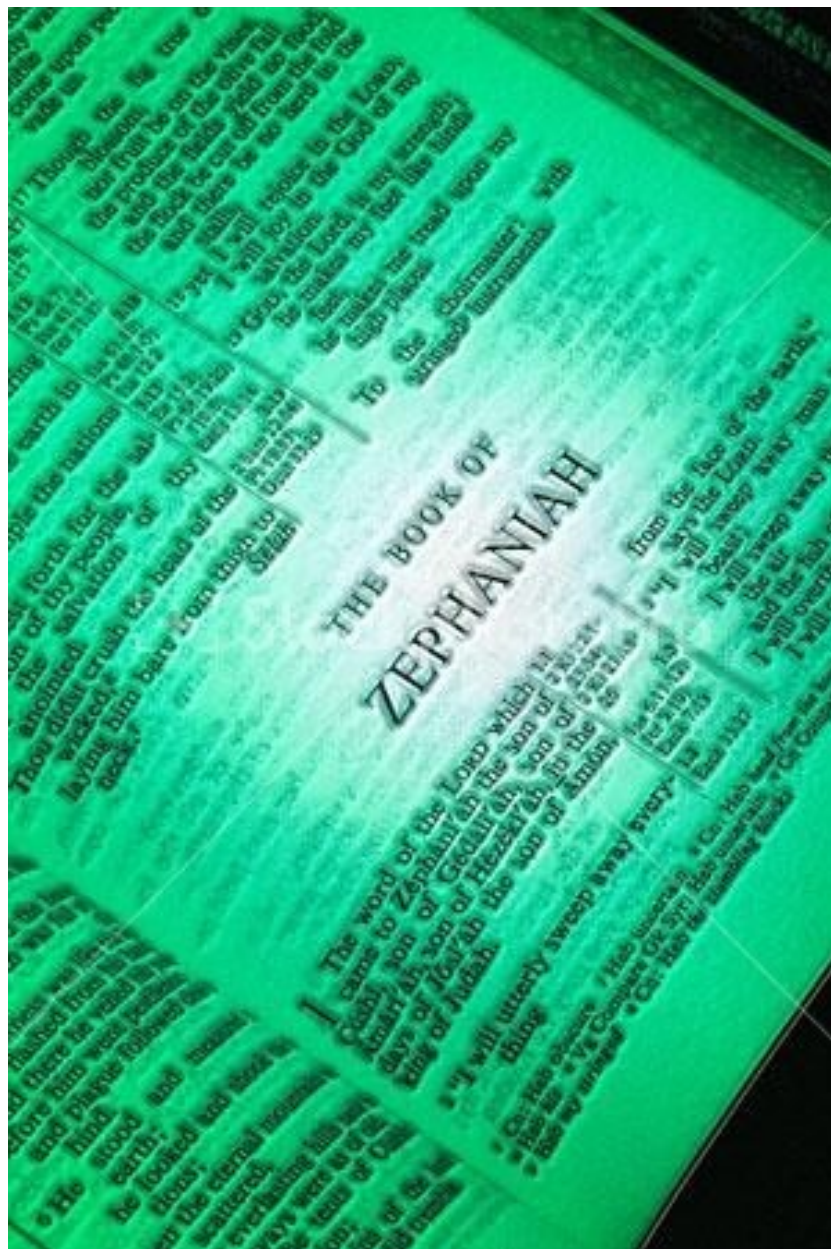


ZEPHANIAH



John Edmiston

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Zephaniah 1:1-6

The word of Jehovah which came unto Zephaniah the son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah. (2) I will utterly consume all things from off the face of the ground, saith Jehovah. (3) I will consume man and beast; I will consume the birds of the heavens, and the fishes of the sea, and the stumbling blocks with the wicked; and I will cut off man from off the face of the ground, saith Jehovah. (4) And I will stretch out my hand upon Judah, and upon all the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I will cut off the remnant of Baal from this place, and the name of the Chemarim with the priests; (5) and them that worship the host of heaven upon the housetops; and them that worship, that swear to Jehovah and swear by Malcam; (6) and them that are turned back from following Jehovah; and those that have not sought Jehovah, nor inquired after him.

