

Prophecying Restoration

The older woman across the banquet table sucked her teeth. Then she elbowed her friend and said “Jessie Collins” as she pointed to the program.

Sitting across the table from the pair of women were Felicia and Rhianna, who exchanged looks. Felicia and Rhianna were there to support Jessie, their friend and church member.

“She’s a bank robber!” the older woman said in a voice that could still be heard by the other six people at the table.

The women were at an awards ceremony. A nonprofit agency was honoring men and women for various accomplishments. Jessie was being recognized as an employee who went “above and beyond.” The brief description said Jessie was a stock person at a thrift store and worked with one of the company’s programs that seeks to steer young people away from crime.

Previously, Jessie’s life choices had landed her in such deep debt and financial trouble that she could not maintain her apartment and care for her two sons.

The result was Jessie being the driver in two bank robberies. The threesome were caught after the second robbery, and Jessie did 36 months in prison.

Now, four years since Jessie’s release, she has been relishing being back in the arms of the Lord and her church family.

“Ma’am,” Felicia said to the older woman across the table. “The Lord has restored Jessie and blessed her to be a productive citizen. I think that is something to praise God for!”

1. *We restore objects, but why is it more important to restore people?*

2. *Has God restored you after a devastating event in your life? Explain your answer.*

3. *How can prophecies about God restoring people and nations give us hope?*

The Lord Is with Us

Zephaniah 3:14-15, KJV

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

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.

Zephaniah 3:14-15, NIV

¹⁴Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel!

Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem!

¹⁵The 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.

In a book that prophesies the coming of God’s wrath upon both Judah, Jerusalem, and the surrounding nations, it might seem surprising to discover that its closing section begins with a call for exuberant rejoicing by the people of Jerusalem. Zephaniah even describes Jerusalem in the beginning of chapter 3 as “the city of oppressors, rebellious and defiled” (3:1).

So why such joyful exultation as well? The preceding verses tell us of a great spiritual renewal for both the nations and Israel. A day will come when God “will purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD” (3:9). For Israel, God’s chastisement will bring great results—a “meek and humble” people who will rest secure as “no one will make them afraid” (3:12-13).

Zephaniah 3:15 provides the key reason for such joyful praise to God; it says that “the King of Israel” will someday dwell with His people. As a result, they will never again have reason to fear—God will have removed all “punishment” for their sins and eliminated all threats of violence from their enemies.

For the faithful of Zephaniah’s day, they could find encouragement in knowing that the coming judgment for their sins would not end their existence as God’s people. They could rejoice knowing God would someday restore them.

When will Jerusalem experience these great blessings of forgiveness and security? Many believe this restoration refers to the end of the age when Jesus will restore a repentant Israel (Zech.

12:10) and reign over the nations of the world. Others see this as referring to Jesus' presence in the world beginning with His birth and then through the Holy Spirit in His Church.

4. *What does Zephaniah call upon the people of Israel to do in verse 14?*

5. *What's the cause of such exultation?*

The Lord Delights in Us

Zephaniah 3:16-17, KJV

16 In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear thou not: and to Zion, Let not thine hands be slack.

17 The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing.

Zephaniah 3:16-17, NIV

¹⁶On that day

they will say to Jerusalem,

“Do not fear, Zion;

do not let your hands hang limp.

¹⁷The 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.”

Although future residents of Jerusalem could look forward to safety from their enemies, such was not the case in Zephaniah's day. The reference to the hands of the people hanging “limp” (vs. 16) depicts weakness as the result of dread for what lies ahead. Soon, the advance of Nebuchadnezzar's army toward Jerusalem would lead to much panic for the people of Judah.

The prophet, however, saw a future day when such dread would no longer be their experience. Because of the Lord's presence, concern for their safety will no longer exist. God, “the Mighty Warrior who saves” (vs. 17), will someday defeat all their enemies and deliver them from all threats of harm.

Zechariah continues his encouragement for the faithful by telling them that God takes “great delight” in them. This speaks to the Lord's great love for all that belong to Him whether they are the people of Israel or us as New Testament followers of the Savior. As His people, we bring Him joy.

Verse 17 contains one of the more amazing statements in all of Scripture: God rejoices over us “with singing.” This brings to mind images of a mother tenderly singing over an infant. Such is the love of our Father in heaven toward us. It’s almost beyond comprehension that our almighty heavenly Father would lovingly rejoice over us “with singing.” Yet such is the abundance of His compassion and love for us.

6. *Why do the people of Israel have no need to fear at the time depicted in verse 16?*

7. *What does the picture of God singing over us reveal about His love for us?*

The Lord Restores Us

Zephaniah 3:18-20, KJV

18 I will gather them that are sorrowful for the solemn assembly, who are of thee, to whom the reproach of it was a burden.

