

**The Strength of Joy**  
**Zephaniah 3:14-20, 1 Thessalonians 1:4-10**

Well brothers and sisters are you ready for Christmas? It is December 18 and there are only 7 shopping days left until Dec 25<sup>th</sup>. So, I won't ask you how your preparations are coming along and if your Christmas shopping is done – because I don't want to induce a panic attack for anyone who has just suddenly realized – there are only 6 days until Christmas Eve!!!

Now scrambling to get prepared for Christmas at the last minute is not something that I enjoy, what I do enjoy is the Christmas Eve Service “After-Party” if you will... when everything is done and finished and I can relax and enjoy hanging out with people who were involved in the service and we can talk and laugh about what went well and what didn't quite go the way it was supposed to but at least nobody else noticed and so on...

And of course I always enjoy the food that is involved with celebrating Christmas!

And this enjoyment is what makes us endure all the stress of preparing for Christmas, isn't it.

So brothers and sisters what it is that brings you joy at Christmas and what are you willing to put up with... in preparing to experience that joy?

Does it give you joy to see the look on people's faces, especially children, when they open a gift from you? If so then you will endure crowded malls, frazzled cashiers, and slushy parking spots in order to get those gifts.

Or is it the joy of reuniting with family and friends? If so you're willing to pay the high ticket prices and put up with the hassles and inconvenience of the holiday travel season.

Now if I was to bump into you at the mall during the next eight days, or if I happened to see you at the airport and I said “**Happy** holidays to you!” It would be a bit out of place, wouldn't it?

Because crowded malls and inconvenient holiday travels are not **happy** experiences are they!

Happiness is when everything around you is nice and pleasant and there isn't anything weighing on your heart or mind... but preparing for the Christmas season is anything but that.

So I think it would be more appropriate to bless you by saying "May you have a Joyous Christmas!" because in spite of the fact that you just stepped into an icy puddle of slush and got a "soaker..." there is the anticipation of the Joy that is coming when you see little Timmy eagerly open that gift from you on Christmas morning and watch his face light up!

And brothers and sisters, the scriptures understand joy in a similar way. Biblical Joy is what you feel when something you have been waiting for, anticipated, and longed for... finally comes to pass.

Maybe you've been waiting to graduate, or you've been longing to find that special someone to build a life and a family

with. Maybe you are anticipating having grandkids, or retirement...

And when these things finally happen - they give us Joy, and the longer we have waited, the more we have anticipated them – the greater the Joy.

Now thus far in Advent we have prepared ourselves with HOPE and LOVE; our Hope is that Christ's birth, his first coming, where the Kingdom of God was established in principle, is a sign and a promise that Christ's return, his second coming, is when He will establish the Kingdom of God in completeness.

This is a fact... this is our Hope.

And we prepare with Love – or rather we are prepared by LOVE for this awesome day of the Lord. But this love is not the sentimental saccharine kind, nor is it a tolerant and indulgent kind; instead we learned it is a purifying LOVE!

A Love that refines the sinfulness out of our human nature thru Jesus' incarnation into it at His birth, and a Love that will purify us, and the entire cosmos completely, when Christ returns. (That's why we can sing of it forever ☺ )

Now brothers and sisters – I know that preparing in this way is not nice, it's not pleasant, it goes against the sentimental grain that we usually like to experience in the holiday season – but it is biblical; and that should count for a great deal...

And if we are willing to put up with the stress of shopping for the joy of giving... then surely we can put up with the burden preparing biblically for the even greater joy of Christ's arrival.

So today we are preparing with Joy and so far we've learned that Joy is different from happiness and it is derived from that which we are waiting for coming to pass - this is how the bible presents Joy to us, and the passage we read this morning from Zephaniah is a good illustration of this.

It's pretty easy to see that this is a passage about joy isn't it. We read things like *"Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem!"* (vs. 14) and *"He [Yahweh] will take great delight in you... he will rejoice over you with singing."* (vs. 17) there is no doubt that this is about joy!

And the other thing we notice - is that joy gets expressed! This is another way joy differs from happiness. Happiness is kind of quiet and content – nothing wrong with that – but you don't hear people *"Shouting for happiness"* do you...

You do however hear people shouting for joy, singing for joy, and rejoicing with all their heart. Joy is expressed physically and audibly – especially great joy.

And the joy which Zephaniah prophesies about comes from Yahweh's promises to the Jews who were being sent into exile, as a punishment for their covenant unfaithfulness, that there would be a return... a restoration... and a rebuilding

Zephaniah prophesies that some point in the future Yahweh will; *take away punishment and turn back their enemy (vs. 15), that He will be with them as their King (vs 15), remove what is a source of shame to them (vs 18) he will deal with their oppressors (vs 19) he will bring them home – e.i. rescue the lame and gather the exiles (vs. 19-20) and he will make sure they are honored and praised publically (vs. 19-20) and He will restore their fortunes (vs. 20).*

When this happened – and it did in 539 BC when a remnant of Jews lead by Nehemiah was given permission and funding by the Persian Empire to return and rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple – there was GREAT Joy.