Zephaniah is an Old Testament prophet who prophesied during the reign of Josiah in the 7th century BC (639-608 BC). Like many prophets his prophecies have multiple fulfillments –an immediate one in the time of the prophet or soon after – and a distant one fulfilled in Christ and / or the Second Coming. As we study this short series in Zephaniah we will mainly focus on the fulfillment in the Second Coming and issues of general theological application to readers today.

In Zephaniah we see God acting to finally break the power of evil - and then to renew Creation and the people of God. Buddhists, Hindus and Christian Scientists and others claim that evil is not real and is fact an illusion. However Christianity states that it is real, but it is temporary. God took evil seriously and planned the incarnation, the cross and the resurrection to deal with it. This age is “the present evil age” and it will end with the return of the Lord when a new age called “the renewal of all things” will begin. Evil will pass away, it will not last, there will be a final day of reckoning when evil will cease for all eternity and never recur - so that only a world that is only good and loving and true will remain.

But evil will not just vanish, evil is violent by nature and puts up a fight –and it will be a big fight, one that will lead to the end of the world. Zephaniah looks ahead to this day, the “Day of the Lord” and paints the picture for us. “I will utterly consume all things from off the face of the ground, saith Jehovah. (3) I will consume man and beast; I will consume the birds of the heavens, and the fishes of the sea, and the stumbling blocks with the wicked; and I will cut off man from off the face of the ground, saith Jehovah.”

God’s anger will be principled focused on:

Idolaters and fertility worshippers: “I will cut off the remnant of Baal from this place”

False Ascetics: “and the name of the Chemarim (idolatrous ascetic priests) with the priests;”

Astrologers: “and them that worship the host of heaven upon the housetops;”

Double-minded - mixing Yahweh worship with pagan worship: “and them that worship, that swear to Jehovah and swear by Malcam;”

Apostates: “and them that are turned back from following Jehovah”

Unbelievers: “and those that have not sought Jehovah, nor inquired after him.”

Everyone will be required to worship the True God – Yahweh, the Creator of Heaven and Earth.

A very similar message is found in the proclamation of one of the three messenger angels in Revelation: Revelation 14:6-11 And I saw another angel flying in mid-heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to those dwelling on the earth, even to every nation and kindred and tongue and people, (7) saying with a great voice, Fear God and give glory to Him! For the hour of His judgment has come. And worship Him who made the heaven and the earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters.

The “Everlasting Gospel” which goes out to all nations is about appropriate reverence to the one God who created all things. I find that the more I look at Creation the more I get to understand and appreciate God. Creation is so good, so fertile, so wise and balanced and beautiful and intricate and gentle that the One who made such things so must be very good Himself. This is the God that made the world and can end the world and which has the lives of all things in His hand.

Zephaniah tells us that this God does not tolerate the worship of “other gods” or the worship of the stars, or who defile His worship or turn from Him as apostates or stubbornly refuse to seek Him or fear Him. (Zephaniah 1:1-6 above) Zephaniah does not allow us to have our own made-up religion. This prophet is not at all a secularist or tolerant of other faiths, rather he insists that we believe, and that we keep on believing, and that we believe in the true Creator God and in no other.

Zephaniah calls us back to this God – the Universal God, the Creator, who is the very ground of our existence. This God is not a mere religious concept – He is real and powerful has the ability to destroy the earth that He created. He is a God to be reckoned with and a God to be obeyed.

And this is not just the “Old Testament God” - for even in Hebrews, in the New Testament we still find this great God, the Creator, who should be served with reverence and awe: Hebrews 12:25-29 See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape, those who refused him that spoke on earth, much more we shall not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from Heaven, (26) whose voice then shook the earth; but now He has promised, saying, "Yet once more I will not only shake the earth, but also the heavens." (27) And this word, "Yet once more," signifies the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that have been made, so that the things which cannot be shaken may remain. (28) Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear, (29) for also, "Our God is a consuming fire."

