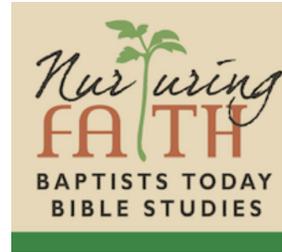


# Adult Teaching Resources

December 13, 2015



## Hope Waits

A Time for Praise — Luke 1:68-79

**A Time for Joy — Zephaniah 3:14-20**

A Time for Peace — Micah 5:2-5a

## Season of Christmas

A Time for Growth — 1 Samuel 2:18-26

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# A Time for Joy

*Zephaniah 3:14-20*

## FIT Teaching Guide

by Rick Jordan

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Baptists Today*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Baptists Today* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Baptists Today* so they can prepare before the lesson.

**Before the Lesson:** Find the lyrics to “Sing Out! All God’s People” at [http://www.carolynshymns.com/sing\\_out\\_all\\_gods\\_people.html](http://www.carolynshymns.com/sing_out_all_gods_people.html) for the Transformational Exercise. Prepare equipment need to play an instrumental of “O Come All Ye Faithful.”

### Fellowship Question

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Use *one* of the following to break the ice, to begin discussion, and lead into the study:

What is your favorite Christmas carol?

What is the last song/artist you heard before coming to today’s class?

### Information

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Today’s reading is from Zephaniah, a very somber book for the first three quarters of the book. In that section, the people have sinned and God is a mighty warrior who is mighty angry.

[Have a class member read Zephaniah 1:2-6.]

What is the cause of God’s wrath?

The first of the commandments was snubbed by God’s people.

[Have a class member read Exodus 20:2-6.]

The leaders of God’s people were corrupt.

[Have a class member read Zephaniah 3:1-5.]

Who was causing Israel such problems? Was the enemy on the inside or the outside of their nation? (The problem was not with an outside enemy. The Jews were their own worst enemy. They were making choices that were not faithful to their God and not obedient to God’s commands, etc.)

Clearly, all bad things that happen to us are not due to our misbehavior. Sometimes, we are harmed for doing the right things, even. But there come times that we must stop, reflect, and repent of things we do that harm our relationship with God and with others. We must confess our sin and turn from it before healing will take place. We must remove ourselves

## Information *continued*

from persons and situations that are toxic and tragic.

As THE BIBLE LESSON writer reminds us, in the words of an old song:

*“When the gates are all down,  
and the signal light’s flashing,  
and the whistle is screamin’ in vain —  
and you stay on the track,  
ignoring the facts,  
well, you can’t blame the wreck on the train.”*

God judges all of this impurity, but God says that purification is coming.

[Have a class member read Zephaniah 3:11-13.]

How does your translation describe the persons who remain after the purification in verse 13? (KJV/NRSV: the remnant; CEV: the few remaining; GNT: the people of Israel who survive; MSG: this core holy people)

Purification is never pleasurable, but it is desirable.

Do you recall the verse in “How Firm a Foundation”?

*When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,  
My grace, all-sufficient, shall be thy supply.  
The flames shall not hurt thee; I only design  
Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine.*

Now that God’s people have been through the fiery trials and are refined, there is reason to celebrate.

[Have a class member read Zephaniah 3:14-20.]

We might expect a text about salvation and reconciliation to describe praise and celebration coming from those who were saved. Many times we read in the Psalms a choral refrain, “Praise the Lord!” But who is doing the singing in this text?

In verse 17, God sings for joy! This may a new image of God for us. Have you ever thought of God singing?

We do have several images in Luke’s gospel that might imply God’s singing.

[Have class members read Luke 15:3-7; Luke 15:8-10; Luke 15:17-20.]

We sing, “Joy to the world, the Lord is come!” which is true. It is also true that Heaven sings, “Joy to the heavens, the lost has returned!”

