

## ZEPHANIAH

### I. Name:

The name Zephaniah or in Hebrew Tsephanyah; means “Yah hides,” or “Yah has hidden.” The prophet calls himself “son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah.” The unusual fact that the prophet goes back four generations in tracing his roots is taken by many commentators as an indication that the Hezekiah mentioned is no one other than King Hezekiah of Israel. Some understand the name “Yah has hidden” to suggest that Zephaniah was hidden by YHWH during the “killing times” of King Manasseh.

### II. Place and Time of Prophecy:

The time of the prophecy is given as being “During the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah,” which places the prophet in Jerusalem between 639 and 608 BC. It makes him a contemporary of Isaiah and Micah.

King Josiah instituted his great reform in 621 BC. Scholars have argued whether Zephaniah’s prophecy should be placed before this date or after. During the restoration of the temple, the high priest Hilkiah found a copy of the Book of the Law, which was read to the king.<sup>1</sup> It is generally supposed that this book was a copy of the Pentateuch. Some go as far as to suggest that it could have been the original manuscript written by the hand of Moses, but that is only speculation. There is also no reason to believe that this temple copy of the Pentateuch was the only copy of Scripture left to the nation. It is true that Zephaniah quotes from Deuteronomy. “They will build houses but not live in them; they will plant vineyards but not drink the wine” is an almost direct quote.<sup>2</sup> But such a quote does not constitute proof that Zephaniah prophesied after the restoration of the temple, unless it could be proven that the copy of the Pentateuch found was the only remaining copy in the whole country.

*The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* observes: “There are several considerations pointing to the earlier date: (a) The youth of the king would make it easy for the royal princes to go to the excesses condemned in Zeph 1:8-9. (b) The idolatrous practices condemned by Zephaniah (1:3-5) are precisely those abolished in 621. (c) The temper described in 1:12 is explicable before 621 and after the death of Josiah in 608, but not between 621 and 608, when religious enthusiasm was widespread. (d) Only the earlier part of Josiah’s reign furnishes a suitable occasion for the prophecy. Evidently at the time of its delivery an enemy was threatening the borders of Judah and of the surrounding nations. But the only foes of Judah during the latter part of the 7th century meeting all the conditions are the Scythians, who swept over Western Asia about 625 BC. At the time the prophecy was delivered their advance against Egypt seems to have been still in the future, but imminent (1:14); hence, the prophet’s activity may be placed between 630 and 625, perhaps in 626. If this date is correct, Zephaniah and Jeremiah began their ministries in the same year.”

### III. Zephaniah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah:

Several of Zephaniah’s utterances are akin to the prophecies of Isaiah or Jeremiah. In ch. 2:14 we read: “The desert owl and the screech owl will roost on her columns.” Isaiah reads: “The desert owl and screech owl will possess it.”<sup>3</sup> Zephaniah describes Jerusalem: “This is the carefree city that lived in safety. She said to herself, ‘I am, and there is none besides me’ ” (2:15). And Isaiah says: “Now then, listen, you wanton creature, lounging in your security and saying to yourself, ‘I am, and there is none besides me. I will never be a widow or suffer the loss of children.’ ”<sup>4</sup> Both Zephaniah and Isaiah refer to the pride of Moab. Zephaniah: “I have heard the insults of Moab and the taunts of the Ammonites, who insulted my people and made threats against their land” (2:8). And Isaiah: “We have heard of Moab’s pride--her overweening pride and conceit, her pride and her insolence--but her boasts are empty.”<sup>5</sup>

Zephaniah refers, with Jeremiah, to the idolatrous worship of the heavenly bodies. Zephaniah speaks of “Those who bow down on the roofs to worship the starry host, those who bow down and swear by the

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<sup>1</sup> II Kings 22:8-10

<sup>2</sup> See Deut. 28:30

<sup>3</sup> Isa. 34:11

<sup>4</sup> Isa. 47:8

<sup>5</sup> Isa. 16:6

LORD and who also swear by Molech” (1:5). And Jeremiah warns: “They will be exposed to the sun and the moon and all the stars of the heavens, which they have loved and served and which they have followed and consulted and worshipped. They will not be gathered up or buried, but will be like refuse lying on the ground.”<sup>6</sup>

#### IV. Moral and Religious Conditions:

*The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* states the following about the moral and religious conditions about the time of Zephaniah: “The Book of Zephaniah, the early discourses of Jeremiah, and 2 Kings 21-23 furnish a vivid picture of the social, moral, and religious conditions in Judah at the time Zephaniah prophesied. Social injustice and moral corruption were widespread (Zeph 3:1,3,7). Luxury and extravagance might be seen on every hand; fortunes were heaped up by oppressing the poor (1:8-9). The religious situation was equally bad. The reaction under Manasseh came near making an end of Yahweh-worship (2 Kings 21). Amon followed in the footsteps of his father, and the outlook was exceedingly dark when Josiah came to the throne. Fortunately the young king came under prophetic influence from the beginning, and soon undertook a religious reform, which reached its culmination in the 18th year of his reign. When Zephaniah preached, this reform was still in the future. The Baalim were still worshipped, and the high places were flourishing (Zeph 1:4); the hosts of heaven were adored upon the housetops (1:5); a half-hearted Yahweh-worship, which in reality was idolatry, was widespread (1:5); great multitudes had turned entirely from following Yahweh (1:6). When the cruel Manasseh was allowed to sit undisturbed upon the throne for more than 50 years, many grew skeptical and questioned whether Yahweh was taking any interest in the affairs of the nation; they began to say in their hearts, ‘Yahweh will not do good, neither will he do evil’ (1:12). Conditions could hardly be otherwise, when the religious leaders had become misleaders (3:4). The few who, amid the general corruption, remained faithful would be insufficient to avert the awful judgment upon the nation, though they themselves might be ‘hid in the day of Yahweh’s anger’ (2:3).”

#### V. Outline of the Book:

*The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary* gives the following Outline of the Book of Zephaniah:

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|-----|---|-----------|
| I.  | The Day of the Lord prefigured                    | (1:1-3:7) |
|     | A. In judgment upon Judah and Jerusalem           | (1:1-2:3) |
|     | B. In judgment upon surrounding nations           | (2:4-15)  |
|     | C. In Jehovah’s manifestation to sinful Jerusalem | (3:1-7)   |
| II. | The kingdom prophesied                            | (3:8-20)  |
|     | A. The judgment of the nations                    | (3:8-13)  |
|     | B. The Messiah revealed as King                   | (3:14-20) |

#### VI. The Text of Zephaniah:

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|----|---|-----------|
| I. | <b>The Day of the Lord prefigured</b>       | (1:1-3:7) |
| A. | <b>In judgment upon Judah and Jerusalem</b> | (1:1-2:3) |

*1 The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah, during the reign of Josiah son of Anion king of Judah:*

*2 “I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD.*

*3 “I will sweep away both men and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. The wicked will have only heaps of rubble when I cut off man from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD.*

*4 “I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem. I will cut off from this place every remnant of Baal, the names of the pagan and the idolatrous priests<sup>5</sup> those who bow down on the roofs to worship the starry host, those who bow down and swear by the LORD and who also swear by Molech,*

*6 those who turn back from following the LORD and neither seek the LORD nor inquire of him.*

*7 Be silent before the Sovereign LORD, for the day of the LORD is near. The LORD has prepared a sacrifice; he has consecrated those he has invited.*

<sup>6</sup> Jer. 8:2

**8 On the day of the LORD'S sacrifice I will punish the princes and the king's sons and all those clad in foreign clothes.**

**9 On that day I will punish all who avoid stepping on the threshold, who fill the temple of their gods with violence and deceit**

**10 "On that day," declares the LORD, "a cry will go up from the Fish Gate, wailing from the New Quarter, and a loud crash from the hills.**

**11 Wail, you who live in the market district; all your merchants will be wiped out, all who trade with silver will be ruined~**

**12 At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps and punish those who are complacent, who are like wine left on its dregs, who think, 'The LORD will do nothing, either good or bad.'**

**13 Their wealth will be plundered, their houses demolished. They will build houses but not live in them; they will plant vineyards but not drink the wine.**

**14 "The great day of the LORD is near- near and coming quickly. Listen! The cry on the day of the LORD will be bitter, the shouting of the warrior there.**

**15 That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness,**

**16 a day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the corner towers.**

**17 I will bring distress on the people and they will walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the LORD. Their blood will be poured out like dust and their entrails like filth.**

**18 Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the LORD 's wrath. In the fire of his jealousy the whole world will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth."**

**2:1 Gather together, gather together, O shameful nation,**

**2 before the appointed time arrives and that day sweeps on like chaff, before the fierce anger of the LORD comes upon you, before the day of the LORD's wrath comes upon you.**

**3 Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the LORD's anger.**

As a young Christian, I decided to read through the whole Bible. During a break in my work at a bank in Amsterdam, Netherlands, my Bible lay open on my desk when the man who carried memos and letters from department to department passed by and asked what I was reading. I felt like hiding behind my desk when he picked up my Bible and read: "I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth," declares the LORD. "I will sweep away both men and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. The wicked will have only heaps of rubble when I cut off man from the face of the earth," declares the LORD." I expected him to exclaim: "What is this?" This man was not a Christian. I had tried to talk to him about the Lord Jesus Christ. I almost felt I owed him an apology and I looked for ways to explain away the harsh language with which Zephaniah begins his prophecy.

Some people feel that God owes them an apology, not only for what He ordered Zephaniah to say but for the calamities and disasters that sweep over this planet, the world wars, famines, earthquakes and other "acts of God." The problem is aggravated by the fact that God seems to take responsibility for the evil things men do to one another. It is as if, after for instance, King Nebuchadnezzar swept through the land and left behind a scourged earth, God says: "I did this."

It is true, of course, that evil in all its forms originates, not with God, but with Satan. But in some instances the lines seem to blur, as in the case of Job where God initiates the dialogue with Satan and clearly gives him permission to torture Job. The problem of pain remains a problem, whatever way we look at it. We believe that God is good and God is love but we often grope in the dark for points of contact that do not seem to line up between what we believe to be true and the reality we observe.

But the message of Zephaniah is not of God's harsh dealing with His people but of the consequences of sin. Zephaniah's language is borrowed from Genesis, where we read: "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the LORD said, 'I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth--men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air--for I am grieved that I have made them.'"<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Gen. 6:5-7

*The Matthew Henry's Commentary* introduces the book as follows: "The general proposition contained in it is, that utter destruction is coming apace upon Judah and Jerusalem for sin. Without preamble, or apology, he begins abruptly (v. 2): By taking away I will make an end of all things from off the face of the land, Saith the Lord. Ruin is coming, utter ruin, destruction from the Almighty. He has said it who can, and will, make good what he has said: 'I will utterly consume all things. I will gather all things' (so some); 'I will recall all the blessings I have bestowed, because they have abused them and so forfeited them.' "

God's judgment upon the whole of creation emphasizes the pivotal role man plays in it. It is because of man's moral failure that the birds of the air and the fish of the sea are affected. Man's depravity brings death to all of creation. God had intended man to rule over His creation; when man fell into sin, creation fell with him. In the words of the apostle Paul: "The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time."<sup>8</sup>

In spite of the seemingly all-inclusive language, God obviously did not intend to wipe mankind off the face of the earth. Statements as: "The wicked will have only heaps of rubble," indicate that some will survive the judgment that sweeps over the earth.

The main reason for the judgment seems to be the people's practice of maintaining the idolatrous worship of Baal and Molech, or rather maintaining of form of syncretism in which YHWH and the pagan idols are both given a place. Vs. 5 speaks of people "who bow down and swear by the LORD and who also swear by Molech." In doing so, man maintains an outward form of serving God, while in reality he pledges allegiance to Satan."

The Bible is not very explicit in its information about the worship of Baal and Molech. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* states about the worship of Molech or Moloch: "When we come to consider the nature of this worship it is remarkable how few details are given regarding it in Scripture. The place where it was practiced from the days of Ahaz and Manasseh was the Valley of Hinnom where Topheth stood, a huge altar-pyre for the burning of the sacrificial victims. There is no evidence connecting the worship with the temple in Jerusalem. Ezekiel's vision of sun-worshippers in the temple is purely ideal (Ezek 8). A priesthood is spoken of as attached to the services (Jer 49:3; compare Zeph 1:4-5). The victims offered to the divinity were not burnt alive, but were killed as sacrifices, and then presented as burnt offerings. 'To pass through the fire' has been taken to mean a lustration or purification of the child by fire, not involving death. But the prophets clearly speak of slaughter and sacrifice, and of high places built to burn the children in the fire as burnt offerings (Jer 19:5; Ezek 16:20-21). The popular conception, molded for English readers largely by Milton's '*Moloch, horrid king*' as described in *Paradise Lost*, Book I, is derived from the accounts given in late Latin and Greek writers, especially the account which Diodorus Siculus gives in his *History of the Carthaginian Kronos or Moloch*. The image of Moloch was a human figure with a bull's head and outstretched arms, ready to receive the children destined for sacrifice. The image of metal was heated red hot by a fire kindled within, and the children laid on its arms rolled off into the fiery pit below. In order to drown the cries of the victims, flutes were played, and drums were beaten; and mothers stood by without tears or sobs, to give the impression of the voluntary character of the offering."

