign because of God's presence among them. Read Zechariah 8 in preparation for this study.

Home Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY , May 4	"God's Worldwide Covenant with Abraham"	(Genesis 12:1-8)
TUESDAY , May 5	"A New Covenant of the Heart"	(Jeremiah 31:31-34)
WEDNESDAY , May 6	"Divided Peoples to Become One"	(Ezekiel 37:15-23)
THURSDAY , May 7	"Just Living in Church and the World"	(Romans 12:9-21)
FRIDAY , May 8	"Cultivate Peaceful and Just Relations"	(1 Thessalonians 5:12-22)
SATURDAY , May 9	"Joyful Feasts Draw Newcomers"	(Zechariah 8:18-23)
SUNDAY , May 10	"Enjoy Fruits of Peace and Justice"	(Zechariah 8:1-8, 11-17)