



Joy

Kicking It Off

What's something you didn't feel like doing at first but ended up being really glad you did?

Read

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Summary

We're told to rejoice, to celebrate, to praise God, and our first reaction is usually, "But I don't feel like it."

But joy isn't supposed to wait until we feel it. Think about teaching kids to say thank you. They don't feel grateful when you hand them dinner. But you teach them the words anyway, hoping that eventually the habit shapes the heart. Doing the thing can actually create the feeling.

What's wild is that when this command was originally given, everything was falling apart. We're talking about people whose country was being invaded, who were about to lose their homes. And right in the middle of that mess, they're told to sing and shout and celebrate. Not because things were going well, but because of who God is and what he's already done.

But here's where it gets really beautiful. It's not just us celebrating God. God celebrates us. Picture a parent holding a newborn baby. That baby does absolutely nothing useful. Keeps you up all night, needs constant care, can't even say thanks. And yet parents look at their kids with complete joy. That's how God looks at us. He's not just tolerating us. He's actually delighted by us. He sings over us.

That doesn't mean God is fine with the stuff that hurts us. It's like when your kid gets sick. You hate the sickness, you'd take it on yourself if you could, but you love that child completely. That's exactly what happened at the cross.

So what does this mean for us? Maybe we need to stop thinking of ourselves as capable adults who have it all together and start seeing ourselves as little kids who need help with everything. When we're hungry, tired, and making a mess of things, the answer

isn't to fix ourselves first. It's to cry out to the Father who actually delights in taking care of us.

You don't have to feel joyful to choose joy. Start with obedience, and let the feelings catch up.

Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the sermon or the passage that stuck out to you?
2. Scripture says that God rejoices over us, delights in us, and even sings over us. How does your picture of how God sees you compare to the image of a parent looking at their child with complete affection?
3. The call to rejoice in Zephaniah came during one of the darkest seasons in Israel's history, when exile and loss were imminent. What makes it possible to worship and give thanks when circumstances are genuinely difficult?
4. There's a difference between God tolerating us because of Jesus and God genuinely delighting in us. Which of these two pictures do you tend to default to in your own thinking about your relationship with God?
5. The sermon suggested that we need community to help us rejoice when we don't feel like it on our own. Who in your life helps you keep your eyes on Jesus, and how can you be that person for someone else this week?

Significant Quotes from Sermon

"I will teach my children to say thank you in the hopes that as they do this thing, they may not initially feel thanks and gratitude, but as they learn to say their pleases and thank yous, it would cultivate in them a heart of gratitude."

"You might think that God tolerates you because of the blood of Jesus. You might think he accepts you, but he's not really happy about it because you're so messed up. I want you to know what Zephaniah writes: He rejoices over you. He delights in you, and he sings over you."

"God saw us in our sickness and said, 'I love you so much, but I hate your sickness. And because I hate seeing you living in this brokenness of your sin, I'm going to bear your sin on me.' The sickness was placed on Christ, on Jesus."

"Church is not a place where you have to be someone when you come in. We're all these infants, these little children that have no utility, that have no ability. We are given ability and given gifts by the Father. He is the one who makes us into something."

Sermon Notes

Zephaniah 3:14-20

*14 Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion;
shout, O Israel!*

*Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter of Jerusalem!*

*15 The Lord has taken away the judgments against you;
he has cleared away your enemies.*

*The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;
you shall never again fear evil.*

*16 On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
“Fear not, O Zion;*

let not your hands grow weak.

*17 The Lord your God is in your midst,
a mighty one who will save;*

*he will rejoice over you with gladness;
he will quiet you by his love;*

he will exult over you with loud singing.

*18 I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival,
so that you will no longer suffer reproach.*

*19 Behold, at that time I will deal
with all your oppressors.*

And I will save the lame

and gather the outcast,

*and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.*

*20 At that time I will bring you in,
at the time when I gather you together;*

*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.

