

SEEKING GOD AND WAITING: HOPE ON THE DAY OF THE LORD (ZEPH 2:1–4; 3:8–10)

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UPON HIS RESURRECTION, Jesus opened his disciples' minds to understand the Old Testament Scriptures and said, Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.¹

The prophet Zephaniah proclaimed not only the sufferings of Christ but also his rising and the mission his victorious reign would spark (cf. Acts 3:18, 24; 10:43; 26:22–23; 1 Pet 1:10–11). This article will evaluate the prophet's two main exhortations and consider their relevance for Christians today.

Zephaniah portrays Yahweh as a mighty warrior who will decisively eradicate all evil and save those who have sought him. The punishment on the day of the Lord will come as cataclysm, conquest, and sacrifice, and God's fiery wrath will blaze against all unrepentant sinners, consuming the earth as we know it. Will you be hidden and have hope on the day of the Lord?

Joel says, "The day of the LORD is great and very awesome;

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¹ Luke 24:46–49. Unless otherwise noted, English translations are from the ESV.

who can endure it?” (2:11).² Similarly, Nahum writes, “Who can stand before [Yahweh’s] indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken into pieces by him” (1:6).³ In Zephaniah 1:17, God announces, “I will bring distress on mankind, so that they shall walk like the blind, because they have sinned against the LORD.” We then read in verse 18, “In the fire of his jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed; for a full and sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.”

Having established the need to revere Yahweh in chapter 1,⁴ Zephaniah shifts from the setting to the substance of the Savior’s invitation to satisfaction. He signals this move first by the lack of any connection in 2:1 (i.e., no conjunctions) and then by using two groupings of imperatives, which always carry the highest level of appeal. The primary exhortation develops in two stages: Seek the Lord together to avoid punishment (2:1–3:7), and wait for the Lord to enjoy salvation (3:8–20).

STAGE 1 OF ZEPHANIAH’S EXHORTATION: SEEK THE LORD TOGETHER (ZEPH 2:1–4)

Stage 1 of Zephaniah’s exhortation includes a charge to bundle together in submission to the Lord (2:1–2), a charge to seek the Lord in righteousness and humility (vv. 3–4), and two parallel reasons to seek the Lord together (vv. 5–15; 3:1–7). We will focus here on the two charges.

BUNDLE TOGETHER IN SUBMISSION TO THE LORD

We first look at Zephaniah 2:1–2: “Gather together, yes, gather [הִתְקוּשׁוּ יְקוֹשׁוּ], O shameless nation, before the decree takes ef-

² Joel’s answer follows: “‘Yet even now,’ declares the LORD, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.’ Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD your God?” (2:12–14).

³ See Malachi 3:2; Revelation 6:17. Nahum’s answer includes the following hope and warning: “The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him. But with an overflowing flood he will make a complete end of the adversaries, and will pursue his enemies into darkness” (1:7–8).

⁴ See Jason S. DeRouchie, “Revering God: Punishment on the Day of the Lord (Zeph 1:2–18),” *BSac* 181.720 (2024): 3–18.

fect—before the day passes away like chaff—before there comes upon you the burning anger of the LORD, before there comes upon you the day of the anger of the LORD.” Zephaniah here addresses his primary audience Judah as “shameless nation” (lit., “the nation not longing” for Yahweh; cf. 1:12).⁵ He urges listeners to “gather” (*hithpolel* imperative קָשַׁק) together using a Hebrew root usually associated with collecting straw or sticks in contexts of punishment (2:1; cf. Exod 15:7; Nah 1:10). The context here, though, is more hopeful. As people collect desirable straw or grain after separating the chaff, so also the faithful remnant must “bundle” themselves in unity (cf. Joel 1:14–15) and separate from everything destined for God’s fiery wrath. “Bundle yourselves . . . before the decree takes effect . . . before there comes upon you the burning anger of the LORD” (Zeph 2:1–2, author’s translation). The prophet repeats the preposition “before” (בְּיָמֵי) to emphasize that the time to repent is fleeting, and he repeats the phrase “the anger of Yahweh” (אַף־יְהוָה) to stress the seriousness of the need to repent. Yet for those who heed this charge, hope remains.

