

June 25 Lesson: Renewed in God's Love

Summer Quarter 2023: The Righteous Reign of God Unit 1: The Prophets Proclaim God's Power

Sunday School Lesson for the week of June 25, 2023 By Jay Harris

Lesson Scripture: Zephaniah 3:14-20

Key Verse:

The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. (Zephaniah 3:17)

Lesson Aims

- To introduce the theme of renewal in God's loving reign
- To acquaint ourselves with the Prophet Zephaniah and his times
- To explore how seasons of judgment often must precede seasons of renewal
- To learn about the biblical idea of a remnant and what God can do with a remnant
- To reflect on the ways we are renewed in God's love and experience God as a warrior
- To imagine our place alongside God as a warrior on the side of the oppressed
- To give thanks for ways God has brought us home

How God's People Are Renewed in God's Loving Reign

As we continue to study the Reign of God this quarter, we look at this theme through the eyes of Zephaniah, one of the so-called minor prophets. We should not consider the minor prophets to be minor in terms of their importance. The only reason they are referred to in this way is because they wrote fewer words. One of the benefits of studying a prophet like Zephaniah is that we can take in the whole message since it is only three chapters. We can therefore set the particular passage we are studying in context. In this case, the passage comes at the end of the message. Therefore, everything in the message builds up to the declarations in our scripture.

The theme of today's lesson is "Renewed in God's Love." The phrase comes from the key verse which proclaims that the Lord God is in the midst of his people, a warrior who brings victory, who rejoices over his people with gladness, and renews them with his love. It is all that leads up to this declaration that teaches us so much about the reign of God.

An Introduction to the Prophet Zephaniah and His Times

To start at the beginning, we should first look at what is said about Zephaniah in the first verse. We learn three things in this verse. First, it says that the word of the Lord came to Zephaniah. This is a prophet's call from God. Then, there is a genealogy, which is somewhat brief, but

longer than most prophets. Zephaniah is identified as the great-great grandson of King Hezekiah. Zephaniah had some royal blood. The first verse also tells us that Zephaniah was active during the reign of King Josiah who reigned from 640 B.C. to 609 B.C. Because of the death of Josiah's father in a palace coup, Josiah's reign began when he was eight years old.

The genealogy shows that Zephaniah and Josiah were distant relatives. Attention was also being drawn to the connection between Josiah and Hezekiah, because both were considered to be reformers. In their respective reigns, both Hezekiah and Josiah removed the pagan influences from the temple and from the practice of worship. Essentially, Josiah, became like another Hezekiah. Josiah "walked in the way of his father David" and "did not turn aside to the right or the left." (2 Kings 22:2)

Second Kings describes the remarkable event that led to the spiritual reforms that King Josiah brought to Judah. Around 621. B.C., Josiah told the high priest to conduct a search for money in the temple that could be used to refurbish the temple. During the high priest's search, he found the lost Book of the Law. For a long time, scholars have suspected that this lost book was none other than the book of Deuteronomy. When Josiah heard all the specific warnings contained in this book, he tore his clothes as an act of contrition and repentance. Judah's long pattern of ignoring this book of the law led to its discontinued use. It is easy to imagine the dust collecting on this book until it eventually became unrecognizable. When Josiah read in the book all the warnings that Judah had been ignoring, it was not hard to imagine the wrath of the Lord over Judah.

After Josiah heard the warnings and judgments of the lost book of the law, Josiah led in religious reforms much like the ones Hezekiah led. Josiah also commanded the people to observe the Passover, which had not been observed since the days of the judges. Since Josiah was still only in his mid-20s, when his work as reformer began, it is not difficult to imagine the work of Zephaniah, the prophet, and Josiah, the king, reinforcing one another, although we are not told how closely they actually worked together.

Unfortunately, Josiah's reforms were short-lived, as were the reforms of Hezekiah before him. Josiah's reforms were dealt a serious set-back when Josiah was killed in battle before age forty. Zephaniah's amazing message, however, is still with us today, and God still speaks through Zephaniah's words about the renewal that is possible through God's loving reign. The placement of Zephaniah's prophetic career during the reign of Josiah also makes Zephaniah the first prophetic voice to emerge after the time of Isaiah—a gap of about 70 years.

