

“HOPE AGAIN”

READING: *Zephaniah 3 verses 14 – 20*

Introduction

Charles (Chuck) R Swindoll, evangelical pastor, writer and teacher from Dallas in Texas wrote in the introduction to his book, “Hope again – when life hurts and dreams fade”, “*Hope is a wonderful gift from God, a source of strength and courage in the face of life’s harshest trials.*” He then goes on to list how hope swings into action when we face some of the various challenges which come our way, eg

- When we are trapped in a tunnel of misery, hope points to the light at the end.
- When we struggle with a crippling disease or a lingering illness, hope helps us to persevere beyond the pain.
- When we fear the worst, hope brings reminders that God is still in control.
- When we are forced to sit back and wait, hope gives us the patience to trust.
- When we feel rejected and abandoned, hopes reminds us we’re not alone...we will make it.

For some you reading this, I know that some of these are very real experiences, whether for you personally, or for someone that you know and love. This list is not exhaustive, I am sure that there are many others which you could add. At present, I am trying to hold on to the hope that the young “gent” next door might realise that the whole of the neighbourhood does not want to listen to his music, or indeed that he might realise that “singing” (loosely speaking) along to the racket, is not helping anyone to enjoy it any better.

Anyhow, hope is one of the great theological values of our Christian tradition, something that we are meant to practise every day, like faith and love. The apostle Paul in writing to the church in Corinth reminds them that “***Now abide these three, faith, hope and love (charity). But the greatest of these is love (charity).***” (1 Corinthians 13 verse 13). In our world, people use the hope as something that “might be”, not with any great certainty. But in the minds of the believer, hope is an assurance, a certainty.

Zephaniah

At the start of our “lockdown”, I introduced you to the prophet Habakkuk and saw through his writings the questions he raised as to the circumstances he found himself in, of how then in asking the questions he listened to what God had to say, and then in listening to the response how he went on to praise and worship God. Today we move on to one of his contemporaries, Zephaniah, whose name meant “hidden in the Lord”, had royal blood in his veins. He was the great great grandson of King Hezekiah and distantly related to King Josiah who found the scrolls of the Laws of Moses and instigated religious reform across a nation who had wandered far away from its relationship with God (2 Kings chapters 22 and 23).

On the surface, things looked good, but that is just where such reform stayed – on the surface. The people obeyed the King’s instructions, but sadly the reformation had not travelled, on the whole, to the heart of the people. They said the right things, they did the right things, but their hearts were not in. God chose a number of men to be his mouthpieces, to deliver to the people a message reminding them of the promises made by their forefathers, promises which they were not adhering to. As a result, they now had to face the consequences. Delivering bad news was not popular and as a result the prophets were not widely accepted – including Zephaniah. Coming from his “blue blood” lineage, his message was particularly disliked by the higher echelons of society. But called by God to deliver his message, Zephaniah was faithful to his calling.

ZEPHANIAH'S MESSAGE

Not so good news

Like our news reports of today, first the bad news! It was about a hundred years since the destruction of Israel, Judah's sister kingdom to the north, the ten tribes of Israel, had been devastated by the Assyrians. Wiped out, never to appear again on the stage of history, until 1947. Down in the south, centred around Jerusalem, huddled the two tribes that made up the Kingdom of Judah. Things had not been so good in Judah, either. Idolatry was rampant, cult prostitution and child sacrifice had crept in, criminal activity was rife, merchants cheated their customers, widows suffered in poverty, the abuse of power was evident. Everywhere things looked bleak. People were not hopeful.

Zephaniah starts off his prophecy with the bad news not just for his own people (**chapter 1**). In this chapter the warning is clear. The Lord is going to consume (**verses 1-7**); to punish (**verses 8-11**); there will be no hiding (**verses 12 and 13**); and great distress (**verses 14-18**). Anyone from the neighbouring nations who may have heard the message may thought themselves rather smug but Zephaniah goes on in **chapter 2** to deliver a message of God's judgement on the neighbouring nations – Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Cush, and Assyria. The warning was stark, the warning was clear – “THE DAY OF THE LORD IS COMING”, “THE END IS NEAR”. Even into **chapter 3** there is a note of warning for the city of Jerusalem and it will also face judgement.

Now, the good news

But once again the people are reminded that despite the coming judgement, God will not abandon them totally. Phil Moore in his commentary “Straight to the heart of The Minor Prophets” describes that from that disaster will come a people who will be “humbled enough to repent in truth instead of in pretence.” He goes on to write “He will relaunch them as his lifeboat of salvation, their hull fixed, their speech purified and their hearts made holy.”

For the people of Zephaniah's day there would be the hope of forgiveness (**verse 15**), the hope of freedom from fear (**verse 15**), the hope of salvation (**verse 17**) and the hope of love (**verse 17**).

SO WHAT?

When I was in Baptist College my first college Principal told us that at the end of every sermon preached, there should be that “so what?” moment. Having said everything you need to say, so...? So what relevance does this have for me, in my life, in my situation? So what difference is this going to make? So what do I do next?