Zephaniah 1:7-18

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Zephaniah 2:1-7

Gather yourselves together; yea, gather, O nation not desired; (2) before the birth of the decree, the day shall pass like the chaff; yet not before the hot anger of Jehovah comes on you, yet not before the day of Jehovah's anger comes on you. (3) Seek Jehovah, all the meek of the earth who have done His justice; seek righteousness; seek meekness. It may be you shall be hidden in the day of Jehovah's anger. (4) For Gaza shall be forsaken, and Ashkelon a ruin. They shall drive out Ashdod at the noonday, and Ekron shall be rooted up. (5) Woe to the inhabitants of the sea coast, the nation of the Cherethites! The Word of Jehovah is against you: Canaan, the land of the Philistines, I will destroy you, so that no inhabitant survives. (6) And the sea coast will be pastures, meadows of shepherds, and folds for flocks. (7) And the coast shall be for the remnant of the house of Judah; they shall feed on them. In the houses of Ashkelon they shall lie down in the evening, for Jehovah their God shall visit them and turn away their captivity.

Zephaniah chapter 2 predicts judgment on the Philistines, Moab, Ethiopia and Assyria. Most of these judgments fell during the conquests of either Nebuchadnezzar or Alexander the Great.

This prophecy in part concerns the Palestinians - who are the remnant of the old Philistines, and who well in the old Philistine cities such as Gaza. (The term Palestine was coined, (by the Romans I think) to insult the Jews by naming the land after their arch enemies the Philistines.) This prophecy predicts that Israel will occupy Gaza - which is news since Ariel Sharon is proposing a complete Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza strip.

In these judgments a certain type of person will be spared: "Seek Jehovah, all the meek of the earth who have done His justice; seek righteousness; seek meekness. It may be you shall be hidden in the day of Jehovah's anger." The word for meekness (awn-aw) means- humility, lowliness, gentleness. The meek are gently submitted to God, do justice and seek righteousness. These are "dwelling in the center of God's will" and judgment passes them by.

The whole idea of judgment on cities and nations is foreign to most people. Even God's judgments on individuals are hard to accept or many. But even Jesus spoke of judgments on cities:

Zephaniah 2:8-15

I have heard the reproach of Moab, and the curses of the sons of Ammon, with which they have cursed My people and have magnified themselves on their border. (9) Therefore, as I live, says Jehovah of Hosts, the God of Israel, Surely Moab shall be like Sodom, and the sons of Ammon like Gomorrah; a possession of nettles, and salt pits, and a ruin forever. The remnant of My people shall plunder them, and the remnant of My people shall possess them. (10) They shall have this for their pride, because they have cursed and magnified themselves against the people of Jehovah of Hosts. (11) Jehovah will be frightening to them; for He will make all the gods of the earth lean; each man from his place and all the coastlands of the nations shall bow to Him. (12) You Ethiopians also shall be slain by My sword. (13) And He will stretch out His hand against the north and destroy Assyria, and will make Nineveh a desert and dry like a desert. (14) And flocks shall lie down in her midst, all the beasts of a nation; both the pelican and the bittern shall roost in the capitals of its pillars; a voice shall sing at the window, ruin shall be at the doorsill, for he will bare the cedar-work. (15) This is the rejoicing city, dwelling confidently, who says in her heart, I am, and no other still is. How she has become a ruin, a resting-place for animals! Everyone who passes by her shall hiss; he shall wag his hand.

Those that hate God's people will be overthrown – the resentful, the atheists, the idolaters, hostile religions of other lands and the grand empire builders who want the Church and her ethics swept aside – these will end up as desolate the empires of old.

Verses 8 to 11 deal with the Moabites and Ammonites who actually cursed and reproached Israel and harassed Israel at every opportunity. These have several modern equivalents from hostile terrorist groups blowing up churches, to the ACLU harassing Christians in court to witches and pagans literally cursing pastors and their ministries. They will not be victorious for: “The remnant of My people shall plunder them, and the remnant of My people shall possess them.”

We can claim this – so if you feel you are under some sort of hostile persecution you can ask God for the power to “plunder” your enemies –just as Moses “plundered the Egyptians” who persecuted them and oppressed them. We see this in history Rome persecuted Christians – and was later possessed by Christians. The Communist Party in Russia persecuted the Church and later was brought down by prayer meetings! If you are facing hostility at work because of your faith you can ask God to give you victory so that you “plunder and possess” (not in a literal violent sense of course!). If God is for us – who can be against us? (Romans 8:31)

Not only does God plunder the hostile nations He also punishes the religious systems: “Jehovah will be frightening to them; for He will make all the gods of the earth lean; each man from his place and all the coastlands of the nations shall bow to Him.” They will be starved of spiritual power and supporters. The old religious systems of Ammon and Moab are now no more and their temples are in ruins. Thus anti-Christian cults and religions like Wicca, Communism and fundamentalist Islam will lose their power and supporters over time, they cannot triumph, they are doomed. God will diminish them. They will end up like the temples of Moab.

