

Renewed in God's Love

Devotional Reading: [2 Corinthians 5:12–21](#)

Background Scripture: [Zephaniah 3:14–20](#)

Zephaniah 3:14–20

- 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.

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.”

Key Text

“The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you;”

—Zephaniah 3:17a

The Righteous Reign of God

Unit 1: The Prophets Proclaim God's Power

Lessons 1–5

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify a reason for joy.
2. Contrast a reason for joy with a reason for sorrow.
3. Sing a hymn or praise chorus that reflects the text's mandate to do so.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

A. Nobody Wants to Do It!

B. Lesson Context

I. Praises to the Lord (Zephaniah 3:14–17)

A. Calls to Sing (v. 14)

B. Causes for the Rejoicing (v. 15)

Bearable Losses

C. Confidences Expressed (vv. 16–17)

II. Promises of the Lord (Zephaniah 3:18–20)

A. Comfort for the Sorrowful (v. 18)

B. Condemning the Oppressors (v. 19a)

C. Confirming the Restoration (vv. 19b–20)

Best Plan or Second-Best Plan?

Conclusion

- A. An Irony of Prophecy
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Chaldean Kal-*dee*-un.

Hezekiah Hez-ih-*kye*-uh.

Hilkiah Hill-*kye*-uh.

Josiah Jo-*sigh*-uh.

Zephaniah Zef-uh-*nye*-uh.

Introduction

A. 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 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 bear study

yet today.

B. Lesson Context

The instructor for a class on the Minor Prophets presented an imaginary conversation in Heaven. A person had recently arrived there, and one of the first persons he met introduced himself as Zephaniah. The new arrival was thrilled, for he assumed that this was the prophet who wrote book of the Bible by that name. So he asked his new friend if he had indeed written that book. The individual replied that he had, and then he asked the new arrival in Heaven what he thought of the little book of only three chapters. One of the students in the class reflected on that scenario and decided to write a term paper that would feature some aspect of the book of Zephaniah—just in case!

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. The fourth one is Hezekiah, the same name as one of the “good” kings of Judah (reigned about 727–699 BC; [2 Kings 18](#)). The information given by Zephaniah causes many to conclude that he is referring to that king. That is a conjecture, but it is usually understood that there is no reason to list the name unless it referred to that king, who reigned about 100 years earlier. Zephaniah was therefore 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 BC) 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 BC 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 BC.

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. Today's study reviews the final verses of Zephaniah, where a hopeful theme resounds.

I. Praises to the Lord ([Zephaniah 3:14–17](#))

A. Calls to Sing (v. [14](#))

14. Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem!

Hebrew poetry often repeats thoughts by using different words—a feature known as parallelism. That feature is present when the phrases in lines of poetry echo one another. Despite two (or more) different phrases, one thing or action is in view. Thus in the verse before us, the *Daughter Zion* being addressed is the same as both *Israel* and *Daughter Jerusalem*. The designation Zion originally referred to “the City of David” (2 Samuel 5:7); eventually Zion came to include the temple area just to the north (Joel 2:1). Zion often parallels (stands for) the city of Jerusalem in Old Testament poetry (example: Psalm 128:5), and that is the case here.

The prophets frequently refer to Jerusalem, Zion, or both in terms of a daughter (examples: Isaiah 37:22; Lamentations 2:13). This is a literary technique known as personification, in which the writer assigns the qualities of a person to something that isn’t human. The name Israel, for its part, can take different references depending on historical context. Sometimes it refers to the entirety of the 12 tribes (example: 1 Kings 4:7). At other times it refers only to the 10 tribes of the northern kingdom of the divided monarchy (example: 2 Kings 3:1). At still other times it refers to the patriarch Jacob (example: Genesis 35:10). Here all the terms in our verse seem to refer to the faithful remnant.

The 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).

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?

B. Causes for the Rejoicing (v. 15)

15a. The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy.

Here begins a listing of four reasons why the people were to sing, shout, and rejoice. First, the prophesied Day of the Lord and its attendant *punishment* would be a thing of the past (see [Zephaniah 1:7–10, 14–16, 18; 2:2–3](#)). Second, God will defeat (turn *back*) the *enemy* Babylon, thus ending the oppression Judah was yet to face. The 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 just noted above.

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

15b. The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you;

We come to the third and most important of the four reasons for rejoicing: *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 in the midst of 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 gather in my name, there am I with 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!

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?

15c. never again will you fear any harm.

When God is with his people, there is no room for *fear*. And that is the fourth reason for rejoicing. God was promising through Zephaniah to step into the situation in a new way. Although the nation of Judah as a whole had disobeyed and turned its back on God, he would not abandon the faithful remnant among his covenant people. The promised restoration in general and this verse in particular in no way suggest that God exempts his people from experiencing the natural consequences of their choices. The context, rather, is that of God's removal of those who instigate *harm*.