Outline

1. Commanded to Rejoice (vv. 14-15)

- a. The command to rejoice comes before circumstances warrant it; Zephaniah's context includes Assyrian oppression and coming Babylonian exile
- b. We often resist worship because we don't "feel like it," but obedience is not contingent on emotional readiness
- c. Teaching children manners illustrates the principle: the action cultivates the feeling, not the reverse
- d. The command addresses past, present, and future simultaneously:
 - i. Past: "The Lord has taken away the judgments against you" (v. 15a)
 - ii. Present: "The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst" (v. 15b)
 - iii. Future: "You shall never again fear evil" (v. 15c)
- e. Rejoicing disconnected from circumstances: even in exile, even in chains, the people could worship
- f. We must not be like a petulant child withholding praise until God performs to our expectations

2. The God Who Rejoices (vv. 16-17)

- a. The direction reverses: not only do we rejoice over God, but God rejoices over us
- b. "He will rejoice over you with gladness. He will quiet you by his love. He will exult over you with loud singing" (v. 17)
- c. This corrects the caricature of an angry, disappointed Old Testament God
- d. The parental analogy: babies provide no utility yet are loved with complete delight
 - i. God does not merely tolerate us because of Christ's blood; he genuinely delights in us
 - ii. He is not a disappointed father saying "I forgive you, but you could do better"
- e. God hates our sin like a parent hates their child's sickness, bearing it himself to heal us
- f. The question: Do you see yourself as the object of your Father's affection?

3. Restoration and Reversal (vv. 18-20)

- a. God promises concrete action: gathering the scattered, bringing justice, saving the lame, transforming shame into honor
- b. Short-term fulfillment: return from Babylonian exile; greater fulfillment: the work of Christ
- c. True kingship is measured by power to accomplish, not wealth accumulated
- d. Jesus enters humbly (the manger) yet demonstrates true authority and power
- e. The powerful King will: gather the scattered, bring justice, save the lame, change shame to honor, bring his people home, restore everything

- f. Our restoration is past ("you have been restored"), present ("you are being restored"), and future ("you will be restored")

Notes

Zephaniah opens his climactic passage with a command that seems almost absurd given his context: "Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion. Shout, O Israel. Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem." This is not a gentle suggestion or a polite invitation. It is an imperative, a divine mandate to worship. And the first honest response most of us have to such a command is simple: but I don't feel like it.

This resistance to commanded joy reveals something important about how we think about worship and obedience. Somewhere along the way, many of us have absorbed the idea that we should only do things when we feel like doing them. This philosophy has crept into parenting, where children are sometimes excused from participation because they lack the emotional motivation. It has crept into our spiritual lives, where we wait for the right feelings before we engage in worship. But this approach fundamentally misunderstands both the nature of obedience and the purpose of commanded actions.

Consider the simple act of teaching children to say please and thank you. No child naturally feels gratitude when handed a plate of food. The feeling is not there. Yet we teach them the words anyway, not because feelings are irrelevant, but because we hope that through the practice of gratitude, the feeling of gratitude will eventually take root. The action cultivates the emotion. Obedience forms the heart.

This is precisely what Zephaniah is calling Israel to understand. His context is bleak in ways that dwarf most modern difficulties. The kingdom is fractured. The Assyrians have already oppressed the land. And now Zephaniah, alongside Jeremiah the weeping prophet, is warning that the Babylonians are coming. The day of the Lord, that dreaded phrase that echoes through the prophetic literature, is approaching. Exile looms. The temple will be destroyed. The people will be marched away from their homeland in chains.

And yet, in the face of all this, the command stands: rejoice.

The command to rejoice is not arbitrary, nor is it a call to ignore reality or engage in false optimism. Zephaniah grounds the command in something more substantial than circumstances. He points to what God has done, what God is doing, and what God will do.

