

A VISION OF RESTORATION

Lesson Scripture: Zephaniah 3

Focus Scripture: Zephaniah 3:14-20

Key Verse: I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast. Zephaniah 3:19 (NRSV)

ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20 (NRSV)

14 Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!

15 The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.

16 On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak.

17 The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing

18 as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it.

19 I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.

20 At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.

ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20 (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.

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.

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.

INTRODUCTION

In the set text, we see what is a usual pattern with prophetic messages. They start with a notation of what was ungodly in the nations. Then judgment and punishment is predicted. But this period of chastisement is followed by a promise of restoration. Often, the restoration period points beyond the current period into the millennial age. It is indeed helpful to know that something good always flows from God's chastisement of a people. This is as true for individuals as it is for nations. Further, these prophetic Old Testament messages point to the very nature of God. Therefore, we see in them much of what was later made plain in the New Testament period.

If you listen carefully you can hear John 10:10 as an undertone in the text. Yes, God will punish sin. But out of that punishment can come a higher, rich, and satisfying life. Is that not the promise of John 10:10, that Jesus came into the world to bring life, and more abundant living? Sadly, many of us never appreciate that life until *after* God has put us up against some hard walls in life.

That reality puts into focus scriptures like Psalm 119:71, "My suffering was good for me, for it taught me to pay attention to your decrees." See how this is played out in the examples given below.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

Chapter 3 is the climax of the prophetic message of the prophet Zephaniah. The message cuts across three time periods: the situation of the prophet's day, the days of the Messiah, and the time of the final eternal judgment. Some commentators argue, with good justification, that today we are in the center period. Also, in the chapter we see three concurrent themes. In verses 1-7 the prophet calls out the injustice with a view to inspiring repentance. Verses 3-8

give encouragement and hope to God's faithful people. The final section, verses 14-20, point to the future prosperity which reaches into the end-times. Keep this background in mind as we focus on verses 14-20. One last point to add here! Some critics have a problem with the contrasting messages of severe judgment and hope for salvation in the same chapter. But for most commentators, that is not a

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problem. Jesus also gave these blended messages of condemnation, repentance, and salvation in the same teaching.

Verses 14-15 looked to the coming days of eternal salvation (relief) for God's faithful people. In contrast to the horrors which the people faced at that time, the prophet gave good news, exciting news. So the people were encouraged to rejoice, to shout and sing. This message of eventual salvation was directed to the

'daughter of Zion' and 'Israel.' Both of these terms are inclusive of the faithful people of Zephaniah's day as well as all other faithful followers of Christ. So we are included. Why should the people rejoice? Because at that time, all their troubles will be over, and they will be safe and secured in the presence of God.

The good news to the redeemed people continues in verses 16-18. The prophet explained further why the people should rejoice and be happy. The prophet saw God dwelling in their presence. And, in that day of salvation, God will have great pleasure in God's people. The Lord almighty will shower them with love. They will have no cause to mourn or fear.

To appreciate verses 19-20, see them in contrast to the conditions that existed in Zephaniah's day. In the prophet's day the people were badly oppressed. The people will now be free, and God will punish the oppressors. The poor and helpless were without a defender or provider – without hope. Now God will be their provider and protector. Instead of the shame and disgrace which the exiles endured, these redeemed people will have glory and fame.

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Also, the people were exiled in a hostile environment, so God made the promise to return them home, i.e. to their familiar place of safety. This would not be to their former lands where they would face more threats and hardships. Instead, God would bring them home, to God's home.

That is, to a secure place of peace, security, and prosperity. What a promise; what a message of hope!

Finally, the Lord personally signed off on the message: "I the Lord have spoken." This must have been an inspiring message of hope to a people who had endured captivity and oppression. It is

also a message of hope for us today. We are included in the promises. Whatever we face on earth now, we can still look forward to what will happen on “that day” or “the day of the Lord” (i.e. the return of Jesus Christ).

SANKOFA

Since today’s text mentioned Ethiopia, it is fitting to use that country to demonstrate the power of hope in a nation. Prior to May 2015, Ethiopia was a country in chaos. Charges of human rights abuses, corruption in government, and wars among different tribes abounded. Generally, the outlook for the future was negative. Then came May 2015, and a new leader was elected. By August 2016 the international press was reporting that the mood of the country had changed. People were now more hopeful, more positive. What happened in that short space of time to turn around the outlook of the population? Hope! The new leader sounded a note of hope for the people.

From the start of his administration, the new prime minister showed that he

was open to addressing the concerns of the people. He promised to end the attacks on demonstrators, to listen to the differing opinions, and to accommodate them where possible. Also, he offered to explore ways to improve relations between the various ethnic groups. Further, the leader promised to drop charges against activists, and to have frequent open dialogue with the public.