The worship of Molech was clearly forbidden in the Old Testament. In Leviticus we read: "Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molech, for you must not profane the name of your God. I am the LORD."<sup>9</sup> And Micah's hypothetical question points to an existing practice of child sacrifice: "Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"<sup>10</sup>

It is difficult to imagine the horror of those sacrificial practices. How a nation with a spiritual heritage such as had Israel could sink to such a level of depravity is beyond our understanding. The subtle link between the worship of YHWH that was maintained and the practice of Molech worship suggested that both forms of religion were one by nature, and that God actually approved of this infanticide. We can understand how God reacts with fury to this kind of insinuation. The crimes that are committed under demonic inspiration are put on His account. This would infuriate any human being with a sense of morality. If we were in the place of God, we would also exclaim: "I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth... when I cut off man from the face of the earth."

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<sup>8</sup> Rom. 8:19-22

<sup>9</sup> Lev. 18:21

<sup>10</sup> Mic. 6:7

During the reign of Manasseh, a resemblance of righteousness must have been maintained to cover up the king's crimes against humanity. There must have been courts sessions that exhibited a resemblance of justice but that convicted innocent people. Such must have been the condition of the land when young King Josiah ascended the throne and Zephaniah began his prophetic ministry. The duplicity of the priests of Molech who, at the same time called upon the Lord God, is exposed in the words: "those who turn back from following the LORD and neither seek the LORD nor inquire of him." People who call upon the Lord must, first of all, seek His guidance. This is implied in the words "seek the LORD" and "inquire of him." The priests used the Name of the Lord as a sticker to give their satanic practices a resemblance of legitimacy.

In recent history, we have had ample illustrations of such duplicity. The Nazi troupes that that overran Europe had written on their belt buckles: "Gott mit uns."<sup>11</sup> And many of Hitler's and Stalin's purges are well documented as if the executions were legitimate cases in which justice was applied. Millions of innocent people were murdered in the name of justice in this way. But we don't have to look to the world governments alone for proof. Well-known Christian leaders have used their image to satisfy their own lustful desires and fill their own pockets. And on a lower level still, many of us try to love God and Mammon at the same time. Jesus says however: "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon."<sup>12</sup>

*The Adam Clarke's Commentary* suggest that God stretched out His hand over Judah and Jerusalem to uproot the idol worship in the great cleansing under King Josiah, but *Barnes' Notes* observes: "In this threatened destruction of all, Judah and Jerusalem are singled out, because 'judgment' shall 'begin at the house of God' (I Peter 4:17; Jer 25:29). They who have sinned against the greater grace shall be most signally punished. Yet, the punishment of those whom God had so chosen and loved is an earnest of the general judgment. This too is not a partial but a general judgment 'upon all the inhabitants of Jerusalem.'... Zephaniah distributes them in parallel clauses, 'the 'residue of Baal' and the 'name of the Chemarim.' Good and evil have each a root, which remains in the ground, when the trunk has been hewn down. There is 'a remnant according to the election of grace,' when 'the rest have been blinded (Rom 11:5,7); and there is a 'holy seed' (Isa 6:13) to carry on the line of God. Evil too has its remnant, which, unless diligently kept down, shoots up again, after the conversion of peoples or individuals. The 'mind of the flesh' remains in the regenerate also. The prophet foretells the complete excision of the whole 'remnant of Baal,' which was fulfilled in it after the captivity, and shall be fulfilled as to all which it shadows forth, in the Day of Judgment. 'From this place;' for in their frenzy, they dared to bring the worship of Baal into the very temple of the Lord (2 Kings 23:4). Ribera: 'Who would ever believe that in Jerusalem, the holy city, and in the very temple idols should be consecrated? Whoso seeth the ways of our times will readily believe it. For among Christians and in the very temple of God, the abominations of the pagans are worshiped. Riches, pleasures, honors, are they not idols which Christians prefer to God Himself?'"

The name Chemarim is not found in the newer Bible translations. It is derived from the Hebrew word *kamar*, which refers to extreme ascetic self-maceration practiced by certain idolatrous priests. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* states about them: "Who these were is not well known. The Chaldee, the Syriac, and the Arabic, call them the priests simply, which the kings of Judah had ordained. Probably they were an order made by the idolatrous kings of Judah, and called *kemarim*, from *kaamar*... which signifies to be scorched, shriveled together, made dark, or black, because their business was constantly to attend sacrificial fires, and probably they were black garments; hence, the Jews in derision call Christian ministers *kemarim*, because of their black clothes and garments. Why we should imitate, in our sacerdotal dress, those priests of Baal, is strange to think and hard to tell."

In vs. 7, Zephaniah introduces "the day of the LORD." *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* presents an article about the Day of the Lord by Henry E. Dosker, of which we copy the following: "The idea is a common Old Testament one. It denotes the consummation of the kingdom of God and the absolute cessation of all attacks upon it (Isa 2:12; 13:6,9; 34:8; Ezek 13:5; 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:11; Amos 5:18; Zeph 1:14; Zech 14:1) It is a 'day of visitation' (Isa 10:3), a day 'of the wrath of Yahweh' (Ezek 7:19), a 'great day of Yahweh' (Zeph 1:14). The entire conception in the Old Testament is dark and foreboding. On the other hand the New Testament idea is pervaded with the elements of hope and joy and victory. In the New Testament it is eminently the day of Christ, the day of His coming in the glory of His father." In Jesus' sermon in the synagogue of Nazareth, our Lord read the Scriptures from the Book of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the

<sup>11</sup> God with us

<sup>12</sup> Matt. 6:24 (NKJV)

poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn,"<sup>13</sup> but between the words "the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God" the Lord closed the scroll, indicating that the latter had not yet arrived.

Zephaniah's admonition to "Be silent before the Sovereign LORD," first of all, contrasts the worship of the Lord with the noise of the idol worship. We find an example of the racket that accompanied the service to Baal in the account of Elijah's confrontation with the priests of Baal on Mount Cannel. We read: "Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. 'O Baal, answer us!' they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made. At noon Elijah began to taunt them. 'Shout louder!' he said. 'Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.' So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed."<sup>14</sup>

The silence before YHWH is a silence of awe; it is also the silence of conviction. It is the silence of the man who was caught not wearing the appropriate clothes for the king's wedding feast. We read about him in Matthew's Gospel: "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. 'Friend,' he asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless."<sup>15</sup>

The Day of the Lord occurs several times in the history of the Kingdom of Heaven. One of its occurrences was certainly the day of the crucifixion, when the Father laid upon the Son the load of the sin of the world to expiate our common guilt. That is the most important date in the history of the universe. All the other days stand in its shadow. The day Zephaniah refers to seems to correspond to the one John saw in Revelation. We read: "And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, 'Come, gather together for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and mighty men, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great.'... The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh."<sup>16</sup> John, on the other hand, borrowed the image from Ezekiel who had said earlier: "Son of man, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: Call out to every kind of bird and all the wild animals: 'Assemble and come together from all around to the sacrifice I am preparing for you, the great sacrifice on the mountains of Israel. There you will eat flesh and drink blood. You will eat the flesh of mighty men and drink the blood of the princes of the earth as if they were rams and lambs, goats and bulls—all of them fattened animals from Bashan. At the sacrifice I am preparing for you, you will eat fat till you are glutted and drink blood till you are drunk. At my table you will eat your fill of horses and riders, mighty men and soldiers of every kind,' declares the Sovereign LORD."<sup>17</sup> That gruesome picture is borrowed from wars humans fight on earth for the purpose of awakening man's conscience to the horror of his behavior. The battlefield in John's vision was unlike the battlefields on earth in that the killing was not physical but spiritual. The victims had been killed by no ordinary sword but "with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse," which is the Word of God. The dead were spiritually dead. The difference makes the scene not better or easier to accept. It is worse to be killed by the Word of God than by the sword of man.

In Zephaniah's prophecy the line between the two is not drawn clearly. After all, God's judgment over Israel and Jerusalem would come in the form of the Babylonian army. But the prophecy suggests that the Babylonian invasion with all its horror and destruction is the lesser part of God's judgment. It would be the portal of hell, not hell itself. Jesus' words to His disciples suggest that the judgments that are carried out over places and people on earth are shadows of the judgment to come, not the actual judgment. We would think that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah would have been God's final act of judgment upon the people of those cities, but evidently there is more to come. We read in Matthew's Gospel: "If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town. I tell you the truth, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that

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<sup>13</sup> Isa. 61:1,2

<sup>14</sup> I Kings 18:26-28

<sup>15</sup> Matt. 22:11,12

<sup>16</sup> Rev. 19:17,18,21

<sup>17</sup> Ezek. 39:17-20

town.”<sup>18</sup> As in the image of John’s battlefield, so in Zephaniah’s prophecy, the destruction of Jerusalem is an image of the Day of the Lord; it is not the Day itself.

Most commentators interpret the words: “The LORD has prepared a sacrifice; he has consecrated those he has invited” as referring to the destruction of Jerusalem and the extermination of its inhabitants by the Babylonians who would do their work with gusto. That is undoubtedly the first application. But we can also look behind this image to David’s prophetic words about the sacrifice of the body of our Lord Jesus Christ. We read in the Psalms: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said, ‘Here I am, I have come--it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.’”<sup>19</sup> It is true that this application is hidden behind the obvious one but that doesn’t mean that it is not there. Man always has the choice between being sacrificed as a victim or being included in the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. The alternative for the one who refuses to accept the atonement made for his sin is to become one of the slain on God’s battlefield. The Book of Proverbs states profoundly: “The LORD works out everything for his own ends--even the wicked for a day of disaster.”<sup>20</sup>

The first to be sacrificed are “the princes and the king’s sons and all those clad in foreign clothes.” The reference is obviously to the fashionable clothing worn by the members of the royal family who refused to wear anything but imported material. *The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary* comments here: “The prophets did not care for externals of this kind, but it was evident to them that ‘as the dress, so the heart;’ that is to say, the clothes were witnesses in their esteem of the foreign inclinations of the heart.” The prophecy about this sacrifice was fulfilled when Zedekiah, the last king of Judah before the Captivity was captured. We read: “He was taken to the king of Babylon at Riblah, where sentence was pronounced on him. They killed the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes. Then they put out his eyes, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon.”<sup>21</sup>

How different that sacrifice is from the one made by those martyred for the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ! The Lord considers those, who give their lives because they love Him more than themselves, as sacrifices on His altar. That is the obvious meaning of what John saw in his vision on Patmos. Since “the life of a creature is in the blood,”<sup>22</sup> John saw in the blood that had run off the altar the souls of men. We read: “When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, ‘How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?’ Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.”<sup>23</sup>

The second category of those who will be victims to be sacrifices are “all who avoid stepping on the threshold.” The expression probably refers to an ancient incident from the days of Samuel when the ark was captured by the Philistines and placed in Dagon’s temple. Scripture records: “The following morning when they rose, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the LORD! His head and hands had been broken off and were lying on the threshold; only his body remained. That is why to this day neither the priests of Dagon nor any others who enter Dagon’s temple at Ashdod step on the threshold.”<sup>24</sup> Some scholars believe that Isaiah referred to this when he said about the house of Jacob: “They are full of superstitions from the East; they practice divination like the Philistines and clasp hands with pagans.”<sup>25</sup> *Barnes’ Notes* disagrees: “Neither language nor history nor context allow this to be understood of the idolatrous custom of Ashdod, not to tread on the threshold ... (There is a trace of this explanation in the Chaldean: ‘who walk in the laws of the Philistines,’ and in Jerome, doubtless from his Jewish teachers. Isaiah’s reproof that they have soothsayers like the Philistines, Isa 2:6, is altogether different) of the temple of Dagon. It had indeed been a strange infatuation of idolatry, that God’s people should adopt an act of

<sup>18</sup> Matt. 10:14,15

<sup>19</sup> Ps. 40:6-8

<sup>20</sup> Prov. 16:4

<sup>21</sup> II Kings 25:6,7

<sup>22</sup> Lev. 17:11

<sup>23</sup> Rev. 6:9-11

<sup>24</sup> I Sam. 5:4,5

<sup>25</sup> Isa 2:6

superstitious reverence for an idol in the very instance in which its nothingness and the power of the true God had been shown. Nothing is indeed too brutish for one who chooses an idol for the true God, preferring Satan to the good God. Yet, the superstition belonged apparently to Ashdod alone; the worship of Dagon, although another form of untrue worship, does not appear, like that of Baal, to have fascinated the Jews; nor would Zephaniah, to express a rare superstition, have chosen an idiom, which might more readily express the contrary, that they 'leapt' on 'the threshold,' not over it. They are also the same persons, who 'leap on the threshold,' and who 'fill their masters' houses with violence and deceit.' Yet, this relates, not to superstition, but to plunder and goods unjustly gotten. As then, before, he had declared God's judgments upon idolatry, so does he here upon sins against the second table, whether by open violence, or secret fraud, as do also Habakkuk (Hab 1:2-3), and Jeremiah (Jer 5:27). All, whether open or hidden from man, every wrongful dealing, (for every sin as to a neighbor's goods falls under these two, violence or fraud) shall be avenged in that day. Here again all which remains is the sin. They enriched, as they thought, their masters by art or by force; they schemed, plotted, robbed; they succeeded to their heart's wish; but, 'ill-gotten, ill-spent!' They 'filled their masters' houses' quite full; but wherewith? With violence and deceit, which witnessed against them, and brought down the judgments of God upon them."

