

## **May 3 Lesson 10 (NIV)**

### **PROPHESYING RESTORATION**

**DEVOTIONAL READING:** Psalm 47

**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:** Zephaniah 3

#### **ZEPHANIAH 3:14–20**

- 14 Sing, Daughter Zion;  
shout aloud, Israel!  
Be glad and rejoice with all your heart,  
Daughter Jerusalem!**
- 15 The LORD has taken away your punishment,  
he has turned back your enemy.  
The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you;  
never again will you fear any harm.**
- 16 On that day they will say to Jerusalem,  
“Do not fear, Zion;  
do not let your hands hang limp.**
- 17 The LORD your God is with you,  
the Mighty Warrior who saves.  
He will take great delight in you;  
in his love he will no longer rebuke you,  
but will rejoice over you with singing.**
- 18 I will remove from you  
all who mourn over the loss of your appointed festivals,  
which is a burden and reproach for you.**
- 19 At that time I will deal  
with all who oppressed you.  
I will rescue the lame;  
I will gather the exiles.  
I will give them praise and honor  
in every land where they have suffered shame.**
- 20 At that time I will gather you;  
at that time I will bring you home.  
I will give you honor and praise  
among all the peoples of the earth  
when I restore your fortunes  
before your very eyes,” says the LORD.**

## KEY VERSE

*At that time I will deal with all who oppressed you. I will rescue the lame; I will gather the exiles. I will give them praise and honor in every land where they have suffered shame. — Zephaniah 3:19*

# JUSTICE AND THE PROPHETS

## Unit 3: Called to God's Work of Justice

LESSONS 10–14

### LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify themes of restoration.
2. Explain the significance of those themes.
3. Use daily for a week a favorite hymn or song that praises God for his promise and work of restored relationship with him.

### LESSON OUTLINE

#### Introduction

- A. An Amateur Restorer
- B. Lesson Context
- i. Celebration (ZEPHANIAH 3:14, 15)
  - A. How to Praise (v. 14)
  - B. Whom to Praise (v. 15)
    - The Healing Power of Love*
- ii. Promise (ZEPHANIAH 3:16–20)
  - A. In That Day (vv. 16–18)
  - B. At That Time (vv. 19, 20)
    - Better Than Ever*

#### Conclusion

- A. The Restoration Expert
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

### HOW TO SAY IT

Jerusalem *Juh-roo-suh-lem.*

Judah *Joo-duh.*

personification *per-saw-nih-fih-kay-shun.*

Zephaniah Zef-uh-nye-uh.

Zion Zi-un.

## Introduction

### A. An Amateur Restorer

In 2012, the *New York Times* reported on what it called “probably the worst art restoration project of all time.” A small church in Spain had a famous painting of Jesus that was deteriorating due to age and moisture. Painted directly on the stone wall by nineteenth-century artist Elías García Martínez, the picture portrayed Jesus wearing a purple robe and a crown of thorns.

One day, church officials found the work of art changed beyond all recognition, and authorities suspected vandalism. The modified painting, which quickly became famous on the internet as “Monkey Jesus,” had none of the grace or artistry of the original. While investigating the crime, authorities were shocked to discover that the perpetrator was no young vandal, but rather Cecilia Giménez, an 80-something-year-old member of the church. Cecilia, distressed at the deteriorating state of the painting, had taken it upon herself to restore it. Sadly, her skills were nowhere near up to the task.

When a priceless work of art needs to be restored, it’s foolish to trust the job to anyone but the best. Like the painting, Israel needed true restoration. Was anyone willing and able to take on the job?

### B. Lesson Context

Zephaniah was a prophet in the southern kingdom of Judah in the seventh century BC. His lineage suggests that he may have been of royal blood (see Zephaniah 1:1). This family background would have given him deep insight into the state of the nation and impact his understanding of God as king of Israel. Zephaniah understood the importance of leadership and what its absence could do to a nation.

Zephaniah likely wrote in the late 620s BC before King Josiah’s spiritual reforms. The prophet is primarily concerned with Judah’s continued rebellion against God (see 2 Kings 22:1–23:28). The first two chapters of the book of Zephaniah describe a coming Day of the Lord, in which Judah is to face judgment for idolatry. This judgment is to come in the form of both the natural consequences of that nation’s choices and as a tool of God for purifying his people.

