

6

Joy in Place of Fear



QUESTION 1:

When have you said, "I'm glad that's behind me"?

THE POINT

Fear will be a thing of the past
in God's eternal kingdom.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

I once ran a half-marathon with a friend. I don't enjoy running, but I did like the thought of doing something that I had never done before. As I reviewed the training schedule, I saw that most of the runs seemed feasible. It was the ten-mile run a few weeks before the race that unnerved me. I was scared that I would not be able to finish and afraid that I might get hurt.

On the day of the ten-mile run, my body ached all over. I wanted to stop, but my feet kept moving. When I finished, I just sat in my car with the seat leaned back because

everything hurt. When I got home, the struggle of running was replaced with rest and the joy of eating with my family.

We have days when we want to give up. But there is an end in sight. We have a reason for hope because one day we will rest and enjoy the table prepared for us by Jesus. The prophet Zephaniah reminds us that fear will be a thing of the past in the eternal kingdom of God.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

ZEPHANIAH 3:9-13

⁹ For I will then restore pure speech to the peoples so that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him with a single purpose. ¹⁰ From beyond the rivers of Cush my supplicants, my dispersed people, will bring an offering to me. ¹¹ On that day you will not be put to shame because of everything you have done in rebelling against me. For then I will remove from among you your jubilant, arrogant people, and you will never again be haughty on my holy mountain. ¹² I will leave a meek and humble people among you, and they will take refuge in the name of the LORD. ¹³ The remnant of Israel will no longer do wrong or tell lies; a deceitful tongue will not be found in their mouths. They will pasture and lie down, with nothing to make them afraid.

During the seventh century BC, when Josiah was king over Judah, Zephaniah came on the scene as a prophet. King Josiah's father and grandfather were evil kings. They encouraged the people to chase after idols and false gods, yet when Josiah took the throne, he desired to turn the people's hearts back to the one true God, Yahweh. It is likely that Zephaniah's prophecies of warning, punishment, and restoration were spoken before the reforms of King Josiah had taken root.

Throughout the book of Zephaniah, the prophet spoke of God's anger and judgment against Judah, the other nations, and the city of Jerusalem. The people were guilty of chasing after other gods, and judgment was

due. But the tone of Zephaniah's prophecy makes a major shift beginning with 3:9. The refining fire of righteous anger would lead to the purification of the land and the people. In verses 1-8, Zephaniah spoke about Jerusalem, but these words of restoration included all the world's people. God's desire is that "all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him with a single purpose" (v. 9).

QUESTION 2:

Whom do you know who models a life of humility?

Verses 11-13 give us a glimpse of what the refinement of God will yield. Shame for our past actions will be removed, as well as arrogance. It will produce a humble not a proud people. God's people will be established as those who understand who is on the throne, and they will walk accordingly in this truth. They "will no longer do wrong," doing what is right as they see the King who is righteous. They will not "tell lies" nor have "a deceitful tongue" for they will live with and serve the God of truth (see Heb. 6:18).

Especially inviting is the image that "they will pasture and lie down, with nothing to make them afraid" (v. 13). Sheep will not relax if they are afraid, and they will not eat if they feel threatened. Yet here are God's people—His sheep—who have had their fill

and are contentedly resting. They can do this because they are resting in the presence of their Shepherd.

Note who this future kingdom applies to: "I will leave a meek and humble people among you, and they will take refuge in the name of the LORD" (v. 12). The Hebrew word for "meek" refers to those who are poor and weak, and "humble" refers to those who are in need and physically afflicted. There is no pride or arrogance among them because they know there is nothing in them.

In this refining process, God will remove fear from those who humble themselves before Him. When we bow to the right One, we do not need to fear lesser things. God sits on His throne and all fear will ultimately be removed.

ZEPHANIAH 3:14-17

¹⁴ Sing for joy, Daughter Zion; shout loudly, Israel! Be glad and celebrate with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem! ¹⁵ The LORD has removed your punishment; he has turned back your enemy. The King of Israel, the LORD, is among you; you need no longer fear harm. ¹⁶ On that day it will be said to Jerusalem: "Do not fear; Zion, do not let your hands grow weak. ¹⁷ The LORD your God is among you, a warrior who saves. He will rejoice over you with gladness. He will be quiet in his love. He will delight in you with singing."