There is in fact, as *Barnes' Notes* suggests, a clear relationship between the first table of the law and the second. The person who loves the Lord his God with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his mind, will also love his neighbor as himself. Jesus says: "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."<sup>26</sup> Dishonesty in inter-human relations can always be traced to broken relationship with God. Idolatry and robbery belong together.)

Verses 10 and 11 bring the disaster closer to home, to places that are identifiable to the people living in the city at that time. Based on details given by Nehemiah during the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, scholars have tried to determine the location of the "Fish Gate." Nehemiah mentions it after the completion of the wall during the festal parade by the two choirs. We read: "The second choir proceeded in the opposite direction. I followed them on top of the wall, together with half the people—past the Tower of the Ovens to the Broad Wall, over the Gate of Ephraim, the Jeshanah Gate, the Fish Gate, the Tower of Hananel and the Tower of the Hundred, as far as the Sheep Gate. At the Gate of the Guard they stopped."<sup>27</sup>

At the time of Zephaniah's prophecy, the Fish Gate was part of the city that had been recently restored by King Manasseh after his conversion. The Book of Second Chronicles reports: "Afterward he rebuilt the outer wall of the City of David, west of the Gihon spring in the valley, as far as the entrance of the Fish Gate and encircling the hill of Ophel; he also made it much higher."<sup>28</sup> The NKJV, as well as several of the older versions, renders "Wail, you who live in the market district; all your merchants will be wiped out, all who trade with silver will be ruined" "Wail, you inhabitants of Maktesh! For all the merchant people are cut down; All those who handle money are cut off." The Hebrew word *maktesh* literally means "mortar." It is derived from *kathash*, which means, "to butt or pound." The words obviously point to the work of restoration King Manasseh had carried out. But *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* believes that Zephaniah uses it "prophetically it is used to depict the way the inhabitants would be beaten and pounded to death, as grain is pounded in a mortar." The quarter Zephaniah speaks about must have been the commercial part of the city. The prophet promises that God will hit the city where it hurts most, in their economy. The economy has always played a major role in the life and welfare of nations. Quantity usually rates higher than the quality of life. In God's judgment both will be affected.

God presents Himself as a woman on the eve of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, who searches the house with a light to see if there are any traces of yeast left before the beginning of the feast. The "leaven" in this case is the "complacent, who are like wine left on its dregs, who think, 'The LORD will do nothing, either good or bad.'" "On this, *The Matthew Henry's Commentary* comments: "Their notions are atheistical. They could not live such loose lives but that they say in their heart, The Lord will not do good, neither will he do evil; that is, He will do nothing. They deny his providential government of the world: 'What good and evil there is in the world comes by the wheel of fortune, and not by the disposal of a wise and supreme director.' They deny his moral government, and his dispensing rewards and punishments: 'The Lord will not do good to those that serve him, nor do evil to those that rebel against him; and therefore there is nothing got by religion, nor lost by sin.' This was the effect of their sensuality; if they were not drowned in sense, they could not be thus senseless, nor could they be so stupid if they had not stupefied themselves with the love of pleasure. It was also the cause of their sensuality; men would not make a god of their belly if they had not at first become

<sup>26</sup> See Matt. 22:37-40

<sup>27</sup> Neh. 12:38,39

<sup>28</sup> II Chr. 33:14

so vain, so vile, in their imaginations, as to think the God that made them altogether such a one as themselves. But God will punish them; their end is destruction, Phil 3:19.”

Those people believed in a silent God if they believed in any God at all. There will in fact be silence on the Day of Judgment, but it will be the silence of the people who made the worst discovery of their lives. It is the speechlessness of those who find themselves on the left hand of the king to whom he will say:” ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal tire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’ They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’”<sup>29</sup> Those who believe in a silent God believe themselves exempt from acts of compassion. Only those who have a passionate love for God will have a passion for souls.

The last part of vs. 13 is a direct quotation from Moses’ great discourse in Deuteronomy: “You will build a house, but you will not live in it. You will plant a vineyard, but you will not even begin to enjoy its fruit.”<sup>30</sup>

In the fast section of this chapter, verses 14-18, Zephaniah telescopes the world’s last night into the events of the 1Babylonian invasion. The one is fused into the other and the coming of the Babylonians becomes an image of the last event in world history, the last World War. Mankind, in all its efforts to build a better world, is heading for the great disaster of Armageddon. The apostle Peter takes up Zephaniah’s prophecy: “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.”

The coming invasion is depicted in vivid colors. Different sounds melt together in the turmoil. There is the cry of anguish mingled with the shouts of the warriors, and the trumpet calling people to battle. Then all color disappears from the picture when darkness descends upon the earth and men walk around like blind people. Light, which was the first element in God’s creation, is taken away from man. The prophet Joel uses the same images to depict the day of the Lord: “Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision. The sun and moon will be darkened, and the stars no longer shine.”<sup>31</sup> And in some of Jesus’ parables darkness is the alternative to the Kingdom of Heaven. People who disregard the will of God “will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”<sup>32</sup>

The picture of death in the stanza “Their blood will be poured out like dust and their entrails like filth” lacks all the respectability that we like to accompany the funeral of a human being. Human bodies are left to rot as the ultimate insult to all dignity. We are all too familiar with these images in modern warfare.

Yet, this is not the worst that can happen to a human being; what happens to the soul is more important than what is done with our intestines after we die. Jesus warns us: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”<sup>33</sup> And it is on this point that man without God becomes most desperate. When the whole of a life has revolved around the accumulation of wealth, man will be poorer than the poorest on the day of the Lord. Zephaniah predicts: “Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the LORD’s wrath.” Silver or gold has never been able to save any soul. Peter reminds us: “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.”<sup>34</sup> Riches will be of no avail if we are not rich in God.

*Barnes’ Notes* observes: “[Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the Lord’s wrath] Gain unjustly gotten was the cause of their destruction. For, as Ezekiel closes the like description; ‘They shall cast their silver into the streets, and their gold shall be removed; their silver and their gold shall not be able to deliver them in the day of the wrath of the Lord; they shall not satisfy their souls nor fill their bowels: ‘ ‘because it is the stumbling-block of their iniquity’ ‘(Ezek 7:19). Much less shall any possession, outward or inward, be of avail in the Great Day; since in death the rich man’s ‘pomp shall not

<sup>29</sup> Matt. 25:41-45

<sup>30</sup> Deut. 28:30

<sup>31</sup> Joel 3: 14,15

<sup>32</sup> Matt. 8:12

<sup>33</sup> Matt. 10:28

<sup>34</sup> I Peter 1:18,19

follow him' (Ps 49:17), and every gift which he has misused, whether of mind or spirit, even the knowledge of God without doing His will, shall but increase damnation. 'Sinners will then have nothing but their sins.'

The fire that will ultimately consume our planet is called "the fire of his jealousy." The Hebrew word is *qin 'ah*, which means "jealousy or envy." It is closely related to the word that is used in the Ten Commandments where God forbids idolatry: "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me..."<sup>35</sup> In the context of human behavior, jealousy is not a commendable feature. Jealousy, however, is part of God's character, which makes it good and perfect. God is the measure against which all creation is to be judged. God's jealousy is His reaction to man's efforts to change the standard by placing another authority or power next to God. If God would allow an idol to stand next to Him, He would restrict His omnipotence, which would be the end of divinity. And if God were not longer God alone, all of creation would crumble. It would be man's undoing. In a way, God's jealousy is our protection and salvation. It was Moses who originally said: "For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God."<sup>36</sup>

Jealousy is always related to love. In human relations jealousy is aroused when love is spurned. The same is true of our relationship with God. James issues the warning: "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely?" God's jealousy will be directed toward us if we do not love the LORD our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our strength."<sup>37</sup>

God created man for His own glory. This is clear from Isaiah's prophecy: "Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth--everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."<sup>38</sup> When man came to the point where God had to conclude: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one,"<sup>39</sup> God offered to mankind free justification by faith in the atoning death of Jesus Christ. As we read in Romans: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."<sup>40</sup> On the last day of this world, God's fire of jealousy will consume all that has resisted the wooing of His love. That will be the end of our planet.

The opening verses of the second chapter, however, leave the door open for salvation. The call to repentance is launched to the nation as a whole, but it is obvious that the conversion of a nation consists of the sum of conversions of individuals. There is in the "Gather together, gather together, O shameful nation" a suggestion that a restoration of unity on the basis of conviction and confession of sin is the road of salvation. The word "shameful" is the translation of the Hebrew words *lo kacaph*, which literally means, "not to become pale." Other versions render the expression: "undesirable" (NKJV), "without shame" (NASU), "shameless" (TLB). Those different rendering emphasize the various shades of meaning of the word. "Shameless" seems to be closest to the original.

Shame is man's wholesome reaction to a confrontation with sin. A feeling of shame is an indication of a sensitive conscience. Israel, however, had seared its conscience; they sinned without embarrassment. What saved the nation in Zephaniah's day was the embarrassment of King Josiah. We read: "When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his robes."<sup>41</sup> Repentance restores the dignity of man. God compares the sinner with chaff, the empty hull of a grain of wheat. A sinner is usually overly impressed by the weight of his own dignity. In God's sight, sin makes us like chaff blown away by the wind. The writer of Psalm One compares the righteous to "a tree planted by streams of water ... Not so the wicked! They are like

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<sup>35</sup> Ex 20:4,5

<sup>36</sup> Deut. 4:24; See Heb. 12:29

<sup>37</sup> See Deut. 6:5

<sup>38</sup> Isa. 43:6,7

<sup>39</sup> Rom. 3:10-12

<sup>40</sup> Rom. 3:23,24

<sup>41</sup> II Kings 22:11; II Chr. 34:19

chaff that the wind blows away.”<sup>42</sup> John the Baptist announces the coming of Christ in terms similar to Zephaniah’s prediction here: “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”<sup>43</sup> The glory of God that gives us the weight of dignity will consume those who are weighed and found to be too light.

To seek the Lord in humility means to recognize our own “weightlessness” before Him. If we confess the emptiness of our life and turn to Him to be filled, the transformation that means salvation will occur.

Zephaniah’s appeal to the “humble of the land” seems to imply a ministry of intercession. Those who turn to God in obedience will not only save themselves but also those around them. Ten righteous would have saved Sodom and Gomorrah from destruction. The intercession of a few can save a nation.

The NKJV renders “all you humble of the land,” “all you meek of the earth.” The Hebrew word is *ani*, which can be translated: “poor; humble; meek.” *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* explains: “Especially in later Israelite history, just before the Exile and following, this noun came to have a special connection with those faithful ones who were being abused, taken advantage of, by the rich Isa 29:19; 32:7; Amos 2:7. The prophet Zephaniah’s reference to them as the ‘meek of the earth’ Zeph 2:3 set the stage for Jesus’ concern and ministry to the ‘poor’ and the ‘meek’ Matt 5:3,5; Luke 4:18; cf. Isa 61:1. By New Testament times, ‘the poor of the land’ were more commonly known as *am ha`arets*, ‘the people of the land.’ “When King Nebuchadnezzar carried the inhabitants of Jerusalem into captivity to Babylon, we read: “Only the poorest people of the land were left,” thus fulfilling Zephaniah’s prophecy.

The words “you who do what he commands” are also rendered differently in the older versions. The KJV reads: “which have wrought his judgment.” The implication could be that the humble people who fear the Lord are instrumental in bringing judgment upon those who do not obey. Paul suggests that the very fact that we exude the presence of Christ in our lives can be a judgment upon the unbeliever. To the Corinthian church he writes: “For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life.”<sup>44</sup> But there are also examples in which God’s judgments are linked directly to the prayers of the saints. We read in Revelation: “Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel’s hand. Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake.”<sup>45</sup>

The Hebrew word translated “judgment” or “command” is *mishpat*, which means “a verdict, a sentence.” The meaning of the Hebrew words seems to favor the thought that those who are on the Lord’s side are instrumental in the coming of His judgment. On the other hand, they may also be saved from the worst of it. This prophecy could be seen as an announcement of the rapture, which saves the church from the last phase of God’s judgment over this world during the reign of the Antichrist.

