

The Minor Prophets
Lesson 26: “The Glory of The Kingdom”
(Zephaniah 3)

Why did the prophets consistently close their books with messages of hope? For at least three reasons. To begin with, hope is a great motivation for obedience, and the prophets wanted to encourage God’s people to submit to God’s will and do what He commanded. God’s covenant blessings come to His people only when they obey His covenant conditions.

A second reason is the prophet’s emphasis on the faithfulness of God. The Lord will keep His promises and one day establish the kingdom; and since God is faithful to keep His promises, we ought to be faithful obeying His Word. If we obey, God will be faithful to chasten; if we confess, He will be faithful to forgive.

Finally, the closing message of hope was an encouragement to the faithful remnant in the land who were true to God and suffered because of their devotion to Him. It’s difficult to belong to that “company of concerned” who stand true to the Lord and His Word no matter what others may do or say. Knowing God would one day defeat their enemies and reign in righteousness would encourage the believing remnant to persist in their faithful walk with the Lord.

In this last chapter, God reveals His plan for Jerusalem, the Gentile nations, and the faithful remnant. At the same time, the Lord reveals Himself and His gracious working on behalf of His people in every age and in every place.

I. Jerusalem: God’s Jealous Anger (3:1-8)

Jerusalem is commonly called “the Holy City,” but in Zephaniah’s day the city didn’t manifest much holiness! Isaiah (1:21ff.), Jeremiah (29:12ff.), and Ezekiel (4—6, 9) gave the same assessment in their day. Even the Gentiles called Jerusalem “the rebellious and wicked city” (Ezra 4:12, 15 NIV), and they could cite proof for their statement.

a. A sinning people (vv. 1-2).

- Instead of being holy, the city was filthy and polluted because of shameful sin; and instead of bringing peace (*Jerusalem means “city of peace”*), the city was guilty of rebellion and oppression.
- God gave His people the revelation of Himself in His Word and His mighty acts, yet they didn’t believe Him or seek Him.
- **See James 4:8 NKJV.**

b. A godless leadership (vv. 3-4).

- God expected the civil and religious leaders of the land to take His Word seriously and lead the people in the way of righteousness. Instead, the leaders acted like ravenous beasts in the way they oppressed the people and took what they wanted from them.
- The prophets were unfaithful to the Lord and His Word and dealt treacherously with the people. They didn’t proclaim God’s truth; they only preached what the people wanted to hear.

- As for the priests, their very ministry was toxic and polluted the sanctuary! (Matt. 23:25-28 relates what Jesus said about the Pharisees in His day.) Instead of serving God for His glory, the priests twisted the law to please themselves and gain what they wanted.
- The tragedy is that God had spoken to His people and corrected them in discipline, and yet they wouldn't listen or obey (Zeph. 3:2). "If in spite of these things you do not accept my correction but continue to be hostile toward me, I myself will be hostile toward you and will afflict you for your sins seven times over" (Lev. 26:23-24 NIV). This is the message of Jeremiah to the city of Jerusalem even while Babylon was poised to attack. (Jer. 2:30; 5:3; 7:8; 17:23; 32:33).

c. A righteous God (vv. 5-8).

- God's name was identical with the city and the temple (2 Sam. 7:13; 1 Kings 5:5; Neh. 1:9), and yet both were cesspools of iniquity. Therefore, He would have to act in judgment for His own name's sake. The wicked officials met at the city gate morning after morning to transact their evil business, and the Lord was there to behold their deeds.
- How patiently He waited, and yet they would not repent and turn to Him for cleansing!
- Since the Lord reminded His people that He had judged the Gentiles and cut off nations (Zeph. 3:6), He was able to cut Judah off as well. In fact, the Jews were more truth and more blessing. The people were sinning against a flood of light. Surely God's judgment of the other nations should have awakened the Jews to their peril, but they paid no attention.
- They forgot that covenant privileges also involved covenant responsibilities.

The Lord concludes this message to Jerusalem by describing a courtroom scene in which He stands to testify against His people (v. 8). While the impending Babylonian captivity is involved here, there is also an end times application in the battle of Armageddon, when the nations of the world converge against Jerusalem. God will pour out His wrath upon these nations, deliver His people, and establish His kingdom (Zech. 14:1-9).

