

The Lord Will Rejoice Over You

by John Piper

The book of Zephaniah calls everyone to a deep humility, which frees a person to seek refuge in God, which in turn produces a righteous life and leads to God's joy over the godly.

Topics: "Repentance", "Judgment"

Description

John Piper preaches on the book of Zephaniah, highlighting the prophet's call for Judah and Jerusalem to repent, seek righteousness, and seek humility to avoid God's coming judgment. The book is structured into five parts, focusing on announcing judgment, calling for repentance, warning surrounding nations, accusing Jerusalem, and proclaiming the conversion and regathering of the godly. The main point is to obey God's commands, heed the warnings, and trust in His promises for salvation and refuge.

Transcript

September 25, 1982

Zephaniah 3:14-17

According to Zeph. 1:1, the prophet Zephaniah delivered the word of the Lord during the reign of Josiah, king of Judah. Josiah reigned from 637 to 608 B.C. So his reign came to an end just twenty years before Jerusalem was sacked by the Babylonians and Israel was taken into captivity. Josiah is the king, you recall, who found the long-lost book of the law in the temple and tried to reform the people who had drifted so far into idolatry and wickedness. Zephaniah, then, was a part of this effort to call Judah and especially Jerusalem back to God.

What I would like to do this morning is give a brief outline of the book of Zephaniah, then let each section have its say, and as we go apply the teaching to us, especially the section on God's joy at the end.

I think the book falls naturally into five parts. First, chapter one announces the coming judgment upon Judah and Jerusalem. Verse 4, "I will stretch out my hand against Judah, and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem." Second, chapter two verses 1-3 calls the nation back to God and specifically (as it says in verse 3) to "seek righteousness and seek humility." Third, in chapter 2 verses 4-15 Zephaniah announces the judgment that is also coming on the lands that surround Judah: the Philistines to the east (vv. 4-7), Moab and Ammon to the west (vv. 8-11), the Ethiopians to the south (v. 12), and Assyria to the north (vv. 13-15). The fourth section of the book is chapter 3 verses 1-7. Here Zephaniah turns his attention to

Jerusalem again and lengthens the catalogue of God's accusations against her. Finally, chapter 3 verses 8-20 proclaims the conversion of the peoples (v. 9), the conversion and regathering of Israel (v. 10) and the glorious future of all the godly as God rejoices over them with gladness.

I think the main point of the book is 2:3, "Seek the Lord all you humble of the land, who do his commands; seek righteousness, seek humility." The rest of the book is mainly made up of warnings that judgment is coming upon the proud and promises that the humble and righteous who seek refuge in the Lord will be saved (3:12,13). So there are three things: commands, warnings and promises. Obedience to the command in 2:3 is Zephaniah's main goal, and the warnings and promises are incentives for the people to repent and obey.

That's the general outline and structure of the book. Now let's go back to the beginning and listen more closely as each section has its say. Chapter one announces coming judgment on Judah and Jerusalem. Just like in Joel the coming judgment is called the "day of the Lord." Verse 7: "Be silent before the Lord God! For the day of the Lord is at hand." Verses 14 and 15 describe the judgment in words almost identical to Joel (cf. Joel 2:2):

The great day of the Lord is near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter, the mighty man cries aloud there. A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness.

But unlike the book of Joel Zephaniah not only warns of judgment but in doing so exposes the sins which kindle God's wrath. We can see these both in chapter one and in 3:1-7. The list begins in 1:4, "I will cut off the remnant of Baal." Manasseh had built altars and high places to this foreign god even in the temple of Yahweh himself (2 Kings 21:3,5,7). Josiah had torn them down during his reform effort. But there remained a remnant of Baal worshippers. These God will cut off in the day of the Lord.

Verse 5 describes two other forms of idolatry. There are people in Judah "who bow down on the roofs to the hosts of heaven," that is, sun and moon and stars. As Paul said six centuries later, they exchanged the glory of God for the derived glory of created things. Then there was another group who tried to serve two masters: "those who bow down and swear to the Lord, and yet swear by Milcom." Milcom is another name for Molech, the national god of the Ammonites. But (as we saw in Joel) God's purpose is to show that he alone is God and there is none else (2:27) and that, therefore, the people should return to him with all their heart (2:12). If you try to serve two masters (to give God 50% or 95% of your heart but not all) you will be swept away into judgment at the day of the Lord.

