

# Shout Aloud

This passage from Zephaniah reminds me of an old Carter Family tune called God Gave Noah the Rainbow Sign. The song speaks of God's promise to Noah not to destroy the earth by water and then it says that it will be by fire next time. Through Zephaniah here God says that the whole world will be consumed by the fire of his jealous anger. Bear with me for a moment and I'll play it for you.

God gave Noah the rainbow sign don't you see.  
God gave Noah the rainbow sign don't you see.  
God gave Noah the rainbow sign no more water but fire next time.  
Hide in the Old Rock of Ages cleft for me.

Poor old Lazarus poor as I don't you see.  
Poor old Lazarus poor as I don't you see.  
Poor old Lazarus poor as I when he died he had a home on high.  
Hide in the Old Rock of Ages cleft for me.

East and west the fire will roll how about me.  
East and west the fire will roll how about me.  
East and west the fire will roll how will it be with my poor soul.  
Hide in the Old Rock of Ages cleft for me.

When this world's all on fire what about me.  
When this world's all on fire what about me.  
When this world's all on fire to God's bosom I'll retire.  
Hide in the Old Rock of Ages cleft for me.

I've got a home in that rock don't you see.  
I've got a home in that rock don't you see.  
I've got a home in that rock just beyond the mountain top.  
Hide in the Old Rock of Ages cleft for me.

There are many places in the Bible where God or his jealous anger is described as a consuming fire and that there will be a time when all is consumed by that fire or rather consumed by God himself. The fiery image originates with the fire and smoke that appeared on top of Mt. Sinai when God was with Moses and the Hebrews in the desert wilderness establishing the covenant and giving them the Law. In the New Testament it carries through to the tongues of fire that rested on the disciples on the day of Pentecost. The question we need to ask is how literal do we want to be about it. Are we talking about being burnt to a crisp and utterly melted away or is this consuming fire rather a way of speaking about something that is otherwise unimaginable and indescribable because of our human limitations? Who can literally describe God and the effects of the manifestation of his presence among people and in his creation? That's best done with music, poetry, and art. In the very next verse there in Zephaniah (9) the LORD says, "Then will I purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him shoulder to shoulder." It seems to me that the outcome of this consuming fire is not total destruction, but rather a refining, a purification of all peoples that brings forth faith and faithfulness from everyone. I am inclined to say that this consuming fire of jealous anger is God's ultimate bringing forth or completion of the Resurrection and New Creation that began with the Incarnation of the Son of God as Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the Holy One of Israel, the Lord of all creation. In fact, I am inclined to say this whole passage is about the day of Resurrection, purifying Judgment in the love of God, and New Creation. And, to let you in on a little secret, I am telling you something that most Old Testament scholars don't say. Because Zephaniah prophesied just fifty years before the Babylonian Captivity, they say Zephaniah's prophecy inciting Israel to shout aloud for joy in praise of God pertains to that event and the return to Jerusalem seventy odd years later of only a remnant of faithful Jews who wanted to live and worship in Jerusalem.

Their thinking goes like this. The LORD spoke through Zephaniah just after the reign of Manasseh who was the most depraved king Judah had ever known. Manasseh brought the idols of the foreign gods Baal, Astarte, and Molech into the temple and even sacrificed his own son. After a stint in a Babylonian prison, Manasseh eventually humbled himself before the LORD and was restored to his throne. He then cleaned the land of idols. But after his death, his son Amon reverted. In the wake of Manasseh, roughly between the years of from 640 to 620 BC, Zephaniah paints a picture of Jerusalem as being a city full of wealth yet also full of idols and spiritual complacency. People were saying, "The LORD will do nothing, either good or bad" particularly in response to their own rebelliousness and after seeing what the LORD did to Manasseh. Through Zephaniah the LORD calls Jerusalem, the city of wealth, a city of oppression. The officials are roaring lions. The rulers are evening wolves who leave nothing for morning. The prophets are arrogant, treacherous men.

The priests profane the sanctuary and do violence to the law. Therefore, the LORD would bring them all to ruin and their money won't save them. He would remove from the city all those who rejoice in the name they had made for themselves. Well, it appears that the LORD brought this all to fruition in 586 BC when the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem, trampled and pillaged the temple, and carried away the rich and powerful to Babylon leaving only the poor and powerless. Then, as I mentioned a moment ago, seventy years later a remnant of Jews, faithful Jews, returned to Jerusalem to worship and live.

The commentators tend to say that it was to that remnant that the LORD said, "Sing! Shout aloud! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart! The LORD has taken away your punishment; he has turned back your enemy. The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm. Do not fear! Do not let your hands hang limp. The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you. He will quiet you with his love. He will rejoice over you with singing. *The LORD says*, 'I will gather you who mourn for the appointed feasts; your reproach is a burden to you. At that time I will deal with all who oppressed you; I will rescue the lame and gather those who have been scattered. I will give them praise and honor in every land where they were put to shame. At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home. I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes."

The remnant did return, but it was far from the glorious, "Shout aloud" event that Zephaniah forth-told. If we read the prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, we find that it took a couple of generations to repair the walls of Jerusalem to make the city safe for living in and to finally get the temple in order. By that time, the zeal of those who first returned was not shared by their children and grandchildren who had benefited from their hard work and faithfulness much as those born after 1959 have waned in appreciation or forgotten the hard work those who lived through the Great Depression and WWII have invested in building life as we know it. Finally, those who returned were never free of foreign rulers and were for all shapes and purposes still exiles except they were *home*, exiles in their own land and it did not take long for their rulers to become just as corrupt as those who were carried off to Babylon in the first place.

So, I rather think that this prophecy pertains to us, the faithful remnant of humanity, the Christian Church, the disciples of Jesus Christ; those whom God is working New Creation in and through and who carry in ourselves the consuming fire of the love of God poured into us by and as the Holy Spirit who ever works to purify us that we bare more clearly the image of Christ Jesus. We are those who should, must, and do sing and shout aloud in worship because the judgment against us and its punishment has been taken away. Jesus Christ, the sacrifice that the LORD said he had prepared in Zephaniah 1:7, took that judgment and punishment upon himself and bore it away on the cross and destroyed it in death. Then the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit raised him to New Creation life and revealed him to be Lord of all. Jesus is the warrior king Zephaniah spoke of who has destroyed our greatest enemies, Sin and Death. Any judgment against us, though we still sin, and the resulting punishment that we truly do deserve, Jesus, God the Son incarnate, has removed from us. There truly is now, therefore, no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. The grace of God has prevailed against our idolatry and complacency. In the end we will stand because Jesus has stood for us. Moreover, the same Holy Spirit by whom the Father raised Jesus from the dead lives in and with us and will raise us to new life when "This world is all on fire". God is with us. Immanuel. We've nothing to fear. Don't let your hands hang limp. Raise them and shout aloud. Amen.

Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask you to stay  
Close by me forever, and love me, I pray.  
Bless all the dear children in your tender care,  
And fit us for heaven to live with you here.