

**International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
June 19, 2016**

**Lesson Text: Zephaniah 3:9-14, 20
Lesson Title: Joy for the Faithful**

Introduction

The prophesy of Zephaniah is filled with some of the most graphic depictions of God's wrath towards sin and sinners. Nearly two-thirds of the book is focused on the prophetic concept of the Day of the Lord being a day of judgment. In his commentary on Zephaniah, Doctor J. Vernon McGee writes, "*The Book of Zephaniah is like a Florida hurricane, a Texas tornado, a Mississippi River flood, a Minnesota snowstorm, and a California earthquake all rolled into one.*" (Thru the Bible with Doctor J. Vernon McGee).

As you read and study the prophesy of Zephaniah, it would be easy to conclude God was unloving and cruel to His people. But in Zephaniah 3:9-20, the final section of Zephaniah's prophesy, the prophet calls our attention to God's love, and calls the people of God to a time of celebration. Even in judgment, God is love (Hebrews 12:6).

The Restoration of Nations (Zephaniah 3:9-10)

Verse 9

"For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the LORD, to serve him with one consent."

It is important to remember God's call of Abraham to be the spiritual father of the nation of Israel involved blessings to all nations (Genesis 12:1-3). The failure of Israel to live up to her spiritual privileges resulted in evil nations and kingdoms rising up against her. God holds individual nations responsible and accountable and will judge those who oppose His law and commandments. God also has a plan to change the Gentile nations and Israel in the endtimes after He has administered righteous judgment.

The word "then" signifies a major change in Zephaniah's message. He shifted from predictions of God's wrath and judgment to predictions of peace and blessing. "Then" refers to a time after God has punished the Gentile nations, when he will convert Gentile nations and restore Israel and Judah to their land.

"Turn" is a word of graciousness. God the judge is also God the gracious who "turns" distant and disobedient nations to himself. When His judgments are

complete, God will “turn to the people a pure language.” Some Bible scholars interpret “pure language” as the restoration of a universal language, similar to the days prior to the confusion of languages at the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). It seems best to interpret “pure languages” as a restoring of the speech to those who had polluted their speech in worship to pagan gods. When God’s gracious restoration takes place, everyone will worship Him with “pure language” coming from a pure heart (Psalm 24:4). Jesus said, “...*Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh*” (Matthew 12:34).

Once the heart and lips are “pure,” the people will be able to “call upon the name of the LORD, to serve him with one consent.” Pure worship is not only through “language” or word, it is also through “service” and deeds. The Hebrew word for “serve” is *abad* {aw-bad} referring to “obedient work for God.” Prior to God’s judgment, the people said serving and working for the Lord was in vain (Malachi 3:14). After judgment and restoration, “all” will “with one consent” or “shoulder to shoulder,” unanimously and joyfully serve the Lord.

Verse 10

“From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia my suppliants, even the daughter of my dispersed, shall bring mine offering.”

As an example of how the people and nations will come together, Zephaniah prophesied they will come from “beyond the rivers of Ethiopia” to “bring mine offering.” The area mentioned is the upper Nile region, the most distant land in the prophet’s knowledge. In their converted state the Gentile nations along with “the daughter of my dispersed,” or the Jewish people, will come to Jerusalem to worship.

The “offering” referred to is a subject of much debate among commentators. Some suggest the “offering” is the “dispersed” Jews being brought back to Jerusalem by people from the converted Gentile nations. By escorting God’s people home, they are in a sense bringing a precious “offering” to the Lord. That may be a proper interpretation but it seems best to interpret what is happening here in the following two ways. First, the Gentile people and nations will bring “offerings” to the Lord because they have accepted His redemption through Jesus Christ. Second, the “dispersed,” or returning remnant of Jews will be restored to properly present their “offerings” in Jerusalem because of God’s grace in sending the Messiah. The text seems to indicate both Jews and Gentiles will be a part of bringing God’s offerings to the holy city. Such is the result of redemption and restoration.

“Mine offering” suggests the sacrifices to be brought to the Lord are offerings of any kind. It refers to any gift or sacrifice, usually voluntary, bestowed upon the Lord. The thought here is whatever “offerings” are presented, the tribute will be considered to be God’s proper due. This is in contrast to how God’s

people brought their offerings prior to their captivity in Babylon (Isaiah 1:13; Malachi 1:8).

The Restoration of Israel (Zephaniah 3:11-14, 20)

Verse 11

“In that day shalt thou not be ashamed for all thy doings, wherein thou hast transgressed against me: for then I will take away out of the midst of thee them that rejoice in thy pride, and thou shalt no more be haughty because of my holy mountain.”

“In that day” when the terrible Day of the Lord is over, Israel will be a new nation with a new spirit and attitude. She will “not be ashamed for all thy doings, wherein thou hast transgressed against me.” One of the reasons God judged Israel and Judah was because there was “no shame” when they sinned against God with their immorality (Zephaniah 3:5). When the Day of the Lord is over, and God’s people return from exile, they will be a cleansed people who no longer bear the “shame” of their past sins. Although their “shame” was deserved because of their wicked past, their “shame” will be gone!

“For then I will take away out of the midst of thee them that rejoice in thy pride” is a reference to the wicked Jewish priests and scribes who dominated God’s people with “pride” and self-sufficiency. After the Day of the Lord, God will “take away out of the midst” of His people those who worshipped and ministered in “pride” because they were privileged to be in the temple in Jerusalem, “my holy mountain.” There will be no place on God’s “holy mountain” for proud sinners who think they earned God’s salvation by their good works.