In chapter 3 verse 2 the problem with the people in Jerusalem is stated most simply: [Jerusalem] listens to no voice, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the Lord, she does not draw near to her God." The essence of the sin against which the Lord is coming is self-sufficiency. They won't listen to anybody. They won't accept correction from anybody, not even God. They do not need God. So they don't trust him nor even draw near to him. This may seem like an inconsistency: a self-sufficient rejection of Yahweh on the one hand (3:2), and a dabbling in idolatry on the other hand (1:5). But it's not. There is in every human, I think, a deep longing to worship something great--to have a god or a hero or some beautiful or powerful thing to admire. But there is also in every human the sinful and insatiable longing, too, for self-determination and autonomy--we will do our own thing and get our own glory. Therefore, man does not cease to be a worshipping creature when he rejects the true God. Rather he searches out a god in his own image who will give him all the leeway he craves and exert on him no moral constraints of which he

does not approve. There may be no more arrogant man on the face of the earth than the man bowing humbly before the god he has created in his own image. So the day of the Lord is coming upon Judah and Jerusalem because of their arrogant refusal to seek the Lord and take refuge in him.

But chapter one also stresses that God's wrath is against those who love money and rely on their gold and silver. Verse 18 warns: "Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them on the day of the wrath of the Lord." Verse 9 describes servants of the rich who fill their master's houses through violence and fraud. Verse 11 says, "All who weigh out silver will be cut off." And verse 12 refers to those who are "thickening upon their lees" which means those who have grown hard and calloused in their abundance and say, "The Lord will not do good nor will he do ill." In other words, the love of money is not a separate problem from the arrogance and self-sufficiency and idolatry we saw earlier. They are all of a piece. In their race toward self-reliance they do not reckon with God's reward or punishment. They are thickening upon the dregs of their self-wrought security. And, as verse 18 says, "In the fire of his jealous wrath (they) shall be consumed."

The second section of the book (2:1-3) is a call to repentance. Just like Joel, Zephaniah holds out the hope that the guilty can be yet spared from wrath if they turn and seek the Lord. It shouldn't surprise us, after what we have seen in chapters 1 and 3:1-7 that the specific things Zephaniah calls for are righteousness and humility. Verse 3: "Seek the Lord all you humble of the land, who do his commands; seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the wrath of the Lord." I'm not sure why Zephaniah calls for the "humble of the land" to seek humility and righteousness when it is the arrogant idolaters who love unrighteous mammon that need to repent. Probably what he is saying is this: anyone in the land who is humble enough to submit to God's commands, here is what you should do and keep on doing--stay humble, seek the Lord, and do righteousness. These are the very three conditions laid down by God in 2 Chronicles 7:14, "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven and forgive their sin and heal their land." And if this summons applies to the humble of the land, how much more to the arrogant, the idolaters and the lovers of money! So the main point of Zephaniah's prophecy is to call everyone who reads it to a deep humility, which frees a person to seek refuge in God which in turn produces a righteous life.

The third section of the book, 2:4-15, is introduced by the word "for" (in v. 4) which suggests that this unit is the ground of Zephaniah's call to repentance. It gives reasons why we should listen and obey the summons of 2:3. I see three ways that 2:4-15 motivates us to obey 2:3. First, it warns us that there is no escape when the day of the Lord comes. If we flee to the west we will find the wrath of God falling on the Philistines (vv. 4-7). If we flee to the east we find that Moab and Ammon are famished under the wrath of God (vv. 8-11). If we flee to the south the Ethiopians are being slain by his sword (v. 12). And if we flee to the north Assyria is destroyed and its great city Nineveh is a desolation. In other words, there is no escape on the day of the Lord. Every staff on which we try to lean in our pride will snap and pierce us through. one refuge will be secure: God. Therefore, humble yourselves, seek his face and do righteousness.

The second way that 2:4-15 motivates us to obey 2:3 is by promising that there will indeed be a faithful remnant who survives the day of the Lord. When it says in 2:3, "Perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the Lord," it does not mean that God's saving work is underlain. It means that our being a part of it depends on each individual's conversion to humility and faith and righteousness; and of that Zephaniah is not certain. But he gives us strong encouragement to repent and seek God while there is time because he assures us there will be a saved remnant. The last part of verse 9: "The remnant of my people shall

plunder them, and the survivors of my nation shall possess them." Again in verse 7: "The seacoast shall become the possession of the remnant of the house of Judah, on which they shall pasture."

Do you see the implication of this promise? How could God be sure some would humble themselves and seek him and thus survive his judgment? He could be sure because he is the one who performs the conversion which guarantees salvation. When the catastrophe fell several decades later God spoke to his beleaguered people in Ezekiel 36:26,27 "A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you ... I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances." God can require conversion for salvation in Zeph. 2:3 and yet speak with absolute certainty that there will be a saved remnant in 2:7-9 because in his mercy he will sovereignly perform the conversion and thus secure the remnant. This is a great incentive to obey Zeph. 2:3 because now we know we are not left to ourselves to overcome the obstacles to our salvation but rather we work out our salvation for God himself is at work in us to will and to do for his good pleasure (Phil. 2:12,13).