The Judgment that Precedes and Leads to Renewal

The first chapter of Zephaniah's message tells of the coming judgment for Judah's sins. An important backdrop is the gathering Babylonian threat over the region including Judah. Zephaniah imagined a judgment so total that it would have the effect of wiping away everything. It would take this level of destruction to remove the influences that had polluted the worship of God:

“I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and I will cut off from this place every remnant of Baal and the name of the idolatrous priests, those who bow down on the roofs to the host of the heavens, those who bow down and swear to the LORD but also swear by Milcom, those who have turned back from following the LORD, who have not sought the LORD or inquired of him.” (Zephaniah 1:4-6)

From the corrupt officials and the faithless prophets to the complacent masses, all were warned of the coming judgment. One might wonder how well it served God’s people to be shown such a graphic and dire picture of their future. First of all, destruction would indeed come. When everything around you seems to be coming to an end, you don’t want to hear a word that says in effect, “this is isn’t so bad.” You also don’t want to wonder if God knows what is going on or cares. Secondly, you want to know if there will be a purpose to the destruction. God was making the case that there will be a purpose. A word that is used multiple times is the word “sweep.” Sweeping away all that a people has known creates the conditions for starting over.

The second chapter contains a “judgment of nations,” which is a characteristic feature of the messages of the prophets. Zephaniah addresses a number of the neighboring nations whose sinful actions the people of Judah would have known. This chapter ends with an emphasis on the judgment against Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrians whose army destroyed the northern kingdom, Israel. Nineveh would fall to the Babylonians soon after Zephaniah’s prophecy in 612 B.C.

We should note that before Zephaniah launched into the judgment of the nations, he addressed his own nation with a word of hope: *“Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, who do his commands; seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the LORD’s wrath.” (Zeph. 2:3)* This was a call to faithfulness to those who will remain after the day of the Lord’s judgment comes.

How have you experienced seasons of judgment? Have you ever been tested by a trial in your life that made you realize that your faith was not equal to the task at first? Have you ever been forced in a way by your circumstances to grow in your faith? How were you humbled by the experience?

What God Can Do with a Remnant

The third and final chapter begins with the judgment of Jerusalem. Verse 8 serves as a pivotal verse: *“Therefore wait for me, says the LORD, for the day when I arise as a witness. For my decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out upon them my indignation, all the heat of my anger, for in the fire of my passion all the earth shall be consumed.”* If Zephaniah’s message had ended with these words, it would be one thing, but notice that the Lord tells his people, “Therefore wait for me...” The Lord intended for his people to lean into what God was to do next.

This is when we see that the goal of God’s judgment was not annihilation, but to make the way for a fresh start: *“At that time, I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all*

of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord.” (Zeph. 3:9) When God says, “at that time,” God is referring to the time when the fire of God’s righteous anger has burned up all except for that which is pure and enduring. Notice that all the nations that were previously mentioned in the judgment are included in this transformation of the speech of the various peoples. Imagine the removal of deceit, hostile speech, and acrimony to honesty, truth, authenticity, integrity, grace, peace, and calling on the Lord’s name together.

The description of this type of divine action is echoed in the New Testament, in the Letter to the Hebrews. Beginning in Hebrews 12:26, we are reminded that once more at the end of time, God will shake not only the earth but also the heaven: *“This phrase, ‘Yet once more,’ indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe, for indeed our God is a consuming fire.” (Hebrews 12:27-29)*

There are multiple illustrations in scripture that describe the same thing. In some place, the image is wheat that has been threshed on the threshing floor, then sifted so that the good grain remains in the sieve, but the chaff falls through and is swept up and burned. In other places, it is the unfruitful parts of the tree that are pruned so that the tree bears more fruit and the pruned branches are burned. In other places, it is the impurities in the ore that are burned away while retaining the pure silver. It is all about what remains after God does his purging and purifying work—what God calls “the fire of my passion.” (Zephaniah 3:8)

