"It's not your fault." I hear that line a lot these days. It was used to great effect in the movie *Good Will Hunting*, when the titular character Will, a young man with a troubled past, is confronted by his friend and mentor Sean Maguire about his self-image. In Will's case, the way his life had turned out really *wasn't* his fault, and he needed to hear that. In most other cases when I hear the phrase, well…I'm not so sure. I don't think it's very helpful when a parent tells a child that some unfortunate thing isn't their fault when really, it kind of is. I've learned myself that, even with adults, when there's a lesson to be taught, it's much more readily learned by someone who can admit that their actions are what led to some consequence.

We love to tell ourselves that bad things aren't our fault. Take the credit for the good; pass the blame for the bad, right? That's how it's been since the beginning: from Adam to Eve to the serpent. Adam even tried to pass some of the blame to God at one point. "This woman that you made, it's *her* fault!" "It's not your fault" has become something of an empty way to compliment somebody. It lets them know that, hey, you don't blame them. It's someone else's fault.

When God addresses the people of Judah through the prophet Zephaniah, though, he doesn't go that route. They were conquered by the empire of Babylon in a bloody, horrific war. It would be easy to say that it wasn't their fault: no tiny nation like Judah could hope to stand against the might of a superpower like Babylon. Well, except that they *had* stood up against such a superpower: in the days of King Hezekiah, Jerusalem was laid siege by an army of hundreds of thousands of Assyrian soldiers. Trusting in God's promise of protection, Hezekiah refused to surrender. Soon after, during the night, the angel of the Lord swept through the Assyrian camp, and the next day, 185,000 soldiers lay dead in their tents. Soon after, the remnant of Assyria's army went home, defeated.

So Judah *had* held out against imperial superpowers in the past, and they *could* hold out again—but, according to Zephaniah, they wouldn't. Why? Because Babylon was coming not as the Lord's enemy, but as the Lord's *judgment*. Judah had forsaken the Lord. They had broken his covenant, pursued false gods, refused to repent, and taken the Lord's protection for granted. "We are God's people," they said, "He won't let harm come to us no matter what." Babylon was coming to prove them wrong, and it was going to hurt.

Worse, it was entirely their fault. God had send prophets repeatedly to warn Judah to repent and turn back to him. By the time he sent Zephaniah, though, that hope was no more. Zephaniah was a prophet of doom, sent to ensure that the people of Judah knew that this defeat? This disaster? It is *entirely* their fault.

And yet, a spark of hope remained. Today's reading, taken from the very end of the book of Zephaniah, gives God's people a hope beyond their doom at Babylon's hand. Although Zephaniah's hearers would face the wrath of God for their idolatry, their descendants would yet
see victory. "Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion;" our reading begins, "shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem." Although Jerusalem herself would fall, her daughters—her descendants—would have cause to rejoice.

Why? Verse 15: "The Lord has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil." The Lord himself—no mere man—will be King of Israel. He will rescue and protect his people from the judgments against them. That word "judgments" has a certain ambiguity to it. On one hand, it refers to the moral judgments against Israel, to her guilt. On the other hand, it refers to the consequences of Israel's guilt, to the enemies of Israel triumphing over her. God promises to deal with both: not just Israel's enemies, but Israel's guilt, the ultimate enemy.

And when he does, it will be a victory unlike anything the world has ever witnessed! Verse 17: "The Lord…will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing." I love the interplay between "quiet" and "loud" here. God's love will quiet their fears and whatever else disturbs them, bring them calm, peace. God's exultation, his singing, on the other hand, will be loud in celebration! For some reason I always picture this big, bearded, stately man just dancing and singing with complete abandon when I read about God celebrating. Like he's a regal, dignified man, but at the same time he is just so overcome with joy that he can't contain himself. And at the same time, he's completely unapologetic about it; he is completely confident in how right he is to be celebrating. He's no fool.

He is so confident that in verse 18 he even interrupts people from their mourning to join in a festival. It's kind of rude to do that normally, right? You don't interrupt a funeral with festivities. There is a time to mourn, as Solomon says; to interrupt mourning is to say that they are wrong to mourn, that this isn't the time for mourning. Yet that's exactly what God is saying: his salvation will come so suddenly that he will catch the mourners at unawares. What his people lament as forever lost is the very thing he will restore to them.

This isn't just empty words or denial—this is giving back the exact thing that was once lost. In this case, that word "festival" is key: a "festival" is a religious event. God's people mourned not just the loss of a building when the temple fell; they mourned the loss of worship itself. In Babylon they were not free to worship the Lord as they pleased; they were literally cut off from him in that regard. and in winning the victory for his people, God would restore to them festival worship once more.