The third way that 2:4-15 motivates us to obey the command to be humble in 2:3 is by showing that the reason the surrounding nations are being judged is because of their pride and arrogance. Verse 8: "I have heard the taunts of Moab and the revilings of the Ammonites, how they have taunted my people and made boasts against their territory." Verse 10: "This shall be their lot in return for their pride, because they scoffed and boasted against the people of the Lord of hosts." Verse 15 pronounces judgment on Nineveh, the capital of Assyria: "This is the exultant city that dwelt secure, and said to herself, 'I am and there is none else.' What a desolation she has become!" When we hear why the nations are being judged, then surely we will feel strongly moved to obey when Zephaniah commands, "Seek the Lord ... seek righteousness, seek humility." The way of escape in the day of wrath is godly humility.

The third section of the book is Zeph. 3:1-7, but we already looked at this together with chapter 1 concerning God's accusations against Jerusalem. That brings us to the final unit: 3:8-20 which describes the glorious future of the godly. The first thing to notice here is that even though the amazing promises of this section relate most directly to the converted and restored people of Israel (v. 10), nevertheless it is a necessary implication of the prophecy that the blessings promised flow out beyond the bounds of Israel and include us who through faith in Christ become Abraham's seed and heirs of the promise (Gal. 3:29). Verse 9 shows that God intends to save more than just Jews: "Yea, at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord."

What is it then that will characterize all the redeemed who will enjoy the promises of this section? Verses 11-13 describe them:

On that day you shall not be put to shame because of the deeds by which you have rebelled against me; for then I will remove from your midst the proudly exultant ones, and you shall not longer be haughty in my holy mountain. For I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord, those who are left in Israel; they shall do no wrong and utter no lies.

In other words, the people who will experience the fulfillment of the promises of 3:14-17 are the ones who obeyed the threefold call back in 2:3: "Seek the Lord ... seek righteousness, seek humility." Therefore, humility which takes refuge in God (or as we should say today, humility which takes refuge in the death of Jesus Christ for our sins) is not only the way of escape from divine wrath, it is even more the way of entrance into divine joy.

Verse 14: "Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!" This is what the humble and lowly will do for all eternity. And verses 15-20 give the reasons why they can rejoice. The judgment that had been directed against them is turned away--no more condemnation (v. 15). Every enemy and opponent and hindrance to joy is cast out (v. 15). The king of Israel, the Lord, is in their midst, mighty in strength, and there can be no more fear (vv. 15-17).

But the most amazing promise of all is in verse 17: "The Lord will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love (or better: he will be silent, i.e., make no accusations, in his love), he will exult over you with loud singing (or: a shout of joy)." Jesus said, "There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." And Zephaniah tell us that when all those repentant, humble, lowly sinners gather before God--what will he do? Will he look down with disapproval, and glower at our guilt, and frown with malevolence? Will he ignore us and look over our heads in sublime indifference? Will he grieve that his flock is so shabby? NO! "He will rejoice over you with gladness ... he will exult over you with a shout of joy." "As a bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you" (Is. 62:5).

We must banish from our minds forever any thought that God admits us begrudgingly into his Kingdom, as though Christ found a loophole in the law, did some fancy plea-bargaining and squeaked us by the Judge. No way! God himself, the Judge, put Christ forward as our substitutionary sacrifice, and when we trust him God welcomes us with bells on. He puts a ring on our finger, kills the fatted calf, throws a party, shouts a shout that shakes the ends of creation and leads in the festal dance.

Someone may ask: Isn't that a bit unseemly and undignified of God to get so excited and shout and carry on this way? But I answer: Remember David's wife, Michal. When David danced with joy before the Lord with all his might, Michal despised this immoderate display of emotion. And the Lord struck her barren for the rest of her life! For he intends to be mightily enjoyed, and one day he will show us how to rejoice with all his might.

Another may ask: But doesn't it belittle God to have him rejoicing over us? Not necessarily. It would be unrighteous if he made us his god--if we and not he himself were the ultimate spring of his joy. But we aren't. We are not his god. He is his own God. And when we stand before him redeemed in Christ Jesus he will behold his own handiwork. "We are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus." According to 3:12 it is God himself who will see to it that there is in the midst of Zion a humble and lowly people who take refuge in his name. Does it belittle the designer of the IDS tower to exult over the beauty of that building at dawn in September? Does it belittle Michelangelo to rejoice with tears as he looks at the ceiling of the Cistine Chapel? Nor does it belittle God when the divine work of your redemption is done and all the millions are gathered before his throne, the humble and lowly, that God should break forth in singing and rejoice over you with all his heart and with all his soul.

Therefore, while the day of the Lord waits, "seek the Lord all you humble of the land ... seek righteousness, seek humility ... Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem" (2:3;3:14). Amen.

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net