“Such joy is not subdued; it is not quiet or dignified. The Hebrew words used in verse 17 are used elsewhere in the Bible to describe great jubilation. The LORD rejoices over his

## Information *continued*

beloved, over Judah and Jerusalem, as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride (Isaiah 62:5). As David danced in front of the Ark of the Covenant, in exultation, so God rejoices over God's people (2 Samuel 6). As the morning stars sang at the creation of the world, so God sings with elation over God's beloved (Job 38:7)." (Kathryn M. Schifferdecker. "Commentary on Zephaniah 3:14-20." [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=468](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=468))

What could cause this mutual joy? It comes from two parties knowing they are mutually loved and desired. "As Kierkegaard noted, if at every moment both present and future I were certain that nothing has happened or can ever happen that would separate me from the infinite love of the Infinite, that would be clearest reason there is for joy." (Huston Smith. "The Soul of Christianity." *The Christian Century*, October 4, 2005, p. 10f <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3297>)

If we can believe this — that God's purification of us is for our own good and that "nothing can separate us from the love of God" (Romans 8:38-39) — it is easier to imagine a God who sings for joy when God thinks of us.

## Transformational Exercise

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According to James 1:17, "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights."

Certainly, one of those gifts is music. Music enables us to express grief, worship, aspirations, disappointments, joy and anything else that is going on inside of us. Think of the last song you heard before coming into the class today. What emotions were expressed in it? What thoughts were put to that music?

God is the Creator. God created music. According to Zephaniah, God sings. And we have one story in which Jesus sings, just after he and the disciples ate the Passover together, we read, "When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives." That hymn was Psalm 118. Imagine Jesus and his disciples singing these words.

[Have a class member read Psalm 118.]

In Zephaniah, God sings in joy. If we can imagine that, it is not too difficult to imagine God singing a lament when we turn from loving others or when we choose self-destructive, sinful behavior. How many songs must be in God's repertoire?

This week, pay attention to the music around you. Remember that this creation is a gift from the Creator of all good things.

As we listen to this Christmas carol, thank God for the creation of music! This new hymn text is based on today's passage.

[Provide the lyrics to the lyrics to "Sing Out! All God's People." If you are a singer, or if you have one in the class, the lyrics may be sung with or without an instrument. Or, as the class members follow the lyrics, play an instrumental of "O Come All Ye Faithful", such as the one found here, which has three verses: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wXUzQc2gus8> ]

## Transformational Exercise *continued*

[Close in a prayer something like this: *God of all creation. Thank you for music. Thank you for this image of you singing with joy over us. In this Advent season, we pray for purification of our thoughts and motives and behaviors so that there will be more joy in this world. Amen.*]

**Comments or Questions for Rick Jordan?** You may send comments to the lesson plan author at [rjordan@cbfnc.org](mailto:rjordan@cbfnc.org). Rick is also available to lead workshops and conferences on Christian Education, with particular emphasis on how best to use the FIT Faith model.

## Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartlege

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Baptists Today*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Baptists Today* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Baptists Today* so they can prepare before the lesson.

**Dating Zephaniah** — While Zephaniah’s superscription dates his ministry to the late seventh century, BCE, many scholars note that parts of Zephaniah (including today’s text) seem to address an exilic or post-exilic setting. Thus, they argue that the final version of Zephaniah did not take shape until after the Jews returned from the Babylonian exile in the late sixth or early fifth century. For a detailed defense of this view, see James D. Nogalski, *The Book of the Twelve: Micah-Malachi*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Smyth & Helwys, 2011), 697-99.

**Two good kings** — The author of 1-2 Kings, commonly known as the Deuteronomist, routinely made editorial comments as he summarized the reign of each king, most of whom were regarded as falling short of the mark. Of all the kings who ruled Judah, only Hezekiah and Josiah escaped criticism.

**A prophet priest?** — While we’ve suggested that Zephaniah may have had royal blood, he may also have come from a priestly family. When the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and burned the temple in 587 BCE, they deported all the leading figures, including the second ranking priest, whose name was Zephaniah, according to 2 Kings 25:18. We can’t know if this was the same man, but neither can we rule it out.