SEEK THE LORD IN RIGHTEOUSNESS AND HUMILITY

In addition to the two commands in verse 1, Zephaniah gives three more imperatives in verse 3. Having addressed the nation broadly, the prophet now narrows his focus to the remnant of “the land” who have already humbled themselves before Yahweh. That this remnant remains unnamed and that in verses 5 and 12 he actually addresses foreign nations with his speech suggests that Zephaniah’s broader audience includes the remnant of faithful not only from Judah but also from lands beyond Judah who would heed his instruction.⁶ “Seek the LORD [בְּקִשׁוּ אֶת־יְהוָה], all you humble of the land, who do his just commands; seek righteousness; seek humility [בְּקִשׁוּ צְדָקָה בְּקִשׁוּ עֲנוּוּתָה]; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the LORD” (v. 3).

⁵ The *niphal* of the verb קָשַׁק in its two other occurrences is followed by the preposition לְ (“to, for”), which together mean to “be in a state of longing for” something (see Gen 31:30; Ps 84:3). In the present context, “Yahweh” is the missing center in the people’s existence (see Zeph 1:17; 2:3), so he is most likely the implied object. See A. Vanlier Hunter, “Seek the Lord! A Study of the Meaning and Function of the Exhortations in Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, and Zephaniah” (ThD diss., St. Mary’s Seminary & University, 1982), 261–62; Ehud Ben Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Zephaniah*, BZAW 198 (de Gruyter, 1991), 142; and Thomas Renz, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 2021), 523.

⁶ See further Jason S. DeRouchie, “The Addressees in Zephaniah 2:1, 3: Who Should Seek YHWH Together?,” *BBR* 30.2 (2020): 183–207.

The ESV treats the remnant as those who have followed God's "commands." However, the Hebrew suggests the prophet regards the remnant as those who are humbly taking seriously his coming "judgment." I translate the beginning of 2:3 as, "Seek Yahweh, all the humble of the land who *have heeded his judgment* [מְשִׁפְטוֹ פָּעֵלָיו]." ⁷ In this book, Yahweh's "judgment" relates to the day of reckoning that he has declared (cf. 3:5, 8). "The humble . . . who have heeded [Yahweh's] judgment," therefore, are those who have revered God (1:7) and who have already heeded his call to bundle together in the hope of protection (2:1). ⁸ These are the ones who must "seek the LORD, . . . seek righteousness; seek humility!" (2:3). According to 1:6, the "remnant of Baal" (v. 4) are those "who do not seek the LORD or inquire of him." In contrast, the humble turn from self-reliance to surrender to the living God.

Zephaniah explains his call to "seek the LORD" from two different angles. First, having spurned the chaos of injustice and rebellion, those humbled before God should "seek righteousness." Pursuing "righteousness" (צְדִיקָה) is to align with right order in the cosmos (Pss 89:14; 119:75) and the community (Gen 18:19; Deut 16:20; Ps 15:2) such that one values God and those made in his image. Jesus urged those who were already his followers to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matt 6:33). Similarly, Zephaniah urges those already enjoying a relationship with God to now pursue righteous deeds in their lives.

Second, to "seek the LORD" means seeking "humility" (עֲנָוָה)—a life that depends on God (Zeph 3:12; Ps 37:11; Isa 11:4). ⁹ The hum-

⁷ Zephaniah describes the humble of the land as those "who have heeded his [Yahweh's] judgment" (מְשִׁפְטוֹ פָּעֵלָיו; 2:3). The singular form of מְשִׁפֵּט occurs two other times in Zephaniah, and both refer to God's just decision to punish worldwide human rebellion (3:5, 8; cf. v. 15). Thus, those "who have heeded his judgment" are principally the individuals in Judah who have (1) "hushed" before Yahweh (1:7), (2) already turned their hearts from their idolatry, self-rule, oppression, and complacency (1:4–6, 8–9, 12), and (3) heeded the declarations of chapter 1's coming global punishment and the "decree's" (קִדְּוָה) coming fury in 2:2. For more on this argument, see DeRouchie, "Addressees in Zephaniah," 197–98.