The promise of restoration does not end with Zephaniah's prophecies to pre-exilic Judah (and the restoration that will result in a post-exilic remnant). In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught his disciples to pray for restoration in terms of God's kingdom coming and God's will being done ([Matthew 6:10](#)).

As Jesus proclaimed that coming kingdom, he did not consider the restoration to have been accomplished fully during his earthly ministry. Instead, restoration and the establishing of the kingdom of God were inaugurated. Fulfillment is in some sense both "now" and "not yet." Full restoration in terms of new life in Christ is consummated at his return ([1 Corinthians 15:52–57](#); [Revelation 22](#)). In the meantime, we allow the Holy Spirit to transform us daily ([Romans 12:2](#)).

What Do You Think?

In what ways are you already experiencing the "now" of restoration in your relationship with God?

Digging Deeper

What aspects of life suggest that you are still living in the "not yet"?

Bearable Losses

Every year on her birthday, Meri Mion remembers her lost birthday cake. It happened when she turned 13, which was also the day Allied troops liberated her hometown in Italy during World War II. After a tense night, hiding as the retreating Germans shot at their house, Meri and her mother peeked out the next morning to discover that an American command post had been set up only 150 yards away!

In celebration of both Meri's birthday and the liberation, her mother used scarce supplies to bake a cake. But after leaving it outside the window to cool, it disappeared before Meri had a bite of it. But she reasoned that someone else—maybe even one of her liberators—needed it worse than she did. That reasoning made the sacrifice bearable.

We all face negative experiences as big as losing a loved one and as small as losing a birthday cake. What can help most in this regard is contrasting our losses with God's infinitely greater sacrifice when his Son died on the cross. When we are overwhelmed by joy and gratitude at the liberation Jesus has brought us, we can take our own losses in stride. As we do, we constantly remember that our current suffering (perhaps of our own making) is far outweighed by the eternal reward that awaits ([2 Corinthians 4:16–18](#)). How can you best stay focused on that perspective?

—A. W.

Visual for [Lesson 4](#). While discussing verse [17](#), ask learners for other images that come to mind when thinking of God’s joy in his people.

C. Confidences Expressed (vv. [16–17](#))

16. On that day they will say to Jerusalem, “Do not fear, Zion; do not let your hands hang limp.

When burdens are lifted, some people become cautious about moving forward—just in case another difficult blow is coming. God’s people as a nation had experienced much suffering throughout their history. Here, however, a blessed assurance is repeated in different words, and *Jerusalem*—synonymous with *Zion*—is exhorted again to be confident

and move ahead. It is time to be busy in the Lord’s work. Caution can be wise, but too much caution results in accomplishing nothing.

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.”

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.

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?

II. Promises of the Lord **([Zephaniah 3:18–20](#))**

A. Comfort for the Sorrowful (v. 18)

18a. “I will remove from you all who mourn over the loss of your appointed festivals,

This verse presents some translation difficulties. Taken as a whole, however, the verse suggests that *the appointed festivals* that were instituted (whether part of an annual festival or a Sabbath observance) as an expression of faith either had or was to become a matter of shame instead. Another possibility is that because God calls the people to rejoice, he will remove those who choose to continue to wallow in sorrow; they will not be allowed to prevent others from expressing their joy.

18b. “which is a burden and reproach for you.

The language of *reproach* brings another dimension to the promise of restoration. The same word is translated “shame” elsewhere (example: [Isaiah 47:3](#)), and that may be the sense here. Shame and honor in the time of the ancient Near East were more than simply matters of hurt feelings. Rather, those concepts spoke to how people identified and valued themselves. To be cast into exile would result in the Judeans no longer understanding who they were as a people (compare [Psalm 74](#)). This *burden* will be lifted when God reclaims his remnant.

B. Condemning the Oppressors (v. 19a)

19a. “At that time I will deal with all who oppressed you.

The phrase *at that time* links this promise to the previous verses. The consequences to be suffered for sin will come to an end as God removes the agents of judgment (*all who oppressed you*). Judah will no longer be known as the people who abandoned their God (compare [Deuteronomy 29:24–25](#); [Isaiah 60:18](#)). What the Babylonians will have done to the people of God will become their own fate also.

C. Confirming the Restoration (vv. 19b–20)

19b. “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.

In the ancient Near East, physical disabilities often were considered evidence of a deity’s judgment (see [John 9:2](#)). The word *lame* refers to a handicap related to walking. Similarly, enslavement by a hostile nation was thought to prove the inability of both king and deity to protect a people (compare [Isaiah 14:1–8](#)). Restored relationship with God removes and heals these purported signs of abandonment (see also [Ezekiel 34:16](#); [Micah 4:6](#)). Physical healing, freedom, and return home are concrete ways God’s justice and love will be announced.

