



# Zephaniah

Impending Judgment  
& Distant Hope

**Grace Baptist Church  
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# ZEPHANIAH

## TITLE AND WRITER

The title of the book comes from the name of its writer. Most scholars believe that "Zephaniah" means "Hidden by Yahweh." It is believed that Zephaniah was the great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah of Judah (1:1). If Zephaniah was a descendant of King Hezekiah, he would have the most royal blood in his veins of all the prophets except for David and Solomon. Zephaniah lived in Jerusalem, in the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

## DATE

Zephaniah ministered during the reign of King Josiah of Judah (640-609 B.C.). Zephaniah's reference to the future destruction of Nineveh (2:13) definitely fixed his writing before that event in 612 B.C. His contemporaries were Nahum, Habakkuk, and Jeremiah.

## THEOLOGY

Theologically, Zephaniah stresses the sovereign justice of the LORD (Yahweh) and His willingness to receive the repentant. He also emphasizes the wickedness of man.

## MESSAGE

Zephaniah contains more references to "the day of the LORD" than any other Old Testament book. This phrase sometimes refers to the past, sometimes to the near future, sometimes to the distant future, and sometimes to the far distant, eschatological future. The phrase always refers to some period of time in which God is working in the world in a recognizable way. It usually refers to a time of judgment, but sometimes it refers to a time of blessing; but it is a day which the LORD is obviously at work in man's affairs on earth.

Wherever we find the phrase "the day of the LORD," it always suggests a contrast with the "day" of man. The 'day of man' is any day when *man* appears to be in control of human affairs on earth. The 'day of the LORD' is any day when *God* is clearly in control of human affairs; it is a day of God's judgment and/or blessing.

The "day of the LORD" that Zephaniah predicted was an eschatological day ("relating to judgment and final destiny of humankind") in which God would judge the people of Judah and Jerusalem. This judgment will take place during the first part of the eschatological "day of the LORD", the period we refer to as the Tribulation. Zephaniah also predicted restoration following judgment, which refers to the second part of the eschatological "day of the LORD", the period we refer to as the Millennium.

But Zephaniah also presents an eschatological "day of the LORD" even after the Millennium. That "day of the LORD" will be the judgment of the LORD at the end of the Millennium, including the destruction of the present earth and heavens, which will be followed by the creation of *new heavens* and a *new earth*.

Zephaniah reveals three things about the coming "day of the LORD:" its content, its extent, and its intent. The content of the "day of the LORD" is that God will visit earth with direct and positive retribution, executing vengeance on humanity in cataclysmic judgment (1:14-16). The extent of this judgment will be discriminating as God's people, Israel, will be the special target of this judgment, though all humanity will also suffer (1:12). The intent of this judgment is the creation of a new order, with God Himself ruling mankind (3:17), which will be the Millennial reign of Christ first, and then the Eternal State.

## APPLICATION

It is our responsibility to live holy and godly lives as we anticipate the coming of "new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness will dwell" (2 Pet. 3:11-13). We need to be diligent to be found at peace with God, "spotless and blameless" in our lives (2 Pet. 3:14). We need to be on guard that we do not fall away from our own faithfulness and that we continue to "grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior

Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18). Rejoicing and responsible living: these characteristics need to distinguish our lives as we anticipate the "day of the LORD".

Zephaniah's prophecies are all about "the day of the LORD." He revealed two things about this "day." First, it would involve judgment (1:2—3:8), and second, it would eventuate in blessing (3:9-20). The judgment portion is the larger of the two sections of revelation. This "judgment followed by blessing" motif is common throughout the Prophets. Zephaniah revealed that judgment would come from Yahweh on the whole earth, Judah, Israel's neighbors, Jerusalem, and all nations.

The arrangement of this judgment section of the book is chiasmic. A chiasm is a literary device in which a sequence of ideas is presented and then repeated in reverse order. The result is a "mirror" effect as the ideas first presented are "reflected" back in the passage written.

**Chiasm:**

- A Judgment on the world (Universal) - 1:2-3**
- B Judgment on Judah - 1:4—2:3**
- C Judgment on Israel's neighbors - 2:4-15**
- B' Judgment on Jerusalem - 3:1-7**
- A' Judgment on the all nations (Universal) - 3:8**

**THE DAY OF THE LORD'S JUDGMENT – ZEPHANIAH. 1:2—3:8**

Zephaniah's prophecies are all about "the day of the LORD." He revealed two things about this "day." First, it would involve judgment (1:2—3:8), and second, it would eventuate in blessing (3:9-20). The prophecy of judgment (1:2 – 3:8) is the larger of the two sections of revelation. Zephaniah reveals that judgment will come from the LORD upon on the whole earth, Judah, Israel's neighbors, Jerusalem, and all nations.

*Chapter 1 chiasm:*

- A Universal judgment 1:2-3*
- B Judgment on Judah 1:4-6*
- B' Judgment on Judah 1:7-13*
- A' Universal judgment 1:14-18*

**Zephaniah 1:2-3 - The Judgment of the World (Universal Judgment)**

Zephaniah immediately presents a graphic description of the universal judgment on mankind and the earth that comes in the "Day of the LORD." His introduction has been compared to a "punch to the gut – Rambo style"; a direct approach where he swings first, connects to the mid-section and then punches again – before anything is said. The judgment described in verses 2 and 3 is similar to the universal judgment which occurred when the LORD judged sinful man with the universal flood judgment that came upon the earth (Gen. 6-8).

**1:2** – The LORD reveals that He will "completely remove / utterly consume" (meaning "to gather and take away, to remove, to destroy") everything "from the face of the earth" (cf. 2 Pet. 3:10-12). This is one of the most explicit announcements of the total devastation of planet Earth in the Old Testament (cf. Isa. 24:1-6, 19-23). While it may involve some hyperbole, it clearly foretells a devastating worldwide judgment.