Powerful empires often think they can overthrow the Church and act insolently towards the Creator. Yahweh rebukes the Assyrian empire based in Nineveh for such proud ideas: And He will stretch out His hand against the north and destroy Assyria, and will make Nineveh a desert

and dry like a desert. (14) And flocks shall lie down in her midst, all the beasts of a nation; both the pelican and the bittern shall roost in the capitals of its pillars; a voice shall sing at the window, ruin shall be at the doorsill, for he will bare the cedar-work. (15) This is the rejoicing city, dwelling confidently, who says in her heart, I am, and no other still is. How she has become a ruin, a resting-place for animals! Everyone who passes by her shall hiss; he shall wag his hand.

Nineveh felt untouchable and on top. "This is the rejoicing city, dwelling confidently, who says in her heart, I am, and no other still is." This pride, this self-exaltation, brings desolation and ruin. "How she has become a ruin, a resting-place for animals! Everyone who passes by her shall hiss; he shall wag his hand." This is the Enron syndrome of untouchability. I saw it first hand when I worked as a 17 year old office boy in a major finance firm in Australia that went bankrupt in the early-70's. As the office boy sorting through the piles of accounts for the auditors I was looking at the dreadful figures with astonishment yet all around me were people saying "we are the biggest, we cannot go bankrupt". Pride leads to silly actions and great blindness that results in desolation.

Not only does it lead to physical desolation it results in spiritual desolation as in "being haunted" for that is the import of: "And flocks shall lie down in her midst, all the beasts of a nation; both the pelican and the bittern shall roost in the capitals of its pillars; a voice shall sing at the window, ruin shall be at the doorsill, for he will bare the cedar-work. " This is also the fate of the final Babylon: "Revelation 18:2 And he cried mightily with a strong voice, saying, Babylon the great has fallen, has fallen! And it has become the dwelling-place of demons, and a prison of every unclean spirit, and a cage of every unclean bird which has been hated,"

This is well captured by Shelley in his famous poem Ozymandias about a famous statue of the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses II :

Ozymandias

I met a traveler from an antique land
 Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
 Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
 Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read,
 Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
 The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed,
 And on the pedestal these words appear:
*"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
 Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"*
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
 Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
 The lone and level sands stretch far away.

-Percy Bysshe Shelley
 1792-1822

This desolate haunting can sometimes be palpably felt in the offices and buildings of organizations that have defied God – old Communist party headquarters, desolate cult temples, and the like. The Kingdom of God seems fragile - but is in fact indestructible and Jesus Christ is

the Stone on which others break themselves and fall. Do not fear for the Church, it will survive while Empires crumble into dust.

Revelation 11:15 And the seventh angel sounded. And there were great voices in Heaven, saying, The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of His Christ. And He will reign forever and ever.

Zephaniah 3:1-10

Woe to her that is rebellious and polluted! to the oppressing city! (2) She obeyed not the voice; she received not correction; she trusted not in Jehovah; she drew not near to her God. (3) Her princes in the midst of her are roaring lions; her judges are evening wolves; they leave nothing till the morrow. (4) Her prophets are light and treacherous persons; her priests have profaned the sanctuary, they have done violence to the law. (5) Jehovah in the midst of her is righteous; he will not do iniquity; every morning doth he bring his justice to light, he faileth not; but the unjust knoweth no shame. (6) I have cut off nations; their battlements are desolate; I have made their streets waste, so that none passeth by; their cities are destroyed, so that there is no man, so that there is no inhabitant. (7) I said, Only fear thou me; receive correction; so her dwelling shall not be cut off, according to all that I have appointed concerning her: but they rose early and corrupted all their doings. (8) Therefore wait ye for me, saith Jehovah, until the day that I rise up to the prey; for my determination is to gather the nations, that I may assemble the kingdoms, to pour upon them mine indignation, even all my fierce anger; for all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of my jealousy. (9) For then will I turn to the peoples of a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of Jehovah, to serve him with one consent. (10) From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia my suppliants, even the daughter of my dispersed, shall bring mine offering.

