

Zephaniah 3:18-20

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/zeph/zeph-3/zephaniah-318-20/>

The LORD promises to regather His covenant people to the land of Israel and restore their blessings. At that time, He will deal with all their oppressors and replace Judah's shame with honor and renown. The earth will be restored, and filled with love, wellness, and prosperity.

In the previous section, Zephaniah envisioned a time of peace, security, and blessings for the covenant people of God, a time of intimate love, security, and joy, in which they will rejoice exceedingly (vv. 14–17). In this section, the LORD promises more blessings to His people, giving them more reasons to shout for joy.

The LORD began by saying, *I will gather those who grieve about the appointed feasts* (vs 18). The verb *grieve* refers to someone worried or sorrowful (Lamentations 1:4). The *appointed feasts* refer to the three annual festivals celebrated in Israel: the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Booths (Exodus 23:14–17; Deuteronomy 16:1–17). The Jewish people scattered abroad were sorrowful because they could not participate in these important festivals.

This verse about gathering those who are missing the *appointed feasts* predicts a regathering of God's people back to the land of Israel. This is also promised in God's covenant agreement, that when the people are exiled due to disobedience, God will ultimately cause them to return to the land (Deuteronomy 30:1-4).

Those in exile who grieved because they could not enjoy the festivals were Israelites. *They came from Zion, and the reproach of exile is a burden on them* (vs 18). (The terms *Zion* and *exile* are not in the Hebrew text, but the NASB added them to make sense of the verse). God encouraged His people, telling them their sorrows would not last forever. One day He will regather them to allow them to enjoy all His blessings.

It is interesting to note that these prophecies of a future regathering are being predicted even prior to Judah being exiled to Babylon. Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of Josiah, king of Judah (Zephaniah 1:1). Judah was exiled to Babylon shortly after the end of King Josiah's reign (2 Kings 25:1-4).

The LORD introduced the next verse with the particle *Behold*. The particle *Behold* is often used to describe an event that is about to take place. It serves to focus attention on the statement that follows it. In other words, the speaker uses the term *Behold* to focus on an event that is surprising or unexpected for his listeners.

After the term *behold*, God declared, *I am going to deal at that time with all your oppressors* (vs 19). The term *oppressors* refers to someone who exercises coercive power over another, often to the point of cruelty.

The *LORD* had used the Assyrian empire as His instrument to discipline Judah for their wickedness. Judah had become a place of oppression, so God turned them over to an oppressor (Zephaniah 3:3-4; Hosea 4:2). This reflects the biblical principle that our judgment is generally to be treated in the manner we treat others (Matthew 7:2). But, the Assyrians did not treat Judah righteously, but were arrogant and abusive themselves. Therefore, they also were judged, and turned over to the Babylonians, who burned Nineveh. Thus the Assyrians were defeated utterly (Nahum 3:7).

But this passage speaks of a future time. The phrase *at that time* (vs 19) refers to the time when God will gather exiles from across the face of the earth. So it would seem that God's defeat of the Assyrians might picture a future defeat of a future enemy. Micah predicts an invasion of "the Assyrian" into the land (Micah 5:5). This might refer to a future invasion of a world empire as brutally vicious as Assyria, perhaps the alliance of the nations of the earth led by the beast of Revelation, who will gather to assault Jerusalem, and be vanquished by Jesus even as God vanquished Assyria in the days of Hezekiah (2 Kings 19:35-37; Revelation 19:19).

Not only will God free Judah from the Assyrian oppression, but also, He will remove any physical deformity to bring them home. As He declared, *I will save the lame and gather the outcast* (vs 19). The phrase *I will save the lame* likely refers to the deliverance of the *lame* from their illness. The word "save" or "salvation" requires context to determine what is being delivered from what.

The Greek word "sozo," most often translated "save" is sometimes translated "healed" or "get well" when the context shows someone is being delivered from sickness (Matthew 9:21-22). In this new era when the earth fills with righteousness, things will return to their original design, which will include an elimination of physical maladies, such as being *lame* (2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 20:4).