And not just worship, but all good things. In verse 19 God promises to save the lame, to gather the outcast, and to change their shame into praise. There's a real emphasis here on the Lord bringing his people together once more. Not all of the Israelites were led into captivity when Babylon conquered them—many fled. Some fled west to Egypt, some north to Asia Minor—in short, they were scattered everywhere. And then, of course, many of them—hundreds of thousands, if not millions—were straight-up killed. These are not just fellow countrymen; these are families. Parents and children; brothers and sisters. They were torn from
each other suddenly, never to see one another again. Yet God promises to gather them all to himself once more, that they will see one another again. "At that time," verse 20 begins, "I will bring you in, at the time when I gather you together; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes," says the Lord.

For all its fire and brimstone and judgments against Judah, Zephaniah sure ends on a high note. God had many great promises for his people, but make no mistake: their ruin was their own fault. Most of what God will save them from is the judgment that they brought upon themselves. And if you haven't figured it out yet, Zephaniah's words are intended for you, too. You, the church, are God's people just as the people of Judah were back then. The church is scattered to the four corners of the earth, separated by distance, by culture, and by language. And while there isn't always a straight-line relation between your deeds and your suffering, make no mistake: your sins and their consequences are your fault, just as much as the Babylonian conquest was the Jews' fault. All the pain and suffering of this world is due to sin, and it is due to your sin just as much as it is due to anyone else's.

That's a tough pill to swallow for those of us who hate to admit when things are our fault. And yet, admitting your fault is the first step to receiving God's promised healing. Whether it's Old Testament or New, how does God differentiate between his people and their enemies? Not by their race, for his people come from all nations. Not by their works, for his people's evil works are the reason they are suffering in the first place! Only by repentance do God's people become God's people, inheritors of God's grace.

Counterintuitively, then, the only way to receive God's grace is to be honest about how little you deserve it, how powerless you are to earn it, how the problem of sin is your problem, and you do not have the solution. You can earn God's grace no more than Judah could overcome the army of Babylon. You can save yourself from sin no more than a dead man can raise himself to life.

And a dead man raising himself to life is exactly what it took to win life for you. God's promised reign has already begun! God's promised restoration is underway! Certainly Zephaniah's promises were fulfilled in their own time, when God's people returned to the Promised Land after 70 years of captivity in Babylon, but there was a greater fulfillment to be had in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Even in the restored kingdom of Judah, the Jews were under the rule of Persia, and then Greece, and then Rome. Greater than that, they were still under the rule of sin and of death. They were still receiving the wages of sin, of their sin, of your sin. Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise to his people: the end of all judgment, the restoration of all that was lost. The Jews may have lost their homes for a time, but they and you and I and all people have lost everything to death. And until that enemy was defeated, all mankind was doomed to death and eternal judgment.
But in Jesus, that enemy is defeated. For now only in himself—his own crucifixion and victory over death were witnessed by hundreds and is testified in the words of Scripture—but the final defeat of death, the ultimate end of God's judgment against his people, will come at Jesus' triumphant return. That is when the eternal, heavenly feast will begin, when we will be united with our heavenly Father once more, gathered together with saints from every age in his presence.

For now, we live in the time between the victories. We know of Jesus' victory over death and the grave, and we cling to his promise that that victory is for us, as well. Yet his final victory has yet to come: the death of death, the end of our judgment. Your life for now is lived in eager anticipation of that final victory.

And that eager anticipation is not meant to be kept in silence, in secret. Look again at verse 20: "I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes." Your salvation is not a private matter to be kept between you and God—it is a victory to be declared from the mountaintops, to be worn proudly before all peoples!

The goal of your salvation here on earth is that you can be a beacon of God's grace to the world. The Old Testament is filled with language about the nations seeing God's goodness in Israel and praising him—today's reading is but one example of literally hundreds. And the New Testament certainly is founded on Jesus' Great Commission to go and make disciples of all nations. The book of Acts chronicles the spread of Jesus' Good News beyond the Jews to all nations, because that spread is part of the victory!

When those outside the church see God's grace in your life, it will move them to receive that grace, as well. Not all the time—ultimately it's up to the Holy Spirit who believes and who continues to reject him—but make no mistake: the Lord's goal for your life, as long as you draw breath, is to testify to his grace. He has won a great victory for you in Christ—the greatest victory—and he wants to share that victory with as many people as will accept it. But they cannot accept it without the Spirit's help, and the Spirit helps them most of all by the living testimony of his people.

Your life, your hope, was bought for you at the cost of Jesus' blood. Your condemnation was your fault, but your hope and salvation is all due to Jesus. As his child, you now have a mission: to live in a way that earns renown for him, that earns the praise of all nations. Not that they will praise you—many who see Christ in you will react with anger and animosity—but when you live for Jesus, you testify to his love to all who experience it. How they respond to that testament, well, that's on them.

Just as Jesus gave his all for you, you should give your all for him. Just as the Father celebrates his victory with exultation and singing, so your life should be a continuous festival of praise to him. May his Spirit remind you continually of all that you have to celebrate in this life and the next, in Jesus' name, amen.