**1:3** – In this verse Zephaniah moves from the general statement of judgment to more specific details of the LORD's universal judgment. This impending judgment on earth will extend to the land (man and animals), to the air (birds) and to the water (fish). Interestingly, these four created beings are listed and judged in the reverse order of God's creation; fish (Gen. 1:20a), birds (Gen. 1:20b), animals (Gen. 1:24) and man (Gen. 1:26).

So in essence this destructive judgment is a kind of reversal from creative acts, as this judgment is experienced by all life on the land, in the air and in the water.

The LORD's judgment of fish, birds, animals and man will create "ruins / rubble / stumbling blocks" that He will "consume." These 'ruins' may refer to what is left after the judgment of the LORD has occurred, or it may be what is left from false religions and their worship areas – but whatever is left will be "consumed" by the LORD's judgment.

The LORD will also "cut off" (meaning "to destroy, consume, to cut-in-half, perish, lose") man in this judgment. The universal destruction of "man" described here points to and (I believe) is limited to the wicked (cf. Jer. 25:30-33) because Zephaniah specifically calls out and identifies a remnant in 3:8-13.

*Does this prophecy refer to the judgments that will come during the Tribulation (Rev. 6—18) or at the end of the Millennium (2 Pet. 3:10; Rev. 20:11-15)? In view of what follows in this chiasm describing judgment, especially 3:8 - the parallel passage to 1:2-3, I think it refers to the Tribulation judgments. Why is this important to understand, because the LORD can return at any time? What is our spiritual relationship with the LORD – believer, unbeliever? What is the hope of our future – heaven or unknown?*

### **Zephaniah 1:4-6 - The Judgment on Judah**

**1:4** – The LORD announces that He would "stretch out" His "hand against Judah" and the people "of Jerusalem"—in judgment. "Stretching out the hand" is a figure of speech that implies a special work of punishment. The LORD promises to "cut off the remnant/every trace of Baal" meaning the worshippers of Baal who remained in Judah. The worship of Baal (the Canaanite god of fertility which involved sexual acts as a part of worship) was a constant source of temptation for Israel as Israel would try to worship Baal and the LORD at the same time. This mix was the cause for the LORD to judge Israel.

Zephaniah identifies two classes of priests that will be judged by the LORD. One group was the pagan priests (priests for idols) and the other group was idolatrous Levitical priests who had defected from the worship of the LORD. The LORD's judgment would remove every vestige of pagan worship as well as the termination of the priests of Baal and the unfaithful priests of The LORD and any memory of them.

**1:5** - The LORD will also judge those who worshipped "the host of heaven" (meaning the sun, moon, stars, and planets), which the idolatrous Israelites did on their flat "housetops" (cf. Deut. 4:19; Acts 7:40-43). The Israelites would build altars on their rooftops to provide a clear view of the sky to worship these idols. This idolatry persists today by those who believe in horoscopes.

The LORD will also judge the Judeans who worshipped both the LORD and "Milcom". It is believed that "Milcom" probably represents all foreign gods, with a probable reference to "Molech", the god of the Ammonites. To "swear" by a deity meant to pronounce an oath that called on that deity to punish the oath-taker if they failed to do what they promised to do under that oath. To "swear" by another god involved acknowledging its authority over the LORD, which God prohibited in Israel. This is known as syncretism. Syncretism exists today whenever someone worships the LORD but at the same time chooses something over Him; this is pretending to serve the LORD but giving of themselves to other things and other priorities that take their time, treasure and talent.

"Milcom" could have been spelled "malcam," meaning "their king." If this were the case "their king" could be a sarcastic allusion to Judah's unfaithfulness. Despite their outward actions to give the LORD His proper due, they really regarded a pagan god as their sovereign ruler.

**1:6** - Judgment would come upon Judah to those people who had departed from loving and following the LORD, and had stopped praying to Him. They might not have participated in pagan idolatry, but if their love had grown cold, they were still guilty (cf. Rev. 2:1-7). They may have been those who had never known, nor cared to know the LORD – they were ones who were apathetic and indifferent. The LORD commanded His people to love Him wholeheartedly (cf. Deut. 6:5). They may have forgotten Him, but He had not forgotten them.

Zephaniah identified three types of idolatry: the overtly pagan, the syncretistic, and the religiously indifferent; and all three would be judged by the LORD. Zephaniah described the LORD's judgment of Judah without specifying exactly when He would judge them. Most of what Zephaniah prophesied would be fulfilled, at least initially, in 586 B.C.; but the LORD will also judge Israel in the Tribulation (cf. Jer. 30:7; Rev. 6-18). This is an example of a prophet's foreshortened view of the future, in which he could not see the difference in time between some events that he predicted (cf. Isa. 61:1-3; Dan. 11:35-36).

### **Zephaniah 1:7-13 - The Objects of Judah's Judgment**

**1:7** – This is the first reference to the “day of the LORD” by Zephaniah, and it is a reference to a time of judgment and great sacrifice. As noted previously, the “day of the LORD” is often a time when God clearly works to judge mankind for willful sin; and in view of the coming judgment for idolatry, the Judeans were called upon to “be silent” or quiet before the LORD. The Judeans had no defense for their idolatry. The LORD was punishing them for their disobedience to His covenant commands; now was His time to enact just judgment.

Zephaniah announces that the “day of the LORD” is near (‘at hand’). The LORD had prepared “a sacrifice”, which was Judah (cf. Isa. 34:6; Jer. 46:10). Judah was prepared by the LORD to be eaten (just as a sacrificial animal was prepared for sacrifice to be eaten) by His invited guests. The LORD's invited guests to eat the prepared sacrifice were the Babylonians (cf. Jer. 10:25; Hab. 1:6). God's chosen people who were being sacrificed to the Babylonians were the overtly pagan, syncretic and religiously indifferent Jews living in Judah.