Regarding the past, the prophet declares that "the Lord has taken away the judgments against you." Whatever sins have accumulated, whatever failures have piled up, the verdict has been reversed. The guilt has been removed. This is not a future promise but a present reality rooted in God's decisive action. For those who read this through the lens of Christ's work, the implications deepen further. The cross stands as the ultimate removal of judgment, the place where guilt was transferred and canceled.

Regarding the present, Zephaniah announces that "the King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst." This is not a promise of future presence but a declaration of current reality. God is not distant, not removed, not waiting to engage until circumstances improve. The king is here. For Christians, this takes on flesh in the incarnation, God dwelling among us, and continues through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The presence of God is not contingent on our circumstances aligning properly.

Regarding the future, the prophet assures Israel that they "shall never again fear evil." Not because evil will cease to exist or because difficulties will disappear, but because the outcome is secure. The future rests in hands capable of holding it. This is not optimism based on probability but confidence based on the character and power of the one who holds all things.

Perhaps the most striking element in this passage comes in verses 16 and 17, where the direction of rejoicing unexpectedly reverses. After commanding Israel to sing and shout and exult, Zephaniah reveals something remarkable: "The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save. He will rejoice over you with gladness. He will quiet you by his love. He will exult over you with loud singing."

God sings over his people.

This image shatters many common perceptions of the God of the Old Testament. The caricature of an angry deity, perpetually disappointed and barely tolerant, cannot survive contact with this text. Here is the fatherly heart of God laid bare. He rejoices. He delights. He sings.

The analogy to parenting illuminates this beautifully. Consider a newborn infant. What utility does a baby provide? Objectively speaking, none. Babies keep you awake. They require constant care. They cannot express gratitude or contribute to the household. They are, in the most practical sense, entirely useless. And yet parents hold their children with overwhelming love. They look at tiny faces with complete delight. They sing lullabies and whisper comfort, not because of what the child can do, but simply because of who the child is.

This is how God regards his people. Not as useful servants who have earned his attention through impressive spiritual achievements. Not as barely tolerable sinners whom he reluctantly accepts. He looks with genuine affection. He delights. He sings.

This does not mean God delights in sin. When a parent holds a sick child, they do not celebrate the sickness. They hate what is harming their child even as they love the child completely. So God hates what damages us while loving us deeply. The gospel message is precisely that God loved us so much that he addressed our sickness himself, bearing what was harming us so that we might be healed.

The passage concludes with promises of gathering, justice, and restoration. God declares that he will deal with oppressors, save the lame, gather the outcast, and transform shame into honor. He will bring his scattered people home and make them renowned among all nations.

For Zephaniah's original audience, this pointed toward the eventual return from Babylonian exile, a restoration that did occur when a remnant returned to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. But the deeper fulfillment comes in Christ, whose work accomplishes the ultimate reversal. Shame becomes honor. Exile becomes homecoming. Death becomes life.

The nature of this restoration reveals something important about what kind of king God is. Human kingdoms typically measure success by wealth and prosperity. A good king, by worldly standards, is one who increases material abundance for his subjects. But this metric entirely misses what makes a king truly great. Power is not wealth. The ability to actually accomplish what needs doing, to right what is wrong, to restore what is broken, that is power.

Jesus enters the world in humility, born in a manger rather than a palace, yet he speaks with authority and demonstrates power that no wealthy monarch could match. He gathers the scattered not through military conquest but through sacrificial love. He brings justice not through political maneuvering but through bearing injustice himself. This is the king worth celebrating.

All of this leads back to the original command. We are obligated to rejoice. This is not a suggestion based on emotional readiness but a command grounded in reality.

The appropriate response to this obligation is not resentment but recognition. We are like infants, hungry and tired and often covered in our own mess. We cannot feed ourselves spiritually. We cannot clean ourselves morally. We cannot secure our own futures. And the command to rejoice is essentially a command to cry out, to acknowledge our need, to reach for the Father who alone can meet us in our helplessness.