His jealous anger will burn like fire against all who resist His truth and disobey His Word. The terrible day of the Lord will dawn, and there will be no escape (see Zeph. 1:2ff).

II. The Gentiles: God's Gracious Forgiveness (3:9-10)

It's important to keep in mind that God's call to Abraham involved bringing God's blessing to the whole world (Gen. 12:1-3). God accomplished this by giving the Jews the knowledge of the true God, the written Word of God, and the Savior, Jesus Christ (Rom. 9:1-5). Therefore, they were to share the blessings with the Gentiles.

- The Jews were supposed to magnify the Lord's name before the Gentiles. Instead, they imitated the pagan nations and disgraced God's name (Isa. 52:5; Rom. 2:24).
- The court of the Gentiles in the Jewish temple was supposed to be the place where Gentiles could talk with Jews about the true God and even pray to Him, but the religious leaders made that area into a market for selling sacrifices and exchanging money.

- What blessings does God promise for the Gentiles in the last days? First, He promises that the Gentiles shall be converted (Zeph. 3:9). Instead of calling on their false gods, the Gentiles will call upon the true and living God and have their lips purified. Since what we say with our lips comes from the heart (Matt. 12:34-35), cleansed lips indicated forgiven sin and a cleansed heart (Isa. 6:1-8).
- But the gentiles will do much more than call on the Lord and receive His cleansing; they will also serve the Lord as one people and no longer be divided (Zeph. 3:9 NIV).
- The God of Israel will be the Lord of all the earth, and the Gentile nations will honor and serve Him. Along with the scattered Israelites who return to their land, the Gentiles will bring the Lord offerings and be called His “worshipper.”

Before our Lord’s death on the cross, there was a vast difference between the relationship of Jews and Gentiles to each other and to the Lord. But the middle wall that separated them has now been taken down (Eph. 2:11ff) and both can share in the spiritual blessings that come through faith in Christ. (See Romans 10:12-13 NKJV). The miracle of God’s grace will be demonstrated in the Kingdom age as the Gentile nations trust and worship the God of Israel.

III. The Remnant: God’s Bounteous Blessing (3:1-20)

When the terrible day of the Lord is over, Israel will be a new nation. Then Jews will look by faith upon the Messiah, whom they crucified, believe in Him, and enter into a new life in the promised kingdom.

a. Sin will be removed (vv. 11-13).

- The Jews won’t have to be “put to shame” because when they see Christ, they will be ashamed of what they did to the Lord and will mourn over their transgressions (Zech. 12:10—13:1. It will be a time of deep repentance and confession that will lead to salvation.
- For centuries, the pride of Israel kept them from submitting humbly to the righteousness of God, that comes through faith in Christ (Rom. 9:30—10:13). There will be no place on God’s holy hill for proud sinners who think they can earn God’s salvation by their good works.
- Faith in Christ will make everything new so that the people will no longer disobey God or practice deception. This suggests that all love of idolatry will be taken from their hearts, for idols are lies, and to worship them is to practice deception.
- For the first time in centuries, the Jews will be able to enjoy their meals and their sleep, for all their enemies will have been defeated.

b. God’s people will rejoice (vv. 14-17).

- This is one of the most poignant passages in Scripture. It depicts the Lord as a loving mother, singing over her children and finding joy in their presence. The people of God sing and shout because all that God has done for them. He has taken away their punishment, defeated their enemies, and come to dwell with them.
- When Pilate presented a suffering Jesus to the Jewish leaders, they rejected Him and shouted, “We have no king but Caesar” (John 19:15). But now the Jewish people will joyfully acknowledge that Jesus Christ is King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Phil. 2:9-11).

- What do they have to sing about? To begin with, they have God's presence with them and God's power working for them (Zeph. 3:17). Even more, their God holds them next to His heart like a loving mother holds a baby; He quiets them with His love, and He even sings to them! This image of "the motherhood of God" assures forgiven sinners that God is with them, that He loves them, and that they have nothing to fear.
- Our God is a "singing" God. God the Father sings to the Jewish remnant entering the kingdom (v. 17). God the Son sang at the close of the Passover Feast, and then went to the garden to pray (Matt. 26:30). He also sang after His triumphant resurrection from the dead (Ps. 22:22; Heb. 2:12). God the Spirit sings today through the hearts and lips of Christians who praise God in the Spirit (Eph. 5:18-21).

c. The nation will be restored (vv. 18-20).

