

July 6, 2025

Return: The Hope of Restoration

Zephaniah 3:8-20

Vernon Advent Christian Church

Introduction...Theme...Do you ever feel like your just going through the motions? It's easy to do. The monotony of every day life: getting up, going to work, coming home, going to bed and then getting up the next morning to do it all over again. Well the same thing can happen in our spiritual lives as well. We come to church on Sunday mornings, we read our bibles, we pray before our meals and if we're not careful these things can just become something that we do instead of acts of true worship to our God.

We call this complacency and again, if we're not careful, it can lead to spiritual laziness that then leads to spiritual atrophy, loss of spiritual muscle, as well as spiritual apathy, we don't care anymore. And so we keep going through the motions. It's a vicious cycle. This is the place that God's people found themselves and thus the call to return to a true heart of worship. And that same call is made to us this morning.

As we have made our way through the Book of Zephaniah, God has described the problem that is occurring with his people, namely, that even though Josiah is a godly king (1:1) and even though he is making spiritual reforms, the people are complacent in their sin(1:12). They bow down to God out of routine while they were also bowing down to false gods of the nations around them (1:5). They are worshipping God but they do not follow him, seek him, or inquire of him (1:6).

So the prophet, as we looked at last week, has called for the people to gather for repentance (2:1-3). He says the nations are going to be judged for their wickedness (2:4-15) as a warning, and Judah needs to turn back before it is too late. Unfortunately, the people were all the more eager to make all their deeds corrupt (2:7) because mankind, apart from God, in our sinful nature, is bent toward sin. God said that they, his people above all people, should listen and accept correction. But the people will not.

The questions that hangs over us then is this: what is God going to do since his people have rejected him and who are worthy of his judgment? Not only this, but what about those who were true worshipers of God? Who worshipped him with a pure heart? How were they to live in a culture and society that was falling farther and farther away from the LORD? These are the questions that are answered as the book of Zephaniah comes to an end. If you are able, please stand with me as I read the Word of God this morning from the last portion of the Book of Zephaniah, chapter 3:8-20. [Read]

The first thing God is going to do bring his judgment upon the nations, Judah included, as we read in vs. 8. Notice the language here, "all the earth shall be consumed." As with all prophetic messages, we have to understand that there is certainly a direct fulfillment, that God is just and he will not overlook sin and that judgment is coming within the near future of the original audience. But with this kind of "global" language, we're meant to see that there is also a distant fulfillment that is yet to come. A prophecy that God will come and bring justice to a broken world and will, once for all, destroy his enemies.

But that judgment is not the end of the story, for after his judgment he speaks of a restoration. And the first thing that he says he's going to do is change the speech of all the peoples to a pure speech in vs. 9. Changing the speech of the people means that God is going to, literally, change the hearts of the people. The idea here is that the tongue says what is in the heart. Jesus said that "the mouth speaks out of the abundance of the heart." (Luke 6:45) The heart has to be changed for the speech of the people to be changed. A repentance will be accomplished in the hearts of the people so that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve the Lord together. What is pictured is a radical change of desire! Jeremiah 31 speaks of this same thing when God says, speaking of the new covenant that is come with the Messiah, Jesus, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be there God, and they shall be my people." (Jer. 31:33)

We have read that the people are complacent, hypocritical, arrogant, unwilling to listen, and unwilling to draw near to God. But now the people will have hearts that want to call out to God. Notice that calling on the name of the Lord is not just saying words but a completely transformed and purified life.

And notice that God is not only going to change the speech of Judah. But the text says that God is going to change the speech of the peoples, plural. This point is emphasized in vs. 10. Worshipers of God will come from even beyond the rivers of Cush, which is land located south of Egypt that we talked about briefly last week, and the point is that people from the ends of the earth are going to come to the Lord to worship him. Which again speaks to the last days when those that are included in the multitude surrounding the throne, worshipping God, will include people from every tribe, nation and language.

The second thing that God is going to change is their position. Listen to what is going to happen in vs. 11. "You will not be put to shame because of all the rebellious deeds committed against the Lord." This is a picture of God taking away the guilt of the people. I want us to think about this idea for a moment. God acknowledges their sin but declares that they will no longer be ashamed of those deeds. God's forgiveness of sin is intended to be so complete that the people will not continue to loath themselves for what they have done. Nor are they going to find their trust in the Lord to be in vain because of their prior sin. God's forgiveness is so complete that we can trust in God, free from worry or guilt. This is the beauty of the Gospel. Romans 8:1 says, "For now there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Back to the text, God says he will remove the arrogant and haughty from their midst (3:11). Those who are left will be humble and lowly. They will not do wrong, speak lies, or be deceitful (3:12-13). The remnant will be purged from these sins. As they come to God in humility, God is taking away their shame and establishing their hope through his gracious forgiveness. Thus, their position has changed.

Look again at the end of vs. 13. [Read] Does this remind you of Psalm 23? "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake." (Ps. 23:1-3) The shepherd is making them to lie down and enjoy peace. We come to the Lord, we who were once in the position as his enemies and lost in our sin, and now, because of the atoning work of Christ, we are now in the position as his children, free

from the threat of fear of God's wrath and judgment. We have been brought to a grazing place to enjoy peace with God. Our position has changed.

