

Rejoice in the LORD!

In our First Reading for today, taken from Zephaniah chapter 3, we find the prophet interrupting what the LORD had just spoken by breaking into a song of praise, and he calls for the people of God to join him in praising the LORD. The LORD had just declared judgment on Jerusalem and the nations. The city of Jerusalem, including its leaders, refused to return to the Lord. Such impenitence would bring upon them God's day of wrath. But why would Zephaniah now break forth in joy? He says their hearts should be filled with joy and gladness and their mouths should overflow with praise. Why? The reason is simple and yet compelling: "*The LORD has taken away the judgments against you. He has turned away your enemy,*" (3:15). Scripture tells us, "*The wages of sin is death,*" (Romans 6:23) and "*The soul who sins is the one who will die,*" (Ezekiel 18:4). If punishment is gone, and if that great enemy, death, has been removed and what remains of it is simply a sleep of the body until the resurrection, then sin and the guilt associated with it before God must be gone as well.

This is exactly what has happened. Isaiah speaks of the work of the Suffering Servant in these words: "*He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed,*" (53:5).

The punishment our sin deserves has been placed on Christ. Regarding the new covenant that God would establish in Christ, the Lord asserts through Jeremiah, "*I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more,*" (31:34). Zephaniah can speak the way he does in verse 15 because the Lord in His mercy has taken away the sins of the world. They are removed in Christ, and the terrible consequences of sin have been removed as well. Death and hell are no longer a threat to the one who clings to Christ in faith. ***Those enemies have been removed forever.***

The second consequence of the removal of sin is that God is present in the midst of His people with His protecting power. Isaiah tells us, "*Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear,*" (59:2).

The holy God hates sin, and He will not dwell among a sinful people. That's why Isaiah speaks as he does. But when sin is forgiven, and its guilt has been removed by Christ, there is no reason why the LORD must stay separated from His people any longer. So Zephaniah assures his readers, "*The King of Israel, the LORD, is among you.*"

Yes, the LORD is with them, protecting them from harm, delivering them from evil, quieting and comforting them in their fears and anxieties, and empowering their limp hands to move in service to Him. In fact, *The LORD, your God, is among you. He is a Warrior, who saves. He will rejoice happily over you. He will reduce you to silence in His love. He will exult over you with shouts of joy,*" (v.17). The LORD rejoices because they are living in His presence.

What a glorious revelation of our God! We are the ones who should be filled with joy and singing, because we have the privilege in Christ of living with our God for eternity. But also note that Zephaniah says that the LORD is just as happy as we are. He is happy because the goal of His work of redemption - saving His elect - has been reached. He is joyful because the purpose of creation - that the crown of creation, mankind, might live in His presence forever - has been realised. God's universal restoration, purification (3:9), and deliverance from all enemies (verses 15-17) will be an occasion of joy for God and for His people.