**1:8** – When the LORD judges Judah by slaughtering Judah like a sacrifice, He will “punish the princes and the king's children.” His judgment begins with the leadership of Judah – as they had not lead Judah to following the LORD and the covenant commands, but had adopted the customs and idolatrous practices of pagans. The “princes and the king's children” refer to the future rulers of Judah because they would be responsible for the spiritual conditions in Judah. Josiah's sons did indeed suffer the LORD's punishment. Jehoahaz was taken captive to Egypt (2 Kings 23:34). Jehoiakim was defeated by Nebuchadnezzar and died in Jerusalem (2 Kings 24:1-6). Josiah's grandson, Jehoiachin, was taken captive to Babylon (2 Kings 24:8-16). The last son of Josiah to rule over Judah, Zedekiah, was blinded and also taken captive to Babylon (2 Kings 24:18—25:7).

The reference to wearing “foreign garments/foreign apparel” is evidence that the leadership of Judah had adopted the fashion of dress from Nineveh and Babylon; thereby expressing love and support for non-Israelite values. Jewish dress was distinctive (Num. 15:38) so to dress like pagan cultures publicly demonstrated a turning away from the LORD.

**1:9** - The LORD would also punish those who “leap over the threshold/avoid stepping on the threshold.” There are various interpretations of this phrase. One – Jews who eagerly hurry from their homes to oppress and plunder the poor. Two – Jews who followed a Philistine superstition of not stepping on a threshold because it would bring bad luck (1 Sam. 5:5). Three – Jews who plundered their neighbors so they could fill the temple with gifts taken through “violence and deceit.” Four – Jews who claimed their neighbors' houses as

their own. Five – Jews who worshiped pagan deities in the temple courts that had been established for the worship of the LORD.

The phrase “violence and deceit” does provide some guidance on the interpretation of “leap over the threshold/avoid stepping on the threshold.” “Violence and deceit” indicate robbery and/or extortion for material gain. Most pagan deities required monetary gifts to be given as a part of the worship or as objects of sacred worship. In light of this – preference could be given to an interpretation of 1:9 to be: “The LORD will punish Jews who used violence and deceit to plunder others to gain objects to offer in worship to pagan deities.”

**1:10** – Zephaniah proclaimed that when the LORD brought judgment on Judah, there would be crying out (a lament would come forth) from various parts of Jerusalem; meaning that destruction would occur in all parts of the city as the city and all of its inhabitants were being destroyed.

The "Fish Gate" was a gate in Jerusalem's north wall, close to the fish market (cf. 2 Chron. 33:14; Neh. 3:3; 12:39), through which the fishermen normally entered the city with their catches. Also, it was through this gate that Nebuchadnezzar entered Jerusalem, since he invaded it from the north. The modern name of this gate today is the Damascus Gate.

The "Second /New Quarter" was a district of Jerusalem northwest of the temple area (cf. 2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chron. 34:22). "The hills" may refer to Jerusalem as a city, or the hills on which Jerusalem stood, or the hills surrounding the city, or any combination of these locations. A ‘wailing’ and ‘loud crashing’ would come from these areas as the Babylonian army advanced into Jerusalem, destroying the city of Jerusalem and killing all of its inhabitants.

**1:11** – Zephaniah then singled out those who were businessmen and merchants of Jerusalem. The “inhabitants of Maktesh (‘the Mortar’) were the businessman located in the market or business district of Jerusalem. This section of Jerusalem may have received the name "mortar" (meaning bowl) because it lay in the somewhat geographically depressed Tyropoeon Valley. The primary trade in the Tyropoeon Valley of Jerusalem was banking, trading gold and silver – and lending money at high interest rates.

The merchants and businessmen were to "wail," because the LORD’s judgment was coming; and the coming judgment would “cut” them “down” and “cut” them “off.” They would literally be wiped out and silenced; their business would cease to exist. Why this severe judgment? Because money had become their “god” and their covetousness was ruling and controlling their life. Do we suffer from that today?

**1:12** – Zephaniah tells the Jews in Judah that the LORD will make a diligent, comprehensive, careful search the inhabitants of Jerusalem – not one individual would be missed – so no one would go unpunished. And He would punish the people: 1) whose love for Him had “settled into complacency” (a term referring to a thickened crust that forms on wine when it is left undistributed for a long period of time – it is stagnated), and 2) who concluded that He was indifferent, complacent and would not act. Their complacency had led them to believe that the LORD was similarly complacent. Is that our view of the LORD today???

J. Sidlow Baxter stated; “The popular attitude today is exactly that of Zephaniah's time—'The Lord will not do good, neither will He do evil,' that is, God doesn't act in human affairs: He neither blesses nor punishes: the

world is governed by 'natural laws,' and God doesn't interfere with these laws to give supposed answers to prayers. God's existence is remotely admitted; but His interest and activity in human affairs is denied."

**1:13** – Zephaniah closes with a three-part proclamation. The wealth of the Jews in Judah will become “plunder / booty” (taken away and consumed) and their homes will be destroyed as the LORD promised (Deut.28:30). They would "build houses" but they would not be able to live in them and they would "plant vineyards" but not be able to harvest their crop or "drink their wine" (cf. Lev. 26:32-33; Deut. 28:30, 39; Amos 5:11; Mic. 6:15). Their apathy would lead them into the LORD's judgment – and away from His blessing.

*Is this occurring today? The issues identified by Zephaniah are relevant and applicable to us today. The LORD desires to be actively involved in our lives, but are we focused more on money, homes, material things or self? Or are we apathetic toward the LORD, not believing that He is active in human affairs today?*

### **Zephaniah 1:14-18 - The Devastation of the LORD's Universal Judgment**

Zephaniah's third picture of the day of the LORD describes the devastation of the judgment that will occur. Zephaniah's description of the day of the LORD is vivid and relentless. The content of 1:14-18 appears to point to a “near” fulfillment as well as a “far” fulfillment.

**1:14** - Zephaniah declares that the "great day of the LORD" was "near," very near, and "coming very quickly." Grammatically this verse stresses the word “near”, just like the use of the emphatic “near/at hand” in 1:7. The judgment of the LORD was coming quickly – the day would soon arrive when the LORD would act in carrying out His judgment! When it came, the people would cry out bitterly because that day would involve fierce fighting.