God is faithful – even if we are faithless, and God is righteous even if all men are corrupt.

God says of Jerusalem: “Her princes in the midst of her are roaring lions; her judges are evening wolves; they leave nothing till the morrow. (4) Her prophets are light and treacherous persons; her priests have profaned the sanctuary, they have done violence to the law. But Zephaniah says of God: “Jehovah in the midst of her is righteous; he will not do iniquity; every morning doth he bring his justice to light, he faileth not.”

A culture can come to love sin so much that it cannot depart from it. The leaders care only for themselves, nothing is held truly sacred, the holy is profaned and the law is violated. It reaches a point where the society refuses to accept correction, “she received not correction; she trusted not in Jehovah; she drew not near to her God.” and the prophets are scoffed at and “the unjust knoweth no shame”.

Even in the midst of such a situation God is not completely absent. He is still there for “Jehovah in the midst of her is righteous”. Neither is God the source of the evil “he will not do iniquity” but in fact is opposed to it “every morning doth he bring his justice to light”. Sometimes we say “Why does God allow such and so to occur?” The plain fact is that God does not allow wickedness – He forbids it utterly. God does not allow murder or rape or theft or injustice. God forbids them and punishes them and prophesies against them and raises up governments to arrest and convict those that do them. (Romans 13:1-8)

When God’s instruments for justice (the leadership, priests and government) fail and become corrupt then God continues to forbid evil and acts in direct divine judgment on sin.
 ” for my determination is to gather the nations, that I may assemble the kingdoms, to pour upon them mine indignation, even all my fierce anger; for all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of my jealousy.”

Yet this is not completely predetermined – repentance can change things: “I said, Only fear thou me; receive correction; so her dwelling shall not be cut off, according to all that I have appointed concerning her: ...” Thus God is saying that He has seen the mess and appointed judgment but that repentance would change things. “Only fear thou me; receive correction; so her dwelling shall not be cut off”. If Israel had received correction and listened to God then Jerusalem would have been spared. We see a similar situation in the book of Jonah where Nineveh does repent – and God turns back from judging the great city.

Thus God is responsive to moral change on the part of His people. God looks for us to listen to Him. As Alcoholics Anonymous has demonstrated The most wretched alcoholic who makes an inventory of their sin and truly turns their life over to God will find mercy and release. God hears the repentant – as the parable of the Pharisee and the publican so clearly tells us:

Luke 18:13-14 But the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote his breast, saying, God, be thou merciful to me a sinner. (14) I say unto you, This man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be humbled; but he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

Repentance delights God and all the angels in heaven: “Luke 15:7 I say unto you, that even so there shall be joy in heaven over one sinner that repents, more than over ninety and nine righteous persons, who need no repentance.”

Do born-again Christians need to repent after conversion? Not in the sense of whole-of-life repentance but certainly in the many acts of repentance that accompany sanctification – repenting of a certain sin, repenting of an angry disposition, repenting of being a gossip, or even repenting over financial dishonesty. God wants us to face up to our sin, to heed His voice, to receive correction and to deal with it once and for all.

Zephaniah tells us that God punishes the nations, to break the power of sin and to make a pure and holy people who worship Him: “For then will I turn to the peoples of a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of Jehovah, to serve him with one consent. From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia my suppliants, even the daughter of my dispersed, shall bring mine offering.” Or as Jesus says: “John 4:23 But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth: for such doth the Father seek to be his worshippers.”

To sum up: God seeks pure hearted people who will worship Him in Spirit and in truth. When we are out of tune with the Spirit, or away from the Truth we need to receive correction and repent. God will always be in our midst as a righteous and faithful God who does no iniquity – and He will speak to us – and we must listen!.