⁸ The adjective נָפַץ in Zephaniah 2:3 means "humble," and the adjective עָנָו in 3:12 means "afflicted, needy." William J. Dumbrell writes, "עָנָו means to have been humbled, afflicted by necessity or circumstances, stressing difficulty of the condition and implying . . . some kind of disability present. . . . עָנָו means, basically, bent over (under the pressure of circumstances) and consequently, as affliction does its proper work, humble." עָנָו, עָנִי [*ānāw*; *ānī*], in *NIDOTTE*, ed. Willem VanGemeren (Zondervan, 1997), 3:451–52.

⁹ That those who are already "humble" (נָפַץ) must now "seek humility" (בִּקְשׁוּ עֲנָוָה) accords with Scripture's stress on the dangers of hardening one's heart and on the need to persevere in faith (Ps 95:7–8; Prov 28:14; cf. 1 Thess 4:9–10). From this

ble life receives from God's hand without fighting against his providence. It embraces one's neediness and follows God's lead. In Peter's words, "Humble yourselves . . . under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you" (1 Pet 5:6).

Only those who seek the Lord, who seek righteousness and humility, "may be hidden" from Yahweh's coming fury (Zeph 2:3; cf. Ps 27:5). The prophets regularly use qualifiers like "perhaps" (אולי) to help their hearers hope in, but not presume on, divine favor (Joel 2:14; Amos 5:15; Jonah 3:9; Acts 8:22). Yahweh's merciful character is unchanging (Exod 34:6–7), his promises are sure (Deut 30:1–14), and Zephaniah elsewhere emphasizes both the true potential of reconciliation with God (Zeph 3:7) and the certainty that the Lord will preserve a remnant (2:7, 9; 3:11–20). God will protect some from his fury, but he will only hide tomorrow those who have sought him today by pursuing righteousness and humility. Will you be hidden from God's wrath when he appears?¹⁰

Zephaniah 2:4 ends the initial exhortation section by supplying a reason why the faithful remnant from Judah and beyond should seek the Lord.¹¹ It is because (כי, "for") "Gaza shall be deserted, and Ashkelon shall become a desolation; Ashdod's people shall be driven out at noon, and Ekron shall be uprooted." Listed here are four primary Philistine cities.¹² Yet how do Yahweh's promises to

perspective, Calvin noted that divine discipline rouses even the most loyal of saints "to seek true religion with greater ardor than they had before done. . . . When calamities arise and God appears as judge, we ought to be stimulated to greater care and diligence." John Calvin, "Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai," in *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, trans. John Owen, vol. 15 of *Calvin's Commentaries* (Baker Books, 2009), 235.

¹⁰ Ironically, in John 3 Jesus says that those who hide in the dark today are those who will not be hidden from God's wrath tomorrow, but those who come to the light of Christ today, having their works exposed and believing in him, will enjoy eternal life (vv. 20–21, 36).

¹¹ Zephaniah 2:4 most likely provides a reason (signaled by כי) only for verse 3 and not also verses 1–2 since (1) the imperative "seek!" (שׁוּבוּ) at the beginning of verse 3 lacks explicit connection with what precedes and (2) the subordinate conjunction כי ("for") normally does not cross sentence boundaries in Hebrew. Contra Michael H. Floyd, *Minor Prophets: Part 2*, FOTL 22 (Eerdmans, 2000), 216; Marvin A. Sweeney, *Zephaniah: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Fortress, 2003), 112; and Ernst R. Wendland and David J. Clark, "Zephaniah: Anatomy and Physiology of a Dramatic Prophetic Text," *JOTT* 16 (2003): 8.

¹² Ordered from southwest to northeast geographically, "Gaza . . . Ashkelon . . . Ashdod . . . Ekron" were four of the five Philistine cities/capitals located west of Israel along the Mediterranean Sea. Gath's absence from the list (cf. Josh 13:3) is common among the prophets (see Jer 25:20; Amos 1:6–8; Zech 9:5–7) and is likely due either to its present weakened state (Amos 6:2) or to its more positive association with Israel throughout history (1 Sam 27:1–7).

destroy those cities motivate listeners to seek him? The logic is this: If God's punishment falls on Judah's immediate neighbor to the west, Jerusalem should not think that she will escape the blaze of his fury.

