

This Week in the Word

Forever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens. Ps 119:89.

SEVENTH DAY  BAPTIST



Lesson 10 May 2nd, 2020

A Vision of Restoration

Study Scripture – Zephaniah 3:14-20

Background Scripture – Zephaniah 1-3

Key Verse:

Behold, at that time
I will deal with all who afflict you;
I will save the lame,
And gather those who were driven out;
I will appoint them for praise and fame
In every land where they were put to shame.

Zephaniah 3:19

INTRODUCTION

The title of this Study Lesson might lead us to assume that the life of believers is all sweetness and light. But note that the announcement of the prophet Zephaniah is full of detailed descriptions of why this restoration was necessary. There is a line by line description of the sins and iniquities of the people. It is this negative behaviour that has brought disaster which now requires a promise from God resting on the need for rescue.

God had to resolve to save His people and bring joy to them by way of a gracious promise which in itself implies a great deal of negativity. The very promise of the joy that was done on the Day of the Lord makes it plain that the nation of Israel and/ourselves will hear and know that the disaster that that the Day of the Lord would come to remove was linked inextricably and could not be separated from the reproach for their failings, the oppression that they had brought on the people of the nation, the injustices that they had multiplied in the nation, the terrible treatment to the lame and the outcasts who had to suffer alone, and the shame that they had brought to the name of God.

So therefore when God comes to restore you never think too highly of yourself but remember that it is the Lord God who by Himself alone will change your shame into praise and will bring you good fortune and unite you with the people of God that had been scattered abroad. So as you read these verses which we will now quote remember what you have done and remember the graciousness of God. Listen to the essence of the promises made by Yahweh:

I will renew....

will exult over you.....

will remove disaster from you.....

will deal with all your oppressors....

will change shame into praise.....

***will bring you home....
make you renowned and praised....
restore your fortunes.***

The cardinal sin of believers is that they do the opposite way to their speech. We tend to practice hypocrisy to a magnificent and great degree. We will sin thinking that God does not see and that people will not know what we are doing.

Fundamental privilege has a tendency to lull people into a false sense of security. Misfortune, tragedy and disaster happen to other people; not to us. This must have been the mindset of those in Judah and Jerusalem in particular as the prophet Zephaniah unfolded his prophecy. After an initial warning to Judah, the prophet followed with a series of similar announcements of judgment on peoples and nations beyond Judah's borders, including the Philistia (Zephaniah 2:4-7), Moab and Ammon (2:8-11), the Ethiopians (2:12), and Assyria (2:13-15). This would have been welcome news in Jerusalem, but then the prophet again turned his attention to Jerusalem and the news was not good.

We should note particularly that Zephaniah was the last of the pre-exile prophets. God had long before warned His people of the consequences of disobedience, even from the time He made a covenant with Israel (Deut. 28-31). The fate of the Northern Kingdom which went into exile in 722 BC should have been warning enough for Judah; not to mention the line of prophets God sent to warn them. Somehow they found comfort in the pronouncement of false prophets and their token gestures at religion and so ignored the warnings of God's prophets that judgment was imminent. They convinced themselves that God was indifferent about their sins (1:12). Now through Zephaniah, one of Judah's eleventh-hour prophets come a terse, stark message of Judgement with a litany of the charges that will be basis for God's judgment.

This Study Scripture calls on us to look at several aspects of national and individual life which is displeasing to God. We see the constant emphatic attack on violence, fraud, complacency, and the faithless assumption that Yahweh is powerless.

We often today like to dismiss the dysfunctional elements in government, in the church, in the schools, and in the courts because we love to entertain the myth of secular progress, a state that many people in the present world do not see at all. One writer calls on us to look at our world and our own society with clear eyes and as we read the Book of Zephaniah which states:

"Evil powers and violent politics—along with starvation, disease, genocide, displacement and crushing debt—are “principalities and powers” that threaten daily life for many people. For ordinary believers who live in contexts like these, the Bible offers a compelling, revolutionary, liberating and explanatory narrative of hope rather than a pre-scientific myth that specialists must deconstruct. In particular, the Old Testament themes of divine retribution and human restoration ring true to these believers; they speak a language that many in the west have forgotten".