Best Plan or Second-Best Plan?

“It was a combination of the saddest moment of my life but also the proudest.” That’s how Craig described meeting his son Sam for the first time.

It all started in 1969 when Craig was a young enlisted man stationed at an army base. His red convertible helped him attract a pretty girlfriend, but it didn’t exactly suggest he was the marrying type. After completing military service and returning home, his former girlfriend called and congratulated him on being the father of a healthy baby boy—whom she had already placed for adoption.

Unable to find Sam or contest the adoption according to the laws of the time, Craig resigned himself to never seeing his son—such was a consequence of the immorality that preceded. But 52 years later, Sam tracked Craig down with the sad news that he was dying of cancer. Craig crossed the country to sit at Sam’s side and catch up on the lost decades.

On the drive back home, Craig received a phone call that Sam had passed away.

That was a bittersweet reunion. We too may find ourselves in long years of struggle over a relationship broken because of sin. Often when we are attempting to cope, we are actually searching for God's second-best plan, his best plan ("Don't sin!") having been rejected already (hence the heartache).

Which do you find yourself searching for most: God's best plan or his second-best plan?

—A. W.

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 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 *that time*, he reinforced the link between the promises. God's restoration of familial relationship goes hand in hand with restoring a sense of identity as God's covenant people. God's care is to be demonstrated in this renewed relationship and rediscovered identity.

The phrase *when I restore your fortunes* reemphasizes that the terrible judgments of the Day of the Lord were yet to occur, from the perspective of the original reader. And as the decades passed until they did, it would be easy to forget or outright dismiss the predictions of exile and return (compare [2 Peter 3](#); [Revelation 2:4–5](#)). Could there be anything sadder than to fail to be restored to relationship with God Almighty himself?

Conclusion

A. 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 today's lesson. The original recipients of this message lived in the time of Josiah ([Zephaniah 1:1](#)). He was slain in battle about 609 BC. The destruction of the temple did not take place until 586 BC and the return from exile did not begin until 538 BC. 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](#)). Today's 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!

B. 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.

C. Thought to Remember

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

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Distribute sheets of paper and pencils. Ask learners to fold their papers vertically in half to create a crease, then open the papers again. Have them label the left side “Joy” and the right “Sorrow”; then allow one minute to list words and experiences that they associate with the two words.

Bring the class together to discuss these questions: 1—Did your lists display any overlaps? Where, or why not? 2—How can we be simultaneously joyful and sorrowful about something?

Explain that today's lesson challenges us to consider apparent contradictions in seemingly opposing truths: that God's judgment and discipline deliver us and give us hope; they restore us and are part of his plan for our salvation.

Into the Word

Ask a volunteer to read [Zephaniah 3:14–20](#). Write *Joy* and *Sorrow* on the board as the headers of two columns (you will add a third column shortly). Conduct a discussion on how to fill in the columns, using the verses from Zephaniah. Refer to the Into the Lesson exercise to compare and contrast with the lists learners already created.

Add the third column with the header of *Punishment*. Challenge learners to consider how God's definitions differ from our worldly understandings. Ask: 1—What does this passage teach about God's attitude toward punishment? 2—What does this passage teach about God's attitude toward discipline?

Have participants form pairs (or groups of three), each with access to a Bible and a concordance. Distribute paper and pencils to the groups. Invite groups to identify other passages that seem to demonstrate similar and contrasting attitudes toward punishment and discipline, as well as how we reconcile the passages. As an example, together look at [1 John 4:18](#). Discuss how our cultural views of fear and love differ from this biblical message. Challenge participants to consider how this cultural disconnect can cause people outside the church to misinterpret the message of the prophets. Then allow time for groups to find and make notes about other passages. After 15 minutes, bring groups together for discussion about their findings.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Power and Promises” exercise

from the activity page, which you can download. Have participants work in groups of three or four to complete as indicated. After 15 minutes bring the class together to discuss their findings.

Into Life

Ask students to get into pairs as you cue up some background music with a peaceful message about renewal in Christ. Encourage them to consider how the passage in Zephaniah carries a timeless message about the temptations of idolatry and trusting in God to overcome its power over us. Display the following phrases as discussion prompts:

Your Life

Your Neighborhood

Our City

Our Country

The World

Have pairs discuss: 1—Where is renewal happening in your life? in the other listed areas? 2—For each of these, did renewal look the way you expected? How did God surprise you? Individuals might look back at the joy and sorrow notes they wrote at the beginning of the lesson as they reflect on renewal here. Close by singing together a favorite praise song. Invite the group to spend time during the week rejoicing in God.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Viral Rejoicing” activity from the activity page. Have learners work in pairs or trios to complete as indicated.