Zephaniah 3:11-20

In that day you shall not be ashamed for all your doings in which you have transgressed against Me; for then I will withdraw from your midst those who rejoice in your pride, and you shall never again be proud in My holy mountain. (12) I will also leave in your midst a poor and weak people, and they shall trust in the name of Jehovah. (13) The remnant of Israel shall not do iniquity nor speak lies, and a deceitful tongue shall not be found in their mouth; for they shall feed and lie down, and none shall make them afraid. (14) Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all the heart, O daughter of Jerusalem. (15) Jehovah has turned off your judgments; He has cast out your enemy. The king of Israel, Jehovah, is in your midst; you shall not fear evil any more. (16) In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear not! Do not let not your hands droop, Zion. (17) Jehovah your God is mighty in your midst; He will save, He will rejoice over you with joy; He is silent in His love; He rejoices over you with joyful shout. (18) I will gather the afflicted ones from the appointed place; they were from you, a lifting up of reproach over her. (19) Behold, at that time I will deal with all those who afflict you. And I will save her who is lame, and gather her who was driven out. And I will give them for a praise and for a name in all the land of their shame. (20) In that time I will bring you, even in the time that I gather you; for I will give you for a name and for a praise among all the peoples of the earth, when I turn back your captivity before your eyes, says Jehovah.

God judges but God also restores.

God's aim is to build a safe and loving world: "for they shall feed and lie down, and none shall make them afraid." Where even the "poor and weak people" (verse 12) and the lame and the rejected (verse 19) are safe and have no need to fear.

In order to produce a safe world there needs to be a change in attitude "and you shall never again be proud in My holy mountain" as well as in moral character: "The remnant of Israel shall not do iniquity nor speak lies,..." It is evident that a good world cannot be established where people are proud or iniquitous or full of lies and deceit. These things must go! A good world is not achieved simply by having more advanced technology – it also requires good people with good hearts. For it is out of the heart that evil proceeds (Mark 7:21-23) – and so the gospel, with its power to change the human heart, is the necessary foundation for a truly functional society.

In God's new order sin is forgiven and the Devil is bound, "Jehovah has turned off your judgments; He has cast out your enemy." The judgments are turned off, sin is forgiven, we have passed from death to life, and there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus and who walk according to the Spirit (Romans 8:1).

God also gets rid of the power of the Devil and delivers us from being assailed by Satan "He has cast out your enemy". God will not condemn us and Satan is not allowed to.

"The king of Israel, Jehovah, is in your midst; you shall not fear evil any more. " We are not just forgiven then left alone to fend for ourselves – God comes into our midst in the name of Jesus and in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit:

Matthew 18:20

For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

Acts 2:1-4

And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. (2) And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. (3) And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. (4) And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

And when God is truly in our midst we shall not fear evil anymore:

Revelation 21:3-4

And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God [is] with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, [and be] their God. (4) And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

And when God is with us He rejoices over us and loves us and enjoys us as His children. “ In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear not! Do not let not your hands droop, Zion. (17) Jehovah your God is mighty in your midst; He will save, He will rejoice over you with joy; He is silent in His love; He rejoices over you with joyful shout.”

It can be depressing when we look at our spiritual flaws and weaknesses and lack of achievement. We feel dejected and sag inside and to us God declareth: “Fear not! Do not let not your hands droop, Zion. “ Do not let it get to you! Do not let your sin and failure cause you crippling shame so that you fail to rejoice in God. Forgiveness should outrun shame and overtake its effects: “In that day you shall not be ashamed for all your doings in which you have transgressed against Me”.

God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all – which means that He has a totally positive and enthusiastic attitude. He rejoices over us: “God is mighty in your midst; He will save, He will rejoice over you with joy; He is silent in His love; He rejoices over you with joyful shout.” God is enthusiastic about His sons and daughters!

Though we may feel rejected and sinful and judged and be weak and lame and poor –yet God still rejoices over us. God takes the poor, the weak and the meek and builds them into His community and causes them to inherit the earth.

God will remove our affliction and make even the weakest person to become famous and honored –literally “a name and a praise”: “Behold, at that time I will deal with all those who afflict you. And I will save her who is lame, and gather her who was driven out. And I will give them for a praise and for a name in all the land of their shame. (20) In that time I will bring you, even in the time that I gather you; for I will give you for a name and for a praise among all the peoples of the earth, when I turn back your captivity before your eyes, says Jehovah.”

God is good, and God will restore us and build us into a safe and loving community which he will indwell and where He will rejoice over us and love us and be mighty in our midst.