Heaven itself is characterized by rejoicing. It is more like a party than a waiting room, more festival than funeral. When one person turns to God, the response is not polite acknowledgment but raucous celebration. This is the atmosphere we are called to enter, not because we have manufactured the right feelings, but because we have recognized the right realities.

Church, then, becomes the place where this rejoicing happens together. Not a place where you must achieve a certain spiritual level before participating. Not a gathering of people who have their lives figured out. It is a community of infants,

helpless but held, messy but loved, learning together to lift their voices to the one who is already singing over them.

The feelings may or may not follow. That is not the point. The point is that we have a Father who delights in us, a King with power to restore everything, and a future secured by hands stronger than our circumstances. Whether we feel it or not, the grounds for joy remain solid. And so we sing.

Blog

The book of Zephaniah isn't for the faint of heart. For nearly three chapters, the prophet delivers one of the most intense proclamations of judgment in all of Scripture. He speaks of the Day of the Lord as a day of wrath, distress, anguish, and devastation. Fire and destruction. The righteous anger of a holy God against sin. But, Zephaniah shifts from thunderclouds to sunshine, from judgment to jubilation. It's one of the most dramatic reversals in biblical literature, and it carries a message we desperately need to hear.

To understand the weight of this passage, we need to know who Zephaniah was and when he spoke. He prophesied during the reign of King Josiah, around 630 BC, roughly forty years before Jerusalem would fall to Babylon. His name means "the Lord hides" or "the Lord has hidden," which carries theological significance. God was about to hide a remnant of His people through the coming judgment. The situation in Judah was dire. Politically, they lived under Assyrian domination. Spiritually, idolatry had infected every level of society. Social injustice was rampant. Into this darkness, Zephaniah spoke words of coming judgment. But he also spoke words of coming hope.

The passage we're examining (Zephaniah 3:14-20) forms the climax of the entire book. Everything has been building to this moment. After the warnings and the woes, after the descriptions of destruction and the pronouncements against the nations, we arrive here. And what we find is breathtaking.

Verse 14 opens with a barrage of commands: "Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!" Four imperatives pile on top of each other. The prophet can't find one word adequate for what he's trying to express. He needs four. The Hebrew verbs are intense. The first (*ronni*) means to give a ringing cry. The second (*hariau*) is often used for battle cries and shouts of victory. The third (*simḥi*) is the most common Hebrew word for rejoicing. The fourth (*alzi*) means to exult triumphantly. This is over the top joy, the kind that makes you jump up and down.

Now, we might pause here and ask: can you really command an emotion? Biblical joy isn't merely an emotion. It's deeper than that. Joy in Scripture is a posture of trust grounded in truth. We can choose to rejoice even when we don't feel joyful, because we're making a decision about where to fix our gaze. We're choosing to focus on God's reality rather than our fluctuating feelings. Often, the feeling follows the choice.

But God doesn't simply command joy without reason. Verse 15 gives us four solid grounds for celebration. First, "The Lord has taken away the judgments against you." This is forensic, legal language. A sentence had been passed. We stood condemned. And God Himself has removed that sentence. For those of us in Christ, this finds its ultimate

fulfillment at the cross. Paul declares in Romans 8:1, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." The judgment has been removed, not ignored, not overlooked, but removed because Christ bore it in our place.

Second, "He has cleared away your enemies." Who are our enemies? Ultimately, they are sin, death, and Satan. Colossians 2:15 tells us that Christ "disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them" at the cross. The decisive battle has been won. We still face skirmishes, but the war is over.

Third, and this is the hinge of the passage, "The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst." Three titles are stacked together here: King, Lord (the covenant name of God), and the one who is "in your midst." That last phrase is significant. It literally means "in your inner parts," suggesting the most intimate presence possible. This is Immanuel theology. God is not merely sending help from a distance. He is coming Himself. For Christians, this finds its fulfillment in the incarnation. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). "They shall call his name Immanuel, which means, God with us" (Matthew 1:23). The King has entered the dungeon. The Sovereign has stepped into our situation.