Let's face it, as if we need to reminded. We live in a world in which the word of God is either ignored, compromised or accepted and lived out. On the whole, given the size of our church congregations (when we could meet), the first two would be the case. But thanks be to God for the faithful remnant who accept and live it out.

2020 has not really got off to the best starts. Storms, incessant rain and resulting flooding at the start of the year. Followed by coronavirus, lockdown, self isolation and constant sunshine now. In both sets of circumstances we have seen the very best and the very worst in our society. Whilst I cannot fully say that these were delivered by God as a judgement on us, perhaps, just perhaps, He has got our attention. The self sacrificing of time to helping others – whether through a particular vocation / job or through neighbourly awareness. The realisation that “things” are not as important any more than love and life. The realisation that we cannot work and exist in splendid isolation, but that we need each other and help beyond ourselves.

The hope which Zephaniah offered to the people of Judah then, and is the same hope we have today is that:

- **God was with them.** The hope offered at Christmas time in Immanuel – “God with us”- is something not just for Christmas, but for all time. Jesus, before leaving his disciples promised not to leave them as orphans (**John 14 verse 18**) but that after He had returned to Heaven, he would send them a “Comforter”, the Holy Spirit to be with them. In these days of self-isolation and physical separation from friends and family, we are assured **“Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you” (Hebrews 13 verse 5).**
- **He is mighty to save.** God is a mighty warrior fighting our corner, and not just fighting, but winning. His power is enough to defeat any enemy who comes against us. Here we have the assuring hope as outlined in **Romans 8 verse 31** – **“...if God is for us, then who can be against us?”**
- **He will take great delight in you.** Some of us may have the misconception of God as being the angry headmaster waiting to whack us the moment we do something wrong. Max Lucado writes: *“God is for you. Had He a calendar. Your birthday would be circled. If He drove a car, your name would be on His bumper. If there’s a tree in heaven, He would carve your name into its bark....If He had a refrigerator, your photograph would be on it.”* Christina Perri, sings “I have died every day waiting for you. Darling, don’t be afraid I have loved you for a thousand years, I’ll love you for a thousand more.” But God’s word tells us that: **“For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be blameless and holy in His sight.....In love he predestined us as His sons through Jesus Christ...” (Ephesians 1 verses 4 and 5).** Somewhat longer than a thousand years.
- **He will quiet you with His love.** God is our peace. When I read this, I cannot help of thinking back to those days when Rhys and Elise were very small – particularly Rhys because he used to have screaming fits every night between 6.30pm and 8.30pm and I would very often lay on the bean bag with him cwtched up trying to calm him down. Years later, when daddy was going through a tough time, those same two children – a little older cwtching into me, to calm my fears – to “quiet me with their love”. Perhaps in these uncertain times, there are those who you would long to “quiet with your love”.
- **He will rejoice over you with singing.** I understand that the Hebrew word used here means “to spin around in joy with great gladness and glee”. After this is all over, I am sure that there will be much dancing around with great gladness. Nehemiah reminds us that **“the joy of the Lord is your strength” (Nehemiah 8 verse 10).** It is his joy for us which gives us strength. Like a parent delighting in a child’s achievements.

Someone has translated **Zephaniah 3 verse 17** from the Hebrew and it seems to highlight the true majesty of this verse: **“The eternal self-existent God, the God who is three in one; He who dwells in the centre of your being is a powerful and valiant warrior. He has come to set you free, to keep you safe, and to bring you victory. He is cheered, and He beams with exceeding joy and takes pleasure in your presence. He has engraved a place for Himself in you, and there He quietly rests in His love and affection for you. He cannot contain Himself at the thought of you, and with the greatest of joy spins around wildly in anticipation over you...In fact, He shouts and sings in triumph, joyfully proclaiming the gladness of His heart in a song of rejoicing! All because of you!”**

Too many of us are way too focused on our feelings. It’s time to focus on the facts. OK, the Bible has some bad news but the good news overshadows the bad and these are some to hold on to:

- God’s presence – God is with you.
- God’s power – God is for you.
- God’s pleasure – God delights in you.
- God’s peace – God calms you.
- God’s praise – God celebrates you.

MIGHTY TO SAVE

By Ben Fielding and Reuben Morgan

Everyone needs compassion
A love that's never failing
Let mercy fall on me
Everyone needs forgiveness
The kindness of a Saviour
The hope of nations

[Chorus]

*Saviour, He can move the mountains
And my God is mighty to save, He is mighty to save
Forever, Author of Salvation
He rose and conquered the grave
Jesus conquered the grave*

So take me as You find me
All my fears and failures
And fill my life again
I give my life to follow
Everything I believe in
And now I surrender, I surrender

[Chorus]

Shine your light and let the whole world see
We're singing for the glory of the risen King, Jesus
Shine your light and let the whole world see
We're singing for the glory of the risen King!

[Chorus x 2]

Shine your light and let the whole world see
We're singing for the glory of the risen King, Jesus
Shine your light and let the whole world see
We're singing for the glory of the risen King, Jesus....