The picture of restoration in God’s kingdom is great and compels us to worship. Zephaniah calls us to worship with several imperatives:

- ▶ **Sing for joy.** Throughout history, people have been drawn to songs as a way to express their emotions from love to sadness. And the joy we receive because of what God has done for us certainly calls for a joyful expression in song.
- ▶ **Shout loudly.** This needs no explanation to the sports fan. When our team is winning, we get excited and we shout. A game is just a game, though, but when we “win” in life because Christ has won the victory for us, we certainly have cause to shout—and to shout loudly.
- ▶ **Be glad and celebrate.** The Hebrew phrasing reflects extreme happiness that we express in some outward form, and we are to do this “with all your heart.”

In verse 15, Zephaniah reminded us why we should be joyous.

- ▶ **Our punishment is removed.** We see this ultimately played out by what Jesus did on the cross on our behalf.
- ▶ **Our enemy is turned back.** In the immediate historical context, it is not clear which enemy Israel was facing, but now because of Christ, no enemy will stand.
- ▶ **The Lord is with us.** Sin keeps us from a relationship with God, but since Christ has dealt with our sin problem, we can stand before God free, forgiven, and unashamed.
- ▶ **Our fear is removed.** And when the sovereign, all-powerful Lord of the universe is standing at our side, we have absolutely nothing to fear in God’s presence.

As we see in verse 17, our God is a mighty warrior, but He delights in us! To think that Almighty God would sing over a people who rejected Him is mind-boggling. Yet, that is precisely what He does.

QUESTION 3:

When has God’s presence helped you stand through fear?



ZEPHANIAH 3:18-20

¹⁸ I will gather those who have been driven from the appointed festivals; they will be a tribute from you and a reproach on her. ¹⁹ Yes, at that time I will deal with all who oppress you. I will save the lame and gather the outcasts; I will make those who were disgraced throughout the earth receive praise and fame. ²⁰ At that time I will bring you back, yes, at the time I will gather you. I will give you fame and praise among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes. The LORD has spoken.

Recently my family moved into a renovated home. When I say renovated, I mean the contractors took it down to just the studs and framing. When we first looked at the home, there was little appeal, but we didn't base our opinion of the house on what we saw in its current state. We based it on what was to come. Each week the house changed, and the more the men worked, the more it resembled what was foretold. Then the day came when it was fully restored and we moved in.

Zephaniah spoke of a far greater restoration, one that will come with God's eternal kingdom. God wanted them to see that in the future all reasons for judgment would be removed and those who experienced the burden of sin and reproach would find relief. We can get frustrated with all the hassles of life we face, and fears and frustrations might frequently rise. During my home's renovation, I faced such feelings, but I knew not to give up. One day it would be completed, and we could take up residence. We need to have the same mindset as followers of Christ. Regardless of whatever fears and frustrations we face, we can endure, knowing that one day it will all be over and behind us. In the meantime, let's not lose heart on the journey.

QUESTION 4:

How have you seen God bring joy in place of fear?

In verse 20, God spoke through Zephaniah to remind us that He is faithful to complete what He has begun. Paul affirmed this truth: "I am sure of this, that he who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6). We do not have to fear because God keeps His promises. He always has and He always will. We will be fully restored, and fear will be no more because of the goodness of our King.

QUESTION 5:

With all these promises from God, why do we still struggle with fear?

MY JOURNEY

On the timeline below, mark places where you experienced fear (the numbers represent ages). Below each one, describe the joy or hope that helped you overcome the fear if that's what happened. Then offer a prayer of thanks and praise to God.

0 - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9 - 10

20 - 30 - 40 - 50 - 60 - 70 - 80 - 90 - 100

My Prayer:

“All joy emphasizes our pilgrim status; always reminds, beckons, awakens desire. Our best havings are wantings.”

C. S. LEWIS



CREATION BEYOND GENESIS

by Argile A. Smith Jr.

When we want to know what the Bible says about creation, we usually go to Genesis 1–2 for answers. Other Scripture passages, however, help us too. They offer insights into creation that enable us to understand more about God as Creator and everything He created.

THE “WHO” OF CREATION

The Bible points to God alone as the Creator of the universe. In His challenge to Job, God spoke of His creative acts:



“Where were you when I established the earth? . . . Who fixed its dimensions? . . . Or who laid its cornerstone?” (Job 38:4-6).