Whatever the meaning, it is also clear that none of this will happen without the prayer of God’s people. Zephaniah urges the people to pray (seek the Lord), and to maintain a holy lifestyle (Seek righteousness, seek humility). God has made the coming of His Kingdom contingent upon the prayers of His saints. Otherwise the words in the Lord’s Prayer: “Your kingdom come”<sup>46</sup> would make no sense, nor would the last prayer in the Bible: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.”<sup>47</sup> We may attribute the edict of King Cyrus, which opened the door for the Babylonian captives to return to Jerusalem, to the prayer of Daniel.<sup>48</sup> And Amos

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<sup>42</sup> See Ps. 1:3,4

<sup>43</sup> Matt 3:12

<sup>44</sup> II Cor. 2:15,16

<sup>45</sup> Rev. 8:3-5

<sup>46</sup> Matt. 6:10

<sup>47</sup> Rev. 22:20

<sup>48</sup> See Dan. 9:1-19

states: "Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets."<sup>49</sup> The intercessory prayer of God's children can change this world.

**B. In judgment upon surrounding nations (2:4-15)**

*4 Gaza will be abandoned and Ashkelon left in ruins. At midday Ashdod will be emptied and Ekron uprooted.*

*5 Woe to you who live by the sea, O Kerethite people; the word of the LORD is against you, O Canaan, land of the Philistines. "I will destroy you, and none will be left"*

*6 The land by the sea, where the Kerethites dwell, will be a place for shepherds and sheep pens.*

*7 It will belong to the remnant of the house of Judah; there they will find pasture. In the evening they will lie down in the houses of Ashkelon. The LORD their God will care for them; he will restore their fortunes.*

*8 "I have heard the insults of Moab and the taunts of the Ammonites, who insulted my people and made threats against their land.*

*9 Therefore, as surely as I live," declares the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, "surely Moab will become like Sodom, the Ammonites like Gomorrah- a place of weeds and salt pits, a wasteland forever. The remnant of my people will plunder them; the survivors of my nation will inherit their land."*

*10 This is what they will get in return for their pride, for insulting and mocking the people of the LORD Almighty.*

*11 The LORD will be awesome to them when he destroys all the gods of the land. The nations on every shore will worship him, every one in its own land.*

*12 "You too, O Cushites, will be slain by my sword."*

*13 He will stretch out his hand against the north and destroy Assyria, leaving Nineveh utterly desolate and dry as the desert.*

*14 Flocks and herds will lie down there, creatures of every kind. The desert owl and the screech owl will roost on her columns. Their calls will echo through the windows, rubble will be in the doorways, the beams of cedar will be exposed.*

*15 This is the carefree city that lived in safety. She said to herself, "I am, and there is none besides me." What a ruin she has become, a lair for wild beasts! All who pass by her scoff and shake their fists.*

*Barnes' Notes* quotes Jerome: "As Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, after visions concerning Judah, turn to other nations round about, and according to the character of each, announce what shall come upon them, and dwell at length upon it, so doth this prophet, though more briefly." And adds: "And thus under five nations, who lay west, east, south and north, he includes all mankind on all sides, and, again, according to their respective characters toward Israel, as they are alien from, or hostile to the Church; the Philistines (Zeph 2:4-7), as a near, malicious, infesting enemy; Moab and Ammon (Isa 2:8-10), people akin to her (as heretics) yet ever rejoicing at her troubles and sufferings; Ethiopians (Isa 5:12), distant nations at peace with her, and which are, for the most part, spoken of as to be brought unto her; Assyria (Isa 13-15), as the great oppressive power of the world, and so upon it the full desolation rests."

One of the standards the Lord will apply in His judgment over this world will be the attitude of the nations toward His chosen people, Israel. Moses stated: "When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set up boundaries for the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel."<sup>50</sup> That verse does not state clearly what the relationship between the rest of the world and Israel is, but it does establish a relationship. In the Old Testament prophecies mentioned above, the criterion is the nations' reaction to God's judgment over His people, which is what condemns them.

The first nation that falls under this judgment is Philistia. The Bible records tension and wars between Israel and the Philistines that spans several centuries. But nothing is known about the Philistines' reaction to the deportation of Israel into captivity. The wrath of God may have been directed toward them, primarily, because of the historic animosity between the nations. Zephaniah mentions the Kerethite separately, but according to *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, "It may be taken as certain that the Cherethites were a Philistine clan." The prophet promises that the people who would return from captivity

<sup>49</sup> Amos 3:17

<sup>50</sup> Deut. 32:8

would take this particular piece of land as their possession. *Barnes' Notes* observes: “ ‘The tract of the sea,’ which, with the rest, was assigned to Israel, which, for its unfaithfulness, was seldom, even in part, possessed, and at this time, was wholly forfeited, should be a portion for the mere ‘remnant’ which should be brought back.” The implication seems to be that, where previously the area was dotted with thriving commercial Philistine centers, it would turn into a pasture for Israel’s herds. The judgment on one would be the restoration of the other.

Next the prophet turns to the East of Israel and Judah, to the Moabites and Ammonites. *Barnes' Notes* observes about the words “the insults of Moab and the taunts of the Ammonites”: “Both words, ‘reproached, reviled,’ mean, primarily, cutting speeches; both are intensive, and are used of blaspheming God as unable to help His people, or reviling His people as forsaken by Him. If directed against man, they are directed against God through man. So David interpreted the taunt of Goliath, ‘reviled the armies of the living God’ (1 Sam 17:26,36,45...), and the Philistine cursed David ‘by his gods’ (1 Sam 17:43).”

The relationship between Israel and Moab spans several centuries. Moab, Ammon, and Israel were related because Moab and Ammon were the children of Lot’s daughters through an incestuous intercourse with their father.<sup>51</sup> It is difficult to trace the ups and downs of Israel’s relationship with Moab. Israel had been ordered to respect the territorial integrity of Moab, but Moab forfeited its favored nations status when it invited Balaam to pronounce a curse upon the people of Israel. God forbade future association with Ammon and Moab because of their attitude toward Israel when they entered the Promised Land. Moses said: “No Ammonite or Moabite or any of his descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD, even down to the tenth generation. For they did not come to meet you with bread and water on your way when you came out of Egypt, and they hired Balaam son of Beor from Pethor in Aram Naharaim to pronounce a curse on you.”<sup>52</sup>

There must have been other incidents in the relationship between Israel, Ammon, and Moab that caused God’s severe judgment upon those nations that are not recorded in the Bible. It would be hard to believe that a judgment would fall upon them that was so much harsher than that pronounced in Deuteronomy, for things that happened more than a millennium earlier. *The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary* states: “The charge refers to the hostile attitude assumed by both tribes at all times towards the nation of God, which they manifested both in word and deed, as often as the latter was brought into trouble and distress.”

The reference to Sodom and Gomorrah does not necessarily imply that Ammon and Moab had sinned in a similar way as the people who lived in the area that was turned into the Dead Sea. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is used as a general image of what can happen to a land that rejects the sovereignty of God. Moses uses it to describe the condition of the land of Israel during the captivity. We read in Deuteronomy: “The whole land will be a burning waste of salt and sulfur--nothing planted, nothing sprouting, no vegetation growing on it. It will be like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, which the LORD overthrew in fierce anger.”<sup>53</sup>

*Barnes' Notes* states: “The doom of Moab and Ammon is rather of entire destruction beyond all recovery, than of universal barrenness. For the imagery, that it should be the ‘breeding’ (literally, ‘possession’ ) ‘of nettles’ would not be literally compatible, except in different localities, with that of ‘salt pits,’ which exclude all vegetation. Yet both are united in Moab. The soil continues, as of old, of exuberant fertility; yet in part, from the utter neglect and insecurity of agriculture it is abandoned to a rank and encumbering vegetation; elsewhere, from the neglect of the former artificial system of irrigation, it is wholly barren.”

Moab’s pride had become proverbial in Old Testament times. Isaiah prophesied about Moab: “We have heard of Moab’s pride--her overweening pride and conceit, her pride and her insolence--but her boasts are empty. Therefore the Moabites wail, they wail together for Moab.”<sup>54</sup>

Vs. 11 indicates that the issue is not political rivalry but that the background of all conflict is spiritual. Behind every idol looms the shadow of Satan, the murderer of men. Moab’s chief deity was Chemosh. *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary* writes about this deity: “The national deity of the Moabites, honored with horribly cruel rites like those of Molech, to whom children were sacrificed in the fire. It is interesting archaeologically to note that the anger of Chemosh is said in the famous Moabite Stone to be the reason for Israel’s subjugation of Moab (cf. Judg 11:24). Solomon made a fatal mistake, whatever his reason

<sup>51</sup> See Gen. 19:30-38

<sup>52</sup> Deut. 23:3,4

<sup>53</sup> Deut. 29:23

<sup>54</sup> Isa. 16:6,7

might have been, of rearing an altar to Chemosh in Jerusalem (1 Kings 11:7). This abomination was not destroyed until Josiah's purge almost three centuries later (2 Kings 23:13). So infatuated were the Moabites with Chemosh that they were known as the 'people of Chemosh' (Num 21:29)."

The prophecy of the destruction of Chemosh turns out to be, at the same time, a missionary statement. At the end of world history, when the devil is thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown,<sup>55</sup> "the nations on every shore will worship [God], every one in its own land."

It is interesting to place this statement next to the opening words of Zephaniah's prophecy: "I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth," declares the LORD. 'I will sweep away both men and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. The wicked will have only heaps of rubble when I cut off man from the face of the earth,' declares the LORD." We must conclude that God wanted His prophet to issue a warning, not to announce a verdict. In his vision of the end time, peace settles upon the earth and "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea."<sup>56</sup>

The NIV is the only version I know that uses the name Cush in vs. 12. Most other translations speak of "Ethiopians." The Hebrew text uses the word *Kuwshiyim*. *Barnes' Notes* comments: "The Ethiopians were not in any direct antagonism to God and His people, but allied only to their old oppressor, Egypt. They may have been in Pharaoh Necho's army, in resisting which, as a subject of Assyria, Josiah was slain: they are mentioned (Jer 46:9) in that army which Nebuchadnezzar smote at Carchemish in the 4th year of Jehoiakim. The prophecy of Ezekiel implies rather, that Ethiopia should be involved in the calamities of Egypt, than that it should be itself invaded. 'Great terror shall be in Ethiopia,' 'when the slain shall fall in Egypt' (Ezek 3 0:4). 'Ethiopia and Lybia and Lydia etc. and all the men of the land that is in league, shall fall' 'with these,' 'by the sword' (Ezek 30:5). 'They also that' 'uphold Egypt' 'shall fall' (Ezek 30:6)."

Zephaniah's eye sweeps from the far south to the north, engulfing Ethiopia and Assyria in one grand motion. There is also a change of mode of address. Ethiopia is addressed in the second person, Assyria in the third.

*Barnes' Notes* states: "Judah had, in Zephaniah's time, nothing to fear from Assyria. Isaiah (Isa 3 9:6) and Micah (Mic 4:10) had already foretold, that the captivity would be to Babylon. Yet of Assyria alone the prophet, in his own person, expresses his own conformity with the mind of God. Of others he had said, 'the word of the Lord is against you, O Canaan, and I will destroy thee; As I live, saith the Lord, Moab shall be as Sodom. Ye also, O Ethiopians, the, slain of My sword are they.' Of Assyria alone, by a slight inflection of the word, he expresses that he goes along with this, which he announces."

*The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary* clarifies: "He does not say as an imprecation, 'May He stretch forth His hand;' but gently, as continuing his prophecies, 'and,' joining on Asshur with the rest; only instead of saying 'He will stretch forth,' by a form almost insulated in Hebrew, he says, 'And stretch He forth His Hand.' ... This is the last sentence upon Nineveh, enforcing that of Jonah and Nahum, yet without place of repentance now. He accumulates words expressive of desolateness. It should not only be a 'desolation' (Zeph 2:4,9), as he had said of Ashkelon, Moab and Amman, but a dry, parched ... unfruitful (Isa 53:2) land. As Isaiah, under the same words, prophesies that the dry and desolate land should, by the Gospel, be glad, so the gladness of the world should become dryness and desolation. Asshur is named, as though one individual (... Asshur is used in this way of the people, considered in and with their king, Isa 30:31; 31:8), implying the entireness of the destruction; all shall perish as one man; or as gathered into one and dependent upon one, its evil King. 'The north' is not only Assyria, in that its armies came upon Judah from the north, but it stands for the whole power of evil (see Isa 14:13), as Nineveh for the whole beautiful, evil, world. The world with 'the princes of this world' shall perish together... The sketching of the picture of the destruction passes from the general appearance of the city to the separate ruins, coming down from the lofty knobs of the pillars to the windows, and from these to the thresholds of the ruins of the houses."