It would be quite erroneous to believe that everyone in Judah in those dark days of disobedience were living the “good life”. There was prosperity but the prophets all attacked the unequal distribution of wealth, the corruption in the leadership, and the suffering of many materially. The issue for many or most of the people then was not only just material deprivation, but spiritual chaos.

We are being called on by Zephaniah in the few verses in the Study Scripture to be aware of the world around us and how it is very different from the world God desires. The “Day of the Lord” then was a day to right wrongs and to punish those that were ignoring the Covenant terms with God, and the covenant relationship that God had ordered for His people. Disobedience then must always be looked at in the light of the covenant God had established with His people, as well as His covenant with humanity, for of course God is just and makes His rain fall on the just as well on the unjust. God does not like oppression and injustice. He will act when He sees this.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. We will see the prophet emphasizing that there can be no hesitation to obey the commandments of the Lord, for any other way is one of certain death.

This Study also emphasizes the notion that is implied in this Study Lesson that one must “wait” on the Lord. This exhortation (in verse 8) to the righteous remnant in all ages is certainly a difficult one to accept, for even believers who “know” their God are impatient.

It should also be noted that the prophet forces us to think carefully on how God works. God’s ways are indeed marvelous. He tells us that God will gather the nations to deal with their wickedness. But the Book of Revelation opens up our thoughts for it reveals that it is Satan who will do the gathering of the nations together to finally fight against God and God will use his foolishness to carry out His will to destroy the wicked. The words of the prophet reinforce the lesson that the wrath of man will praise the Lord.

As we Study we should consider deeply on why men with knowledge of God and how He operates simply prefer “darkness” to “light”. This nonsensical behaviour even has enthralled professing believers. We seem to think that God is One who is not to be taken seriously. He will never be really angry for He loves us, and so it is fine for us to be complacent.

Notably therefore, Zephaniah’s warning was also a call to Judah to repent and return to the ways of God.

We were told earlier that Zephaniah prophesied at some point during the reign of Josiah, the last godly king of Judah. Josiah had undertaken some decisive reforms to rid Judah of idolatry and false prophets and while his efforts yielded some success during his lifetime, the people’s hearts were already hardened in sin and Josiah’s reforms passed with him. We too must be careful so our hearts are not hardened to sin.



The context of our Study therefore is an unbroken chain of judgment, gloom and doom. However blessing and deliverance is also promised to a righteous remnant.

The bleak scenario painted by the prophet is easily understood when viewed in the context of his times, God's covenant relationship with Judah, and God's holiness and justice. Conversely the promised blessing and deliverance are the marks of the gracious God Almighty and also flows from His covenant relationship.

Josiah ascended the throne in the wake of two of the most evil kings of Judah, namely Manasseh and Amon. Assyria was the dominant power then, but they were in decline, with the Babylonian kings putting them under extreme pressure. Still, the Assyrians, who had exercised a great influence over Israel and Judah, were one of the vilest regimes to have ever existed in that part of the world, being well known for its cruelty, abhorrent idolatry, wanton sexual perversion and all that God found abominable and detestable. Manasseh and Amon loved all things Assyrian and slavishly instituted the repulsive practices of the infidels in Judah. They actually surpassed the evil of the Canaanites, whom the Israelites had expelled from the land. 2 Kings 21: 9-16.

By the grace of God Josiah, who had ascended the throne at the tender age of eight turned out to be a good King and managed to delay the nation's slide into total destruction by God's judgment. Judah had reached such a low spiritual state that there was not even a copy of the Law available to read, not even in the Temple. It was the accidental discovery of a copy of the 'Book of the Law' that triggered one of Josiah's major spiritual reforms. God's law had not only been forsaken, God Himself had been forsaken!

Even before Manasseh's reign Judah had been in a steady spiritual and moral decline, broken occasionally by a righteous king, but that nation was following fast in the footsteps of the now exiled Israel in behaviour and destiny.

Josiah launched a vigorous nationwide campaign to eradicate idolatry and Judah, and did enjoy a measure of success but his efforts turned out to be too little, too late.