Zephaniah wrote this shortly after 622 B.C. In 605 B.C, 17 years after Zephaniah wrote this prophecy, Judah was defeated by Babylon; again in 597 B.C. Judah was overrun by Nebuchadnezzar; and finally in 586 B.C. Judah was conquered and completely destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. Zephaniah's prophecy was fulfilled in its entirety within 36 years of Zephaniah's declaration of it.

**1:15-16** – In these verses Zephaniah wanted to emphasize, even more strongly, the danger the complacent Jews in Judah faced. He described the effects of the “day of wrath” on people by using five synonymous word pairs. It would be a day marked by emotional “trouble/anguish” and “distress”; as well as by physical “devastation/desolation” and “desolation/destruction”; as well as through terror described as “darkness and gloom,” and “clouds and thick darkness/blackness”. It would be a day of tumult, described as “trumpet/blast and alarm/battle cry.” The “fortified cities” of Judah would face invasion, and the “high corner towers” of their walls would come under siege (the cities were defenseless against invasion). When Nebuchadnezzar overran the cities of Judah in 586 B.C., the prophetic words of Zephaniah rang true as this prophecy was fulfilled.

**1:17** - The LORD's judgment would “distress” His people so severely that they would grope around as though they were “blind.” His judgment came upon His people because they had sinned against Him (cf. Deut. 28:28-29). His judgment was so severe that the people of Judah's “blood” would lie all over the ground like common “dust,” and their dead “flesh” would lie piled up in the streets like putrid, decaying “dung.”

*We have a tendency to categorize our sins into the serious, the mediocre, and the insignificant. Yet the LORD does not categorize sin – sin is sin and His statement 'they have sinned' is sufficient reason for the LORD to judge. Do we view sin as the LORD views sin?*

**1:18** – “Near” perspective: The Jews in Judah would not be able to buy themselves out of their trouble when the LORD poured forth His "wrath" in judgment of their sin. The wealth of the Jews will not be able to buy peace.

“Far” perspective: The LORD will devour the whole earth with "the fire" of His jealous rage, which is provoked by the sin of the Jews and all mankind. The LORD has a passion that all follow Him, not false gods or self, which is sin. In His judgment of sin, He will completely destroy "all the inhabitants of / all who dwell on the earth" (cf. vv. 2-3; cf. Joel 2:1-11).

The “day of the LORD” in this passage is comprehensive in nature. It is prophetic to the Jews in Judah, fulfilled by Babylon. But the “near” fulfillment is a preview of the “far” fulfillment, as other passages in scripture align and support.

*Are we serious in living our life in obedience to the LORD’s command and desire? Or are we satisfied in categorizing and rationalizing our sin?*

### **Zephaniah 2:1-3 - A call to repentance**

Zephaniah, having described the “day of the LORD” judgment on Judah now addresses the primary purpose of this prophecy – to bring the Jews in Judah to repentance. In Zephaniah 2:1-3, the LORD, through Zephaniah, mercifully calls and appeals to His people to repent to avoid the punishment destined to come on them if they did not repent. Matthew Henry wrote: “The prophet meant in that terrible description of approaching judgments not to drive the people to despair, but to drive them to God and to their duty—not to frighten them out of their wits, but to frighten them out of their sins.”

**2:1-2** - Zephaniah calls for the people of Judah to "gather ... together," in a nationwide public assembly (or as a collective whole), to repent (cf. Joel 2:12-14). He called them an “undesirable nation/shameful nation”, which means that Judah, as a nation, was no longer sensitive to the LORD and their need to obey His commands. They, as a nation, had become lawless and shameless in their sin; sin had hardened the nation’s sensitivity to sin.

The urgency of Zephaniah’s appeal was real – as he uses the word “before” three times in verse 2. Judah needed to repent before it was too late – before the LORD's decree to punish them took effect. The nation of Judah could prevent the LORD’s judgment if their repentance was immediate, just like Nineveh had experienced. The phrase “passes like chaff / sweeps on like chaff” functions as a parenthesis to strength the use of “before” in the first clause. Imminent repentance was imperative be the “day of the LORD” was rapidly approaching – repentance was necessary before His "burning anger / fierce wrath" (judgment) was released upon them.

**2:3** – This verse expresses the key thought for Zephaniah. Here Zephaniah makes a play on words with his own name that means "Hidden by Yahweh." The Hebrew word *satar* is the root of the word translated "hidden." *Satar* is a synonym of *saphan*, which supports the meaning of Zephaniah’s name. Therefore Zephaniah’s name has a connection with his message of preservation for the godly remnant.

Zephaniah urges those Judeans who know the LORD to continue steadfast in their walk with Him. He encourages the “meek / humble” (those who follow the law of the LORD – the faithful remnant) to continue to

be obedient to the LORD, to continue to seek Him in prayerful dependence, to continue to manifest the fruits of repentance. They were to "seek" (pursue) three things – 1) the LORD, 2) righteousness, and 3) humility. Why?

They needed to continue to pursue righteous behavior, and to place themselves under the LORD's sovereign authority, by listening to Him and obeying Him because there was probable reward. If they did this, the LORD might "hide" them when He poured out His "anger" on the unrepentant. God did protect some Judeans ("the poorest") from destruction when the Babylonians invaded (cf. 2 Kings 24:14-16).

*Repentance is open to anyone. Individuals who humble themselves in repentance will be saved from an eternal hell. Dr. David Allen stated: "This is a beacon of hope for the committed, not an escape clause for the half-hearted." All people need to seek the Lord by repenting of their sin; this is God's command (Acts 17:30) and it is His desire (II Pet. 3:9).*

#### **ZEPHANIAH 2:4-15 - JUDGMENT ON ISRAEL'S NEIGHBORS**

The LORD had used the nations surrounding Judah and Israel to punish His people, but He would not permit those nations to go unpunished. Also, the nations were guilty of leading Judah and Israel to stumble by their idolatrous practices. Zephaniah revealed that judgment was not only coming to Judah but was also headed for the nations around Judah. Through the LORD's leading, Zephaniah identified nations that lived in four directions from Judah to represent that the LORD's judgment will come upon all nations as each nation represented a point on a compass. Philistia laid west of Judah, Moab and Ammon east, Ethiopia south, and Assyria north.