The arrogance of Nineveh, as of all of mankind, is well expressed in the prophet's words: "This is the carefree city that lived in safety. She said to herself, 'I am, and there is none besides me.' " "The strongest nation in the world would end up in ruin and turn into a desert. Countries still call themselves "the strongest nation." In contrast to this, how liberating are Paul's words: "But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly

<sup>55</sup> See Rev. 20:10

<sup>56</sup> Hab. 2:14

await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.”<sup>57</sup> And John’s magnificent statement: “The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.”<sup>58</sup> As Christians, we are the only ones who have a reason to feel safe and boast in the fact that the meek will inherit the earth.<sup>59</sup>

*Barnes’ Notes*, on the other hand, quotes Jerome who warns against an application of this prophecy that emphasizes too much the destruction of the enemy and does not take into consideration the danger into which the pride of the believer can lead the church of Jesus Christ. We read: “It is not difficult to explain this of the world, that when the Lord hath stretched forth His Hand over the north and destroyed the Assyrian, the Prince of this world, the world also perishes together with its Princes, and is brought to utter desolation, and is pitied by none, but all hiss and shake their hands at its ruin. But of the Church it seems, at first sight, blasphemous to say that it shall be a pathless desert, and wild beasts shall dwell in her, and that afterward it shall be said insultingly over her; ‘This is the city given up to ill, which ‘dwelt carelessly and said in her heart, I and none beside.’ ‘But whoso should consider that of the Apostle, wherein he says, ‘in the last days perilous times shall come’ (2 Tim 3:1-5), and what is written in the Gospel, that ‘because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold’ (Man 24:12), so that then shall that be fulfilled, ‘When the Son of Man cometh, shall He find the faith on the earth?’ he will not marvel at the extreme desolation of the Church, that, in the reign of antichrist, it shall be reduced to a desolation and given over to beasts, and shall suffer whatever the prophet now describes.” Without entering upon a dispensational controversy in this quotation, we do well to cling to the fact that only *the meek* are called heirs and that pride in whatever form it may present itself will lead to a desert experience.

### C. In Jehovah’s manifestation to sinful Jerusalem (3:1-7)

***1 Woe to the city of oppressors, rebellious and defiled!***

***2 She obeys no one, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the LORD, she does not draw near to her God.***

***3 Her officials are roaring lions, her rulers are evening wolves, who leave nothing for the morning.***

***4 Her prophets are arrogant; they are treacherous men. Her priests profane the sanctuary and do violence to the law.***

***5 The LORD within her is righteous; he does no wrong. Morning by morning he dispenses his justice, and every new day he does not fail, yet the unrighteous know no shame.***

***6 “I have cut off nations; their strongholds are demolished. I have left their streets deserted, with no one passing through. Their cities are destroyed; no one will be left-no one at all***

***7 I said to the city, ‘Surely you will fear me and accept correction!’ Then her dwelling would not be cut off, nor all my punishments come upon her. But they were still eager to act corruptly in all they did.***

It seems that Jerome’s statement forms a solid bridge to the next section of this book. Zephaniah’s eye roves back from Assyria to Jerusalem and finds little or no difference between the city the Lord had chosen as the place of His revelation and the rest of the world.

Jerusalem is described with three words: “oppressors, rebellious and defiled.” “Oppressors” refers to the relationship of man to man, “rebellious” describes man’s relationship with God, and “defiled” depicts the moral and spiritual condition which is the result of both.

Jerusalem was meant to be “the Holy City,” the residence of YHWH. The Sons of Korah called it: “The city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells,”<sup>60</sup> and “The city of the Great King.”<sup>61</sup> But when Zephaniah prophesied, it could no longer be said: “Glorious things are said of you, O city of God.”<sup>62</sup> It is a terrible thing to realize that the glory of God’s revelation of Himself can be obscured by man’s immoral

<sup>57</sup> Phil. 3:20,21

<sup>58</sup> I John 2:17

<sup>59</sup> See Matt. 5:5

<sup>60</sup> Ps. 46:4

<sup>61</sup> Ps. 48:2

<sup>62</sup> Ps. 87:3

lifestyle. When God chose Israel to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,”<sup>63</sup> He had, to put it in human terms, a vision of “the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.”<sup>64</sup> What Zephaniah sees is not only a caricature, it is the picture of a harlot.

Instead of being as a bride who surrenders herself to her husband, Jerusalem rebelled against her God. When David captured Jerusalem with a view to make it the capital of the land, he wrote the Psalm in which he exclaimed: “Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One. ‘Let us break their chains,’ they say, ‘and throw off their fetters.’”<sup>65</sup> The city of David had returned to its original condition of rebellion.

The defilement is obvious in the corruption of the three classes that ought to have safeguarded the health and well-being of the city and its population: the rulers, the prophets, and the priests. The rulers form the secular government, the prophets ought to have been the bearers of God’s revelation, and the priests formed the bridge between heaven and earth. Originally, when Israel was still a theocracy, there was no secular government. God was the sovereign of His people and He ruled through the prophet and the priest. Israel’s demand to be like their neighbors made them like all the other nations. They had said to Samuel: “We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.”<sup>66</sup> With the exception of King David and one or two of his sons, none of Israel’s kings considered themselves to be the king of Israel “by the grace of God.”

The representatives of God on earth had become the vassals of Satan. Zephaniah describes them as “roaring lions, [as] evening wolves, who leave nothing for the morning.” Peter describes Satan in the same terms: “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”<sup>67</sup>

The Bible sanctions worldly governments. In his Epistle to the Romans, the apostle Paul states: “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God’s servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.”<sup>68</sup> That fact does, however, not license corruption in government. And, although King Josiah proved himself to be a worthy servant of the God of Israel, his government officials were, evidently corrupt. The local authorities used the power entrusted to them as a license to enrich themselves and terrorize the population. Zephaniah’s image of night prowlers “who leave nothing for the morning” suggests more than the time of the night; it stands for the power of darkness to which the oppressors were related.

The prophets are described as “arrogant” and “treacherous.” Arrogant is the rendering the NIV gives of the Hebrew word *pachaz*, which literally means, “to bubble up or froth,” or “to be unimportant.” The KJV translates it “light.” A modern synonym would be to say that the prophets were “full of hot air.” They carried no weight with God. The image if Psalm One comes to mind where we read: “the wicked are like chaff that the wind blows away.”<sup>69</sup> They are also treacherous in that they act as if they speak in the Name of the Lord and thus deceive the people. Their treachery is to the Kingdom of God. If treason on earth is considered a capital offence, how much more treason in God’s Kingdom! Jeremiah also condemned these prophets in similar terms: “ ‘Indeed, I am against those who prophesy false dreams,’ declares the LORD. ‘They tell them

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<sup>63</sup> Ex/ 19”6

<sup>64</sup> Rev. 21:2

<sup>65</sup> Ps. 2:1-3

<sup>66</sup> I Sam. 8:19,20

<sup>67</sup> I Peter 5:8

<sup>68</sup> Rom. 13:1-7

<sup>69</sup> Ps. 1:4

and lead my people astray with their reckless lies, yet I did not send or appoint them. They do not benefit these people in the least,' declares the LORD."<sup>70</sup>

The priests are accused of profaning the sanctuary. The Hebrew word is *chahal*, which literally means, "to bore," or "to wound." *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* writes about the word: "The most frequent use of this Hebrew root is in the sense of 'to pollute, defile.' This may be a ritual defilement, such as that resulting from contact with a dead body (Lev 21:4), or the ceremonial profaning of the sacred altar by the use of tools in order to shape the stones (Ex 20:25). Holy places may be profaned (Ezek 7:24); the name of God (Ezek 20:9) and even God Himself (Ezek 22:26) may be profaned. The word is often used to describe the defilement which results from illicit sexual acts, such as harlotry (Lev 21:9) or violation of one's father's bed (Gen 49:4)-- the first occurrence."

*Barnes' Notes* states: "[Her priests have polluted her sanctuary] Literally, 'holiness,' and so holy rites, persons (Ezra 8:28), things, places (as the sanctuary), sacrifices. All these they polluted, being themselves polluted; they polluted first themselves, then the holy things which they handled, handling them as they ought not; carelessly and irreverently, not as ordained by God; turning them to their own use and self-indulgence, instead of the glory of God; then they polluted them in the eyes of the people, 'making them to abhor the offering of the Lord' (1 Sam 2:17), since, living scandalously, they themselves regarded the Ministry entrusted to them by God so lightly. Their office was to 'put difference between holy and unholy and between clean and unclean, and to teach the children all the statutes which the Lord hath spoken unto them by Moses' (Lev 10:10-11); that they 'should sanctify themselves and be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy' (Lev 11:44; 19:2, etc.). But they on the contrary, God says by Ezekiel, 'have done violence to My law and have profaned My holy things; they have made no difference between holy and profane, and have taught none between clean and unclean' (Ezek 22:26). 'Holy' and 'unholy' being the contradictory of each other, these changed what God had hallowed into its exact contrary. It was not a mere short-coming, but an annihilation (so to speak), of God's purposes."

It ought to amaze us that these priest were not punished swiftly and instantly. There are examples of people in the Old Testament who met with instant retribution when they sinned against the holiness of God. We read that Uzzah died instantly when he inadvertently touched the ark. Scripture records: "When they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out and took hold of the ark of God, because the oxen stumbled. The LORD's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down and he died there beside the ark of God."<sup>71</sup> We read about King Uzziah's punishment when he entered the temple and tried to bring an illicit sacrifice: "But after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall. He was unfaithful to the LORD his God, and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense. Azariah the priest with eighty other courageous priests of the LORD followed him in. They confronted him and said, 'It is not right for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD. That is for the priests, the descendants of Aaron, who have been consecrated to burn incense. Leave the sanctuary, for you have been unfaithful; and you will not be honored by the LORD God.' Uzziah, who had a censer in his hand ready to burn incense, became angry. While he was raging at the priests in their presence before the incense altar in the LORD's temple, leprosy broke out on his forehead. When Azariah the chief priest and all the other priests looked at him, they saw that he had leprosy on his forehead, so they hurried him out. Indeed, he himself was eager to leave, because the LORD had afflicted him. King Uzziah had leprosy until the day he died. He lived in a separate house -leprous, and excluded from the temple of the LORD. Jotham his son had charge of the palace and governed the people of the land."<sup>72</sup>

Yet, here are priests who, like the sons of Eli,<sup>73</sup> habitually sinned against the Lord and seemingly got off with a warning. The warning, issued in the opening verses of this book was frightening enough, but at least it left open a way to repentance.

Together with verse 17, verse 5 of this chapter is probably the most well known of the book. Although hoologians rule the city, the prophets spout false prophecy, and holiness is polluted, the Lord is still present in Jerusalem. What Ezekiel saw in his visions, that the glory of God moved out of the temple of the Lord, leaving behind the temple as an empty hull, had not yet come.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Jer. 23:32

<sup>71</sup> II Sam. 6:6,7

<sup>72</sup> II Chr. 26:16-21

<sup>73</sup> See I Sam. 2:12-17

<sup>74</sup> See Ezek. Chapters 9-11

Since God is omnipresent, the mention of His presence in Jerusalem does not merely refer to the general sense of the word. God is present in Jerusalem in a way in which He is not elsewhere. There is a presence of God that is related to the condition of man's heart. We read in the Psalms: "The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth."<sup>75</sup> This does not refer to God's omnipresence but to the realization of His presence for those "who call on Him in truth." His presence and our truth are linked together. The lie within us will cancel out the realization of God's presence.

Micah had condemned Jerusalem and its inhabitants in similar terms: "Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money. Yet they lean upon the LORD and say, 'Is not the LORD among us? No disaster will come upon us.'"<sup>76</sup> *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* links Zephaniah's words to the question in Micah: "Is not the Lord among us?" The *Commentary* quotes Calvin: "True, He is, but it is for another end from what ye think-namely, to lead you by the example of His righteousness to be righteous. ... The just in the Lord is in the midst of you, that ye may feel His hand to be the nearer for taking vengeance for your crimes: 'He will not do iniquity' by suffering your sins to go unpunished."

*The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary* interprets the words "Morning by morning he dispenses his justice": "His justice, i.e., the righteousness of His conduct, He puts in the light every morning ... not by rewarding virtue and punishing wickedness ... but by causing His law and justice to be proclaimed to the nation daily 'by prophets, whose labor He employs to teach the nation His laws, and who exert themselves diligently by exhorting and admonishing every day, to call it to bring forth better fruit, but all in vain.'"

*The Matthew Henry's Commentary* makes the following observations: "We have here the aggravations of this general corruption of all orders and degrees of men in Jerusalem. They had the tokens of God's presence among them, and all the advantages that could be of knowing his will, with the strongest inducements possible to do it, and yet they persisted in their disobedience, v. 5.

(1.) They had the honor and privilege of the Shechinah, God's dwelling in their land, so as he dwelt not with any other people: 'The just Lord is in the midst of thee, to take cognizance of all thou doest amiss and give countenance to all thou doest well; he is in the midst of thee as a holy God, and therefore thy pollutions are the more offensive, Deut 23:14. He is in the midst of you as a just God, and therefore will punish the affronts you put upon him, and the wrongs and injuries you do to one another.'

