

Zephaniah 3:14-20**God rejoices**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

What are you waiting for? What's the thing in your life that you wish was sorted out? If only you had that one thing fixed, you'd be okay. For some people in the world, it's as simple as enough food to feed their family. Or clean water. Or a solid roof over their head. Maybe for you, it's a broken or strained relationship. Maybe it's a health issue. Maybe it's just finishing harvest without any more drama. Whatever it is, you think, if only that thing was fixed then my life would be sorted.

For the people of Israel in the time of the prophet Zephaniah, their thing was they had lost their national identity. After disobeying God, straying away from his will for them, God had allowed them to be invaded and oppressed. Their status as God's chosen nation, a special possession of his above all others, was ruined.

It was into this that Zephaniah received his prophetic message from the Lord during the reign of King Josiah. Like Hezekiah a few generations before, Josiah had sought to remove the pagan idolatry that was occurring within Israel. The king wanted his people to worship the one true God in purity and truth. But there was still enough going on that God called the prophet Zephaniah to speak out against the people who dabbled in pagan worship and rituals.

By the end of Zephaniah's ministry, he had good news for the people. He calls them to rejoice, to sing praises to God. The Lord is among his people, the enemies turned away, the people's reputation restored. The judgment and condemnation is over, but that doesn't mean that all is done. The age of renewal had begun, and there was no room for idle hands. Even the weak and helpless have a place in this work of restoration. The shame of the people of God for their abandonment of God and turning to idols has now been replaced with praise and rejoicing.

But if we read on in the history of God's chosen people, this rejoicing didn't last long. Within generations, the people had again turned away from God. A different king, a different approach to leading, and people who think they know better. Eventually, this would end with the exile to Babylon as God's full judgment upon his chosen people. And even then, the lesson isn't properly learnt.

We're no different, of course. We let all sorts of things get in the way of living according to God's will. We put so many other priorities ahead of doing things God's way. We think we've found the one thing wrong, and when we can fix that one thing, everything will be perfect again. And then when things don't go right, we look to every other possible solution before admitting the fault lies within ourselves.

But when we look closely at this text from Zephaniah, we see that all the work of renewal is God's work. We basically have the image of God as the good shepherd bringing home the lost and helpless sheep. The end of judgment and the restoration of the people happens entirely by God's mercy. Even the rejoicing is God's:

The Lord your God is living among you. He is a mighty saviour. He will take delight in you with gladness. With his love, he will calm all your fears. He will rejoice over you with joyful songs.

God bursts into joyful song as he saves his people. God rejoices because the relationship is restored. The shepherd has gathered the lost, the starting, and the lame, and brought them home again. He restores their lives, restores their reputations. And then he rejoices.

Now rejoicing is not something you can do in a quiet and dignified manner. Zephaniah is not showing us some distant and unmoving God, but a God who rejoices. We might be used to an image of God as judge or as king or as a mighty saviour. But how often do we think of God as one who rejoices, who sings for joy? But that is what happens here. God and God's people alike are caught up in a joy that overflows into song, a joy that springs from a restored and renewed relationship. It is not simply God's people who rejoice because God has forgiven and restored them, though that is a common occurrence through the scriptures. God, too, sings and shouts with joy.

This reminds us that our God is compassionate, our God enters into whatever mess we're in and acts in mercy toward us. Our God does not watch from a distance and let us fend for ourselves. God enters into the life of the world. God even enters into human flesh, taking on our form at the incarnation. This is something to celebrate. And of course, we do celebrate; that's what Christmas is all about.

But this Sunday in Advent we are reminded of the great joy of all this. The joy of a people redeemed and restored by a loving and compassionate God. The joy of a God who is deeply invested in the life of the world, of his world, his creation. God rejoices at restoring lost and helpless sheep. And scripture tells us the angels in heaven rejoice when even one sinner repents and is brought back into right relationship with God. And we too are invited to join in the celebration, to rejoice always because our Lord is near.

So, whatever it is that might be wrong in your life, whatever it is that you might want fixed, there is still joy to be found in God's presence. God is rejoicing at bringing the lost sinner home. God is rejoicing at restoring and healing the broken ones. God is with us, and has compassion on us, and will gladly take the burden of the troubles of this world.

As we close in on our celebration of God dwelling among us, taking on human flesh, being born into this world, may our hearts be filled with the joy that comes from knowing a God who rejoices. And may your lives always be drawn back to God our saviour as the only one who can properly fix this world. Our saviour has come. Our lives are being renewed and restored every day. Thanks be to God for his great mercy towards all his people. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.