It appears that Zephaniah's critique of the princes and their leadership was dead on and the powerful but unpleasant statements of vengeance in Chapter 1 were well deserved. It appears that even when Josiah struggled to reform Judah, the heart of the princes, priests, elders, and the rest of the leadership were not really in it. Evil and wickedness had become ingrained in the leadership and among the people, and so Zephaniah's call for repentance fell on deaf ears. It was only left for Zephaniah to assure the few godly people in the nation, the remnant, that God would preserve them and bring ultimate worldwide blessing in the future for Israel.

The die had been cast. God had already decreed the destruction and exile of Judah.

Under the banner of the "Day of the Lord" Zephaniah specifically announces judgment and destruction on Judah and Jerusalem, as well as on the surrounding nations: the Philistines (2:4-



7), the Moabites and Ammonites (2:8-11), the Ethiopians (2:12), and the Assyrians (2:13-15). He also prophesied judgment on the entire earth including people, animals, birds and fishes. This would be a universal judgment on all life forms.

Concerning the judgments that the prophet announced at least two fulfillments are clearly in view and one must be at the end of the world, a distant fulfillment. (Joel 2; Matthew: 24). The imminent destruction of Jerusalem and exile of the people to Babylon as also enunciated by other prophets would be a near fulfillment.

But it is important for our study to emphasize that the other side of the “Day of the Lord” sees blessings and restoration to a righteous remnant in Judah, as well as unprecedented blessings on Gentiles. Here again there is a near and far fulfillment. Note however that typically when God announces judgment it is always in conjunction with a call to repentance.

For our benefit for we are also warned to avoid these sins. One writer has detailed indictments and accusations that God brought against Jerusalem, Judah, and the nation at large. It is because of this that a terrible judgment is prophesied. The writer notes:

- **God will judge those in Judah who practice pure paganism (1:4)**
- **God will judge those in Judah who mix the worship of God with their worship of other deities (1:5a).**
- **God will judge those in Judah who completely reject and turn away from the faith of their fathers (1:6)**
- **God will judge those who chose to identify with the heathen (rather than the people of God) by their dress (1:8)**
- **God will judge those who practice violence and deceit (1:9)**
- **God will judge those who refuse divine instruction, and who have ignored His warnings (3:1-2).**
- **Judah should have learned from God's judgment of others, but she did not (3:6-7)**
- **God will judge those in leadership, who have abused their authority and forsaken their stewardship (3:3-4)**
- **God will judge those who presume that God is indifferent about their sin (1:12)**
- **God will judge those who put their trust in anything but Him (1:18).**

The Book of Zephaniah contains more references to the “Day of the Lord” than any other Old Testament book.

What will it be like when the Almighty decides to visit? Essentially, it depends on one's obedience to Him in His absence. For those who have remained righteous, the Day of His visitation will be one of blessing and restoration.

Note however, that even for the righteous restoration will follow purification and purging. That is why these righteous survivors are called “the remnant”, for they are those that remain after purging.



The righteous are delivered from both judgment and through judgment. For the wicked, the Day of the Lord will bring judgment, destruction and terror. In the book of Zephaniah this judgment is described in gory detail as everything is swept away. As a result, some of the prophets, who also speak of a “**nearness**” or “**imminence**” as an aspect of the Day of the Lord, are certainly correct in view of what God did to Israel and Judah.

The extensive nature of Zephaniah's prophecy shows that there is also a distant, future fulfillment, and is in concert with Matthew 24 and Revelation 19.

In the context of our Study, Zephaniah details Jerusalem's barefaced and repugnant spiritual condition as against God's righteousness and justice. The sins of the leaders are cited as the city remained entrenched in sin and unmoved by the prophet's call to repentance, even in the face of God's retribution on the surrounding nations.

Judah refused to repent and the latter section of the Study again shows God's justice and faithfulness to His covenant. The nation is encouraged to wait for the time of restoration which naturally follows God's judgment to purify, protect, and bless His people.

The window to repentance was closing fast even as the prophet spoke. The people's sins were so exposed and detailed by the prophet, they could not be denied. Despite the dire and dreadful consequences outlined in the oracle, there was no repentance. The nation had become so deeply committed to heathen gods and pagan practices (2 Kings 21:9) during the reigns of the evil kings that preceded Josiah, the prophetic words were met with indifference. The nation had reached such a low spiritual state that there was not even a copy of the Law available to read, not even in the Temple. God's law had not only been forsaken; it had been forgotten!