(2.) They had God's own example set before them, in the discovery he made of himself to them, that they might conform to it: 'He will not do iniquity, and therefore you should not;' for this was the great rule of their institution, 'Be you holy, for I am holy. God will be true to you; be not you then false to him.'

(3.) He sent to them his prophets, rising up early and sending them: Every morning he brings his judgment to light, as duly as the morning comes; he fails not. He shows them plainly what the good is which he requires of them, and puts them in mind of it; he wakens morning by morning (Isa 50:4), wakens his prophets with the rising sun, to bring to light the things which belong to their peace. So that, upon the whole matter, what more could have been done to his vineyard, to make it fruitful? (Isa 5:4). And yet, after all, the unjust know no shame; those that have been unjust are unjust still, and are not ashamed of their unrighteousness, neither can they blush. If they had any sense of honor, any shame left in them, they would not go so directly contrary to their profession and to the instructions given them. But those that are past shame are past cure."

There is a tone of amazement in verses 6 and 7 about the lack of fear among the inhabitants of Jerusalem. They have witnessed the judgment of God upon other nations, which is given to them as a warning, but it has not affected their lifestyle. Jesus demonstrated the same amazement about the inhabitants of Nazareth. Mark records: "He was amazed at their lack of faith."<sup>77</sup> Sin has a dulling effect upon man's mind so that he does not recognize reality. John, in Revelation, describes the effect the discovery of reality will have upon Israel and upon the nations. "Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen."<sup>78</sup> And: "Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on

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<sup>75</sup> Ps. 145:18

<sup>76</sup> Mic. 3:11

<sup>77</sup> Mark 6:6

<sup>78</sup> Rev. 1:7

us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"<sup>79</sup>

Israel's own conquest of Canaan should have served them as an example. But it seems the only lesson people learn from history is that they do not learn lessons from history. In Zephaniah's time the memory of Assyria's conquests had not yet faded. It had even threatened Jerusalem in the days of King Hezekiah.

*Barnes' Notes* observes: "God appeals to His judgment on pagan nations, not on any particular nation, as far as we know, but to past history, whether of those, of whose destruction Israel itself had been the instrument, or others. The judgments upon the nations before them were set forth to them, when they were about to enter on their inheritance, as a warning to themselves. 'Defile not ye yourselves in any of these things, for in all these have the nations defiled themselves, which I cast out before you: and the land is defiled; therefore I do visit the iniquity thereof upon it, and the land vomiteth out her inhabitants. And ye, ye shall keep My statutes and My judgments and shall not commit any of these abominations-And the land shall not spew you out when ye defile it, as it spewed out the nations which were before you (Lev 18:24-26,28, add Lev 20:23). The very possession then of the land was a warning to them; the ruins, which crowned so many of its hilltops, were silent preachers to them; they lived among the memories of God's visitations; if neglected, they were an earnest of future judgments on themselves.

Yet God's judgments are not at one time only. Sennacherib appealed to their own knowledge, 'Behold, thou hast heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands by destroying them utterly. Have the gods of the nations delivered them which my fathers have destroyed?' (Isa 37:11,13). Hezekiah owned it as a fact which he knew: 'Of a truth, Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations and their land' (Isa 37:18). And God owns him as His instrument: 'Now I have brought it to pass, that thou shouldest be to lay waste defenced cities into ruinous heaps' (Isa 37:26); and, 'I will send him against an ungodly nation, and against the people of My wrath will I give him a charge, to take the spoil and to take the prey, and to tread them down as the mire of the streets,' and says of him, 'It is in his heart to destroy and to cut off nations not a few' ... The king of Babylon too he describes as 'the man that made the earth to tremble, that did shake kingdoms. That made the world as a wilderness, and destroyed the cities thereof' (Isa 14:16-17). Habakkuk recently described the wide wasting by the Babylonians, and the helplessness of nations before him (Hab 1:14-16)."

**II. The kingdom prophesied** (3:8-20)

**A. The judgment of the nations** (3:8-13)

*8 Therefore wait for me," declares the LORD, "for the day I will stand up to testify. I have decided to assemble the nations, to gather the kingdoms and to pour out my wrath on them- all my fierce anger. The whole world will be consumed by the fire of my jealous anger.*

*9 "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.*

*10 From beyond the rivers of Cush my worshipers, my scattered people, will bring me offerings.*

*11 On that day you will not be put to shame for all the wrongs you have done to me, because I will remove from this city those who rejoice in their pride. Never again will you be haughty on my holy hill.*

*12 But I will leave within you the meek and humble, who trust in the name of the LORD.*

*13 The remnant of Israel will do no wrong; they will speak no lies, nor will deceit be found in their mouths. They will eat and lie down and no one will make them afraid."*

God's judgment over the nations of the world will take the form of a court case in which God will be both the judge and the crown witness. There are instances in Scripture in which Satan avails himself of the process of justice to promote his own interest. In one of Zechariah's visions, the prophet sees "Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him."<sup>80</sup> And John calls Satan: "the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night."<sup>81</sup> In

<sup>79</sup> Rev. 6:15-17

<sup>80</sup> Zech. 3:1

<sup>81</sup> Rev. 12:10

Zephaniah's prophecy the roles are reversed. We would expect, however, that God would take the stand as ~f the accuser of the unrighteous. As it turns out, He appears as the defense lawyer.

There is mention of judgment and punishment, although this is not elaborated on. The fire that will consume the earth is called "the fire of my jealous anger." Peter speaks about this fire: "The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare."<sup>82</sup> But the apostle does not refer to it as a demonstration of God's jealousy. God's jealousy occurs in the context of His love relation with His people. Solomon states in Proverbs: "Jealousy arouses a husband's fury, and he will show no mercy when he takes revenge."<sup>83</sup> Jealousy is one of God's attributes. To Moses God says that His Name is "Jealous." "The LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God."<sup>84</sup> That is the reason God is so furious with Israel when they turn to idol worship. It is as the breaking of a marriage vow. We read in the Ten Commandments: "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments."<sup>85</sup> God's jealousy is not a human projection upon the divine character, as if God is above those feelings but that man attributes to Him what would be considered a human weakness. God's Name is "Jealous." If a husband is jealous because his wife is unfaithful to him, as Moses mentions in the Book of Numbers,<sup>86</sup> he exhibits what God feels about mankind in an absolute way.

The Day of Judgment, therefore, is the day of God's jealousy. It is inspired by God's eternal love for man, which man spurns.

The Hebrew word, translated "wait" is *chakah*, which means more than merely "waiting." It carries the meaning of "longing, tarrying." *The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary* explains that: "*chikkâh layehoovdh* is only used for waiting in a believing attitude of the Lord and His help (Ps 33:20; Isa 8:17; 30:18; 64:3)."

*Barnes' Notes* comments on this amazing turn of reasoning: " 'Therefore'-we should have expected, as elsewhere, 'Therefore I will visit all your iniquities upon you.' But not so. The chastisement is all veiled; the prophet points only to the mercy beyond. 'Therefore wait ye for Me.' All the interval of chastisement is summed up in these words; that is, since neither My mercies toward you, nor My chastisement of others, lead you to obey Me, 'therefore' the time shall be, when My Providence shall not seem to be over you, nor My presence among you (see Hos 3:3-5); but then, 'wait ye for Me.'"

The presence of the Lord in Jerusalem and the dispensing of His righteousness are a demonstration of His amazing grace. God's justice is not revealed in the punishment of the sinner but in the atonement for his sin. It is true that sin is punished, but all through the Old Testament, the only effective way to blot out sin was by way of killing a sacrificial animal. Atonement was always done by substitution. That is the way God's righteousness is revealed. In the New Testament, God's righteousness also means salvation for man. The apostle Paul explains in Romans: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'"<sup>87</sup>

When Zephaniah states: "Morning by morning he dispenses his justice, and every new day he does not fail," he speaks of the morning sacrifice that was being brought in the temple. Even after the city and the temple were completely reduced to rubble by Nebuchadnezzar's army, Jeremiah spoke these beautiful words: "Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."<sup>88</sup>

The tragedy of Jerusalem, however, was that the people saw the dispensation of God's righteousness, which could have meant their salvation, but they ignored it. In His jealousy, God demonstrated His eternal love to His people, hoping it would embarrass them, but they kept on sinning, committing

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<sup>82</sup> II Peter 3:10

<sup>83</sup> Prov. 6:34

<sup>84</sup> Ex. 34:14

<sup>85</sup> Ex. 20:4-6

<sup>86</sup> See Num. 5:12-31

<sup>87</sup> Rom. 1:16,17

<sup>88</sup> Lam. 3:22,23

spiritual infidelity without being in the least ashamed of what they were doing. Israel was like a woman caught by her husband in the act of adultery. The husband was willing to forgive but the wife could not bring herself to admit guilt or feel ashamed of what she had done.

The KJV renders vs. 9: "For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the LORD, to serve him with one consent." TLB reads intriguingly: "At that time I will change the speech of my returning people to pure Hebrew so that all can worship the Lord together," but that paraphrase is not really warranted by the original. The NIV's: "Then will I purify the lips of the peoples..." is quite acceptable. The Hebrew word *sap hah* can be translated "lip" as well as "language."

The diversity of languages we know at present can be traced to the confusion of languages during the construction of the Tower of Babel. The Genesis account states: "The LORD said, 'If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.'"<sup>89</sup> People are separated by their different languages. Or we could rather say that different languages are an outward demonstration of what separates people. George Bernard Shaw remarked wittingly about the British and the Americans that they were separated by the same language. The actual cause of that separation, however, is man's separation from God. Babel is more a monument of rebellion against God than a monument of language barriers. When fellowship with God is restored, people speak the same language, whatever tongue they may use. I have often experienced the unity of the Spirit when I had to speak to a congregation through an interpreter whose language I did not understand. The Book of Acts informs us: "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had."<sup>90</sup> Whether the purification of the lips of the people all over the world will mean that they will all pronounce the same words in the same way is not necessarily what is meant here. On the day of Pentecost, we read that the message was clearly proclaimed to each in his own native language.<sup>91</sup>

*Barnes' Notes* observes: "Christians, as Christians, speak the same language of Faith, and from all quarters of the world, one language of praise goes up to the One God and Father of all." The same *Commentary* quotes Augustine, who wrote: "God divided the tongues at Babel, lest, understanding one another, they should form a destructive unity. Through proud men tongues were divided; through humble Apostles tongues were gathered in one. The spirit of pride dispersed tongues; the Holy Spirit gathered tongues in one. For when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples, they spake with the tongues of all, were understood by all; the dispersed tongues were gathered into one. So then, if they are yet angry and Gentiles, it is better for them to have their tongues divided. If they wish for one tongue, let them come to the Church, for in diversity of the tongues of the flesh, there is one tongue in the Faith of the heart."

*The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary* stresses the fact that the grammatical construction links the promise to the announcement of judgment. We read: "The train of thought is this: the believers are to wait for the judgment, for it will bring them redemption... The construction in both passages is a pregnant one. God turns to the nations a pure lip, by purifying their sinful lips, i.e., He converts them, that they may be able to call upon Him with pure lips. Lip does not stand for language, but is mentioned as the organ of speech, by which a man expresses the thoughts of his heart, so that purity of the lips involves or presupposes the purification of the heart. The lips are defiled by the names of the idols whom they have invoked (cf. Hos 2:19; Ps 16:4). The fruit of the purification is this, that henceforth they call upon the name of Jehovah, and serve Him." The same *Commentary* remarks that "Luther has adopted the rendering: 'Then will I cause the nations to be preached to otherwise, with friendly lips, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord.'"

*The Matthew Henry's Commentary* observes: "Converting grace refines the language, not by making the phrases witty, but the substance wise. Among the Jews, after the captivity, there needed a reformation of the dialect, for they had mingled the language of Canaan with that of Ashdod (Neh 13:24). and that grievance shall be redressed. But that is not all: their language shall be purified from all profaneness, filthiness, and falsehood. I will turn them to a choice language (so some read it); they shall not speak rashly, but with caution and deliberation; they shall choose out their words. Note, An air of purity and piety in common conversation is a very happy omen to any people; other graces, other blessings, shall be given where God gives a pure language to those who have been a people of unclean lips."

<sup>89</sup> Gen. 11:6,7

<sup>90</sup> Acts 4:32

<sup>91</sup> See Acts 2:8

Most versions translate the Hebrew word *Kuwsh*, “Ethiopia.” The NIV keeps the reading “the river Cush.” Genesis states that Cush was the father of Nimrod.<sup>92</sup> This would make us turn in the direction of Mesopotamia. But the name Cush is also given to Ethiopia. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* explains the confusion of interpretations regarding which river is meant: “This may denote both Africa and the southern Arabia. Bochart thinks that Arabia Chusaer is meant; and that the rivers are Besor, which flows into the Mediterranean; Rhinocorura, which flows into the Lake Sirbonis; Trajanus Amnis, which flows into the Red Sea; and the river Corys. Calmet thinks that these rivers mean the Nile River, which by seven mouths falls into the Mediterranean. The Nile comes from Ethiopia, properly so called; and runs through all Egypt, and falls into the sea at that part of Arabia which the Scripture calls Cush or Ethiopia.”