In fact Ps 126 was written to express that joy, listen to it:  
*When the Lord brought back the captive ones of Zion, We were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter And our tongue with joyful shouting; Then they said among the nations, “The Lord has done great things for them.” The Lord has done great things for us; We are glad. Restore our fortunes, O Lord, As the streams in the South.*

*Those who sow in tears shall reap with joyful shouting...*

You can hear echoes of Zephaniah in this – and in fact this Psalm contains the exact same words in Hebrew for “*restoring fortunes*” as what Zephaniah uses. so we know that the Levites who wrote this psalm considered their 539 B.C. return a fulfilment of God’s promises in Zephaniah.

And I’m going to call this a Level 1 Material fulfillment, because it was experienced in very specific, tangible and concrete ways; quite literally “concrete” with the rebuilding of the city and the temple.

And there are lots of times in our lives when Yahweh takes these sorts promises from the scriptures and does a Level 1 Material fulfillment of them in our lives as well; for example He takes away punishment and turns back our enemy – and maybe we can point to a specific example in our lives where we have been spared from the consequences of a foolish decision, or even a sinful action; and where those who oppose us and are against us have not been able to stop us.

So brothers and sisters; what is going on in your life right now that would be a practical specific example of Yahweh doing the kinds of things He says he will do in Zephaniah? And are you expressing your joy back to Yahweh in worship? You don't have to write a Psalm – just singing praise enthusiastically, loudly, and regularly in Church will do.

Just as the Jews praised Yahweh in Ezra 3:11 *“all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid.”*

But brothers and sisters, as great as this was, it was only a Level 1 Material fulfillment. Returning to Jerusalem and rebuilding the Temple wouldn't resolve the deeper issues that had initiated their exile and the destruction of the Temple.

That's why Ezra 3:12 goes on to say – *“Yet many of the priests and Levites... who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid...”* It was

not a restoration of the former glory of Israel and King Solomon.

What was needed was a Level 2 Spiritual fulfillment, and those Jews who resettled their land quickly realized that more was needed if they were going to experience the fullness of all that Yahweh had promised to them in Zephaniah and throughout the rest of the Prophets; so they began to look for the coming of the Messiah to bring in that fullness of the Kingdom of God and to restore the full Glory of Israel as it had once been.

And maybe we've experienced this in our lives as well? Yahweh has blessed us materially but it doesn't bring us the peace and satisfaction that we expected... Maybe He's helped us through one challenge – but we still struggle.

Brothers and sisters, we need to realize that this isn't a failure on God's part to fulfill His promises or on our part in some way – it's how God works to prepare us for greater things, deeper things – spiritual things... And it's how we come to anticipate those greater things, and to recognize the manner

in which he works to bring those greater things to pass.  
Which, given what we learned about how Joy works, means that the Joy will be even greater!

But the Level 2 Spiritual fulfillment can be a bit confusing if we don't understand what the Messiah was really coming to do – He wasn't coming to restore the old glory of Israel, He was coming to begin the new glory of a new Israel.

So let's review the ways in which Jesus' first coming fulfilled the Messianic promises of Zephaniah in a more profound spiritual way than anticipated.

Jesus takes away our punishment by bearing it upon himself in his death on the cross. Jesus turned back the enemy by refusing to give into Satan's temptations in the desert... and he turned back death itself in his resurrection from the grave.

He dealt with our oppressor by making sinful human nature into a faithful human nature...

He rescued the lame by healing them, he gathered those who had leprosy and healed them and this allowed them to return to their homes and restored their fortunes...

He performed miracles in the name of Yahweh and so Jesus showed the people that their God still honored His relationship with them, and that in his very person their God was with them and had come very near to them; *"He shall be called Immanuel, which means God with us"* (Matt 1:23)

These Level 2 Spiritual fulfillments get to the very root of the problems that affect us and our world, and it is good to remind ourselves that without the birth of Jesus none of this would be possible. Paul emphasizes in Ephesians 1:3 how *"we are blessed with EVERY SPIRITUAL blessings in Jesus Christ!"* That's an amazing gift to receive on someone else's birthday!

So, this Christmas might be a good time to reflect on all the Spiritual Blessings we've received in Jesus – grace, mercy, forgiveness, the Holy Spirit and his fruit and gifts... and then

ask Yahweh, as King David did in Ps 51:12 to *“Restore to me the joy of your salvation...”*

Because brothers and sisters we are not often very joyful over our spiritual blessings that the Lord has given us, it’s so easy for us to become consumed with the practical material aspects of Yahweh’s promises that we neglect the depth and significance and primacy of His spiritual blessings and we do not express the great joy that should come from them.

But that is also an indication that there is still a Level 3 Kingdom Fulfillment that must take place. For all the spiritual blessings we have received it’s quite obvious that we are not yet made perfect, we still struggle with our sinful nature...