God’s process of purification would remove the rebellious in order to ensure the survival of those remaining faithful—“the remnant of Israel” (Zephaniah 3:12 [v. 13 in NIV 1984]; see also 2:7, 9; compare Isaiah 10:20–22). The prophet’s warnings to Judah carried weight given the fact of the deportation of the northern kingdom (Israel) by Assyria in 722 BC. That reality and its associated horror underlined the fact that Zephaniah’s warning was not an idle threat.

Zephaniah’s prophecy of God’s judgment came true in 586 BC. That was the year the Judeans were cast into Babylonian exile (2 Kings 25:1–21). The prophesied restoration would not begin until 538 BC, when Jewish captives were allowed to return to Judah (Ezra 1:1–4).

The ancient writers’ fondness for using parallelism (structural doublets) is important to keep in mind when reading Old Testament passages composed as poetry. Previous discussions in lessons 4 and 9 regarding how to recognize this feature still apply, so that information need not be

repeated here. We should, however, stress anew the significance of this technique: when the second phrase in lines of poetry echoes the first phrase, only one thing or action is in view, not two. One happy result of this fact is that when part of a verse is difficult to understand, its companion phrase may be used to interpret the more difficult portion.

Zephaniah's prophecy presents us with a sharp change of theme beginning in Zephaniah 3:9, as restoration of a remnant takes center stage. The Lord promises that the "meek and humble ... will trust in the name of the Lord" (3:12), untroubled by those who are proud and haughty. The remnant can freely celebrate captivity's end.

## **I. Celebration** (ZEPHANIAH 3:14, 15)

### **A. How to Praise (v. 14)**

**14. Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem!**

Having been told why the remnant should celebrate (see the Lesson Context), the people are told how: they are encouraged to *sing, ... be glad and rejoice* (compare Psalms 9:2; 95:1; contrast 137:1–4).

The designation *Zion* originally referred to "the City of David" (2 Samuel 5:7); eventually *Zion* came to include the temple area just to the north (Micah 3:12). *Zion* often parallels (stands for) *Jerusalem* as a whole in poetry (example: Psalm 128:5), and that is the case here. *Jerusalem* is the capital of the southern kingdom of Judah (compare 2 Samuel 5:5).

The prophets frequently refer to *Jerusalem* and/or *Zion* in terms of a *Daughter* (examples: Isaiah 37:22; Lamentations 2:13). This is a literary technique known as personification, in which the writer assigns the qualities of a person to something that isn't human. And since *Jerusalem* is the location of the temple, this imagery emphasizes the value of God's covenant people. It also stresses God's unique claim to stand as their champion.

The word *Israel*, for its part, can designate different things depending on historical context. Sometimes it refers to the entirety of the 12 tribes (example: 1 Kings 4:7). At other times it refers only to the 10 tribes of the northern kingdom of the divided monarchy (example: 2 Kings 3:1). Here the word seems to refer to the faithful remnant; as do the two uses of *Daughter*.

Some students propose that use of the word *Israel* signifies the completeness of God's welcome home. That is quite possible as long as it is accompanied with the realization that the completeness Zephaniah prophesies refers to the completeness of a remnant, not the whole (see Lesson Context).

### **B. Whom to Praise (v. 15)**

**15a. The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy.**

After the prophesied Day of the Lord and the *punishment* that characterizes it (see Zephaniah 1:7–10, 14–16, 18; 2:2, 3), God will step into the situation in a new way. Although the nation of Judah as a whole has disobeyed and turned its back on him, God will not abandon the faithful among his covenant people. The Lord's anger regarding Judah's sin (see 1:4–6, 8–16; 2:1–3) will subside. After God uses *Babylon* as his agent to discipline his people, he will then defeat *Babylon*,

thus ending the oppression Judah faced during that time. Judah will indeed have to face the consequences of its choices, but God will not allow those consequences to destroy completely. Instead, like a parent considering a punishment to be sufficient, he will end it (compare Isaiah 40:1, 2). God's affirmation of his faithful remnant is to be the cause for the joyful celebration just noted above.

