

## Zephaniah 3:14-20 Be Glad and Rejoice

There is nothing quite like Christmas. And there is nothing quite like the prophecies of Zephaniah, which came at the end of the Israelite civilization, just before the Babylonians came in and wrecked up everything.

One can, of course, read some of the other prophets, like Jeremiah, to get a strong feeling for what was happening in Judah at the time. For nearly 400 years there had been a monarchy in Israel, for awhile two of them, and about 600 years before the first Christmas it all came to an end, violently, and without recourse to a positive reading of the story. Zephaniah was one of the prophets there at the end to give it a try.

He insisted that the problem was related to their unfaithfulness, to their assimilation of foreign culture and religion, and their acceptance of injustice in the land. He called for repentance, for a re-commitment to the high and noble traditions of Israel.

And what is true of most of the literature of the Israelite prophets is that they called the people to rejoice. Perhaps the greatest reason why we so easily misunderstand the prophets is that we fail to relate to their circumstances; they asked the people to act as though it was the best of times when in fact it was the worst, worse than we can easily imagine.

“Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem.”

### Have Joy

Telling someone to have joy when they don't have it is like telling someone to walk on broken legs. Yet the theme runs throughout the Bible. In spite of our sinfulness and the world's tragic life, we are told to have joy. There are times when we *do* have joy, when there is hardly a need to give the command to be glad and rejoice. But those times are largely tied to circumstances.

I have mentioned before the time about five years ago when my son Jonathan's football team made a state championship run. Perhaps it would have been different if the tradition was to win championships, but no team in the town history had ever come close and it was a surprise and the whole town was euphoric and seemed to float on air for awhile. It lasted a few months before things returned to normal.

Nobody had to say, “Shout for joy,” everyone just did it, even the quiet among us. It is the same way with the birth of a child. There is a rush of adrenaline like few other times, and even when the circumstances are otherwise rough, there is great joy. No one has to be told to celebrate.

I am sure there are other times when because of some good thing, celebration comes naturally. I am willing to bet that each of you has memories of such times.

Think of those times as foreshadowings of life to come.

What I am also willing to bet is that in the worst of times, all the encouragement in the world could not have induced an expression of joy. Much of life is spent in the tension between the hope of the next time of excitement and joy and the anxiety about the next disappointment, when sorrow and despair rule the day. Zephaniah tries to encourage joy in tragic times.

### The Future

Zephaniah and the other prophets are not proclaiming joy because of their present circumstances. They are forward thinking and are able to see with clarity the future redemption they believe to be inevitable.

They see the victory of life and light, a victory no defeat can overwhelm. They see that even though Israel came to ruin, the blessed vision of a world blessed by grace had not been defeated. To be sure, it is in the future, but there are some present markers that point the way with an unwavering hope.

### The Triumph

There are many ways to speak of the Christian hope, and the joy that accompanies it, but let us listen to the words of Zephaniah:

- 1 - The Lord has taken away your punishment
- 2 - The Lord is with you
- 3 - Never again will you fear any harm
- 4 - The Lord is mighty to save
- 5 - God will take great delight in you
- 6 - God will quiet you with love
- 7 - God will rejoice over you with singing

Then Zephaniah goes on to promise justice and redemption, that the sorrows will be removed and the oppressors will be dealt with justly; the lame will be rescued, the scattered will be gathered together, and where there has been shame and reproach there will be honor and praise. God says, "I will restore your fortunes before your very eyes."

### The Biblical Message

This sense of joy is very much central to the message of the whole Bible. The Bible is the story of creation, sinfulness, liberation and redemption. This message comes as the Word of the Lord to an un-liberated, unredeemed people whose circumstances persist, very often, and it offers them the attitudes of the heart and the state of mind and the emotions connected with liberation and redemption.

Liberation means to be set free; set free from both the societal and personal conditions that hinder life and meaning. We are set free from “the way things have always been done among people.”

For instance, we live in the United States of America, which is a constitutional republic, a democratic form of government that gives each some small access to power. It was very controversial at first and many in the world, even today, think it is not workable. The point is that it is a break with the past.

On the personal side liberation means we are set free from dispositions and attitudes of the heart that hinder us from experiences of life at its best. We have been set free from fear and anger, from selfishness and greed, and from the staggeringly paralyzing belief that life can't get better. We have been set free from sin in all its affects.

We have been redeemed, which means re-purchased, bought back. In the religious sense it means that not only are the affects of sin canceled and removed, but in some miraculous way, the affects themselves have been transformed.

The experience of the faithful is that God not only takes away the consequences of our sin, but uses the consequences for good in ways that are quite surprising. The Cross of Christ, for instance, is the instrument of life giving salvation.

And if we if we become discouraged, even that discouragement works for us, if it is enough to help us appreciate the gift of redemption. Then there will be joy; a feeling of great pleasure or delight, devoid of any shame; a state of spiritual blessedness that is so miraculous that we often associate it with heaven and believe that it can't be attained until after death.

But Zephaniah, along with the other prophets and later Jesus and Paul, tells us that it can accompany us in this life too, especially once we learn to rejoice in the Lord, and not depend on rare occasions like state championships and the birth of children.

Small

And it starts out small so we can catch it. That is the beauty of the Christmas story. It is not crowded like the “shoe” on an October Saturday, but out in the country with stars and shepherds and farm animals. We experience it in the privacy of our homes with a few family and friends around and in the dark, with a few lights, where even in the cold we can sense the warmth.

Then it grows big. It conquers our lives with life. We do not deserve it, but no matter.

Rejoice!

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