

## **The Lord will dwell with his forgiven people Zephaniah 3:14-17**

*<sup>14</sup> Sing out, daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, you daughter of Jerusalem <sup>15</sup> The LORD has removed the judgment against you. He has turned back your enemy. Israel's king, the LORD, is in your midst! You no longer need to fear disaster. <sup>16</sup> In that day Jerusalem will be told, "Do not be afraid, O Zion. Do not give up. <sup>17</sup> The LORD your God is with you as a hero who will save you. He takes great delight in you. He will quiet you with his love. He will rejoice over you with singing."*

The Book of Zephaniah is a rather short book among the minor prophets of the Old Testament. Zephaniah rises above history and his times. He mentions wickedness in Judah and Jerusalem. It could have been wickedness from any age. He also mentions faithfulness that is found in God's church on earth. Enemies of the Lord are mentioned as well. Such enemies will be destroyed. God's people will be delivered eternally. Deliverance that comes to the daughters of Zion should make all rejoice. They are believers, God's church. Zephaniah then breaks into a call for rejoicing in the verses before us. Joy is felt by God and his people. The reason for such joy is because the Lord will dwell with his forgiven people.

Zephaniah begins this chapter by announcing God's judgment upon the evil of Judah and the world. But that's not all that God has to say through his prophet's words. Deliverance will be just as universal as his judgment. The Lord promises to change human hearts so his people confess him rather than curse. He will purify his people. That way all will call upon the name of the Lord and serve him.

The prophet interrupts the Lord's words by breaking into a song of praise. He calls the people of God to join him in praising the Lord. Their hearts should be filled with joy and gladness. Their mouths should overflow with praise. The reason is simple: The Lord has taken away your punishment. He has turned back your enemy. Like a mad dash to clean up before company arrives, our Lord has cleared away every enemy that has made us and our lives a mess. Now nothing can stand in our way of standing in God's presence. Scripture tells us, "*The wages of sin is death*" (Romans 6:23), and "*the souls that sins is the one who will die*" (Ezekiel 18:9). If only someone could remove that punishment. Then the great enemy, death, is removed. All that remains is sleep for the body until the great day of resurrection. Sin and the guilt associated with sin before God will be gone as well.

How is that possible? Isaiah speaks of the work of the Suffering Servant: "*It was because of our rebellion he was pierced. He was crushed for the guilt our sins deserved. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed*" (53:5). The punishment our sins deserved have been placed on Christ. He took the guilt for them all when he was nailed to a cross. He endured every bit of hell's punishment there. Now our sins are wiped clean. His return to life on Easter is all the proof we need. Regarding the new covenant that God would establish in Christ, the Lord states through the prophet Jeremiah, "*I will forgive their guilt, and I will remember their sins no more*" (31:34). Zephaniah can speak the way he does because the Lord in his mercy has taken away the sins of the world. They are wiped out in Christ. The terrible consequences of sin have been removed as well. Death and hell are no longer a threat—not to the one who clings to Christ in faith. Those enemies have been removed forever. If God would keep of our sins who of us could stand. But with him there is forgiveness. Now we have every reason to rejoice.

No wonder the prophet commands us to rejoice. All problems are removed by our great King, the Lord himself. There is no reason to fear with the Lord in your midst. But Jesus left our world physically with his saving work completed. To the ends of the earth he commissioned his followers to go and share the good news of his saving work. But he'd never leave us alone to do that important work. He promised his Holy Spirit to keep us in faith and move us to share that faith. He's promised his lasting presence to the end of the world and supplied us with his saving word that will not return empty.

Another blessing is that God will protect his people with his power. Isaiah tells us, *"It is your guilt that has separated you from your God, and your sins have hidden God's face from you, so that he does not hear"* (59:2). The holy God hates sin, and he will not dwell among sinful people. But when sin is forgiven and its guilt removed by Christ, there is no reason why our Lord must stay separated from his people any longer. So Zephaniah assures us, *"The Lord, the King of Israel is with you."*

Absolute fear can freeze a person. Knowing that your coming face to face with the almighty who knows every thought, word, and deed seems dreadful. But those days are over. Your Savior God has delivered you. He suffered your punishment for you. He bled and died so you don't have to face God's wrath. He won the victory over the grave. We are assured of God's forgiveness for every wrong. So don't just stand there! The hands of God's people are free from fear. It is time to use your hands for service to the One who freed you.

One opportunity that lies before us is reaching out to others. We've already talked about reaching out to others who don't yet know Jesus. If you haven't already, please grab an invitation card to Christmas on the small table where you entered. Share that invite with an unchurched friend or relative. We also need to reach out to members of St. Michael's who have drifted away from worship and God's Word. We might call that in-reach. These members have gotten so busy with work, with family, with whatever that they've forgotten how important it is to spend precious time with their Savior in word and sacrament. God use us to remind our brothers and sisters of what's important. It doesn't involve scolding or reading any riot act. It involves loving them and listening to them and leading them back to their Savior. There's nothing to fear. Simply share your Savior's story and let the Holy Spirit do his work.

Yes, God is with his people, protecting them from harm. He delivers us from evil. He quiets and comforts us in our fears and anxiety. He empowers our limp hands to move in service to him. He actually rejoices with songs on his lips because his people are living in his presence. What a glorious revelation of our God! We are the ones who should be filled with joy and sing. We have the privilege of knowing Christ and the life that is ours in eternity. Zephaniah says the Lord is just as happy for that as we are. He is happy because the goal of his work has been reached. His work of redemption has saved the world. The crown of his creation can now live forever in his eternity. Mankind can now live in his presence forever. They are restored, purified, and delivered from every enemy. This brings joy to God and to his people. *He will quiet you with his love.* What an expression to denote a love so deeply felt. It is absorbed in its object with thoughtfulness and admiration. It results in rejoicing with exultation. It is a loud demonstration of one's love.

The Lord is mighty to save. He is a strong man, a warrior, a hero. He is the God/Man who conquers his enemies to save his people. What a gentle warrior he is. He delights in you. He quiets you. He rejoices over you. Rejoice this Christmas and always. The Lord dwells with us.