STAGE 2 OF ZEPHANIAH'S EXHORTATION:
WAIT FOR THE LORD (3:8–10)

After his initial exhortations in 2:1–4, the prophet digresses in 2:5–3:7, supplying two reasons why the faithful remnant needs to seek the Lord together. It is because of the state and fate of the rebels from the foreign nations (2:5–15) and from Jerusalem (3:1–7). Each unit of lament begins with “Woe!” (וָהֵן), first in 2:5 against Judah's neighbors and then in 3:1 against Jerusalem herself. God's wrath is coming, and not one unrepentant sinner will escape his judgment, including those in Judah.

In 3:1–7 Zephaniah concludes the unit speaking about Jerusalem in feminine singular language. “Woe to *her* who is rebellious and defiled, the oppressing city! *She* listens to no voice; *she* accepts no correction. *She* does not trust in the LORD; *she* does not draw near to her God” (vv. 1–2). “The LORD within *her* is righteous; he does no injustice” (v. 5). And again in verse 7, Yahweh declares using what in Hebrew are second feminine pronouns: “I said, ‘Surely *you* will fear me; *you* will accept correction. Then *your* dwelling would not be cut off.’”

Verse 8, however, marks a major transition, for Yahweh returns to addressing his faithful remnant, using masculine plural address, as in 2:1–4. “‘Therefore [לָכֵן],’” in view of the state and fate of the world's rebels, “‘wait for me,’ declares the LORD, ‘for the day when I rise up.’” Everywhere else in the Old Testament the term for “waiting” (*piel* חָכַה) is used neutrally or positively, never negatively (e.g., Isa 64:4; Dan 12:12; Hab 2:3). Thus, Psalm 33:20 says, “Our soul waits for the LORD; he is our help and our shield.” With this, while the “you” in Zephaniah 3:1–7 addresses the feminine singular “city” of Jerusalem, the masculine plural “you” in verse 8 recalls the addressees of the earlier commands in 2:1 and 3 and signals that we are now hearing stage 2 of the Savior's invitation to satisfaction.¹³ As such, Zephaniah's logic is this:

¹³ Floyd recognizes the similarity in form and content between 3:8 and 2:1–3 and also affirms that these texts are “the two main structural poles around which the rest of the material is organized.” *Minor Prophets: Part 2*, 203; cf. Daniel Hojoon Ryou, *Zephaniah's Oracles Against the Nations: A Synchronic and Diachronic Study of Zephaniah 2:1–3:8*, BibInt 13 (Brill, 1995), 284–85. For others who link 3:8 and

- Initial commands: Seek Yahweh together (2:1–4)
- Reason: Because of the negative state and fate of rebels (2:5–3:7)
- Inferential command: Therefore, wait for Yahweh (3:8–10)

Amid trouble and darkness, when sin runs rampant, remnant of God, hear me: Wait for the day of the Lord’s rising. The ESV at this point says God intends to “rise up to seize the prey” (following the Masoretic Text’s לִפְדּוֹת [“for prey/plunder”]). However, following the Septuagint, the NIV reads that God intends to “stand up to testify” as a witness in the context of judgment (repointing the Hebrew to לִפְדּוֹת), and this reading seems superior to me.¹⁴

Regardless, what follows are two reasons to wait for the LORD, both introduced by the subordinate conjunction “for” (כִּי), and the second of which can only apply to a hopeful people.¹⁵ Yahweh declares, “Wait for me . . . *for* my decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out upon them my indignation, all my burning anger; for in the fire of my jealousy all the earth shall be consumed” (3:8). The first reason that the remnant of faithful followers must persist in their hope of salvation is that God still intends to punish the wicked of the earth (Hab 1:2; 3:17–19). Although injustice still reigns at present, like those who prepare

2:3, see C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, “Zephaniah,” in *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 10 of *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Hendrickson, 2002), 153; Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Interpreting the Minor Prophets* (Zondervan, 1990), 210; J. J. M. Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah: A Commentary*, OTL (Westminster John Knox, 1991), 215; and Christopher S. Tachick, “King of Israel” and “Do Not Fear, Daughter of Zion”: *The Use of Zephaniah 3 in John 12*, *Reformed Academic Dissertations* 11 (P&R, 2018), 92–93.

