

Feel Like Singing?

Zephaniah 3:14-17 (NIV)

¹⁴ Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem! ¹⁵ The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm. ¹⁶ On that day they will say to Jerusalem, "Do not fear, Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. ¹⁷ The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing."

I've said it before, and I'll say it again: I'm not a fan of musicals. Earlier in my life I would have told you that I don't like them because people don't just go around singing about everyday situations and circumstances. But the older I've gotten, the more I realize and admit that there are moments in life when I do want to sing about everyday life. I want to sing about my wife, my kids, about something good that happened, something great that God did. Sometimes I have words, sometimes I don't, which makes me have particular appreciation for people like Mary and Zechariah who seemingly burst into impromptu songs that now have been passed down for two millennia.

Do you want to sing about some of the day-to-day stuff, or am I the crazy one? Maybe in December you want to sing as you see Christmas lights and hear those familiar Christmas songs. Maybe you hummed "Oh, Come, Oh Come, Emmanuel" after worship the last two week. But maybe you haven't felt like singing here at church because we've focused on Jesus' impending arrival, how we have things lacking in our faith, how we have backslid in our life of repentance. Or add whatever other bah-humbug moments you have going on in your life right now. Maybe there doesn't seem to be many reasons at all for us at church to be inspired to sing.

That's like the Jews in Zephaniah's day, around 620ish BC. Their faith was lacking. Their life of repentance had backslid as idolatry ran rampant and the Lord's temple was in disrepair. Many of them were dreading the impending wrath and judgment that came with the Lord's advent. They knew that their sin required punishment, that the ax was already at the root of the trees and that every tree that did not produce good fruit, including them, would be cut down and thrown into the fire. Our consciences ping us with the same feelings of dread and guilt, that we deserve to be punished for our sins, our lack of faith, our backsliding life of repentance. Will God cast us away from him into the eternal, unquenchable fires of hell? That thought doesn't make me want to sing anything except maybe a funeral dirge.

But we are not singing dirges today. "Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem!" Why? Zephaniah give reason after reason starting with: "The LORD has taken away your punishment." (verse 15a)

In the verses leading up to this breakout song of joy, the LORD announced that his wrath against our sin, again all the ways that our faith has lacked, all the backsliding that has happened in our life of repentance, all of that wrath has been poured out. All our sin has been punished. How? Where? On whom? The people of Zephaniah's day would have been aware of where this wrath was poured out because of Isaiah's prophecy about 100 years earlier: "But he [the servant of the LORD] was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." (Isaiah 53:5-6)

We know who this servant of the LORD is. It's Jesus, the Messiah, the promised one, the chosen one. He had all of God's wrath poured out on him for our sins. He took the full penalty, paid the full price. Nothing more is owed. There is no repayment plan with God. In fact, he refuses to let us try to add anything to it or repay him in any way. Nothing more can be added, not even a tip. We can sing that our punishment has been taken away, and we didn't have to pay anything or do anything to have that happen for us!

Because the LORD has taken away our punishment for our sins, he has also turned back our enemy. (verse 15b) Zephaniah was purposeful in not specifically naming just one enemy that the LORD has turned back because he has turned all our enemies away. He has turned away Satan with his accusations and lies away because all our sins have been punished on Jesus. No wrongs are credited to our account; only Jesus and his perfection is credited to us. God turned away the world that tries to choke out our faith because he has overcome the world, especially as our risen Jesus ascended to sit at the right hand of God and lives and reigns over everything on this earth at all times. He has also turned away our own sinful nature by drowning it in the waters of baptism. Our sinful nature does not control us, does not bind us to sin because Christ buried our sinful nature with him in his death and he has raised us to live a new life. All our enemies have been turned back by what the LORD has done. And so we sing about the victory that the LORD has won for us!

There are even more reasons to sing: “The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm... The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves.” (verses 15c, 17a) It’s not just that the LORD routed our enemies and turned them away for a time. He continues to stand by our side, sword ready to defend us against anyone who would try to do us harm. He personally does this. It’s not just guardian angels that he sends to watch over us, but he himself is with us every day, one who never slumbers nor sleeps, the one who no one can defeat or flank or overwhelm. The Mighty Warrior is with us and he saves us! So, we have nothing to fear. We sing in relief as we are always protected and will not be harmed.

Then there’s more singing as Zephaniah continues, “He, [the LORD] will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.” (verse 17b) Of course there is no more rebuking from the LORD. He has taken your punishment away by pouring out his wrath on his servant, not us. He has purified us. He has made us new. He stands with us, ever watchful over us, always protecting us, fighting our battles, defeating our enemies. There is nothing to rebuke. You have this new status in God: purified, holy, set apart. All of it is done for you!

This is not only worth us singing about, but it’s worth God singing about it. He takes great delight in you. You may view yourself as one miserable, horrible, backsliding, faith-lacking, poorly repentant sinner, but that’s not how God views you. He has made you new. He gives you new worth, worth based on what he has done for you, not how well you have lived for him. He sings a song over us because you and I belong to him because of what he has done. Having forgiven us, clothed us with his perfection, we are his precious children. We own this beloved title of Daughter Zion. That who you are! That’s why God sings over you!

What more could make us want to sing and shout aloud? We’ve just gotten to imbibe, drink in, all these reasons that cause us to sing with joy. The has LORD taken our punishment away, poured out his wrath on Jesus instead of us. He has turned away our enemies. He stands ever vigilant and watchful over us so that no harm befalls us. He has made us his children. He rejoices over us with singing because of all this. He will sing a joyous song over us when he does come again because we are pure and clean and holy before him. We fear no judgment, but instead get ready to sing for all eternity the praises of him who did every good thing for us.

So, “do not let your hands hang limp.” (verse 16b) We’ve marveled at all that our Lord has done for us, but don’t let it stop there. If you feel like singing - and I hope you do - sing this song to someone else. Sing to someone else of the joy you have over what God has done for you, how you have absolute confidence of what will happen when Jesus returns, that you have no fear or apprehension over when Jesus judges you because God has taken away your punishment, because Jesus has suffered for you in your place with nothing owed or needed to be repaid. Invite someone to sing along with you here, especially for our upcoming candlelight Christmas Eve worship as we look forward to celebrating the gift of Jesus’ first coming as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Rejoice with me, brothers and sisters. The LORD has taken away our punishment and turned away our enemies. The LORD is with us so that we fear no harm. The Lord takes great delight in us and sings over us because we are forgiven and made holy. That makes us feel like singing. Amen.