It is the remnant which is preserved. Zephaniah describes the faithful remnant: *“For, I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the LORD—the remnant of Israel; they shall do no wrong and utter no lies, nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths. Then they will pasture and lie down, and no one shall make them afraid.” (Zeph. 3:12-13)*

You could say that this marks the turning of Zephaniah’s message. After all the purging has gone on, what can remain is a totally transformed people with whole-hearted devotion, unified in their service to the Lord, humble, authentic, and resting in God’s grace and protection. This was God’s goal all along in allowing events to unfold which try and test God’s people.

It is important to note that a faithful remnant is not produced by a process of elimination. It’s not that the faithful remnant consists of people who were perfectly good all along. No, the faithful remnant are those who have themselves endured trials and testing. They had to come to a place where they relied on the Lord like they never before had relied on him. They built spiritual muscles that they did not know existed before they were tested. To build these muscles, they used spiritual disciplines that were new to them at first. They were driven to their knees—in a good way. They had to learn what was important in life. Whenever we go through trials we learn the difference between wants and needs. We come out knowing that all we really want is what we need. When we truly have what we need, we realize that is what we want more than anything.

The faithful remnant does not consist of those who were merely spared, but it consists of those who have gone through a process of refinement. In the Book of Revelation, the faithful remnant

consists of two groups of people. One group consist of those who remain on earth after catastrophic devastation who turn to the Lord and grow in their faith. Another group of the holy remnant consists of those who are in heaven—perfected through persecution, death, and resurrection. We’re given a picture of this holy remnant in heaven, dressed in white robes as a sign of victory over the evil one: because *“they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.”* (Revelation 12:11)

Have you ever felt like God has done a purging or pruning or sweeping away in your life to make the way for something new? Have you ever felt like you were a part of a group that was called to be a remnant? How was God calling you to remain with something in order to stick by and start something new?

What Being Renewed in God’s Love Looks Like

In the Book of Zephaniah, when the remnant is finally revealed on earth, the tone of the message totally changes. The tone is one of singing and rejoicing:

**¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!**

Do you see why we had to explore the message of Zephaniah from the beginning to this point? This call to sing, shout, rejoice, and exult is all the more remarkable when we consider the long road that it took to get daughter Zion to this celebration. There is a place for recalling the stages the remnant has journeyed through to get to the celebration stage in their life together. There is also a place, however, for turning the page and living into the moment and season of celebration with spirits uplifted and claiming the confidence and boldness that is afforded to God’s people by God’s grace.

**¹⁵ The LORD has taken away the judgments against you;
he has turned away your enemies.
The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.
¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
“Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.**

What a grace-filled declaration that the Lord has taken away the judgments against his people! The feeling reminds me of the opening verse of the 8th chapter of Romans: “There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” The “therefore” recalls all that it took to get to this declaration. It took the atoning death of Jesus Christ. No two words signal better the believer’s feeling of a new start and turning of the page than the words, “No Condemnation.” The Lord has taken away the judgments against you.

God allowed the tests and trials that God's people endured for a time, but at the right time God turned away the enemies of God's people. For a long time, God's people had lived in fear of a menacing threat to the north. First, it was the Assyrians, then the Assyrians would be replaced by the Babylonian menace to the north, and then they would live through the time when threat became reality. There is a time, however, when God says, "Enough." God brings God's influence to bear, and an army, the Persian army, which was more powerful than the Babylonians, would defeat the enemy of God's people. The fear, under which God's people had lived, would be removed under the Persian King, Cyrus.

Can you name enemies that God has turned away in your life? Perhaps those enemies took the form of people in your life who stood unjustly against you. Perhaps the enemies took the form of circumstances that beat you down. Perhaps the enemies took the forms of habits, hurts, or hang-ups that held you back.

