

Zephaniah: Rejoicing Over You with Gladness

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that as the Scriptures are read and your Word is proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Background

I found myself in Witherspoon Hall Room 13 on a first Tuesday of the month. All of the deacons were looking at me.

“John, we need to talk to you about something.”

“Is this an intervention?” I asked.

The bad news John is, your office furniture has to go.
Your tawdry turquoise lamp needs to go.
Your gaudy couches need to go—people can’t get out of them.
Your mint green office walls are, well ... tasteless.

The good news John is, there is hope for your office.
We want to help you. There is a way out.
We, the deacons are going to give your “pastor cave” a total church make-over.

Thank you, Immanuel deacons, for your much-needed tough and tender love for your pastor!

In the same way, the prophet Zephaniah is having a tough and tender intervention with “Daughter Jerusalem,” God’s prodigal people. “I’ve got some bad news ... and I’ve got some good news. Which do you want first?”

Sometimes the most loving thing that can be done to us is a swift kick in the pants.

The argument can be made that the most awful depiction of judgment in the Bible is found in the beginning of Zephaniah, while the most awesome description of God’s love is found at the end of Zephaniah. In other words, Zephaniah begins on a low note like Debbie Downer, but ends on a high note like Zig Zigler.

The name **Zephaniah** means, “**God has hidden**” or “**God has protected.**” The meaning is clear—those who seek after God and follow his commands will be hidden or protected from judgment.

There had been a nearly fifty-year period where the voice of God was not heard in the Southern Kingdom. Under the long and violent reign of King Manasseh, Judah had fallen away from God.

King Manasseh, in his quest to become rich and powerful, had rejected God. And his subjects followed his lead.

Zephaniah doesn't limit the bad news to Israel. He is very inclusive, including the whole earth, that in God's words would be "destroyed by the fire of my fury."

"The great day of the Lord is near,
near and hastening fast; ...
That day will be a day of wrath,
a day of distress and anguish,
a day of ruin and devastation,
a day of darkness and gloom."

[Zephaniah 1:14-15 \(NRSV\)](#)

In other words, you're all toast.

Zechariah describes the usual suspects:

- The priests were profane and the prophets reckless.
- Government officials were roaring lions and judges wolves.
- The people became ignorant and apathetic saying,

"The Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm." ([Zephaniah 1:12b](#))

Do you know the difference between ignorance and apathy, by the way?

"I don't know and I don't care."

The people were no longer giving God a thought or a prayer. To them, God was deistic--distant and defunct. They had slowly become "functional atheists." As a result, religion had degenerated into an earth-made hodge podge, mix and match, pick and choose, all you care to eat spiritual cafeteria. And they found themselves spiritually out of shape and malnourished.

Proud nations around Israel were proud—setting themselves up as God saying as Zephaniah tells us:

"I am and there is no one else." ([Zephaniah 2:15](#))

The false securities of wealth, position, status, and power led the leadership of the day to be riddled with fraud, greed, and corruption. Ears were plugged and eyes shut to God's guidance. But God wasn't going to let this continue. Judgment would not be the final word. The curse would be reversed. And so Zephaniah cries out,

Wake up! Come to your senses! Repent! Seek righteousness! Seek humility! Seek the Lord!
Wait for me. Be silent. Listen and live.

This was an intervention.

...

Now we're ready for some good news. Let's hear it from:

Scripture: Zephaniah 3:14-20 (NRSV)

"Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!
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.
On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.
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
as on a day of festival.
I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.
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.
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."

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

...

SERMON – Zephaniah: Rejoicing Over You with Gladness

Sigmund Freud tells a story of a time he visited someone's home one evening for dinner. The family had a three year-old child who at bedtime was crying in his room.

"Auntie," he cried. "Talk to me—I'm frightened because it's so dark!"

His aunt answered from the other room, "What good would that do honey? You can't see me—the room is dark."

"That doesn't matter," replied the child. "When you talk, it gets light."

The child wasn't afraid of the dark. He was afraid of being alone.