Zephaniah prophesied to the people of Judah **about** these nations rather than **to** these nations themselves. It is possible that these nations might have heard about Zephaniah's prophecies. His prophecies about the nations reminded the Judeans that the LORD was sovereign over all the earth, and that He was not just singling out Judah for punishment.

#### **Zephaniah 2:4-7 - Judgment coming on Philistia**

**2:4** – Zephaniah declares that destruction would come upon four of the five cities of Philistia – Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod and Ekron. The cities were listed in order from south to north. Gath was the only city in Philistia that was omitted; and it is thought that Gath was omitted because it had not recovered from King Uzziah's destruction of it (II. Chron.26:6) and Hezekiah's keeping it under subjection (II Kings 18:8).

It is interesting that "Gaza" and "abandoned" sound similar in Hebrew, just as "Ekron" and "uprooted." The phrase "being driven out / drive out at noon" for Ashdod may imply **an unexpected time**, since people normally rested during the hottest part of the day.

**2:5** - Zephaniah announces "woe" on the "Cherethites / Kerethites / Emigrants." The identity of these peoples is uncertain but the name literally means "nation of the Cretans." These peoples inhabited the Mediterranean "seacoast" and the name "Canaan" also refers to the coastal plains of Philistia. The LORD's announcement of judgment is very clear and it is catastrophic – complete destruction is coming - none of the inhabitants of the coast of Philistia will be left. The LORD promised to "destroy" them and their land, the coastal plain of Canaan, so no one would live there any longer.

Pharaoh Neco II of Egypt (609-594 B.C.) initially fulfilled this prophecy as he attempted to consolidate the area west of the Euphrates against Babylon (cf. Jer. 47).

**2:6-7** – Zephaniah prophesied that the Philistine land along the seacoast, after the LORD’s judgment, would become so depopulated that it would become pastures for the herding of sheep; and its caves would become shelters for shepherds and pens for their sheep.

After the LORD’s judgment of Judah and the nation of Philistia, the surviving remnant from Judah would take possession of the coastal plain and pasture their sheep there. They would also take over the "houses" in "Ashkelon" and make them their homes.

The LORD will intervene and care for this remnant and restore them to their promised land (cf. 3:20). This remnant is the object of the love of the LORD who cares for and restores His people – because Judah’s future occupancy of this territory is guaranteed by the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 15:18-20).

*How does this apply to us today? Is God’s Word secure? Can it be trusted? Do we understand God’s hatred of sin? Do we know true repentance in our own life?*

### **Zephaniah 2:8-11 - Judgment coming on Moab and Ammon**

**2:8** – Zephaniah turns his attention from the Philistines in the west to Moab and Ammon in the east. Moab and Ammon were nations descended from Lot’s daughters (Gen. 19:30-38), so they were blood relatives to Judah. Both nations had reproached and reviled the Israelites in their history as they had repeatedly tried to destroy God's chosen people (cf. Num. 22; 24:17; Judg. 3:12-14; 10:7-9; 11:4-6; 1 Sam. 11:1-11; 2 Sam. 10:1-14; 2 Kings 3). Moab and Ammon were consistent in their arrogant abuse and ridicule of the Israelites.

**2:9** – Because of their habitual hostility toward the Israelites, the LORD made a solemn oath (He swore by Himself - "As I live!") that He would destroy these nations (cf. Isa. 15—16; Jer. 48:1—49:22; Ezek. 25:1-14; 35; Amos 1:11—2:3) just as He had done to Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:23-29). Moab and Ammon’s destruction would be so complete they would become perpetually desolate and a place of "salt pits" where nothing but weeds grew (cf. Jer. 48:9). The remnant of Israelites would "plunder" the territory of Moab and Ammon and take over their territory as an inheritance from the LORD (cf. Isa. 11:14).

**2:10-11** – Zephaniah repeats the reasons for the LORD’s judgment of Moab and Ammon – it was because of "their pride" and "arrogant" ridicule of His people Israel (cf. Isa. 16:6; Jer. 48:26, 29; Ezek. 25:5-6, 8). His judgment would terrify and destroy them. So thorough was this destruction that no one would be left to offer sacrifices to their idols. As a result, these "gods" would cease to exist. What kind of a god needs the sacrifices of mortal man to sustain it?

Zephaniah then writes of a future event - people from "all" the "nations" (pictured as living on "the coastlands/shores" of the world) would worship the LORD (cf. Mal. 1:11). This will happen in the Millennium when Christ rules the world.

### **Zephaniah 2: 12 - Judgment coming on Ethiopia**

**2:12** - Zephaniah's prophecy against Ethiopia (Cush) is very brief (cf. Isa. 18—20; Jer. 46; Ezek. 29—32). The "Ethiopians" were located south of Judah. Biblical Ethiopia occupied the territory now held by southern Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, and northern Ethiopia. The LORD promised to send His "sword" against this nation. His "sword" proved to be Nebuchadnezzar, who defeated Ethiopia shortly after overrunning all of Judah in 586 B.C. (cf. Ezek. 30:4-5, 9, 24-25). No reason for this judgment of the LORD was given, so most assume that Ethiopia shared the same disregard for the LORD that the other nations He judged held.

## **Zephaniah 2:13-15 - Judgment coming on Assyria**

**2:13-15** - Zephaniah also prophesied the destruction of "Assyria" to Judah's north, and its capital "Nineveh" (cf. Isa. 14:24-27; Nahum). Assyria was a much-feared nation in Zephaniah's day because of its merciless atrocities on those they conquered. Nineveh (modern day Mosul) was the capital of Assyria at the time Zephaniah was a prophet.