The third point the prophet makes in this passage is by answering the question, "Who is it that brings about this change?" Who will put an end to injustice, lies, and deceit in the people? Who can change their position with a Holy God? Look at what Zephaniah says in vs. 14-15. [Read]

Judgment and wrath do not even have the final say. God has taken away the judgments and punishments that stand against his people. How has this happened? Vs. 15, "The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil." Think about this for a moment. When the King of Israel, the Lord himself, is in your midst, then your punishment is taken away and you have no need to fear disaster, harm, or evil. This is the picture that John, in his Gospel, gives regarding the arrival of Jesus. Listen to what the Gospel of John says in John 1:11-16:

"He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'") For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." (John 1:11-16)

Jesus came to us and to all who would receive him, he gave the right to become children of God, receiving grace. Grace is God's undeserved favor. It is God who gives it freely, who lavishes it on all who believe, as the Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians. So, it is the LORD who is to accomplish all these things.

Now, what is all supposed to mean for us as we come to our final point this morning. A people who find themselves somewhere on the spectrum between complacency and true worship, trying to live our lives in a God honoring way in a culture marred by sin? Look at vs. 16. On that day it will be said, "Do not fear. Do not let your hands grow weak." So here is the message to us. Do not be afraid. Do not grow weary. Do not let your hands hang limp. Do not weaken. Why? What is supposed to keep us strong and keep us from fear? There are six truths in these final verses that God reveals to us that give us the strength we need for today.

First, the Lord is with you (3:17). You are not alone. God is with you. Think about how many times God tells his people in the scriptures to not be afraid because he is with them. God tells people like Moses, Joshua, and Elijah that they can continue forward because God is with them and they are not alone.

Over and over again, God speaks this promise to his people. Jesus made it clear when speaking to his disciples before he ascended into heaven, "I will be with you always." You will never be alone. I will be with you. Just let this soak in. Whatever is going on in your life today, this promise is still true, the Lord your God is in your midst. He is with you and he will never leave you.

The second truth we find here that gives us strength is the Lord is a mighty warrior who will save (3:17). God often reveals himself in scripture as a mighty warrior which means he is a fighter who fights for his people. Again, think about how many times God was the one who fought for his people, driving the enemies away when they put their trust in him. Jesus is pictured as a mighty warrior in Rev. 19 who, at the consummation of all things, conquers the enemies of his people and gives them ultimate victory and life everlasting.

Third, the Lord will rejoice over you with gladness (3:17). God is pictured in having joy and delight in us. This is hard to get our minds around sometimes, to think that God can take pleasure in us. The problem is, we know ourselves too well and we know that God knows us better than we know ourselves. But if we think about this like parents with children, then the image becomes much easier to understand. Parents take great joy in the joy of their children, don't they. What happens to the children directly affects the parents. It's infectious.

Well, your salvation and your daily spiritual growth into becoming more like Jesus is what gives the Lord great joy. He takes delight in you moving from darkness to light. Be encouraged today knowing that, if you are in Christ, God takes joy in you. In fact, the end of vs. 17 pictures God actually singing over you because of his great joy. Think of a parent holding their child and singing sweet lullaby's over the child. This is the picture we are to capture in our minds.

Fourth, the Lord will quiet you by his love (3:17). His love for us is what gives us peace in the storms of life. This is a picture of God's love soothing us in a similar fashion to the love of a parent that gives peace and calmness to a child. Ultimately though, it is the demonstration of that love, the fact that while we were his enemies, Christ died for us, that is a firm foundation on which we stand, that brings a "quietness" to our lives. This peace is a state of being for the believer so that, whatever happens in this life, we will not be shaken but we find rest for our souls and are quieted by his love.

Fifth, the Lord gathers the outcasts and the broken (3:18-19). This is a promise that God also makes in Isaiah that Jesus said was fulfilled when he came in Luke 4:18-19. Jesus said of himself while speaking at the synagogue in Nazareth, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

God has compassion for his broken people. God did not come to us to tell us to shape up or ship out. He does not come to us with harshness. Jesus did not come to kick us while we are down. Jesus came to restore us. He comes and gathers the broken to himself. We do not bring our "perfect" lives to Christ, in fact the opposite is true, God receives the broken. And aren't you glad for that this morning?

Finally, the text tells us that the Lord will restore your fortunes (3:20). This is not talking about fortunes as in money and wealth, but on a much grander scale, pointing us to the paradise, or fortune, that was lost in the garden. The whole redemptive story of the Bible is God's unfolding plan of restoring what was lost. The promise here is that God will restore us that which was lost, perfect paradise with God, and we cannot begin to understand the full restoration that we will enjoy when Jesus returns and brings us into his Kingdom where there will be no more mourning, no more tears, no more pain and no more

death. And the final fulfillment of the passage I read earlier from Jer. 31 will be realized as we read in Rev. 21:3 “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.”

These six truths are given to us so that we will not falter or give up as followers of Jesus in a world that is in chaos and falling away from its creator. The motivation to continue serving the Lord and being transformed by his grace is found in knowing that the Lord is with you, a mighty warrior who saves, who rejoices and sings over you, who gathers the outcasts and quiets them with his love, giving us the hope of restoration.

Jesus has come and he has taken away our shame and made us lie down in peace and rest with him. Is this something you have in your life today? The invitation to you is to let God change your heart so that you can serve with a family of people who are seeking rest, peace, and hope that can only be found in a relationship with Jesus. Let God quiet you with his love and restore your life. Let us pray and prepare our hearts for communion.