The faithful remnant will suffer along with the unfaithful majority. But when the time comes for God to turn back the *enemy*, he will bring the fullness of his presence to bear in rescuing his remnant. The nature of the forthcoming exile may suggest God's complete abandonment. But that is never true for those who remain faithful (compare 1 Kings 19:18).

**15b. The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you;**

In the ancient Near East, the presence of a *king* was essential to the well-being of his people. An absentee ruler cannot judge disputes. People begin to think, *While the cat's away, the mice can play* (compare Matthew 24:48, 49). A ruler who is present and active is expected to provide some degree of protection and justice. So when Zephaniah describes God as *the King* present with his people, the prophet is telling a powerful story of God's protective rule (compare Isaiah 54:14; Zechariah 9:8, 9).

This language of presence foreshadows significant New Testament themes. God's promise to dwell with his people was fulfilled in Jesus. As the incarnate Word, he physically lived among people (John 1:1–18). Before he ascended, Jesus promised that “where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20). The indwelling of the Holy Spirit for the Christian is a blessed reality (Romans 8:9–11; 1 Corinthians 6:19; 2 Timothy 1:14).

**15c. never again will you fear any harm.**

The promised restoration in general and this verse in particular in no way suggest that God will exempt his people from experiencing the natural consequences of their choices. The context, rather, is that of God's removal of those who instigate *harm* against the remnant. The promise of God's restoration, with the peace and protection he gives, offers hope to God's people in the midst of judgment against the rebellious. There is joy coming in the morning, even after the tears of the night before (Psalm 30:5).

The promise of restoration does not end with Zephaniah's prophecies to pre-exilic Judah that is to become the post-exilic remnant. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray for restoration in terms of God's kingdom coming and God's will being done (Matthew 6:10)

As Jesus proclaims that coming kingdom during his time on earth, he does not consider the restoration to be accomplished fully during his earthly ministry. Just before his ascension, his disciples ask if the time has come for the restoration of Israel (Acts 1:6). Jesus' response, coming on the heels of three years of proclamation that “the kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15), shows that the disciples' expectation of an immediate physical-political fulfillment misses the point. Instead, restoration and the establishing of the kingdom of God are inaugurated. Fulfillment is in some sense both “now” and “not yet.”

Full restoration in terms of new life in Christ is consummated at his return (1 Corinthians 15:52–57; Revelation 22). In the meantime, we allow the Holy Spirit to transform us daily (Romans 12:2).

## **II. Promise**

**(ZEPHANIAH 3:16–20)**

### **A. In That Day (vv. 16–18)**

**16a. On that day they will say to Jerusalem,**

Zephaniah's phrasing makes clear that the promise of restoration is certain even though the exact timing is unrevealed. *That day* points to a real occasion while leaving the timing wide open. Although people may fervently desire to know exactly when restoration is to come, God's fervent desire is that people be confident that the promise of the restoration is certain (compare Hebrews 11:1). What is to happen on the day mentioned here is the opposite of what will happen on the "that day" of Zephaniah 1:15.

**16b. "Do not fear, Zion; do not let your hands hang limp.**

It is no coincidence that there is no occasion for *fear* in God's restored kingdom. When the king of creation is fully present, peace and justice hold sway in his realm.

The Bible's imagery of hands can express strength or symbolize power (example: Micah 5:9). Imagery of weak or incapable hands can indicate a feeling of helplessness or hopelessness in situations characterized by fear (example: Isaiah 35:3, 4). Thus if *hands hang limp* after this pronouncement, it indicates the presence of unwarranted fear. That, in turn, indicates lack of faith (compare Matthew 14:26–31).

**17. "The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing."**

Zephaniah again presents a state of the future, followed by attendant results. The reason the people are not to fear is because *the Mighty Warrior* is present with them. The image Zephaniah paints is of a victorious king. Having defeated his enemy, God's entire focus shifts to his utter *delight* over once again being with his people, providing and caring for them (compare Isaiah 62:4).

The statement *in his love he will no longer rebuke you* may seem curious at first. It should be understood as God's shifting from a mode of active wrath to one of steady love. In that mode, the Lord will no longer punish the people (compare Hosea 14:4).