**You can’t blame the train** — A Youtube performance of “You can’t blame the wreck on the train” sung by the writer can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zTai3knCe5I>. The lyrics, as recorded by Don McLean, can be found at [http://lyrics.wikia.com/wiki/Don\\_McLean:You\\_Can't\\_Blame\\_The\\_Train](http://lyrics.wikia.com/wiki/Don_McLean:You_Can't_Blame_The_Train).

**Daughter Zion** — Note the references in v. 14 to “daughter Zion” and “daughter Jerusalem.” Prophetic oracles were typically cast in the form of poetry, in which Jerusalem was commonly portrayed as a woman, either as “daughter Zion/Jerusalem,” or “lady Zion/Jerusalem.” The prophecies include oracles that predict daughter Zion’s humiliation and suffering as well as her ultimate joy and cause for singing. See also 2 Kgs. 19:21; Ps. 9:14; Isa. 1:8, 62:11; Jer. 4:31, 6:2; Lam. 1:6, 2:1; Mic. 4:10, 13; Zech. 2:10, 9:9; and others.

**Prophecy and poetry** — Some years ago, as I studied this text, Zephaniah’s image of God singing for joy inspired me to momentarily wax poetic:

The human mind is capable of thinking many things;  
Imagining a way to fly to Mars and back again . . .  
Our minds can draw the sonic waves that cause a bell to ring,  
And diagram the chemicals that give the bee its sting . . .  
But things there are that far surpass the brittle human mind,  
God’s grace and loving spirit leave our earthly thoughts behind,

## Digging Deeper *continued*

To hear the joyful voice of God that sings when we're made whole —  
Your mind and ears won't help you — you must listen with your soul. (3:17)

**Joy in heaven** — Zephaniah's vision is not the only biblical image of joy in heaven. Recall Jesus' parable of the lost sheep: Jesus pictured God as a shepherd who goes in search of the one who is lost. When the shepherd finds the sheep and brings it home, *"he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance"* (Luke 15:6-7).

## The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartlege

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### What was the meaning of Zephaniah's name?

Pious Hebrews often gave their children names that incorporated God's name, either as "el" or as "yah." *El* is a generic name meaning "god," or a short form of *Elohim*, which the Hebrews used to describe God. *Yah* (sometimes spelled in Hebrew as *yahu*) is a short form of *Yahweh*, a personal name God had revealed to Moses in Exodus 3.

For example, Micah (*micah*, probably contracted from *micaiyah*) means "Who is like Yahweh?" Isaiah (*yishayahu*) means "Yahweh is salvation," and Jeremiah (*yirmiyahu*) means something like "Yahweh has exalted." Joel combines both names: *yoel* means "Yahweh is El," or "Yahweh is God."

So what does "Zephaniah" (*ts<sup>e</sup>phanyah*) mean? Note that the letter *tsamek*, which begins his name, is usually transliterated as an English "z." The first part could be from a verb (*tsaphan*) that means "to hide." In this case, it would mean "Yahweh has hidden," or "Yahweh has treasured." Some have suggested that this might reflect the dark days of King Manasseh's rule, when Zephaniah was likely born.

Several scholars have noted an interesting alternative. The first part of Zephaniah's name could also be Zaphon (*tsaphon*). Zaphon was the name of a god in the Canaanite pantheon: a high mountain in the north where the Canaanite gods supposedly lived was named for him. Its fame was so prevalent that the Hebrews used the word *tsaphon* to mean "north," and the Old Testament occasionally speaks of Mount Zaphon (Hob 26:7, Isa. 14:13). The Canaanite god Baal, who was known in many manifestations, was sometimes called Baal Zaphon.

It is possible, then, that Zephaniah's name means "Zaphon is Yahweh." If this is the case, Zephaniah's name would have been a lifelong statement that the true god, the god known to the Canaanites as Zaphon, is really Yahweh.

We cannot be sure which option is correct, but with either option, Zephaniah's life of prophecy would have begun with his name.