Fourth, "You shall never again fear disaster." The Hebrew is emphatic: you will not fear evil anymore, ever again. This doesn't mean bad things won't happen. It means we need never fear that evil will have the final word. Romans 8:31-39 captures this security beautifully. Nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Our future is secure because our King is present.

Verse 16 offers reassurance: "On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: 'Fear not, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak.'" The phrase "fear not" appears over eighty times in Scripture, and it's always connected to God's presence or God's promises. We don't fear because of who is with us. And because we don't need to fear, our hands don't need to grow weak. Fear leads to paralysis. Faith leads to action. When we trust God's presence, we can work without fear.

Now we arrive at verse 17, the theological and emotional summit of the entire passage. This verse has been called "the most beautiful verse in the Old Testament" and "the heart of the gospel in miniature." It deserves slow, careful attention.

"The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save." We've heard about God's presence already, but now we get a descriptor: He is a mighty warrior, a champion, a hero. The Hebrew word *gibbor* is the same word used for David's mighty men. God is a divine warrior who fights for His people and saves them. This is familiar and glorious. But what comes next is stunning.

"He will rejoice over you with gladness." Let that sink in. The God of the universe experiences joy when He thinks about you. He doesn't just tolerate you. He doesn't

merely put up with you because Jesus paid the price. He rejoices over you. The verb here (yasis) is an intensive form, expressing emphatic, exuberant rejoicing.

"He will quiet you by his love." This phrase is textually difficult, but the most likely meaning is that God will calm you, bring you peace through His love. Picture a parent gently rocking a crying child. Just tender, peaceful presence. "Shh, I'm here. I've got you." That's what God's love does.

"He will exult over you with loud singing." This is the pinnacle of the passage. The Hebrew (yagil) means to spin around with joy, to exult. And berinnah means with a ringing cry, with loud singing. It's the same root used in verse 14 when God commands us to sing. Here's the stunning reversal: we're commanded to sing over God, and then we discover that God sings over us.

The Creator of galaxies sings over you. The Holy One of Israel exults over you with joy. You are not His burden. You are His delight. This isn't because you've earned it. You haven't. It's because of who He is and what Christ has done. Hebrews 12:2 tells us that Jesus endured the cross "for the joy that was set before him." What was that joy? Us. You and me. We were His joy even in His suffering.

For those wrestling with shame, hear this: you're not just forgiven, you're celebrated. For those who feel like a burden: you're not an obligation. You're His joy. For those performing for acceptance, you can stop. In Christ, you already have it. For those who feel unlovable, know that the God who sees you completely sings over you.

The final verses (18-20) spell out what this means in concrete terms. God will gather those who mourn, those who've been separated from worshiping community. He will deal with all oppressors. He will save the lame and gather the outcast, reversing their shame into praise. He will bring His scattered people home and make them renowned among all the nations. Seven "I will" promises declare God's comprehensive restoration. Scattered people gathered. Broken people healed. Shamed people honored. Everything reversed. This is the pattern of the gospel. The crucified becomes exalted. The rejected stone becomes the cornerstone. Shame becomes testimony.

This passage is particularly fitting for the Advent season. Advent means "coming" or "arrival." We remember Christ's first coming and anticipate His second. Zephaniah 3:14-20 captures both. God "in your midst" points to the incarnation fulfilled. Complete restoration points to the second coming anticipated. We live in the already and the not yet. Already, God has come in Christ. Already, our salvation is secured. Already, we are objects of His delight. Not yet has every tear been wiped away. Not yet has every enemy been finally defeated. So we rejoice now for what God has done, is doing, and will do. This is the joy of Advent.

The foundation of biblical joy is not our circumstances but God's character. We can rejoice, not because everything is easy (it's not), not because we have no problems (we do), not because we're naturally optimistic people (that's not it), but because God has removed our judgment in Christ, God is present with us by His Spirit, God delights in us as His children, and God will complete what He started. The God who commands us to sing also sings over us.