

Third Sunday in Advent; December 15, 2024

Rejoice Always!  
Zephaniah 3:14-17

**“Sing out, daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, you daughter of Jerusalem. The LORD has removed the judgment against you. He has turned back your enemy. Israel’s king, the LORD, is in your midst! You no longer need to fear disaster. In that day Jerusalem will be told, “Do not be afraid, O Zion. Do not give up. The LORD your God is with you as a hero to save you. He takes great delight in you. He will quiet you with his love. He will rejoice over you with singing.”**

The apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians, and Zephaniah in these verses, shout the Christian’s song: Rejoice! Nobody would deny that Christmas should be all about joy.

But if you understand what Paul and Zephaniah were going through, you might understand why they have to tell themselves and the rest of God’s people more than once to rejoice. Why does Paul say it and then say it again? Because he feels so much joy at the moment...or because he doesn’t? Why does Zephaniah say it and then say it again another way? Because he feels so much joy in the moment, or because he doesn’t? Is it because they’re already all aboard the Divine Joy Train, or because at the moment they’re tied to the tracks?

Paul is under house arrest when he says it and then says it again: rejoice! He wants to see these Christians in Philippi in person but cannot. Zephaniah prophesies to people in Judah, in the city of Zion (Jerusalem), as the Babylonians march in to conquer and carry them away for seventy years! What is his natural joy level at the moment, do you think?

Ten days before Christmas, what’s your natural joy level? Maybe you are one of the blessed few who find joy in looking down that list of everything you must buy and bake, decorate and distribute, prepare and package, everyone you must hug and hello. If you find joy naturally in all that activity, God bless you. And I hope what you hear will make you even more joyful. Hopefully this will lead you to find your highest joy in the Lord and consider the joy you find in the hustle of this season an added bonus from him! If, however, you find your joy depleted by everything you must say and do and be in this season – you, please listen carefully. Listen carefully to men of low natural joy who said it and then said it and then said it again, because they and the people they spoke to needed it: rejoice!

Rejoice in the Lord! First, because he has cleared away your judgment and your enemy. Second, because he rejoices over each and every one of us.

Zephaniah knows Judah has seen better days. His ancestor was one of Judah’s best kings, Hezekiah. He reestablished worship in the temple and, like all believers, generally tried to do what pleases the Lord, although slipping and sliding from time to time. But King Hezekiah’s son and grandson were apples that fell far from the tree of the godly king. It was downhill from there. And now it was almost over for Judah. The enemy, carrying the Lord’s judgment, was at the gate.

In that context, Zephaniah ends his little book like this: **“Sing out, daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, you daughter of Jerusalem.”** If you didn’t know better, you might think that the Lord, who is speaking through his prophet, is sarcastically mocking his people. Like this: “You want to disobey and disbelieve me? How’d that work out for you? Look at you now! Why don’t try rejoicing now?” But it can’t be that! Because he also gives them substance to rejoice on.

**"The LORD has removed the judgment against you. He has turned back your enemy. Israel's king, the LORD, is in your midst! You no longer need to fear disaster."**

The consequence of their sin was exile in Babylon; the judgment for sin was – and still is – hell, which is eternal separation from God. Sometimes God allows us to suffer consequences for our sin (and he has many reasons for doing that), but he tells his people then and now that the judgment of their sin is removed by the Lord. Along with removing the judgment of hell, the Lord himself also turns back the enemy.

So we may have to live with temporary consequences for our sins. In the same way, we may have to put with temporary enemies in this world. But just as the Lord removes the eternal judgment for sin, he also removes the eternal enemy, the Devil. Another prophet, who lived not long before Zephaniah, explained exactly what the Lord would do to remove eternal judgment and turn back Satan forever. **He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquity; the punishment that brought us peace was on him.** That's just how our Lord Jesus did it. He suffered the eternal judgment of sin in our place; he turned back the Devil by smashing his head, along with that judgment of having to join him in hell. Sin's judgment is gone in Jesus' sacrifice, and so is the power of our greatest and powerful enemy.

We know this thoroughly from the pages of Scripture. We know John the Baptist called Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We know Jesus' own promise that everyone who believes in him will not perish in hell, but have eternal life. We know his words to Martha, that in him we live in heaven even when we die. Here's Zephaniah's invitation to you and me today: Live it. Rejoice in it. Even when we face sin's consequences. We do every day! Every imperfection, every stressor, every joy-robber is a result of sin. We face enemies, including the Devil and his temptations, every day. And they squeeze our joy.

Overpower them all with this; let the Lord fill your heart with his joy in this declaration: the judgment of your sin is gone in Jesus. The Enemy cannot overpower you, and will never hold you. Dear Christians, one and all: rejoice. The next time your joy begins to fade, remind yourself in the Lord: you have eternal joy in Jesus. Let it fill your heart and show in your life!

But sometimes Jesus seems so small. Sometimes we think of him only of that baby in the manger, wrapped up in swaddling cloths and confined to the little town of Bethlehem. Well, that little baby in that little town was only hiding his glory and power as God, the Lord. He grew up, and while remaining in human humility, he used his divinity to live a holy life for us. He used his divine power to remove sin's judgment and turn back the Devil. And now that little baby of Bethlehem's humility is gone. He reigns in all glory; and he calls us heavenward in his glory, toward his side, away from judgment forever, away from the Devil forever. That's what he came on Christmas to do: not to remain that cuddly baby, but to save, to bring you home to his side. And he's waiting for you there.

So...rejoice! Even when you have to say it two or three times. Rejoice in the Lord, the Lord who removed your judgment and turned back the Enemy. And do it always.

**In that day Jerusalem will be told, "Do not be afraid, O Zion. Do not give up. The LORD your God is with you as a hero to save you."** When the prophets use the phrase, "in that day," it can mean the Messiah's first coming, or his last, or any day in the life of a believer. We live every day in the consequences of sin and the pull of the Devil. But Zephaniah says: don't be afraid, people of God. Don't stand there shrugging

and slumping and saying, “What can I do! The Lord is gone! Sure, he was here to save us; sure, he'll back to save us. But what about now?” No! **The LORD your God is with you as a hero to save you.** Jesus’ saving work is complete; you live in that reality every day as you serve him in life. And Jesus’ promise to deliver you from judgment and hell – that is your joyful power to press on through the troubles of this world. And not just to press on, but to push toward heaven with shoulders back in confidence, hands up to serve, heart filled with joy.

Today is that day. Stay strong in the Lord today, because your saving is with you today. Do not give up, but keep working for God and serving him today. Rejoice today, every day, always in your salvation.

Finally, we’re getting ready to celebrate Christmas always. And it’s going to be great. We get to gather with our fellow redeemed and sing praises, the outward expression of our joy. But listen to Zephaniah tell you why, ultimately, you rejoice in the Lord: **He takes great delight in you. He will quiet you with his love. He will rejoice over you with singing.** We owe God our praises and rejoicing because of what he has done for us. But he did it all – he removed judgment, turned back the enemy, and filled us with joy always – for one simple reason: he rejoiced over us. He rejoiced and sang over us and desired our salvation. And he did it before we did anything for him.

This is the love of God: love that first loved us, the unlovable. First let it quiet your heart’s complaints and groans. And then rejoice! Again and always: Rejoice! Amen.