Zephaniah was on to this, reminding God's children,

"Your King is in your midst,
THERE'S NOTHING TO BE AFRAID OF."

We've got to remember something very important, at the time of this writing—God's deliverance hadn't happened yet. They were still far from home.

Even in the midst of our present exile, we can enjoy the foretaste of our impending exodus.

Sing!

Shout!

Rejoice with all your heart!

Not half-heartedly, but wholeheartedly!

- Faith trains us to leap across the doom and grab for the ledge of grace.
- Faith inspires us to rejoice and revel in what is yet to come.
- Faith claims the victory even though all outward appearances indicate defeat.

Amy Poling Sutherland is a Presbyterian minister and she wrote this year's Horizon Bible Study for Presbyterian Women—*God's Promise: I am With You*.

In the study, Amy tells about a play attic she set up for her kids so she could get some peace and quiet to study for her seminary classes. Even though she loaded the attic with fun toys, the kids refused to go up there and play because the room was "scawee."

She even tried to use theology to get her kids to do what she wanted, telling them that God is everywhere—including in the play attic. Her child responded,

"I know God is there, but I want someone I can see!"

The good news for us is that God is here and we can see Jesus. Christ is God's promise and presence with us.

The Christ who defeated death, is the Christ who is with us to help us when we're feeling down and out and all alone.

I'd like to invite you to help me out with a responsive liturgy that Amy included after her story of the toy attic.

Please say the refrain with me: GOD IS WITH US!

When in faith we stay where we do not want to be...

GOD IS WITH US!

When in faith we go where we've never been before...

GOD IS WITH US!

When we feel that we're not enough...

GOD IS WITH US!

When the task is too much...

GOD IS WITH US!

When we are too aware of our own weakness...

GOD IS WITH US!

When we falter between fear and faith...

GOD IS WITH US!

When we tremble before our foes...

GOD IS WITH US!

When the waters rise or flames lick our feet...

GOD IS WITH US!

When we have never felt more alone...

GOD IS WITH US!

When the world around us, or at least all our plans, fall apart...

GOD IS WITH US!

Immanuel, God is not only "God with us," but God delights in you and rejoices over you. Our present God, LIKES being in our presence. His love renews you.

Or as other translations put it,

"God will 'soothe' or 'quiet us' with his love."

Our Savior serenades us and sings over us. This is reason for rejoicing. When you're on your back, know that God has your back. The Holy Spirit is not only our Advocate, but God is the hound of heaven. Not only that, God is a feisty she-bear looking out after her cubs.

Our most famous Reformed creed says that "the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." Both Redeemer and redeemed rejoice!

Because God is ALL IN with us, we can be ALL IN with God.

Think about it—you make the Creator of the Universe smile.

If that doesn't put a smile on your face, I don't know what will!

And God isn't budging on this. It's not a government shutdown we're talking about here. It's a judgment shutdown. Jubilation is dethroning judgment. As the scriptures say, "mercy triumphs over judgment."

God's judgment against us—is not just frozen or delayed, but its cancelled, erased, annulled, terminated—GONE for good because of the cross of Christ. Sayonara, baby!

So, let the Savior steady your faltering steps and lift your head high. God is coming to the rescue!

Take heart—you need fear misfortune no more. God is a God who rescues the lame and gathers the strays.

- Your exile will be transformed into a homecoming,
- Your painful partings will be turned into reunion.
- Your shame will be transfigured into honor.
- When you feel torn apart, God will not only put you together again, he'll hold you together.
- When you feel mucky, God will give you purity of heart.
- God will exchange your haughtiness for humility.
- He'll give you compassion, for your cruelty.
- Security in scarcity and scary times.
- He'll instill fearlessness in you when you're fearful.

The good news is best news in the worst of times. Listen to Zephaniah, listen to God—help and hope is on the way.

We can be ready, willing, and able to follow the Apostle Paul's command in the shortest verse in the Bible,

"REJOICE EVERMORE!" [1 Thessalonians 5:16 \(KJV\)](#)

Amen.

The New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.