God's judgment was now inevitable; persistent and entrenched sin had totally alienated the people from their God and therein we are warned of both the consequences of habitual sin and the need for repentance.

As we consider our Text let us note that God sees sin in its specificity and not as some general offence. It behooves us to consider, confess and repent of specific sins in our lives knowing the consequences of disobedience.

We should not only mourn at personal sins and the sins of individuals, but we should not ignore “national” sins, for all sins are an offense to God. Those that know His covenant know that this covenant is far reaching and its obligations are not simple ones that can be safely ignored.

Our Study focuses on hope, rejoicing, and reprieve. But never forget that it comes at the end of a three-chapter book where the first two chapters are filled with unbelievably terrible warnings.

So what are you to be restored from? What is your vision of what God needs to do for you?



What kind of condemnation are you living under?

What kind of chastisement should be brought to you before God can call you a son or daughter of Zion?

Is the Day of the Lord the only thing to which you look forward and about which you can sing as you make your way through the world?

Are you waiting for Yahweh to bring a radical turn to things so that they become better?

Are you holding out the small gleam of hope that the people of God will one day burst into a song of joy because God has brought us through?

THE TEXT

It is not very often that we can associate the prophets of the Old Testament with joy and jubilation. What is more amazing is that here God Himself is pictured as completely surrounding Himself with joy. So the people are happy and God Himself is happy for those that have been redeemed. God had just before this threatened to wipe out the entire earth but now when there is no ground for optimism, the prophet declares that there would be a radical turn around and everything will be made better because of God's persona will and His decision.

We are made to understand that joy for the sons and daughters and jubilation is attributed to Yahweh who has guaranteed salvation, removed the guilt of the people and removed from existence those that used to charge God's people and abuse them.

Yahweh will redeem His people, free them from exile and allow them to return to Jerusalem.

We are told what God has done and what God is about to do. This is in fact a gospel message. There is rejoicing, no fear among the people, and continuing celebration.

Do not forget that Yahweh God is shown to be a triumphant warrior. He has delivered Israel and gained victory over all those that have oppressed her. This is therefore a glorious Day for it involves the destruction of Israel's enemies following the Day of the Lord described as, ***"a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness".***

Verse 14. In this amazing section of the chapter given the restoration and utter transformation of the nation and people in the previous verses Israel is told to sing and shout with joy. Note that this is not a formal, quiet, religious and sanctimonious type of behaviour. This is now celebration time for the time of punishment that ended, and the time of rejoicing is now there.

Note that the terms ***daughter of Zion, daughter of Jerusalem*** are synonyms for Israel. This is not only for the old Israel and its remnant but the Israel of God. This will be clear in that time when Messiah will be King and shall reign.

Verse 15. A legal judgment or verdict (***mis' pat***) had been declared against the nation. But now the guilt of Judah in the judgment verdict against her as recorded in verses 1-7 had been dealt



with since the Babylonian instrument of justice would sack Jerusalem and carry the people into exile in Babylon. Now the prophet goes forward to the end of this chapter treating the punishment as having been accomplished, and the people redeemed and saved from their enemies. At the time of this event the verdict against Judah would be considered annulled.

Now God's true King had appeared and was in the midst of them. It would therefore be said that the King of Israel, Yahweh was among them. Note that the ultimate fulfillment of this would wait for the birth of the Messiah Son of David, His death, His resurrection, His ascension, and His Second Coming.

It would seem that Judah had died when they were taken into exile in Babylon but in fact that they would live again for God had decreed that she be redeemed from captivity and restored as a nation.

Now they could live without fear for their King was with them.

Yahweh has power to save. He takes joy in His people and they can now rest without fear in His love.

Verse 16. On the day that the Lord takes away the verdict of judgment against Judah the people hears, ***Do not fear.*** This address to Israel indicates that they should not worry and should not be paralyzed and made weak because of fear. The king of Israel was with them in their midst and so there was no need to fear.