Verse 12

“I will also leave in the midst of thee an afflicted and poor people, and they shall trust in the name of the LORD.”

After the Day of the Lord, God will replace the proud sinners and self-sufficient leaders with “an afflicted and poor people, and they shall trust in the name of the LORD.” When foreign invaders came to cities and nations to conquer them, they usually deported the leaders and skilled craftsmen of the land they had taken, leaving only the afflicted and poor (2 Kings 24:14; 25:12). When God restores Israel, He will have removed the proud leaders and will now “leave” the “afflicted and poor people.”

“Afflicted” means people who are in some type of distress or disability. “Poor” refers to those who are “weak, frail, or needy.” These are people who know they are in need (Matthew 5:3). Zephaniah is not saying Jerusalem will only be

inhabited by people who are materially and socially needy. Rather, they are those who, unlike the former leaders of the city who trusted in themselves, recognize Jehovah as the source of everything they need.

There can never be spiritual salvation, renewal, or restoration until sinful people know they are in need. We live in a culture much like that of Zephaniah. It is a self-sufficient age where men need nothing (Revelation 3:17). When the Day of the Lord is finished, God's people will know they need Him and they "shall trust in the name of the LORD."

It is difficult for us to imagine how something as dreadful and terrible as the "Day of the Lord" can have positive results. The blessed result of God's wrath and judgment for His people is their entire "trust" in the "LORD" (Isaiah 14:32). All self-confidence and self-sufficiency will be gone and God's redeemed and restored people will fully "trust" in the "LORD," Jehovah-Adonai, the self-existing One.

Verse 13

"The remnant of Israel shall not do iniquity, nor speak lies; neither shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth: for they shall feed and lie down, and none shall make them afraid."

The godly "remnant of Israel" or the true Israelites who by grace have trusted Jesus Christ the Messiah, will no longer practice "iniquity, nor speak lies; neither shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth." This suggests their love for idolatry and the deceitful lies they spoke in worship will never again be a part of their lives.

It is somewhat discouraging today to see an increase of people who no longer serve Jehovah, the true and living God. Churches and ministries dedicated to faithful exposition and application of God's Word are for the most part, on decline numerically. Be encouraged, God has always had a "remnant," and there will be a very large "remnant" in the coming kingdom age when Jesus Christ reigns forever!

The last part of this verse, "for they shall feed and lie down, and none shall make them afraid" brings to mind the Shepherd aspect of Israel's relationship to the Lord. Israel, so defiled, ravished, and scattered throughout the ages will one day in the future be at rest among the nations and without fear (Zephaniah 3:15-16).

Verse 14

"Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all the heart, O daughter of Jerusalem."

Though the Day of Lord had not yet come when Zephaniah wrote these words, a day of celebration and praise is promised. When the Day of the Lord is finished and Christ's reign shall come upon the earth, Israel, the "daughter of Zion" is told to "sing, shout, be glad, and rejoice with all her heart."

God is holy, therefore He must deal with sin. God is happy as well and He loves to hear His redeemed "sing, shout, be glad and rejoice with all the heart." The first song in Scripture was sung by Israel at the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:30-15:1). In the coming millennial kingdom, Israel, redeemed, regathered, and restored will sing!

Only a redeemed people can "sing." Only a redeemed people can "shout." "Shout" means "to blow an alarm or split the ears with sound." God's people have a biblical basis for their song and their shout. That basis is found in verse 15, *"The LORD hath taken away thy judgments, he hath cast out thine enemy: the king of Israel, even the LORD, is in the midst of thee: thou shalt not see evil any more."*

Verse 20

"At that time will I bring you again, even in the time that I gather you: for I will make you a name and a praise among all people of the earth, when I turn back your captivity before your eyes, saith the LORD."

"At that time" refers to the "time" when the Lord "gathers" His people into His kingdom. "Bring you again" means God will bring them home. When Zephaniah wrote these words the ten northern tribes of Israel were already in captivity and the two southern tribes of Judah was about to be deported to Babylon. The "time" referred to is the return of the King, Messiah, when the Jews will be regathered and become a source of blessing to the world (Deuteronomy 26:18-19).

When Israel is gathered home, God "will make her a name and a praise among all people of the earth." This means God will cause Israel to be celebrated and praised. That is certainly not the case today. Israel is a source of international contention today. But when God "turns back" their "captivity" or reverses everything "before their eyes," they will be a source of blessing to "all the people of the earth." This will literally be fulfilled when Jesus Christ returns to the earth to rule and reign for a thousand years. Israel will then be a source of joy and "praise" in the earth.

Conclusion

Zephaniah was God's prophet for his time. He boldly declared the Day of the Lord was coming and with it judgment and wrath. Zephaniah also prophesied

a lively expectation of Israel's future blessing in the land of promise (Zephaniah 3:10, 14-20). He evidently had the ear of Judah's leadership and knew how to use that to communicate God's message. It reminds all of us who read his prophesy that God uses people from all walks of life.

Zephaniah's life and ministry is a testimony that one man, yielded wholly to God, can effect great things. His life and ministry is also a reminder that our only hope is in Jesus Christ. Prophetically, the days ahead are days when God's wrath and judgment will be poured out upon the earth. Gentile nations, including America, will become increasingly intolerant of Israel and the church. But in the midst of the battlefield that is life in this world, God's people must continue to be a people of praise knowing that the loving Jesus who saved us by His grace is the soon coming King!

Amen.