More interesting than the location of the river is the fact that the people, that inhabit the edge of the known world at the time of Zephaniah’s writing, are said to bring offerings to the Lord. A superficial reading of vs. 10 suggests that the dispersed Jews will return to their homeland and bring offerings to the Lord. Some commentators, however, link this prophecy to the one by Isaiah, in which the offerings brought are the Jewish people and the ones who bring them are the heathen nations. We read in Isaiah:” ‘And they will bring all your brothers, from all the nations, to my holy mountain in Jerusalem as an offering to the LORD--on horses, in chariots and wagons, and on mules and camels,’ says the LORD. ‘They will bring them, as the Israelites bring their grain offerings, to the temple of the LORD in ceremonially clean vessels. And I will select some of them also to be priests and Levites,’ says the LORD.”<sup>93</sup> *The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary* comments: “They are presented to the Lord by the converted Gentiles as *minchâh*, a meat-offering, i.e., according to Isa 66:20, just as the children of Israel offered a meat-offering. In the symbolism of religious worship, the presentation of the meat-offering shadowed forth diligence in good works as the fruit of justification. The meaning is therefore the following: The most remote of the heathen nations will prove that they are worshippers of Jehovah, by bringing to Him the scattered members of His nation, or by converting them to the living God. We have here in Old Testament form the thought expressed by the Apostle Paul in Rom 11, namely, that the Gentiles have been made partakers of salvation, that they may incite to emulation the Israelites who have fallen away from the call of divine grace. The words of the prophet treat of the blessing which will accrue, from the entrance of the Gentiles into the kingdom of God, to the Israelites who have been rejected on account of their guilt, and refer not only to the missionary work of Christians among the Jews in the stricter sense of the term, but to everything that is done, both directly and indirectly, through the rise and spread of Christianity among the nations, for the conversion of the Jews to the Savior whom they once despised.”

We are amazed when we realize that this prophecy about Israel’s return to Palestine was pronounced before the Southern Kingdom had even been taken into captivity. Zephaniah only saw telescopically one single return, whereas from our perspective we see the two millennia of Diaspora that separated the two events. At present we are, obviously, not at the stage yet where “The remnant of Israel will do no wrong; they will speak no lies, nor will deceit be found in their mouths. They will eat and lie down and no one will make them afraid.” The ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy has not yet occurred.

Recent history has not borne out the fulfillment of this prophecy. The refusal of the British Empire to allow the Jews to return to Palestine between the two world wars, and immediately following WWII strongly contradicts this promise of the nations of the world bringing their offering to Jerusalem. And when the State of Israel was proclaimed in 1948, the reaction of the surrounding nations was a far cry from what Zephaniah predicted. The promise seems to be that, as the above-mentioned *Keil & Delitzsch Commentary* observes, the nations of this world will be so saturated with the Gospel message of salvation that their testimony will overwhelm the Jewish remnant in this world. This seems to be the meaning of Isaiah’s prophecy: “The LORD has made proclamation to the ends of the earth: ‘Say to the Daughter of Zion, “See, your Savior comes! See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.”’<sup>94</sup> Both prophets looked far beyond the horizon of their own time as well as beyond ours.

The NIV renders vs. 11: “On that day you will not be put to shame for all the wrongs you have done to me.” The NKJV reads: “In that day you shall not be shamed for any of your deeds in which you transgress against Me.” The Hebrew word *buwsh* literally means, “to pale.” The word can be used in the sense of being put to shame as well as becoming ashamed. The words suggest the picture of the return of Christ, when the

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<sup>92</sup> Gen. 10:8

<sup>93</sup> Isa. 66:20,21

<sup>94</sup> Isa. 62:11

nation of Israel will recognize that in Peter's words: "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."<sup>95</sup> Zechariah foretells that day when: "They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son."<sup>96</sup> The apostle John puts this in a universal context by saying: ~Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen."<sup>97</sup>

The strange phenomenon when a person recognizes the importance of Jesus' crucifixion for his personal life is that there is a mixture of embarrassment and relief. We may feel embarrassed about the fact that our sins brought Jesus to the cross, but God does not embarrass us by reminding us of that fact. That must be the ultimate meaning of Zephaniah's words: "On that day you will not be put to shame for all the wrongs you have done to me."

God's removal from the city of "those who rejoice in their pride" does not necessarily mean that certain individuals will be evicted from Jerusalem but it may mean that people who rejoiced in their pride are being reduced to humility upon the recognition of the cross of Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. The people remain the same but the hearts are changed.

*The Pulpit Commentary* States about this kind of conversion: "They shall no longer exult in the exclusiveness of their privileges, or feel a vain-glorious confidence in their own election, or the sanctity of their temple or its provision of worship. The Gentiles should be admitted to the covenant, and share in their privileges. Here we see adumbrated the nature of the Christian Church, an organized body no longer local, insulated, but Catholic—a spiritual temple open to all believers."

The description of the inhabitants of the New Jerusalem sounds beautiful. They will be meek and humble, and trust in the Name of the Lord. They "will do no wrong; they will speak no lies, nor will deceit be found in their mouths. They will eat and lie down and no one will make them afraid." A closer look at the Hebrew words used, however, does not seem to give much reason for exultation. The KJV renders vs. 12: "I will also leave in the midst of thee an afflicted and poor people, and they shall trust in the name of the LORD." The Hebrew words used are *'ani* and *dal*. Both words are almost synonymous. *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* describes *'ani* as a person who "lives from day to day and is socially defenseless, being subject to oppression." Regarding *dal*, the *Dictionary* states: "The word may connote social poverty or lowliness. As such, *dal* describes those who are the counterparts of the great: 'Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty: but in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbor' Lev 19:15; cf. Amos 2:7."

The glorious remnant of the Lord's people does not arouse our envy. They rather fit Paul's description of the church: "Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: 'Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.'"<sup>98</sup>

We often look at the Lord's description of the form in which He comes to us in our fellowmen: "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."<sup>99</sup> We understand this to mean that we have to be alert to recognize the Lord of the universe in the person who is less privileged than we are. But in Zephaniah's description, we are not the benefactors to others; we become the ones who are dependent upon the benevolence of others. God purposely denies us certain privileges in order to open our eyes to what is of ultimate importance. "He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had

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<sup>95</sup> Acts 2:36

<sup>96</sup> Zech. 12:10

<sup>97</sup> Rev. 1:7

<sup>98</sup> I Cor. 1:26-31

<sup>99</sup> Matt. 25:36,37

known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”<sup>100</sup>

Throughout the ages, both Israel and the church of Jesus Christ, have struggled to worm their way out from under this predicament. We want glory that is outwardly recognizable, that shines and glitters, whether it is real gold or not. Most of us suffer from some sort of spiritual myopia. The apostle Paul kept the right perspective when he wrote: “Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”<sup>101</sup> The people Zephaniah describes will not be found in the *Who’s Who?* of this world but they will be exempt from the fear that plagues the wealthy. “They will eat and lie down and no one will make them afraid.” Their greatest protection is their own clear conscience.

## **B. The Messiah revealed as King**

(3:14-20)\*

*14 Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem!*

*15 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.*

*16 On that day they will say to Jerusalem, “Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp.*

*17 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.”*

*18 “The sorrows for the appointed feasts I will remove from you; they are a burden and a reproach to you.*

*19 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.*

*20 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,” says the LORD.*

It is hard to imagine greater contrast in moods than is presented between the beginning and the end of this book. Zephaniah began his prophetic utterance by saying: “I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth” and he ends with a vision of God Almighty singing to His people in exuberant joy. We like to think that the God who reveals Himself in these last verses is the real God. The one who shouted so angrily at the world in the opening verses is someone else, or else He didn’t really mean it that way. We are unable to reconcile the two. Yet, there is only one God. The in Deuteronomy reads: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.”<sup>102</sup> The same God who said: “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness,”<sup>103</sup> is the one of whom the apostle Paul writes: “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.”<sup>104</sup> The two extremes are reconciled only in the cross of Jesus Christ. Zephaniah preaches the Gospel of the cross without ever mentioning it.

Having said this, let us have a closer look at the exuberance of God’s joy over the ones He has redeemed. Vs. 14 is an invitation to sing. We could call it an invitation to the dance, one of the wildest and most high-spirited ones ever performed. God wants the daughters of Jerusalem to be glad with all their hearts. The daughters of Jerusalem are the people who are born in the city in the spiritual sense of the word. The Sons of Korah express this truth prophetically in the beautiful Eighty-Seventh Psalm:

“He has set his foundation on the holy mountain;  
the LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob.  
Glorious things are said of you, O city of God: *Selah*

“I will record Rahab and Babylon among those who acknowledge me--Philistia too, and Tyre, along with

<sup>100</sup> Deut. 8:3

<sup>101</sup> II Cor. 4:16-18

<sup>102</sup> Deut. 6:4

<sup>103</sup> Jer. 31:3

<sup>104</sup> Rom. 1:18

Cush--and will say, 'This one was born in Zion.'  
Indeed, of Zion it will be said, 'This one and that one were born in her, and the Most High himself will establish her.'

The LORD will write in the register of the peoples: 'This one was born in Zion.' *Selah*  
As they make music they will sing, 'All my fountains are in you.'"

So, the daughters of Jerusalem are the worldwide congregation of those who have been born again by the Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ, and whose "fountains" are in the Holy City. They are called "daughters" not because of their gender but because of their fellowship with Christ, who is the bridegroom of the church. Speaking about God, C. S. Lewis, in his book *That Hideous Strength*, writes: "What is above and beyond all things is so masculine that we are all feminine in relation to it." God wants the bride of His Son to be glad beyond intoxication.

The reason, or rather the mode, is explained in the next verse. "The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy." It is because of the atonement of our sins on the cross that we can allow letting ourselves go into unbridled joy. The cross represents the greatest paradox of the universe. It is the epitome of man's shame and of God's love and righteousness. It is paradoxical that we can glory in the cross, but we do well to do so. The real reason for joy, however, is the fact that God has created us to be the objects of His eternal love. That is why we say that atonement is the mode, rather than the reason.

The second part of the verse speaks of the backing off of the enemy. Satan, the one who started it all, has been exposed and defeated. Henceforth we are under the eternal protection of the Almighty. The presence of Immanuel, God with us, means deliverance from fear. Man's ultimate fear is the fear of death. The writer of the Hebrew Epistle expresses this so beautifully: "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."<sup>105</sup> Even though we are still mortals, living on earth with the prospect of dying one day, we have no reason to fear the last enemy. He who overcame is with us.

Although this joy of the Lord is an eternal principle there is an intersection with time. This is obvious from the words in vs. 16, "On that day..." Zephaniah was looking forward to it prophetically; for us "that day" lies both in the past and in the future. The events of salvation have taken place in history in the death and resurrection of our Lord; they will be completed at His return. In the meantime, Jerusalem is still a city under siege. The enemy still surrounds it and has, up to a point, penetrated it. But his chance to ever overrun it is nil. Jesus has said to Peter: "On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."<sup>106</sup> He has also said: "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."<sup>107</sup> We who are born in Zion and who live there may be under siege, but "The LORD, the King of Israel, is with [us]," and "The LORD [our] God is with [us], he is mighty to save."

Bible translators do not agree on the translation of vs. 17. The NIV renders: "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 NASU reads: "The LORD your God is in your midst, a victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy, *He will be quiet* in His love, He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy." The KJV has: "The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; *he will rest* in his love, he will joy over thee with singing." TLB paraphrases: "For the Lord your God has arrived to live among you. He is a mighty Savior. He will give you victory. He will rejoice over you with great gladness; *he will love you and not accuse you.*" The Interlinear Transliterated Bible renders the Hebrew text: "The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing." Finally, The Amplified Bible has the following reading: "The Lord your God is in the midst of you, a mighty One, a Savior—Who saves! He will rejoice over you with joy; He will rest [in silent satisfaction] *and* in His love He will be silent *and* make no mention [of past sins, or even recall them]; He will exult over you with singing."

The question that stands out is what is meant by "he will rest in his love." The more modern translations suggest that God gives rest to the person who accepts His love. The older ones see God's rest as something God experiences Himself and maybe shares with humans. Undoubtedly, a whole gamut of meaning

<sup>105</sup> Heb. 2:14,15

<sup>106</sup> Matt. 16:18

<sup>107</sup> John 16:33

is packed in the verse. *Barnes' Notes* suggests: "We have 'joy' here for 'joy' there; 'singing' or the unuttered unutterable jubilee of the heart, which cannot utter in words its joy and love, and joys and loves the more in its inmost depths because it cannot utter it. A shadow of the unutterable, because Infinite Love of God, and this repeated thrice; as being the eternal love of the Ever-blessed Trinity. This love and joy the prophet speaks of, as an exuberant joy, one which boundeth within the inmost self, and again is wholly 'silent in His love,' as the deepest, tenderest, most yearning love broods over the object of its love, yet is held still in silence by the very depth of its love; and then, again, breaks forth in outward motion, and leaps for joy, and uttereth what it cannot form in words, for truly the love of God in its unspeakable love and joy is past belief, past utterance, past thought."