That God alone is the Creator is the most repeated fact in the passages that speak of creation. The affirmation about God the Creator resulted from noticing the existence of the world itself and the humans who live in it. A house’s presence gives evidence of a builder. Likewise, the actual presence of the world and the people in it affirms God’s existence.¹

Psalms declared that bedrock truth. David wrote about the glory of God that people could see by taking a long look at what He had created. David called attention to the heavens and the sky, day and night, as well as the sun’s rising and setting. He beheld all of it and testified that he could behold God’s glory in it (Ps. 19:1-6). Psalm 33 picked up the same line of testimony. The psalmist connected the presence of the heavens, stars, bodies of water, and other features of creation with the Lord who created all of it (33:6-9).

One psalm in particular shows how the human body’s intricate design points to the creating activity of God. In Psalm 139, David wrote that the parts of a person’s body underscored God’s presence. He observed that God the Creator could be seen in the existence of vital organs working together in a complex manner so a human could function well for many years. The formation of a human body in a mother’s womb also testified to God’s work as Creator (139:13-14). Centuries later, the apostle Paul insisted that everyone could see for themselves the living God at work in His world. Nobody had an excuse, therefore, for saying that they did not know about God (Rom. 1:20).

THE “HOW” OF CREATION

According to the Bible, the universe did not form on its own or by accident. Nameless forces did not just happen to merge at the right time coincidentally so that something appeared from nothing. Quite the contrary, God took the initiative to create the universe completely on His own and absolutely by Himself. The psalmists described God’s method of creation by way of anthropomorphisms.² They employed terms that described how ordinary people accomplish tasks in their effort to shed a glimmer of light on how God Almighty performed the miracles of creation.

For instance, David said God used His hands as He created the universe. Because of the work of God’s hand, the sky and sun came to exist. As a result, God gave the sun a home in the sky as it traveled from east to west each day (Ps. 19:1,4). Although David did not use specific scientific jargon from the field of astronomy in his description, he conveyed essential insights and affirmed God’s personal touch by referring to God’s hand in creation.

The psalmist who penned Psalm 33 declared that God used His voice to perform creation miracles. He observed that the stars had been placed in the sky and that water had been collected and stored in the sea. Then He affirmed that God spoke and the stars found their places in the heavens. With His word, the waters were gathered perfectly so the sea could be formed (33:6-7). Without using scientific terms, he spoke volumes about how God performed such monumental miracles of creation.

THE “WHY” OF CREATION

God had a purpose in mind when He created everything and everyone. We can best understand God’s purpose in creation when we think about it in connection with redemption. For instance, the prophet Isaiah brought up God’s work in creation as he assured His people of His intention to restore them (Isa. 45:7).³ Paul conveyed the same linkage when he taught believers that Jesus Christ was the centerpiece of creation. Paul affirmed that Christ created everything. Everything in creation held together,

*Paul affirmed that
Christ created everything.
Everything in creation
held together, therefore,
only through Him.*

therefore, only through Him (Col. 1:15-17).

With his affirmation, Paul provided valuable wisdom for growing believers then and now. Without Christ, everything in the world falls apart. With Christ, however, everything falls into place.

Paul also encouraged Christians to bear in mind the longing of God’s creation. When God held Adam accountable for his sin, He stated that He cursed the ground too (Gen. 3:17-19). Since that moment, God’s creation has been yearning to be set free from the curse. The long-awaited freedom from the curse would coincide with the eternal liberation of believers (Rom. 8:19-22).

Along with Paul, the apostle John had insights to offer regarding God’s creation. At the beginning of Revelation, he wrote that the Lord gave him visions full of hope. In a vision about worship, he had an opportunity to peek into heaven and see a stirring picture of God being praised and adored. He provided details about creation’s role in worshiping the Lord. John had the created order in mind when he identified four creatures that kept on affirming God’s holiness and sovereignty. God’s creation never ceased to give Him honor and glory (Rev. 4:6-9). At the end of Revelation, John shared a vision about what the Lord would do with His creation in the future. In this vision, he saw a new heaven and a new earth. What he saw had been created by the Lord who declared that He would make all things new (21:1-5).

The Bible helps us to understand more about God’s work in creation. His Word gives Christians a perspective on what the Lord has done that encourages us as we serve Him.

1. Herbert Lockyer, *All the Doctrines of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1964), 21.
2. Michael Fink, “Anthropomorphism” in *Holman Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Trent C. Butler (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991), 63.
3. Mike Mitchell, “Creation” in *ibid.*, 314.

Argile A. Smith Jr. is the pastor of Parkway Baptist Church in Biloxi, Mississippi.