Zephaniah not only speaks of enemies that have been turned away, he also speaks about the presence of the King of Israel, the Lord, being in their midst. This is the theme we continue to lean into this summer—the righteous reign of God and its presence in our lives. With the presence of our King, fear of disaster is removed. In the space where so much fear once existed, there can be a sense of relief, lightness of being, confidence, and boldness.

With this new boldness and confidence, hands that had grown weak and atrophied are able to be strengthened again to do God's work. This is what happens when we understand the presence of God being on our side. We are able to make a contribution with our gifts to work that matters.

**¹⁷ The LORD, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness;
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing
¹⁸ as on a day of festival."
I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.**

The title of this lesson has been "Renewed in God's Love." In our study, we are being shown all the ways this renewal happens. The judgment stage allowed God's people to acknowledge their shortcomings, failures, and growing edges. In this space, expressions of remorse and sorrow over one's actions naturally follow. Asking God for forgiveness begins to overcome the distance felt between the remnant and God. God's complete forgiveness and restoration enters and makes the distance completely disappear. We understand that the warrior who has fought for us all along is in our midst and has been seeking to renew us in his love all along.

Likewise, the remnant, because of all they had experienced, could hear the declaration that the Lord, *their* God, was *in their midst*. They could understand it, and feel it. The chasm was crossed and the gap between God and his people was eliminated in the consciousness of God's people.

They experienced God as a warrior who gives victory. God was not a warrior who fought against them, but a warrior who fought for them. In all they had experienced, God was fighting *for* them. God fought for them not only in the way God dealt with the Babylonians, but mainly in the ways God fought for the hearts of God's people. God prevails in winning over hearts and minds. God gets what God wants—a warrior who gives victory, who removes disaster, and all the reproach associated with it, who holds a festival celebration, and in all this renews God's people in God's love.

Have you ever thought of God as loving warrior? Have you ever felt God to be present as a warrior in your life, fighting for you or with you? What do you think God was doing in your life at the time?

**¹⁹ I will deal with all your oppressors
at that time.
And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.**

Throughout scripture, God impresses upon us how much God is against oppression in all its forms, and how God is for the oppressed. God is a warrior who is known for dealing with oppressors and saving the oppressed, the lame, and the outcast. God is about removing the stigma associated with being oppressed. God is about removing the blame often directed toward victims for somehow being at fault. God is about removing the shame projected upon those who have been shunned by the sinful actions of a society that oppresses.

The very fact that Christian preaching does not address oppression as much as scripture, as a whole, does should say something to us. Imagine our loving warrior, acting on behalf of the oppressed. We should consider on whose side we are.

How much are we working with God to save the oppressed, the lame, and the outcast? What joys can we point to as we witnessed people's shame been turned into praise? Can we stand with those whose shame has been turned into praise, because we were part of God's work? Can we link arms with those who have become the renowned in all the earth through the efforts of God, the loving warrior?

**²⁰ At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes, says the LORD.**

When we experience the reign of God in all its fulness, we are renewed in God's love with all the intensity of a warrior who has stood with us throughout our life's journey. Just as God's people were able to return home after their time of exile and captivity, one of the overwhelming feelings we have after being tested and tried is that of coming home, of being gathered along with all who are esteemed by God, and are renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth. Whatever we may lose during the times of our trials is restored to us even if it is in a different form. Our fortunes are restored before our eyes.

**Have you ever experienced loss that you felt was accompanied by a corresponding gain?
Have you ever felt something was restored to you? Was it restored in a different form?
Have you ever felt a homecoming in your life, like you were coming home? What was home for you? How did you follow through?**

Prayer

God of visions | In times of tribulation, You invite the faithful remnant into a better story | Strengthen our faith when we feel under attack, under pressure, or under a cloud of despair | That we may endure, see our faith tested and proven, and lean into hopeful visions you have for us in life | Through Christ, our Vision, Amen.

Dr. Jay Harris serves as the Assistant to the Bishop for Ministerial Services for the South Georgia Conference. Email him at jharris@sgaumc.com. Find his plot-driven guide to reading the Bible, the "Layered Bible Journey," at www.layeredbiblejourney.com.