*The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary* quotes Calvin, who wrote: "He assumes the person of a mortal man, because, unless He stammers in this manner, He cannot sufficiently show how much He loves us. Thy God will therefore be quiet in His love, i.e., this will be the greatest delight of thy God, this His chief pleasure, when He shall cherish thee. As a man caresses his dearest wife, so will God then quietly repose in thy love." *The Commentary* states: "Silence in His love is an expression used to denote love deeply felt, which is absorbed in its object with thoughtfulness and admiration, and forms the correlate to rejoicing with exultation, i.e., to the loud demonstration of one's love. The two clauses contain simply a description, drawn from man's mode of showing love, and transferred to God, to set forth the great satisfaction which the Lord has in His redeemed people, and are merely a poetical filling up of the expression, 'He will rejoice over thee with joy.' This joy of His love will the Lord extend to all who are troubled and pine in misery."

Great thinkers, as is obvious from the above, have seen in Zephaniah's expression of God's feelings toward us an anthropomorphism, that is projecting on God feelings and attitudes that are basically human, not divine. I tend to disagree. Since we are created in God's image and likeness, our emotions reflect what is felt at the heart of the Eternal. God has feelings of love that words cannot express. Even the Logos, the eternal Word, has no words to express the deepest depths of God's soul. What God feels toward us is beyond description.

There is also no contradiction between God's silence and God's singing. After all, music is a better vehicle to articulate emotions than words. It is the highest form of poetry. God's silence makes His singing "A Song Without Words." The very fact that we are the objects of this kind of love ought to reduce us also to silence also. In David's words: "There will be silence before You, and praise in Zion, O God."<sup>108</sup>

The NIV's rendering of vs. 18 doesn't seem to be a particularly good one: "The sorrows for the appointed feasts I will remove from you; they are a burden and a reproach to you." The Interlinear Transliterated Bible reads: "Them that are sorrowful for the solemn assembly, I will gather of thee, who are of it was a burden to whom the reproach." The NKJV seems closer to the original with: "I will gather those who sorrow over the appointed assembly, who are among you, to whom its reproach is a burden."

Most commentators agree that "The sorrows for the appointed feasts" refers to the emotions of those who were taken into captivity, although this event was, at the moment of this prophecy, still in the remote future. *The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary* comments: "The salvation held up in prospect before the remnant of Israel, which has been refined by the judgments and delivered, was at a very remote distance in Zephaniah's time. The first thing that awaited the nation was the judgment, through which it was to be dispersed among the heathen, according to the testimony of Moses and all the prophets, and to be refined in the furnace of affliction. The ten tribes were already carried away into exile, and Judah was to share the same fate immediately afterwards. In order, therefore, to offer to the pious a firm consolation of hope in the period of suffering that awaited them, and one on which their faith could rest in the midst of tribulation, Zephaniah mentions in conclusion the gathering together of all who pine in misery at a distance from Zion, and who are scattered far and wide, to assure even these of their future participation in the promised salvation." *The Matthew Henry's Commentary* observes: "Because they are dispersed; there is no temple to come up to, or, if there were, no people to come up to it; so that the solemn feasts and sabbaths are forgotten in Zion (Lam 2:6). The restraining of public assemblies for religious worship, the scattering of them by their enemies, or the forsaking of them by their friends, so that either there are no assemblies or not solemn ones, is a very sorrowful thing to all good people. If the ways of Zion mourn, the sons of Zion mourn too. And hereby they make it to appear that they are indeed of Zion, living members of that body with the grievances of which they are so sensibly affected. What is the great matter of sorrow to Zion's mourners, when Zion is in mourning? Many are her calamities. The city is ruined, and the palaces are demolished; trade is at an end, and the administration of public justice; but all these are nothing to them in comparison with the desolations of the

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<sup>108</sup> Ps. 65:1 (NASU)

sanctuary, the destruction of the temple and the altar, to attend on which, in solemn feasts, all Israel used to come together three times a year. It is for those sacred solemn assemblies that they are sorrowful.”

The darting back and forth of the prophetic eye from present conditions to future events, from the pain of suffering to ultimate consolation creates a pregnant atmosphere. The consecutive concept of time is almost completely lost in Zephaniah’s prophecy. The promise of a point in time when God wipes away all tears does not cancel the coming judgment that will cause a cataract of weeping. We cannot overestimate the depth of suffering of those who would see the ruin of the city and the destruction of the temple. Jeremiah’s tears are a clear testimony. The cruelty with which the Babylonians would carry out God’s judgment upon God’s people is comparable to what Hitler did to the Jewish population of Europe in the twentieth century. We read about Daniel’s “upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God.”<sup>109</sup> That picture shows us that for the Jews in captivity the only thing that was left to them was a memory of the time in the past when God revealed Himself on earth. It was like people going to a cemetery to pray on the grave of a loved one. With the temple, all the temple rituals disappeared, together with the appointed feasts. All that was left of Judaism was a memory.

Zephaniah’s look into the future when God would comfort those who were suffering was probably the strongest possible warning that could be given to the people who were living at the time of this prophecy. In his book *A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens lets the ghost of Christmas take Scrooge to the tomb that bears his own name. For Scrooge, that vision is the last drop in the bucket. It jolts him back to the reality of his wretched life and makes him decide to mend his ways before the coming of judgment. That is the approach the prophet takes here. Jesus uses the same method in His story of the rich man and Lazarus.<sup>110</sup>

At the same time, this prophecy would provide the people who were descending into this deepest darkness with the comfort needed to see them through. For most of us the problem of pain is that we are unable to see through it to what lies beyond. Suffering tends to draw the focus to the present, as it did with Job. We cannot see through the moment of pain to the God who embraces us in the silence of His love. We believe that God’s love ought to cancel judgment and its consequences. It is hard for us to believe that God’s love actually triggers judgment and suffering. John’s Gospel states: “Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. *Yet* when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.”<sup>111</sup> The Greek text doesn’t even have “yet” which the NIV inserts.

Thus the prophecy speaks particularly to those who would be taken into captivity. Daniel clung to the promise in Jeremiah’s letter to the captives.”<sup>112</sup> We read: “In the first year of Darius son of Xerxes (a Mede by descent), who was made ruler over the Babylonian kingdom- in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.”<sup>113</sup> Daniel’s prayer was pivotal in the return to Jerusalem of Israel’s remnant. So Zephaniah’s prophecy will have been “light at the end of the tunnel” for those who had lost all hope of salvation.

The most amazing part of this prophecy, however, is that when it was spoken the Babylonian empire had not yet risen to power. The Babylonian captivity was still beyond the horizon. Also, of those who were taken to Babel, few if any returned. Their children and grandchildren did but not those who had been led away. Finally, when the Jews did return, they could hardly be depicted as receiving “honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth.” Nehemiah gives the description: “Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. They said to me, ‘Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.’”<sup>114</sup> We can only conclude that God intended to restore their fortunes and to “give [them] honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth” but Israel was not ready for it. At the time of blessing, they failed to open their hands to receive it.

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<sup>109</sup> Dan. 6:10

<sup>110</sup> Luke 16:19-31

<sup>111</sup> John 11:5,6

<sup>112</sup> See Jer. 29:10

<sup>113</sup> Dan. 9:1-3

<sup>114</sup> Neh. 1:2,3

This brings us to the following conclusion: God's view of history is quite different from ours. A thousand years is as one day for Him. As Peter states: "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day."<sup>115</sup> God addresses three or four generations as if they were one. It is difficult for us to see history in this perspective. Secondly, God's willingness to bless and restore often fails to take effect because we are not interested in being blessed and restored. It took Nehemiah's vision to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and restore honor to the nation. Corrie ten Boom once said about some missionaries that they had given all to the Lord but they had not taken all from Him. This can be applied to many Christians in general. The measure of blessing God wants to pour out over us is beyond our wildest imagination. Few of us are ready for it.

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* gives the following summary of this book, which forms a worthy conclusion of our own study:

"(1) Filthiness of heart and oppression in practice entail a heritage of 'woe.' Such was the state of Jerusalem (Zeph 3:1). Nor would she profit even by 'correction' (Zeph 3:2). Disobedience to 'the voice' of the Lord, distrust of His word, were her great sins, and the source of all her other transgressions. No wonder, then, that she 'drew not near to her God.' Let us avoid her sins, as we would escape her punishment. Let us 'draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to us' (James 4:8).

(2) The presence of the 'just Lord in the midst' of an apostate people (Zeph 3:5), so far from saving them from wrath, only brings it the nearer to them. Where the 'prince,' 'judges,' and 'nobles' are rapacious, and God's ministers are 'light and treacherous,' God must indicate His own righteousness by punishing the guilty.

(3) God's 'unfailing' patience in 'bringing His judgment to light,' sparing no pains to lead His people from iniquity to repentance, might be supposed to be enough to melt the hardest heart. 'But the unjust knoweth no shame' (Zeph 3:5). Had Jerusalem taken warning by the judgments of God on foreign nations (Zeph 3:6-7), and on the kingdom of the ten tribes, her 'dwelling' would not have been 'cut off.' But she was at as much pains to 'corrupt' and destroy herself as God was at to reform and save her. So the fatal stroke, long deferred by the forbearance of God, at last fell. Let us take warning by her example, and learn that outward privileges, abused and slighted only increase men's condemnation.

(4) The effect of the judgments of God will at last be, that the elect remnant will be moved by the Spirit of God to 'wait upon Yahweh' (Zeph 3:8). Then shall He pour out 'the fire of His jealousy' on the 'assembled' enemies of His people. He 'will be jealous for His land, and pity His people' (Joel 2:18). And the result of the fearful punishment of the God-opposed nations shall be, that 'the Lord will turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord, to serve Him with one consent' (Zeph 3:9). Lips polluted with sin, blasphemy, and idolatry heretofore, shall then be purified by the Spirit of God, and through the blood of Jesus Christ. The nations that remain after God's judgments on the rebels shall, with conjoint effort, putting as it were all shoulders together (margin, Zeph 3:9), serve Him, Disunion of heart, indicated by the Babel-confusion of tongues, shall cease; and all 'with one mind and one mouth shall glorify God' (Rom 15:6). The nations shall gladly bring as an 'offering' to the Lord 'His dispersed' people from all the distant regions wherein they are now scattered (Zeph 3:10).

(5) The characteristics given of those who shall share in that coming blessedness are such as are common to all the true people of God, of every age and every country. God will exclude all boasting. They that pride themselves on outward spiritual privileges, as the Jews of old 'rejoiced in their' temple on God's holy mountain, which was their 'pride,' shall at last be taken away 'out of the midst' of the true Israel. The spiritually 'poor,' who have no self-sufficiency or haughtiness, who are 'an afflicted people,' as their Lord was 'afflicted' (Isa 53:4), and who 'trust in the name of the Lord' alone (Zeph 3:12), shall be 'left' as heirs of the coming glory and blessedness. Let us see that we have the marks of the saved 'remnant of Israel' 'not doing iniquity, nor speaking lies' (Zeph 3:13); being 'Israelites indeed, in whom is no guile' (John 1:47). Let us search our motives, that there be no latent hypocrisy or self-deceit, 'no deceitful tongue found in our mouth.' Then shall the Lord at His coming cause us to 'feed and lie down' (Zeph 3:13) in heavenly pastures, as His sheep, 'in whose mouth is found no guile,' and who 'are without fault before the throne of God' (Rev 14:5).

(6) The true Israel may well 'be glad and rejoice with all the heart' (Zeph 3:14), in anticipation of the day when the Lord shall have 'cast out her enemy,' Satan, and Satan's representative, Antichrist, and when she 'shall not see evil anymore' (Zeph 3:15). Though the promise belongs to the literal Israel, it also belongs to the spiritual. And it should cause the fearful believer to take courage, and 'lift up the hands that hang down' (Zeph 3:16; Heb 12:12). Now, it is true, 'sorrow' and 'reproach' (Zeph 3:18) are often the portion of

<sup>115</sup> II Peter 3:8

God's people; but all this is coming to a glorious end. Instead of their past 'shame,' God 'will make them a name and a praise among all people' (Zeph 3:20). Instead of the mocking of enemies, and even at times the hiding of God's countenance, because of temporary backslidings, the true Israel shall experience in all its fullness the precious promise realized, 'The Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; He will save, He will rejoice over thee with joy; He will rest in His love; He will joy over thee with singing' (Zeph 3:17)."

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