¹⁴ The Masoretic Text has לִפְדּוֹת (“for prey/plunder”), which fits the context of war in Zephaniah 3:8 (ESV, NET, CSV) and may allude to Jerusalem’s leaders’ predatory activities in 3:3. However, the term “prey/plunder” is rare, and Scripture nowhere else uses it as something Yahweh claims for himself (see Gen 49:27; Isa 33:23). In contrast, both the Septuagint and Syriac Peshitta read לִפְדּוֹת (“for a witness”; NRSV, NASB, NIV), which fits how Scripture commonly portrays Yahweh as a “witness” or “accuser” in judgment contexts (e.g., Gen 31:50; 1 Sam 12:5–6; 20:12; Job 16:19; Jer 42:5; Mic 1:2; Mal 3:5). The language of a *witness arising* (using both the noun עֵד , “witness,” and the verb קָם , “arise”) also appears (see Deut 19:15–16; Job 16:8; Pss 27:12; 35:11), but עֵד never occurs with קָם . As such, the verse probably stresses the remnant’s need to look hopefully to when Yahweh will rise as a covenant witness. See also O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 1990), 324–25; Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 209; and Floyd, *Minor Prophets: Part 2*, 233.

¹⁵ Cf. Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 183; and Richard D. Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah: An Exegetical Commentary* (Biblical Studies Press, 2003), 328.

metal for melting (Ezek 22:19–22) or sheaves for threshing (Mic 4:12–13), Yahweh has determined to “gather” (Ezek 16:37; Joel 3:2; Zeph 3:18; Zech 14:2–3) for judicial assessment (Isa 24:22) all people groups (“nations”) and political powers (“kingdoms”). This ingathering recalls the wording of Zephaniah 1:2–3 and the sacrificial imagery of 1:7, 17–18. At that time, God’s molten jealousy for the honor of his name will finally “pour out” upon “all the earth,” destroying all those who are hostile to him. The fires of God’s just wrath will consume his enemies. And because the coming punishment is certain, the remnant of Judah and beyond must continue to wait in hope, confident that God will act (Isa 64:4).

Zephaniah now supplies his second reason for the faithful remnant to persist in Godward trust.

“Wait for me,” declares the LORD,
 “for the day when I rise up . . .
 For at that time [i.e., the time of the great judicial ingathering] I will
 change the speech of the peoples
 to a pure speech,
 that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD
 and serve him with one accord.” (3:8–9)

The prophet here envisions that some of the earth’s multiethnic peoples (note the plural עַמִּים) will not be destroyed in Yahweh’s fires of wrath but will instead be transformed into a community of worshipers.¹⁶ Specifically, from the ingathered nations and kingdoms of verse 8, God will purify the lip/speech (שִׁפְטָיו) of an international remnant—or, as the Septuagint renders it, he will transform their tongue (γλῶσσα). This change will result in them calling upon Yahweh’s name with one voice and them serving him together, shoulder to shoulder (v. 9; cf. Rev 7:9–10). To call on Yahweh’s name (cf. Zeph 3:12) is to outwardly express worshipful dependence on him as one’s Savior, King, and Treasure. As the psalmist declares,

Then I called on the name of the LORD:
 “O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul!” . . .
 I will lift up the cup of salvation
 and call on the name of the LORD. . . .
 I will offer to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving
 and call on the name of the LORD. (Ps 116:4, 13, 17)

¹⁶ The plural עַמִּים (“peoples”) stands against independent “people” groups (עַם, e.g., Zeph 1:11; 2:8–10) and likely points to a new international community that Yahweh will draw from the “nations” and “kingdoms” that he promises to gather for judicial assessment (3:8).

