

**Rejoice! The Lord is coming!**

How are you feeling. A little anxious? Somewhat stressed? Worried? Scared? A lot of people are. Making sure you have the basic needs of clothing, food and shelter is a constant concern. But it seems that lately, people are even more apprehensive. It's been over a year and a half since we first heard the word COVID and it's still in the news every day. Inflation is going up. Supply chain issues mean that many Christmas presents won't arrive on time and basic essentials might be hard to get. Going to a Christmas parade was always a fun thing to do. Now we wonder if we'll be safe there. I could go on and on, but you can check out the news when you get home. A lot of people are scared, anxious, worried and stressed. And I haven't even mentioned all of the Christmas deadlines you are facing. And then Zephaniah telling tells us to rejoice. How can we?

Zephaniah is not that well known. His book is only 3 chapters long and it's hidden near the end of the Old Testament. He was a prophet at a gloomy time in the history of the Israelites. Under Kings David and Solomon, the nation was a large and respected world power. Now, they were just a speed bump for invading armies. The economy was shaky. Other nations with bigger and stronger armies took advantage of them. Death and disease were as common as ever. In his first two chapters, Zephaniah tells the Jews that their country and their capital were going to be destroyed. There would be destruction and death, suffering and sorrow. And then in chapter 3 he tells the Jews, and us, to rejoice. It doesn't seem logical.

God's people have always faced enemies. John the Baptizer called them out. John had become pretty popular. The Jewish leaders joined the crowds that went to the Jordan River to listen to him. John pointed to those Jewish leaders and called them a "**brood of vipers!**" Children of the Devil. Yikes. They were trusting in their pedigree as Jews and their performance as they acted so pious and proper. God was not looking for people who just looked religious on the outside. He was looking for people who recognized their sin and trusted in the Lord for forgiveness and salvation. The Lord was looking for a heart of faith that would show itself with kindness and love for others in their daily lives, no matter if they were a tax collector or soldier or whatever. John warned the people that Judgment Day was coming. The whole world would be destroyed.

John pleaded with the people to repent – to turn away from their sins and to turn toward Jesus.

The same was true at the time of Zephaniah. The Jews were facing a Judgment Day for their country and capital. Jerusalem wasn't destroyed because Babylon had anger issues, or had more powerful weapons than the Jews. Jerusalem was destroyed because God was sick of his people turning away from him. In painful love, he had to give them a spiritual wake up call. Zephaniah was sent into Israel with the same message John the Baptist would preach later on: "**Repent.**" Don't put God off. Don't take him lightly. And don't think you have more time to think about whether or not you really want to turn away from your sin. Death or the end of the world could come at any moment. Just ask the nearly 100 people who died on Friday night because of tornados. They were not expecting to that day.

God's people still face enemies. Right now in our world, Christians and Christianity are often mocked and ridiculed. TV shows and news reports can take God's name in vain all they want. Our country used to generally follow a Judeo-Christian ethic. Now, nothing is immoral and people scratch wherever their sinful nature itches. They embrace sin and reject Jesus. It's heartbreaking. When the Lord draws near on Judgment Day, he will humble his enemies, those who rejected Jesus as their Savior.

When our world is destroyed, however, God promises us a new world that will never end, a world where sin and sorrow, disease and death will not even be remembered; a world where our sinful nature will not steer us in the wrong direction any more; a world where you will never be scared or anxious or worried or stressed; a world where joy and gladness will never end. That's why Zephaniah tells us to be rejoice.

God knows that true joy can only come from one place – from being with the God who created joy in the first place. In God's mind, the solution for Jerusalem was NOT, "Well, let's set up more security checkpoints. Let's make sure we get rid of all weapons. Let's get everyone counseling. Let's pass more laws." God's solution would be found in a manger in Bethlehem. God's solution would establish peace between a sinful world and a holy God. God's solution would be to love you with an everlasting love.

A week and a half ago, there was another tragic school shooting, this time, in Oxford, Michigan. The carnage would have been much worse if

the students were not trained to hide in their classrooms and barricade the door. When God's strong arm reached deep into this broken world, the baby in Bethlehem became broken too; not by gun shots or a virus or poverty, but from the weight of every sin committed by me and you. Jesus willingly and eagerly opened the door to a lot of pain, refusing to give up on anyone walking away from him so that you could know that what Zephaniah says is absolutely true: The Lord is with you – through anything, through any pain. The Lord delights in his children, just like those parents in Oxford, MI, who were joyfully reunited with their children after the shooting.

And that's why Zephaniah could say, "**Sing aloud! Rejoice!**" Here in chapter 3 he refers to believers, to you and me, as "**Daughter Zion, Israel, Daughter Jerusalem.**" The Lord loves his people, he loves you, more than any daddy could ever love his dear daughter. Zephaniah lists the reasons for why we can be glad and rejoice.

Verse 15, "**The Lord has taken away the judgments against you.**" He did not say that the Lord overlooked, or ignored, your punishment. He "**took it away.**" Jesus came into our world and took your sin and guilt away from you and carried it to the cross. His blood erased all of your sins from your record. When God looks at you, he does not see any sin. He only see the purity and perfection that Jesus gave to you. What a relief! What a joy!

Zephaniah continues, "**He has cleared away your enemies.**" Remember that old board game called Stratego? Two armies faced each other and fought a battle as you moved your little pieces around the board. Or, you could think of a game of chess. Jesus came and completely cleared the board. The devil with his demons and enticing temptations are completely cleared away. You are safe. What a relief! What a joy!

The prophet continues (:15), "**The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst.**" No matter how lonely and isolated you feel, you are not alone. God himself, who is ruling the world, is with you. You can talk to him at any time about anything. He is better than any bodyguard. That's why the prophet can tell you (:15), "**you shall never again fear evil.**" What a relief! What a joy!

On Christmas morning when presents are unwrapped, who do you think is happier – the child or the parents? They're both happy, of course. But, parents, doesn't it bring great joy to your hearts to see your children

smiling and happy? Your heavenly Father feels the same way about you. He is thrilled to see you rejoicing over Jesus as your Savior. He finds joy in your joy. Listen again to Zephaniah (:16,17), "**On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem** [to you, the believers]: "**Fear not, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak.** [Do not lose heart. Do not give up.] **The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness** [The "you" here is singular. Grammatically, it refers to Zion, or Jerusalem. Those terms refers to believers. You can understand that singular "you" as talking precisely about you.]; **he will quiet you by his love** [Again, singular – YOU!]; **he will exult over you with loud singing** [Still singular. Still you!]." God is smiling on you and singing for joy because of you.

Yes, we are still sinners living in a sinful world, but you can rejoice because the Lord is coming to be your Savior and take you home to heaven. Amen.