Nineveh, at the time of Zephaniah, was a proud, carefree, and impregnable city; it was the greatest city known at the time of Zephaniah. It had an outer wall that had a circumference of 60 miles with a population of at least 120,000 people within that outer wall. It had an 8-mile circumference inner wall that was 50 feet thick and 100 feet tall. Between the inner wall and the outer wall was enough water and farmland to support the population of Nineveh. It was a beautiful city full of plants and greenery because it had built irrigation systems to bring water into the city. Its residents boasted of being citizens of the most important city in the world (cf. Isa. 10:12). They lived in safety with the security of their own water and food – and their great military might; they were filled with arrogant pride.

Zephaniah prophesied that the LORD's judgment would make Nineveh a "parched ... desolation" (cf. Nah. 1:8; 2:6-8; 3). Nineveh would become a dwelling place for wild animals and birds. Doorways of homes would be deserted; rubble would be everywhere. The cedar beams of buildings would be exposed because of soldiers ransacking. So complete the destruction of Nineveh would be that passersby would ridicule the pride of Nineveh verbally, by reviling it, and bodily, by shaking their fists at it after its fall (cf. Nah. 3:19).

The fulfillment of Zephaniah's prophecies occurred when Nineveh fell to the combined forces of Babylonia, Media, and Scythia in 612 B.C. An attack on the outer wall began in 614 B.C by the combined forces, but it was a natural disaster that led to Nineveh falling. During the normal dry period of the year, a heavy rain fell causing the Tigris River to flood that caused the inner wall to collapse.

J. Alec Motyer summarized five principles that Zephaniah taught in this section (2:4-15). First, the LORD is the God of all the earth. Second, the LORD plans for the spiritual needs of the world. Third, the LORD is in charge of the whole historical process. Fourth, the LORD's people are central to His world purposes. And fifth, the LORD is the fierce enemy of pride.

Zephaniah's prophecies of the LORD's judgment of Philistia, Moab and Ammon, Ethiopia, and Assyria are also a prophecy of the LORD's judgment on the entire world, which is yet to be fulfilled. The LORD hates pride (Prov. 6:16-19, 16:5; James 4:6; I Pet. 5:5) judges pride and rebellion – yesterday and today. Do we carefully examine our life for pride? It should be a daily activity.

## **ZEPHANIAH 3:1-7 - JUDGMENT ON JERUSALEM**

Having announced that divine judgment would come on the nations around Judah (2:4-15), Zephaniah now returns to the subject of the LORD's judgment on Judah (representing all of Israel), but this time he focuses on Jerusalem, even though he does not mention Jerusalem by name. Zephaniah emphasizes the need for the Jews to seek repentance; as they will be judged by the LORD for turning from revealed truth (Amos 2:4-5) and for rejecting Him (Isa. 65:1-2).

**3:1** - Zephaniah pronounces another "woe" (cf. 2:5), this time on Jerusalem. "Woe" is a pronouncement of an indictment. The indictment was threefold; Jerusalem was "rebellious," "defiled/polluted," and "tyrannical / oppressing." They were rebellious because they refused to submit to God's will. They were defiled and

polluted by sinful religious practices. They were tyrants because they oppressed their own people. Jerusalem was wholly evil in its actions and in its abiding state.

**3:2** - There were four evidences of the sin of the people of Jerusalem. 1) They were unresponsive to the prophets whom the LORD had sent them. 2) They were unteachable and refused to accept any correction. 3) They did not trust in LORD. 4) They did not draw near to the LORD (through repentance and prayer - cf. 1:6). *Does this sound familiar today as we observe the condition of the church today?*

**3:3-4** – Zephaniah indicts two classes of leaders for leading Jerusalem into a perpetual state of sin: civil leaders and religious leaders. The civil leaders, princes and judges, were like vicious "lions" and "wolves" that preyed upon the people to take all the possessions of the people that they could—as fast as they could (cf. 1:8; Ezek. 3:9-10; Mic. 2:1-3, 9-10). The religious leaders, the prophets and priests, were arrogant religionists that were "treacherous" in deceiving the people into thinking that their words were authoritative. They did not observe the Law the LORD but rather twisted the Law to suit their purposes (cf. Ezek. 22:28; Micah 3:5,11). Both classes of leaders selfishly sought money, possessions and power.

*Does this sound familiar today as we observe civil and religious leaders?*

**3:5** – Zephaniah now contrasts the sin of the leaders to the LORD. The LORD was righteous. He would do no injustice only righteous justice. His righteous justice was performed and on display every day, as faithful as the rising of the sun. Yet the civil and religious leaders of Jerusalem knew "no shame" in the wickedness that they consistently practiced.

**3:6** - The LORD now reminds His people that He had already destroyed other "nations." His judgment of the nations occurred because of their wickedness – and it was required because of His standard and requirement of righteousness. His judgment left the nations “devastated/demolished,” “desolate/deserted,” and “destroyed” with no inhabitants.

**3:7** - The LORD expected His people to learn from His judgment of these nations. These visible evidences of His judgment should have motivated His people to respect Him and obey His word so they would not be similarly judged (as He said He would do). But they were more eager to pursue sinful self-indulgence, and to become thoroughly corrupt in their pursuit of money, possessions and power. Charles L. Feinberg stated, "Great is the enticement of sin and great is the penalty it incurs, but man rushes headlong into it, nevertheless."

*Do we see this today as we observe ourselves and others in Christianity?*

#### **ZEPHANIAH 3:8 - JUDGMENT ON ALL NATIONS**

**3:8** – Zephaniah now concludes the “judgements” prophecies by reverting back to the future Day of the LORD when all nations will be judged by the LORD. The LORD’s people (the faithful remnant, cf. 2:1-3) need to "wait" until the LORD “rises” up to consume the nations. The LORD has determined to gather and assemble wicked “nations" and "kingdoms" to "pour" His "burning anger," "indignation," and wrath on them because the world had again become thoroughly corrupt (as in the days of Noah, cf. Gen. 6:5-7; Zeph. 1:2-3). The great outpouring of divine wrath on the earth predicted here will take place during the Tribulation, before the LORD returns to set up His kingdom (cf. 2:2; Zech. 14:2; Rev. 16:14, 16).