19 Behold, at that time I will undo all that afflict thee: and I will save her that halteth, and gather her that was driven out; and I will get them praise and fame in every land where they have been put to shame.

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.

Zephaniah 3:18-20, NIV

¹⁸“I will remove from you all who mourn over the loss of your appointed festivals, which is a burden and reproach for you.

¹⁹At 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.

²⁰At 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.

Still addressing the faithful in Judah, the Lord promises to someday remove their sorrow as the result of the discontinuation of feasts during captivity (vs. 18). Despite the idolatry of most in Judah, those who observed the religious festivals with sincerity of heart would grieve their absence after the Babylonians destroyed the temple. In keeping with His word to relieve their grief, God pledges to someday gather His people back to the land, which would allow for the rebuilding of the temple and the resumption of worship (vs. 19) as happened after the people returned from their captivity in Babylon.

Not only will this be a physical restoration, but also one of healing and of bestowing great honor on those who would soon experience much disgrace and physical suffering. Even the lowest among the people, represented by “the lame,” will have cause to rejoice in the future as the result of God’s changing their shame into praise.



A stele of the goddess Ishtar, worshiped by the Babylonians and some in Judah (see Jer. 44:17-19). God said He would “purify the lips of the peoples” (Zeph. 3:9) so they called on Him, not other gods.

God’s restoring of the “fortunes” of the people would put Israel in a place of “honor and praise” among the nations. Because Israel did not experience the total restoration envisioned in verses 19-20 after returning from Babylon, some see a still future fulfillment restoration for the nation.

The delight God takes in restoring His people encourages us as well. Scripture reveals much of the Lord’s joyous plans for all His people as we spend eternity with Him. That will be a great day of restoration for all God’s people.

8. Why were the people mourning over the loss of their festivals and why will their sorrow come to an end?

Restored to Him

Broken fellowship can occur for many reasons, but the common denominator is us—we withdraw from the Lord. Sometimes it is the cares of this life that hamper the Word, preventing it from bearing fruit in our lives. At other times, we are offended by the Lord because He didn't give us something that we wanted, or He took something or someone away.

We must remember that we are temporary stewards of the things and people in our lives and that all things and all souls belong to the Lord. The truth is, we brought nothing into this world, and we will take nothing out of it but our faith in Christ.

Be assured of this: we can't win any battles or gain any points by blaming God. We have limited perspective regarding the issues of life, but if we live long enough, we will all experience "a time to get, and a time to lose" (Eccl. 3:6, KJV). We are not being picked on or singled-out for disasters; rather, maturity and spiritual development can only occur through the trials and issues of life.

When sin, shame, or blame break our fellowship with the Lord, our holy, righteous, and perfect God can restore us to right fellowship with Him. When we fail to walk according to His Word and sin breaks our fellowship, the way back to the Lord is through humility and repentance: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

When Israel sinned, they went into captivity, but when they repented, the Lord had mercy upon them. He restored them as Zephaniah described. When we sin, we too go into a kind of captivity, but He will have mercy on us and restore our fellowship when we return to Him in humble adoration.

9. *How can our experiences of lost fellowship and restoration be an opportunity for ministry?*

10. *Can we become too proud in our restoration? Explain your answer.*

11. *Why does God allow us to experience problems too great for us to solve ourselves?*

Diligently Seek Him

The Lord helps and delivers those who “diligently seek him” (Heb. 11:6, KJV). We often seek the Lord when we are weak or overwhelmed, but we should do that all the time. Ultimately, restoration to fellowship comes through our commitment to follow Christ and to “cast all [our] care upon him; for he careth for you” (1 Pet. 5:7). We then feel His healing and the “times of refreshing (Acts 3:19) that He promises to those who love Him

► *List here some of the things the Lord did for the exiles to restore them (for example, “take delight in you”). Look at that list this week for encouragement. He wants a close fellowship with you, and He will restore that fellowship as you diligently seek Him.*

KEY VERSE

Behold, at that time I will undo all that afflict thee: and I will save her that halteth, and gather her that was driven out; and I will get them praise and fame in every land where they have been put to shame.
—Zephaniah 3:19, KJV

“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, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK’S LESSON

Week of May 4 through May 10

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross devotionals* on these passages.)

- Mon.** Genesis 12:1-8—God’s Worldwide Covenant with Abraham.
- Tues.** Jeremiah 31:31-34—A New Covenant of the Heart.
- Wed.** Ezekiel 37:15-23—Divided Peoples to Become One.
- Thurs.** Romans 12:9-21—Just Living in Church and World.
- Fri.** 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22—Cultivate Peaceful and Just Relations.
- Sat.** Zechariah 8:18-23—Joyful Feasts Draw Newcomers.
- Sun.** Zechariah 8:1-8, 11-17—Enjoy Fruits of Peace and Justice.