The cycle of joy is thereby complete: as God's people celebrate their restored relationship with him, God celebrates being present with them.

**18a. "I will remove from you all who mourn over the loss of your appointed festivals,**

This verse presents some translation difficulties. Taken as a whole, however, the verse suggests that the *appointed festivals* that were instituted as an expression of faith have become a matter of shame instead. Another possibility is that because God has called the people to rejoice, he will remove those who choose to continue to wallow in sorrow; they will not be allowed to prevent others from expressing their joy.

**18b. "which is a burden and reproach for you.**

The language of *reproach* brings another dimension to the promise of restoration. The same word is translated "shame" elsewhere (example: Isaiah 47:3), and that may be the sense here. Shame and honor are more than simply matters of hurt feelings in the ancient Near East. Rather, those concepts speak to how people identify and value themselves. To be cast into exile will result in the Judeans no longer understanding who they are as a people (compare Psalm 74)

This *burden* will be lifted when God reclaims his remnant. Restored relationship means restored identity. God brings the joy of identity with him in the place of the shame of his rejection.

**B. At That Time (vv. 19, 20)**

**19. “At that time I will deal with all who oppressed you. I will rescue the lame; I will gather the exiles. I will give them praise and honor in every land where they have suffered shame.**

The phrase *at that time* links this promise to the previous verses. The people are to experience restoration identity and more: the consequences to be suffered will come to an end as God removes the agents of judgment (see the Lesson Context for lesson 6). Judah will no longer be known as the people who abandoned their God (compare Deuteronomy 29:24, 25; Isaiah 60:18)

In the ancient Near East, physical handicaps often are considered evidence of a deity’s judgment (see John 9:2). Similarly, enslavement by a hostile nation is thought to prove the inability of both king and deity to protect a people (compare Isaiah 14:1–8). Restored relationship with God removes and heals these purported signs of abandonment (see also Ezekiel 34:16; Micah 4:6). Physical healing, freedom, and return home are concrete ways God’s justice and love will be announced.

Crippling helplessness and insufficiency will disappear in the face of God’s power at work. The language of *shame* emerges again to highlight the remnant’s restored sense of identity as God’s people. The remnant’s inability to protect themselves is to be negated as God exercises his own power to restore and reclaim. The alienation caused by sin in general and idolatry in particular is reversed when God is once again present with his people. Those willing to affirm allegiance to God alone, rejecting idolatry—the opposite of which will be the main reason for the forthcoming exile (Ezekiel 23)—are promised God’s care in his plan to restore his people to wholeness (compare Psalm 68:6).

**20. “At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home. I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes,” says the LORD.**

Zephaniah again refers to *that time*, reinforcing the link between these promises. God’s restoration of familial relationship goes hand in hand with restoring a sense of identity as God’s covenant people. God’s care is demonstrated in this renewed relationship and rediscovered identity.

The phrase *when I restore your fortunes* should reemphasize to us that the terrible judgments of the Day of the Lord are yet to occur from the perspective of the original reader. And as the decades pass until those occur, it will be easy to forget or outright dismiss the predictions of exile and return (compare 2 Peter 3; Revelation 2:4, 5). Could there be anything sadder than to fail to be restored to relationship to God Almighty himself?

## **Conclusion**

### **A. The Restoration Expert**

The final words of the book of Zephaniah remind us that restoration requires the power and willingness of God. He and he alone is the one who has the power to make restored relationship with him possible. That’s why Zephaniah’s promise of restoration for the Old Testament remnant is relevant to us yet today: it foreshadows our restored relationship to God through Christ.

Christians have been delivered from the captivity of sin; yet we still live in a world that is mired in that captivity. Therefore the fullness of our deliverance is yet to come. We trust God to keep his promise in that regard because he has, among other things, “set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit” (2 Corinthians 1:22). Although God’s kingdom is not yet here in its fullest sense, his continuing work of restoration is guaranteed by the presence of his Spirit.

Let us therefore celebrate these grand realities! As we do, we can affirm with Paul “that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38, 39).

### **B. Prayer**

Lord, open our eyes to ways in which you are present and restoring your kingdom in and around us. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

### **C. Thought to Remember**

Celebrate the present and future reality  
of restored relationship to God.<sup>1</sup>

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