#### **ZEPHANIAH 3:9-20 - THE DAY OF THE LORD'S BLESSING**

Having finished the revelation dealing with LORD's judgment of the world in a coming day (1:2—3:8), Zephaniah now announces that the LORD will bring great blessing to all humankind after that judgment (3:9-20). Zephaniah will briefly reveal the LORD's plans for the Gentile nations, and then will speak extensively

about His plans for Israel. Zephaniah discloses the LORD's promises of love, mercy and restoration as he closes his writing.

Warren Wiersbe writes: "Why did the prophets consistently close their books with messages of hope? For at least three reasons; one reason is hope. Hope is a great motivation for obedience, and the prophets wanted to encourage God's people to submit to God's will and do what He commanded. God's covenant blessings come to His people only when they obey His covenant conditions. A second reason is the prophets' emphasis on the faithfulness of God. The Lord will keep His promises and one day He will establish the kingdom; and since God is faithful to keep His promises, we ought to be faithful obeying His Word... Finally, the closing message of hope was an encouragement to the faithful remnant in the land, who were true to God and suffered because of their devotion to Him. It's difficult to belong to that 'company of the committed' who stand true to the Lord and His Word no matter what others may do or say. Knowing that God would one day defeat their enemies and reign in righteousness would encourage the believer's remnant to persist in their faithful walk with the Lord."

### **ZEPHANIAH 3:9-20 - THE DAY OF THE LORD'S BLESSING**

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#### **ZEPHANIAH 3:9 - THE PURIFICATION OF THE NATIONS**

**3:9** - Zephaniah's use of the word "then" signals a major change in time and focus of his prophecy. The use of "then" signifies a major pivot in his message, both in tone and in content; it is a hinge word that serves as a transition from judgment in the Tribulation to blessing in the Millennium. After the LORD's judgments (1:2—3:8), He promises to give the peoples of the world "purified lips/pure language" that would speak truth and grace, rather than lies and defiled speech (cf. Isa. 6:5-7). The use of "purified lips/pure language" is a reference to purified hearts. The LORD will effect this change in all the people of the world, so that they will worship Him (cf. Gen. 4:26). The nations that formerly worshiped idols will turn to worship the LORD. All men will call on the name of the LORD, which will be evidenced by their unity in serving the LORD. This is an indication that everyone living on the earth at the beginning of the Millennium will be a believer in Jesus Christ (cf. Matt. 25:31-46).

#### **ZEPHANIAH 3:10-20 - THE TRANSFORMATION OF ISRAEL**

Zephaniah now writes of his revelation from the LORD about what He will do for Israel following His judgment of the world. This revelation is chiasmic in its structure.

- A Israel's purification 3:10-13
- B Israel's and the LORD's rejoicing 3:14-17
- A' Israel's regathering 3:18-20

#### **Zephaniah 3:10-13 - Israel's purification**

**3:10** – As an example of the unity of mankind in serving the LORD, Zephaniah states that men from the farthest corners of the earth (referring to Gentiles) will bring Him offerings of worship (referring to helping Jews return to Israel and Jerusalem). "The rivers of Ethiopia," is a reference to upper Nile and its tributaries which reside in southern Egypt, Sudan and northern Ethiopia. The "daughter of MY dispersed ones" is a reference to the Jews. Correctly understood – this prophecy states that the Gentile nations will prove their faith in and worship of the LORD by bringing to Him the Jews who live among them back to Jerusalem. It also means that the Jew who are retuning will be bringing Him their offerings of worship.

**3:11-13** - "In *that day*," the day of Israel's return to the LORD, the Jews will not feel any more "shame" for all their previous rebellion against the LORD. This is because He will remove all the pride from their hearts (cf. Ezek. 20:34-38; Matt. 25:1-13). They "will never again" lift up themselves in haughty arrogance against the LORD on His "holy mountain" Jerusalem (cf. Psa. 2:6). Why, because they will be humble rather than proud; they will be cleansed and sanctified by the LORD from every sinful thing. The Jews entering the Millennium will all be believers who worship and trust in the LORD. They will not seek to worship self and idols. They will not rebel against the LORD. This is the characteristic of the 144,000 sealed Israelites (Rev. 7:1-8; 14:1-5) that enter into the Millennium. In contrast to their conduct since the Exodus, the Jews will do no wrong, tell no lies and will not practice deceit. They will resemble a flock of sheep at peace, grazing and lying down with nothing to disturb them (cf. Psa. 23; Mic. 4:4).

### **Zephaniah 3:14-17 - Israel's and the LORD's rejoicing**

Zephaniah opened his writing with one of the most awesome descriptions of the Lord's wrath in judgment of mankind as found anywhere in Scripture. Now he is writing about the joy the nation of Israel will one day experience when Christ is ruling in the Millennium.

Zephaniah arranges this psalm (song) of rejoicing in another chiasm.

- A Zion (Israel) singing (3:14a)
- B Israel's shouts (3:14b)
- C Jerusalem's joy (3:14c)
- D The LORD's deliverance (3:15a, b)
- E Presence of the LORD as king (3:15c)
- F No more fear (3:15d)
- G Jerusalem's future message (3:16a)
- F' No more fear (3:16b, c)
- E' Presence of the LORD (3:17a)
- D' The mighty deliverer (3:17b)
- C' The LORD's joy (3:17c)
- B' The LORD's silence (3:17d)
- A' The LORD's singing (3:17e)

**3:14** – The tone of this verse is exultation and joy! Zephaniah calls for the people of Jerusalem, and all the Israelites, to "shout" for joy with all their hearts (cf. Jer. 33; Isa. 40—66) and to be glad! Even though the immediate prospect for Jerusalem and Israel was bleak, the day was coming when they would be praising the LORD for His goodness and blessing.

The phrase "daughter of" is a way of referring to the citizens of Zion (Jerusalem) as the children of the city. Children born in any city are the children of that city, in a metaphorical sense, as well as the children of their physical parents in a literal sense. Elsewhere, "daughters of Jerusalem" sometimes refers to the villages surrounding Jerusalem, those little communities that arise close to and around Jerusalem. Here, however, Zephaniah identifies Jerusalem as the LORD's daughter.