God will also *gather the outcast*. The word *outcast* can be translated "driven out." This probably refers again to those who were exiled from Israel, who will be gathered back into the land. But it could also refer to other outcasts. The *lame* and the *outcast* give a vivid picture of people who are weak and helpless. These terms occur in a similar context in Micah 4:6-7. One day, God will rescue even the most unfortunate ones so His people can make their way back to their homeland safely. Further, He will set up a kingdom there that will be free from oppression and sickness (Revelation 21:4).

The people of God suffered mistreatment at the hands of other nations. They experienced humiliation and defeat, causing them to lose their identity. But a day will come when the *LORD* their God *will turn their shame into praise and renown in all the earth* (vs 19). The term *renown* is "shem" in the Hebrew language. It often means reputation or fame. According to Proverbs, "A good name is to be more desired than great wealth, favor is better than silver and gold" (Proverbs 22:1).

Judah is about to experience the *shame* of being defeated by the Babylonians, and exiled to that land. They will later return, only to be oppressed and driven out once again by the Romans. But

at the end of the time of the Gentiles, God will restore Israel, and Jesus will reign upon the throne of the House of David (2 Samuel 7:12-13; Matthew 1:1, 21:9).

The covenant people gained respect when they lived in obedience to God's commands. Yahweh their God blessed them beyond measure, causing all the other nations to respect them. This was Israel/Judah doing their job, of serving as a priest to other nations, showing them a better way to live, a way of neighborly love rather than exploitation (Leviticus 19:18). But their disobedience led God to enforce the covenant provisions for disobedience, which including scattering them all over the world (Deuteronomy 28:64). This caused them to lose their status. Nevertheless, one day they will regain their status. People from all over the world will acknowledge their privileged position and will respect them.

The LORD closed this section by summarizing the blessings He will give to His people. He began with the phrase *at that time* to remind the people of Judah that the time of restoration was still future. Then, He stated what He would do: *I will bring you in, even at the time when I gather you together* (vs 20). The covenant people will return to their homeland because their LORD will bring them back. All the scattered ones will not only see their beautiful land but will dwell in it.

Once again, the LORD emphasized the privileged status He will give to His people by saying, *Indeed, I will give you renown and praise among all the peoples of the earth* (vs 20). The people of God will be special. All the peoples of the earth will acknowledge the LORD's care for His covenant people when He turns their *shame* into fame. This will happen *when I restore your fortunes before your eyes* (vs 20).

To restore the fortunes is literally to turn the turning, that is, to restore one to well-being. It implies a reversal of misfortune. That means that *Jerusalem and Judah* will gain what they lost when the LORD their God sent them into exile. He will *restore* fertility to Judah's fields and compensate His people for their (Joel 2:21–27; 3:1). To add more weight and emphasis to the message, *the LORD* added the formula, *Says the LORD*. That means that the declaration came from the LORD and as such is true and amen.

The book of Zephaniah focuses on the theme of the Day of the LORD, a time when God will intervene in the affairs of the world to punish wickedness and restore righteousness. The message is twofold. First, God will judge all nations, including Israel and Judah. Second, He will purify a faithful remnant from all nations, and bring about a full restoration to the earth. It will be filled with righteousness, which is to say that it will be restored to God's original, harmonious design (2 Peter 3:13). The earth will be filled with love, wellness and prosperity.

At that time, Israel and Judah will have a privileged status and will regain their fame and honor. Today, believers who suffer can take courage and live with confidence because one day all God's people will enjoy God's blessings with Israel.

Biblical Text

¹⁸ **“I will gather those who grieve about the appointed feasts—
They came from you, *O Zion*;**

The reproach of exile is a burden on them.

¹⁹ “Behold, I am going to deal at that time

With all your oppressors,

I will save the lame

And gather the outcast,

And I will turn their shame into praise and renown

In all the earth.

²⁰ “At that time I will bring you in,

Even at the time when I gather you together;

Indeed, I will give you renown and praise

Among all the peoples of the earth,

When I restore your fortunes before your eyes,”

Says the LORD.