And this struggle with sin means that our world is still affected by death and disease and sickness, natural disasters and famine, corruption and war and those who follow Jesus Christ are persecuted and sometimes killed.

And yet... somehow in the midst of all this we can still experience Joy. That is the testimony of the Church in the city of Thessalonica. Paul says that they received the spiritual blessings of the gospel *“in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.”*

And lest we think that this happens only in New Testament times I would draw your attention to the testimony and witness of the persecuted Church in China right now, particularly the testimony that is coming from the Early Rain Covenant Church, which is a Presbyterian church in Chengdu, Sichuan.

Let me read you an excerpt from a letter that Elder Li Yinggiang wrote to his church a few hours before being arrested and taken away – he was the last of their elders to be arrested when their persecution began in 2018.

Beloved brothers, sisters, and fellow workers: Thank the Lord! Just as the year 2018 is about to end God has given us a reward in the form of this large-scale persecution that arrived on December 9.

Since yesterday evening until noon today, over 100 pastors, elders, staff, brothers and sisters have been taken away. As of now we still do not know where they all are, and even if we did know it would be difficult for us to help them. But, thankfully, we know for certain that the Lord's loving face is shining upon them. They are within the gracious, sovereign providence of the Lord. He will be with them in the midst of their chains and trials.

The Apostle Peter says, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you." (1 Pet. 4:12-14)

Beloved brothers and sisters, do you have joy? Are you rejoicing in the fact that you are suffering with Christ because of this church? Do you know that we are blessed? The Lord is bestowing on us poor people today treasures of glory from

heaven! The Lord himself is bestowing on us weak people comfort from heaven! The Lord Jesus is shining on us blind people his great light. Those of us brothers and sisters standing on the front lines of the gospel war will earn great spiritual riches!

Thank the Lord for being with us in this trial. Thank the Lord for cultivating us according to his true Word! Thank the Lord for training us through these days of hardship! Thank the Lord for sculpting us through today's persecution! May the Lord give us great joy and true hope and make us strong through reliance on him.

He then goes on to encourage the congregation to keep worshiping in their sanctuary and resist the government's efforts to control them or shut them down, and then he finishes his letter with this...

Beloved brothers and sisters, I am writing this letter in "hiding." May you all be filled with joy in the gospel of Christ... "Christ is Lord. Grace is King. Bear the cross. Keep the faith."



This is the vision Early Rain Covenant Church received from the Lord. May we all obtain it, cherish it, put it into practice, and live it out! Loving you all, Elder Yingqiang Dec 10, 2018

How is this possible brothers and sisters? Well here is something else that we come learn about Joy, it doesn't always come to us by its natural means. We can also receive it supernaturally from the Holy Spirit.

Brothers and sisters, when we must struggle with our sin, and face the brokenness and tragedy that still exists in our world, and when we must endure times of persecution - the Holy Spirit can and will give us a "Joy" advance.

This joy is borrowed from the coming Level 3 Kingdom fulfillment that we are anticipating.

The Joy we will feel in the future on the day when we see Jesus Christ face to face, when we see that we have been resurrected, made new... when we become aware that the effects of sin have been completely eradicated from our heart,

mind, soul and body... When we see our world and all that is in it made new...

Can you imagine that Joy!? It's not just a greater Joy it is an all surpassing – unspeakable Joy!

So the Holy Spirit takes from that Joy and gives it to you now – you don't produce it, it doesn't come from your circumstance - you just receive it and experience it and are strengthened by it. That's why the Thessalonians were Joyful in the midst of severe suffering, that's what is happening to our fellow Christians in China.

The Holy Spirit has given them Joy - and just like we realized at the beginning of the message - when you know something is coming that will give you Joy... you will endure all sorts of things for it, as the scripture says in Nehemiah 8:10 *"the Joy of the Lord is your strength!"*

And just like Paul says of the Thessalonians, these Chinese Christians are a model for us to follow – not that we seek out

persecution or expect to deal with the same challenges as they do, we have our own problems here in the West...

But they are a model to follow in how they rely on the strength of Joy to endure hardship and anticipate with confidence and certainty the return of Jesus Christ.

And at the return of Jesus Christ – the promises of Zephaniah will receive their Level 3 Kingdom fulfillment.

The Lord Jesus will deal with our oppressors and persecutors; He will turn away the enemy and throw the Devil and his demons into the Lake of Fire;

He will be close to us – we will see Him face to face; He will gather all those who have been purchased by His blood and He will bring us home – the home that he has gone to prepare for us – the New Heavens and the New Earth!

We can't even imagine the joy of that occasion – but we can receive an advance on it now.

My prayer brothers and sisters is that in hearing about these promises of Yahweh from His Word this morning, and being assured of what is going to take place in future because of what has been accomplished in the past...

that the Holy Spirit will indeed give you the JOY you need to be strong and endure in the present.

So brothers and sisters be strong in the Joy of the Lord!

Christmas is coming, Christ is coming back – what Joy we will have on that day!!! Are you ready? Amen