Their hands should not be weak. One writer explains the phrase used and tells us:

The posture of the hands can symbolize the state of the heart. Hands held in a posture of submission symbolize weakness—discouragement. With the Lord as their King, the people of Judah would have no reason to let their hands grow weak-to act submissively.

See Isaiah 35:3-4.

If you really understand the tender love and care that God has for you two things would happen. First you will know that the Mighty God loves you and delights in you and therefore you do not fear. After all there was no one mightier than your God and so what do you have to be afraid of?

Second, since you know that God loves you all your energy, all your hands, should be used in His service. You therefore cannot become weary in your service for God. Your hands would always remain strong.

The exhortation is therefore straightforward and blunt. There should be no such thing as even a little fear or a little trembling. There should not be a little tightness in the throat. Fear should not exist at any point in your life. Note therefore that fear comes from unbelief. So be careful. Never let their trust in God slip even a little bit.

Verse 17. In the day of restoration Yahweh will be present as a warrior and will bring victory to Judah. He is the Mighty One and will save. No one can pluck you out of His hands. It is quite



amazing that Yahweh can rejoice over people that have betrayed Him over and over again. This is nothing less than a miracle of grace.

The people of God, those that God has redeemed, have been reassembled politically and religiously and there will be rejoicing.

The Mighty One will rejoice over His people. It is difficult not to underestimate the joy God has in His people. We hear so much that God is annoyed at us and is simply sitting waiting to slap us and send thunderbolts at us that we do not often realize that God has joy in His people. But do not let this fact make you think that God enjoys watching you make a fool of yourself thinking that God does not see you break His commandments and commit all kinds of sin, giving reign to the weakness of your flesh. But let us note the comment of Spurgeon:

Faulty as the church is, the Lord rejoices in her. While we mourn, as well we may, yet we do not sorrow as those that are without hope; for God does not sorrow, his heart is glad, and he is said to rejoice with joy-- a highly emphatic expression.

One writer comments on the fact that God will rejoice over us with singing:

We don't often think of God singing, but He does-- and He sings over His people. This is how much joy and delight we give to the LORD-- that He breaks into song.

"Think of the great Jehovah singing! Can you imagine it? Is it possible to conceive of the Deity breaking into a song: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost together singing over the redeemed? God is so happy in the love which he bears to his people that he breaks the eternal silence, and the sun and moon and stars with astonishment hear God chanting a hymn of joy" (Spurgeon).

2." If God sings, shall not we sing? He did not sing when he made the world. No, he looked upon it, and simply said that it was good. The angels sang, the sons of God shouted for joy: creation was very wonderful to them, but it was not much to God, who could have made thousands of worlds by his mere will. Creation could not make him sing. When all was done, and the Lord saw what became of it in the salvation of his redeemed, then he rejoiced after a divine manner" (Spurgeon).

When the people of God understand the extent of and the reality of God's love this will bring peace to them. They have endured so much trouble and trials and turmoil that their spirits need to be quieted. This would have been when they recognize that Yahweh has guaranteed their security.

It is absolutely amazing that God could love people like us when day after day we prove that we are not genuinely lovable. In fact, though we behave ourselves occasionally, we prove that we are more toxic than lovable. Some of course are almost totally toxic without any break. They might know the Scriptures, they might even go to church or synagogue every week and during the weekdays, but yet their worship is quite hypocritical, for they do not really believe God and His Word. They are really saying like Satan in the garden of Eden, "**Has God really said such and such a thing?"**

The people of Judah are just like what we do today constantly saying, **Does God see?**



More often than not our behaviour is quite toxic. We are unfortunately fundamentally hypocrites.

So does God love all of these people? One writer gives the answer and states:

"The answer is to be found, not in the deserving nature of the people, but in the loving nature of God".

But let us be careful. There is such a thing as judgment and pain before restoration comes. Remember that God is not mocked and what a man sows that he will also reap. That applies to every single one of us without exception.

Verse 18. But now God promises that He will remove their sorrow and their lack of ability to observe the appointed feasts which they could not celebrate when they were in exile in Babylon. They only could simply weep by the rivers of Babylon. They would see their friends die there and they would see Jerusalem and the Temple destroyed. All their religious observances would be taken away and they would not worship.