Social reforms would come. Reforms would also be made in the justice system. In short, the government gave the assurance of a more open, people-friendly administration. It would be one in which justice would be evident.

It is still too early to say how well the government will deliver on the promises. The country still faces great

challenges with droughts, shortages of portable water, and reclaiming drought land for agriculture. However, the shift in outlook shows the power of hope a leader can bring to a people. Fear and hopelessness have largely been replaced by hope. Even the critics are cautiously optimistic.

It is easy to assume that for people

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in a poor country, intangible things like the character of the leaders are not important. Such cases show clearly this is not true. As poor as they were, the people of Ethiopia showed that they do appreciate things like character and the philosophies of their leaders. Just like us, they know when they elect people with a love for decency and justice, the level of hope and outlook rise. On the other hand, when people who are indifferent to justice or comfortable with injustice are in offices of high influence, the people lose hope and take pessimistic positions on future outcomes.

CASE STUDY

What about the level of hope in American society? Naturally this varies from region to region. However, there are some national measures. At the end of 2018 NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist conducted a poll on people's outlook towards the coming year. The results of the poll were published in December 2018. They showed an interesting picture. Based on the responses, the pollsters came to some interesting conclusions. About 60% of the population held a positive

outlook towards the coming year (2019). Around 37% held pessimistic or fearful outlooks; while 3% were uncertain. But the surprises went even deeper.

The 60% positive response was an increase of six percentage points over the corresponding results for 2011 (54%). So the next question was, what caused this high level of positive outlooks? The prospect for families, jobs, health services, and finance were among the major reasons given. On the other hand, the majority of people with negative outlooks identified politics and the political news reports as the basis for their negative responses.

One of the amazing things about these answers was the absence of references to intangibles like justice and religion. So, can we conclude that Americans are comfortable with the level of justice in society? Or are such things not that important to how they see life events? Alternatively, are Americans complacent about such matters? Something to think about!

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LIFE APPLICATION

As Christians, we believe firmly that God will ultimately provide solutions for all the issues that annoy and harm us. And that is great. But how does that assurance help us to face the hurtful situations that confront us now? This is a very practical question. No doubt different people have varying answers for it. Maybe you can suggest that it be the topic for one of your Bible study sessions.

What is shared in such a session will help individual believers, especially new converts, in a tremendous way.

In really tough, disturbing situations, people may say, "Only God can solve this." The challenge for us is to recognize when that which we hope for is happening. And we must do this with the understanding that the way God works is usually outside our normal way of thinking. So, in your private meditation time, consider how you recognize when God is at work to provide relief in a hurtful situation. What are the signs which scream to you, "God's got this"? To find meaningful clues, you may need to consider when, in the past, God provided

amazing solutions seemingly 'out of the blue.'

The next consideration flows from the suggestion in the last paragraph. We say God provides relief to distressing situations. We know these solutions often come through the actions of people. God brought the Israelites out of Egypt. But Moses and Joshua led the march to the Promised Land. With that in mind,

consider how you would know if God is trying to use you to resolve a situation for another person. In thinking about this, think about the ordinary "nobodys" God used to help other people find solutions. One such case is in 2 Kings 5 where a nameless young girl helped Naaman to find healing.

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QUESTIONS

1. In the text, as in other parts of the Bible, we see God's punishments followed by a period of restoration. As Christians, how can we reflect this feature of God's love when dealing with people who hurt us deeply?
2. In how many ways can you connect God's promise of restoration in the set

text to John chapter 10?

3. To what extent does the promise of a world of everlasting justice and peace motivate you to try to live a life that pleases God?

Refrain

*Claim the promise, plead it o'er and o'er;
On his Word lay hold as ne'er before;
Claim the promise, plead it o'er and
o'er; Let your faith be mightier than e'er
before.*

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

We close this lesson by singing or reciting the lyrics to the hymn "Claim the Promise." Here are the first two stanzas:

"Claim the Promise"

Never let a shade of care rest on your brow,

You can have the Savior's helping hand just now;

He has promised if his Word you will believe,

That according to your faith you shall receive.

He has called you in the world to shine for him,

Never need the brightness of your life grow dim;

He has promised evermore he will bestow

All that you may need to keep your light aglow.

Refrain

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help us to walk in the power of your promises. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

April 27–May 3

Monday	Deuteronomy 30:1-6 (God Promises Restoration of Israel's Fortunes)
Tuesday	Ezekiel 34:11-16 (God Will Shepherd the People)
Wednesday	Zechariah 10:6-12 (God Will Strengthen the People)
Thursday	Acts 5:27-32 (Christ's Forgiveness of Israel's Sins)
Friday	Zephaniah 3:1-7 (Leaders, Priests, and Prophets Don't Listen)
Saturday	Zephaniah 3:8-13 (God Will Preserve a Remnant)
Sunday	Zephaniah 3:14-20 (Rejoice in God's Glory and Salvation)