**3:15** - The reason for Israel's rejoicing 'shouts' (vs. 14) is that the LORD has removed His judgments and wrath from them. He has also removed Israel's enemies from their presence and life. These 'shouts of joy' will come from Israel because Israel's Redeemer, the Messiah King, will be in her midst because the Lord Jesus Christ will be with Israel in the Millennium as the almighty King of the world.

**3:16-17** - "In that day" of rejoicing, the people of "Jerusalem" (Israel) will not have to fear disaster anymore because the trouble is taken away because the cause of trouble has been taken away (vs. 9-13). One reason is that the LORD their God (Jesus Christ the Messiah) will be in their midst (v. 15). Because the LORD is there with them, they do not need to despair or be fearful. The phrase 'let not your hands be weak / hang limp' has the meaning of "despair through fear and alarm." Instead, Israel will be able to lift their hands in triumph because of the LORD's presence with them.

The LORD is the "Mighty One" ('victorious warrior') having defeated all His enemies and all opposition worldwide (1:2-3; 3:8) – He is mighty to save! And the LORD will sing and shout with joy over His beloved Israel! Like a bridegroom, He will take joy in His people Israel, and they will rest quietly in the security of His love for them as His bride (cf. Deut. 28:63; 30:9).

J. Alec Motyer stated this: *"Most often the Lord's love is expressed by the Hebrew word hesed. This is the love that issues in commitment, the 'ever-unfailing' fidelity of love, love that lives in the will as much as in the heart. Here, however, the word is 'ahaba, the passionate love of Jacob for Rachel (Gen. 29:20) and of Michal for David (1 Sam. 18:28), the fond love of Jacob for Joseph (Gen. 37:3), Uzziah's devotion to gardening (2 Chron. 26:10), Jonathan's deep friendship with David (1 Sam. 18:3), the devotee's delight in the Lord's law (Ps. 119:97). This too is the Lord's love for his people (Hos. 3:1), a love that delights him (Zeph. 3:17c), makes him contemplate his beloved with wordless adoration (v. 17d), a love that cannot be contained but bursts into elated singing (v. 17e)."*

Charles H. Dyer stated: *"We can find hope in times of difficulty if we focus on God's power, God's deliverance, and God's love. He is our King (3:15), our Savior (3:16-17a), and our Beloved (3:17b)."*

### **Zephaniah 3:18-20 - Israel's regathering**

Eight times in verses 18-20, in the NASB, the Lord said, "I will," "I am going to," or "When I." The LORD, through Zephaniah, wanted to place a strong hope in the hearts of the Jews who believed in and followed the LORD. Judgment was imminent and severe but there was future hope and restoration before them. The LORD wanted the believing Jews to understand and embrace the LORD's promises for comfort and strength for the nation of Israel.

**3:18** – Many Jews were scattered from their homeland. For the Jews who lived far from Jerusalem, they were sad and sorrowful because they could not travel to Jerusalem to observe Israel's annual feasts ('appointed assembly'- cf. Ex. 23:14-17). These Jews may have suffered reproach and/or criticism from their fellow Jews for living far away from Jerusalem. Or these Jews may have considered the annual feasts to be a burden that they did not want to do which was a reproach to the LORD. But in either case, the time was coming when the LORD will enable them, as a nation, to come to Jerusalem to celebrate the feasts. This will occur during the Millennium and the feasts of Israel during the Millennium will be somewhat different from those that the Old Covenant specified, but there will be annual feasts in Jerusalem in the Millennium (cf. Ezek. 45:9—46:24).

*NOTE: Questions have been asked; "Why would the Lord restore religious practices, such as sacrifices, that have now been fulfilled by Christ in His fulfilling of the Law and being crucified as the perfect sacrifice for sin? It is thought that the revival of the feasts and sacrifices in the Millennium are meant to be a means of teaching and reminding Israel of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ (who is now King and bares the marks of His death on the cross) of the meaning of the doctrine of salvation through Jesus Christ.*

**3:19-20** – “Behold at that time” is a strong statement by the LORD that at the time of the return of Jesus Christ as the Messiah King, the Jews will be regathered and become the source of blessing to the world, fulfilling Israel’s original destiny (Deut. 26:18-19; Isa. 62:6). The LORD will have dealt with those who have oppressed and afflicted the Jews (cf. vv. 8-15; 2:4-15; Gen. 12:3) and now He will save the weak (“lame”) and dispersed (“outcasts / those...driven out”) of His people and regather them to Israel. And when the LORD regathers them in Israel He will give them a worldwide reputation for goodness as He restores them (cf. Gen. 12:1-7; 13:14-17; 15:7-21; 17:7-8; Deut. 26:19; 2 Sam. 7:16; Ps. 89:3-4; Isa. 9:6-7; Dan. 7:27).

Zephaniah concludes his prophecy by affirming that this is the LORD’s declaration – He will “restore” His people. J. Sidlow Baxter stated: “The whole message of Zephaniah is finally united in one grand *inclusio*, in that it begins and ends with the LORD, Israel's just but caring covenant God, whose word (1:1) is spoken (3:20).” (An *inclusio* is a repetition of key elements, either words or motifs, at the beginning and end of a literary unit.)

J. Sidlow Baxter also stated: “The key thought in Zephaniah is not expressed so much in any one verse as in the contrast between the very first verse and the very last. After the super-scription, the first word is, ‘*I will utterly consume.*’ This is the fierce fire of judgment. But the last word of the book is, ‘*I will make you a name and a praise.*’ This is the final fullness of blessing. ... Thus we may say that the key thought of Zephaniah is, ‘*THROUGH JUDGMENT TO BLESSING.*’”

To emphasize the divine authority of his message as well as the certainty of the LORD’s comfort and promise, Zephaniah ends his prophecy with the words, “Says the LORD.” The future restoration and blessing of Israel in the world will be something that the LORD Himself will accomplish “in that day” (i.e., the day of the LORD). No one but He *could* ever accomplish it, and no one but He *would* and *will*!

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