It could of course mean by the prophet was telling them that the appointed feasts that they had longed for were simply empty. Those appointed feasts were only filled with formality and hypocrisy and that was why God brought judgment on them. They certainly had been very concerned about things like sacrifices, reciting prayers, going to the Temple and the many other observances but their heart was not in it. There was no reality in the confessions that they made when they were stretching out their hands in prayer to God. It had all been a sham. They were calling the Lord, Lord, but they were not giving Him any fear at all. They had really despised His name.

But the time would come when they are grieving, and sorrow would be ended. God would gather up their grief and dispose of it and restore them. He would take only their approach and their burden.

Verse 19. God would destroy the nations that had oppressed them and taken them into exile. God would restore them to their land from which they had been driven. Yahweh would not only save the strong, but He would also save the weak.

We must carefully note that Yahweh has always been concerned for those who are weak and vulnerable. God always made provision for the poor and helpless and even required that landowners not harvest all their fields but leave some so that the poor people could glean and obtain food so that they could survive. This is recorded in Leviticus 19:9-10. In addition, God in Leviticus 25:35 required that the next of kin should redeem land sold by relative when they were in difficulty. Every single prophet condemned ill-treatment of orphans and widows and Jesus continued that emphasis during His ministry.

So Yahweh insisted that He would bring salvation to all who believed in Him, whether they were weak or whether they were strong.



Those that had been shamed by captivity and exile would be gathered. Their shame would turn to praise when they were returned to their land. Their reputation would be then restored.

Clearly there for captivity is not a good thing in the sight of God. Shaming people is not a good thing in the sight of God. Oppressing those that are weak and vulnerable, stealing from them, and turning them into slaves is not something that God appreciates. So let us be careful.

Verse 20. The climax now comes. The exiles can fully expect to return to their homeland for Yahweh will gather them and bring them home. The surrounding nations and peoples of sin and shame but now they would see their restoration.

This suffering people of God have been given great promises. The promises were fulfilled for Judah and they will be fulfilled in their entirety in the future for all the people of God. The Bridegroom will bring home His Bride.

CONCLUSION

The prophet Zephaniah warned of a day of judgment in his own time, but he also prophesied a sweeping, global execution of divine judgment and then divine restoration.

Jesus provided an unmistakable warning regarding that final day: "*Of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only*" (Matthew 24:36). This is not a date that one can circle on a calendar as we would "save the date" for an upcoming wedding.

A word of advice comes from Peter on the Day of Pentecost: "*Save yourselves from this untoward generation*" (Acts 2:40).

The prophecy of Zephaniah ends with a call to worship. The prophet is not speaking of worship in some future day, though that will surely take place. He is calling for worship now. God's people should worship because the "Day of Judgment" and the times of blessing are certain to come. God's people are to worship by faith, knowing that God is a covenant-keeping God. He always keeps His promises, whether they are promises of judgment or of blessing. Even in the most difficult of times, the future of the righteous is clear, and it is certain.

We are cautioned by the fact that Judah, the nation of God's covenant people, is the first nation mentioned by name in Zephaniah's judgment list (Zephaniah 1:4). This calls to mind the truth of 1 Peter 4:17: "*For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God.*"

The promise of a coming *Day of the Lord* should not produce a sense of smugness among Christians that all the sinners will get their just deserts in the end. The promise of that day should instead move us to remain continually humble before the Lord and to be more committed than ever to helping others prepare for the day of the Lord by proclaiming the gospel to them.



The '*Day of the Lord*' arrived for Judah just in a matter of decades but the ultimate 'Day' is yet future. In the meantime let us be faithful as befits 'covenant' people, heed the lessons of God's past judgments and respond with the expected godly fear and drawing closer to our great God and King, the Lord Jesus Christ.

But note the personal pronouns used by God Himself. One writer lists them:

I will gather...
I will deal...
I will save...
I will make...
I will bring you in...
I will gather you...
I will make...

Remember therefore the triumphal restoration. Righteousness will triumph over evil. We can be fully assured that the Lord God loves His name forever and ever and will fulfill what He has promised.

