

FPFWC Christian Development



Called to God's Work of Justice
May 2020

Spring Quarter

May 2, 2020

Lesson #1 – Prophecy Restoration

Scripture Focus – Zephaniah 3:14-20

ICE BREAKERS –

1. Without giving direct advice, how would you counsel someone whose life seems to be on hold because of besetting fear? (v.16)
2. In what ways do you sense that God wants you to be His hands and feet with regard to restoring the lost to Him?

Key Verse: 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

LESSON BACKGROUND

Zephaniah was a prophet in the southern kingdom of Judah in the seventh century BC. His lineage suggests that he may have been of royal blood (see Zephaniah 1:1). This family background would have given him deep insight into the state of the nation and impact his understanding of God as king of Israel. Zephaniah understood the importance of leadership and what its absence could do to a nation.

Zephaniah likely wrote in the late 620s BC before King Josiah's spiritual reforms. 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 for idolatry. This judgment is to come in the form of both the natural consequences of that nation's choices and as a tool of God for purifying His people.

God's process of purification would remove the rebellious in order to ensure the survival of those remaining faithful—"the remnant of Israel" (Zephaniah 3:13; see also 2:7, 9; compare Isaiah 10:20-22). The prophet's warnings to Judah carried weight given the fact of the deportation of the northern kingdom (Israel) by Assyria in 722 BC. That reality and its associated horror underlined the fact that Zephaniah's warning was not an idle threat.

Zephaniah's prophecy of God's judgment came true in 586 BC. That was the year the Judeans were cast into Babylonian exile (2 Kings 25:1-21). The prophesied restoration would not begin until 538 BC, when Jewish captives were allowed to return to Judah (Ezra 1:1-4).

The ancient writers' fondness for using parallelism (structural doublets) is important to keep in mind when reading Old Testament passages composed as poetry. Previous discussions in lessons 4 and 9 regarding how to recognize this feature still apply, so that information need not be repeated here. We should, however, stress anew the significance

of this technique: when the second phrase in lines of poetry echoes the first phrase, only one thing or action is in view, not two. One happy result of this fact is that when part of a verse is difficult to understand, its companion phrase may be used to interpret the more difficult portion.

Zephaniah's prophecy presents us with a sharp change of theme beginning in Zephaniah 3:9, as restoration of a remnant takes center stage. The Lord promises that the “afflicted and poor . . . shall trust in the name of the Lord” (3:12), untroubled by those who are proud and haughty. The remnant can freely celebrate captivity's end.

LESSON COMMENTARY

3:14-17. The second benefit God promised is the joy that Israel will experience. Calling upon Jerusalem to **shout for joy** (v. 14), the Lord gave three reasons for their exultation. First, God has acquitted them, taking away His judgments (v. 15a). Second, He has delivered them from their enemies (v. 15b). Third, and most important, their longed-for King Messiah, the Lord, will be ruling in their **midst** (v. 15c). Obviously this reflects that day during the tribulation period when Israel as a nation has turned in faith to Jesus as Messiah (see the comments on Zch 12:10; Mt 23:39; Ac 3:19; Rm 11:25-27). As a result, the nation will **not be afraid** or despairing (**let your hands fall limp**; v. 16). They need not do so because **the LORD... in [their] midst** will protect them (as a **victorious warrior**), rejoice over them (**He will exult over you with joy**), and love them (**He will be quiet in His love**) (v. 17).

3:18-20. The third benefit God promised is the regathering of Israel. Although God would have regathered some of Israel before the "day of the LORD" (see 2:1), many Jewish people will still be scattered in exile when Messiah Jesus returns. Thus He will **gather** them so that they no will longer need to grieve about being unable to celebrate the biblical feasts (Lv 23) far from Jerusalem (Zph 3:18). God promises to **gather... outcast** Israel (v. 19), at which time He will transform them from **shame to praise and renown in all the earth**. Thus, all the covenant promises made to the patriarchs would be fulfilled.

Some object that these verses merely describe the restoration from exile when Israel returned from Babylon in 539 BC. However, this description goes far beyond the events of those days. Certainly, when the people returned from exile, all Israel did not know the Lord, nor were all the captives restored physically to the land, nor did the nation become a reason for praise in all the earth. These verses anticipate their fulfillment in the millennial kingdom. At best, the prophets used the return from Babylon as a mere foreshadowing of the future Messianic Age when the Lord would be faithful to keep His covenant with Israel literally and completely. The prophet Zephaniah, by focusing on "the day of the LORD," continually forced the reader to look for that day when Israel comes to know her Messiah, and He will fulfill every promise He made to the nation.

Lesson Nugget – If we delight in the Lord and obey Him, He delights in us and shares His best with us. If we sin, He will chasten us in love. If we turn to Him in repentance, He will forgive us and restore our joy and peace. “I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely.” (Hosea 14:4)

Sources: Moody Bible Commentary; Wiersbe Bible Commentary; The Word For Today Bible; and Standard Sunday School lesson.