

The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah

Lesson 9: The Lord Your God Is in Your Midst; A Purified Remnant -- Zephaniah 3:9-20

After all the thunder, the book ends in singing. Zephaniah began with a fire alarm and a sweeping announcement of judgment, but it closes with one of the most tender and joyful passages in all the prophets. The God who searched Jerusalem with candles and pronounced woe on the rebellious city now promises to purify, to gather, to restore, and, astonishingly, to sing. 'The Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty,' Zephaniah says, 'he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing.' Picture it: God Himself, singing over His people like a delighted parent over a child. That is where this hard little book lands.

The turn begins in verse 9, where God promises to give the peoples 'a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord, to serve him with one consent.' The judgment was never God's final goal; restoration was. He will leave in the midst of His people 'an afflicted and poor people, and they shall trust in the name of the Lord.' Here is the great theme of the remnant: not the proud, not the self-sufficient, but a humble, lowly people who take refuge in the Lord. 'The remnant of Israel shall not do iniquity, nor speak lies... for they shall feed and lie down, and none shall make them afraid.' A purified, trusting, secure people, gathered around the name of the Lord.

We have to read this rightly, because it is the kind of passage that some twist into a forecast of a future earthly, political kingdom of national Israel. But the New Testament will not let us read it that way. The purified people who call on the name of the Lord with one consent, the humble remnant who take refuge in Him, are the people of God gathered in Christ, His church, spiritual Israel, drawn from every nation. The promise that 'the Lord, even the Lord, is in the midst of thee' is fulfilled in Immanuel, 'God with us,' and in Christ dwelling among and within His people by His Spirit. The kingdom is not postponed to some future age; it came with Christ and is His reigning church now.

And so this final lesson, and the whole study, ends not in fear but in joy. The same God who is 'slow to anger and great in power' in Nahum, the God to whom Habakkuk learned to sing 'yet I will rejoice,' the God whose great day Zephaniah announced, turns out to be a God who saves the humble and sings over the redeemed. 'Sing, O daughter of Zion... be glad and rejoice with all the heart.' The proper response to so great a salvation is the response with which the book closes: joy. Let us hear God's song over His people, and let us learn to sing back.

Group Discussion: Read together the astonishing promise that God ‘will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing’ (Zephaniah 3:17). What does it stir in you to picture God singing over His people with delight, and how does this picture of God compare to the way you usually imagine He feels about you?

Personal Reflection: Zephaniah describes a humble, ‘afflicted and poor’ people who simply trust in the name of the Lord, and over whom God rejoices. How does it change the way you see yourself to know that God delights in His people, not for their strength or success, but as those who take refuge in Him?

Read Zephaniah 3:9–20

Study Questions

1. After all the judgment, God promises to give the peoples “a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord, to serve him with one consent” (Zephaniah 3:9). How does this promise of a restored, unified people calling on God’s name find its fulfillment in the gospel and the church, gathered from every nation in Christ (Acts 2; Ephesians 2:13-22)?
2. God promises to leave “an afflicted and poor people, and they shall trust in the name of the Lord” (Zephaniah 3:12). Why does God’s restored people consist of the humble and lowly rather than the proud and strong, and where do you need to embrace your own ‘poverty of spirit’ as the doorway to trusting Him?
3. The remnant is described as those who “shall not do iniquity, nor speak lies... for they shall feed and lie down, and none shall make them afraid” (Zephaniah 3:13). What does this picture of a purified, secure, unafraid people teach about what God is making His church to be, and how is this being worked out in us now?
4. Zephaniah calls God’s people to “sing... shout... be glad and rejoice with all the heart” because the Lord has taken away their judgments (Zephaniah 3:14-15). When was the last

time your heart truly rejoiced in what God has done for you, and what tends to rob you of the joy that should mark the redeemed?

5. The ground of the people's joy is that "the Lord, even the Lord, is in the midst of thee" (Zephaniah 3:15, 3:17). How is this promise of God's presence in the midst of His people fulfilled in Christ (Immanuel, 'God with us') and in His dwelling in the church, and why should this make us hold any reading that postpones God's kingdom to a future earthly reign?
6. God says, "Fear thou not... let not thine hands be slack" (Zephaniah 3:16). Where is fear making your hands 'slack,' causing you to shrink back from what God is calling you to, and how does the truth that God is in your midst free you to act in faith?
7. The most astonishing promise in the book is that God Himself "will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing" (Zephaniah 3:17). What does it reveal about God's heart that He not only saves His people but delights in them, and how does this guard us against viewing God as merely stern or reluctant?
8. God promises to deal with the proud and oppressors and to save "her that halteth," gathering "her that was driven out," turning shame into praise (Zephaniah 3:18-19). Where do you carry shame or a sense of being an outsider, and how does God's promise to gather and honor the lowly speak to that place in you?

9. The book ends with God promising to “gather you... make you a name and a praise among all people of the earth, when I turn back your captivity” (Zephaniah 3:20). How does the New Testament teach us to read these restoration promises, gathering, renown, return from captivity, as fulfilled spiritually in Christ and His church rather than in a future political restoration of national Israel (1 Peter 2:9-10; Galatians 6:16; Hebrews 12:22-23)?

10. Look back over this closing passage and the whole study of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah. Name one specific way the Lord is calling you, through these three prophets, to trust the God who is just and good, to live by faith, and to rest in the God who is in your midst, becoming more like Christ in whom every promise finds its yes.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Acts 2:1–21, 38–41, the gospel gathering people of every tongue to call on the name of the Lord; Ephesians 2:13–22, Jew and Gentile made one new people, a dwelling place of God in the Spirit; 1 Peter 2:9–10, the church as God’s chosen and gathered people; Hebrews 12:22–24, the heavenly Zion to which believers have come; Luke 15:4–7, the joy of God over the lost who are found.

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