- During the seventy years of captivity in Babylon, and then during their worldwide dispersion among the Gentiles after AD 70, devout Jews were not able to celebrate their appointed feasts (Lev. 23). Since the destruction of the temple in AD 70, the Jewish people have had no temple, altar, priesthood, or sacrifice (Hos. 3:4-5). Of course, the types and symbols of the Old Testament law have all been fulfilled in Christ, including the feasts and sacrifices (Heb. 10), but Zephaniah intimates that these feasts will be restored in the kingdom age, and Zechariah 14:16-21 seems to support this interpretation.
- Why would the Lord restore religious practices that have now been fulfilled? Possibly as a means of teaching Israel the meaning of the doctrine of salvation through Jesus Christ. The feasts described in Leviticus 23 picture "salvation history," from the slaying of the Passover Lamb (John 1:29) to the Day of Atonement (the cleansing of Israel) and the Feast of Tabernacles (the kingdom age).
- Just like the Old Testament types looked forward to the coming of the Savior, perhaps during the kingdom age these rituals will look back to His finished work.
- God promised that His scattered people would be gathered, His lame people would be rescued, and His sinful people will be forgiven and no longer bear the shame of their wicked deeds. "I will bring you home" (Zeph. 3:20 NIV) is God's gracious promise, and He will keep it.

The state of Israel was "born" on May 14, 1948, but that event, significant as it is, was not the fulfillment of God's promise to regather His people and restore their fortunes. That promise will be fulfilled in the end times, after Jews have experienced the day of the Lord and been prepared to see the Messiah.

But there is a present-day practical lesson here for any of God's people who have strayed from His will and have experienced His chastening. When you come to Him with a broken heart, confessing your sins, He will receive you the way a loving mother receives a disobedient child. He will love you and even sing to you! He will bring peace to your heart and quiet you in His love. Yes, we suffer for our disobedience; and sometimes we carry the scars of that disobedience for the rest of our lives. But the Lord will forgive us (1 John 1:9), forget our sins, and restore us into His loving fellowship.

Dr. William Culbertson, the late president of Moody Bible Institute, sometimes ended his public prayer with, "And Lord, help us bear the consequences of forgiven sin and to end well." There are consequences to forgiven sin; for though God in His grace cleanses us, God in His government says,

The Wiersbe Bible Study Series, Warren W. Wiersbe, David C. Cook Publishing Company; Knowing the Bible, Lydia Brownback, Crossway Publishing

“You will reap what you have sown.” After King David confessed his sin, the prophet Nathan assured him that the Lord had put away his sin, but the rest of his days, David suffered the tragic consequences of what he had done (2 Sam. 12:1-15).

But when God establishes His kingdom on earth, He will restore His people, renew the land, and give His people a new beginning that will cause them to forget their past disobedience and focus on praising the Lord and glorifying His name.

Jehovah is “the God of hope.” Therefore, He can fill us with “all joy and peace in believing “so that we can “abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 15:13 NKJV).

Is that your experience today?

Questions for Personal Reflections Or Group Discussion

1. Why do you prophets always end their messages with words of hope?
2. How would you describe Jerusalem during Zephaniah’s time?
3. Wiersbe says that covenant privileges involve covenant responsibilities. What are some of our responsibilities under the new covenant of Christ?
4. What hope for the future could the Gentiles look forward to? Does this include all Gentiles? Explain.
5. Wiersbe writes that after the day of the Lord is over, a believing remnant will be left. What will have happened to the rest of Israel?
6. During the kingdom time, what will the lives of the remnant be like?
7. According to Wiersbe, what will be the purpose of feasts and sacrifices in the future kingdom? How do you respond to this?
8. What lesson can we learn from someone who has strayed from God’s will?
9. What are some current examples of the consequences of forgiven sin?
10. What significance do you see in the description of God’s motherly qualities (Zeph. 3:17)?

Homework: Read **Zechariah 1-2**. Study title: God and His People