The prophets often link calling on Yahweh's name with the day of the Lord and future work of God in the messianic era (Isa 12:4; Joel 2:28–32; Zech 13:9). For example, in the days when the child king rises in power and initiates the great end-time second exodus, Isaiah asserts, "And you will say in that day: 'Give thanks to the LORD, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples, proclaim that his name is exalted'" (Isa 12:4). Similarly, Joel declares:

And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls. (2:30–32)

The day of the Lord includes not only punishment but also new creation, the transforming of once-hostile peoples from the nations and kingdoms of humankind into servants of a new king who call out to him for help and in thanksgiving and praise. They smell like smoke, but their lives have been preserved because they looked to the one who alone reigns, saves, and satisfies.

Zephaniah 3:10 now clarifies that verse 9 envisions the reversal of past judgment, and it intentionally uses Cush as the only example of global restoration. "From beyond the rivers of Cush my worshipers, the daughter of my dispersed ones, shall bring my offering" (v. 10). In Zephaniah's day, Cush was the center of Black Africa and located in modern Sudan, and its rivers were the White and Blue Nile (see Isa 18:1–2). As I noted in my first article, Zephaniah was likely biracial, having both Cushite and royal Judean blood (Zeph 1:1). Furthermore, in 1:12 he pointed to Cush as the starting point for God's global destruction.¹⁷

The region of Cush and the people associated with it were named after Cush, Noah's grandson through Ham. Cush's son Nimrod is the one who built ancient Babel (Gen 10:8–10), from which God dispersed all the peoples of the earth (11:9). We first

¹⁷ See especially Floyd, *Minor Prophets: Part 2*, 211. Most English versions treat Zephaniah 2:12 as a prophecy about the future, but it more likely refers to a past event—Assyria's destruction of the twenty-fifth (Cushite) dynasty of Egypt in 663 BC, a generation before Zephaniah's ministry (Isa 20:1–6). The Cushites controlled Egypt from ca. 715–663 BC, but the Assyrians overthrew them under Assurbanipal's rule. As in Nahum 3:8–13, Zephaniah's reference to Cush's demise in 2:12 supplies proof that Assyria's empire, highlighted in the following verses, would also fall. For this interpretation, see, e.g., Floyd, *Minor Prophets: Part 2*, 212–13; Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 146; and Renz, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 569.

learn of Cush in Genesis, where it is identified as a terminus of one of the four rivers flowing from Eden (2:13).¹⁸ So, because Zephaniah envisions the worshipers gathering to Yahweh at his restored Edenic sanctuary to give him offerings, it is as if the descendants of those once exiled from Eden and scattered at Babel are now following the rivers of life back to their source to enjoy fellowship with the great King (Rev 22:1–2).

Significantly, the worshipers Zephaniah foresees are made up of an ethnically diverse group from the world's peoples. All of them have transformed “speech/language” (שִׁפְהָ) such that they call on Yahweh's name, and God calls these worshipers “the daughter of my dispersed ones [בַּת־פוֹצִי].” The language here recalls Genesis 11:9, which notes that “[the place] was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the *language* [שִׁפְהָ] of all the earth. And from there the LORD *dispersed* [hiphil פוֹץ] them over the face of the earth.” At least eight terms in Zephaniah 3:9–10 appear in Genesis 11:1–9: “people(s)” (עַמִּים/עַם), “lip/speech” (שִׁפְהָ), “call” (קָרָא), “all” (כָּל), “name” (שֵׁם), “Yahweh” (יְהוָה), “one/same” (אֶחָד), and “disperse/scatter” (פוֹץ). In the Old Testament, only Zephaniah 3:9–10 and Genesis 11:1–9 share such language, and no other texts pair “lip” (שִׁפְהָ) (when signifying speech) with “disperse” (פוֹץ) (when signifying exile).¹⁹ Thus, Zephaniah likely portrays the coming transfor-

¹⁸ Of the four rivers mentioned in Genesis 2:11–14 (the Pishon, Gihon, Tigris, and Euphrates), scholars debate the precise locations of the initial two, with the Pishon flowing around “the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold” and the second flowing around “the whole land of Cush.” The challenge only escalates when one identifies that earth's topography would have changed significantly after Noah's flood. The narrator of Genesis identifies the Tigris and Euphrates of his day with the great rivers of old, and he also links the Pishon with “Havilah, where there is gold” and the Gihon with “Cush.” Scholars have identified an ancient riverbed running northeast through Saudi Arabia from the Hijaz Mountains near Medina (and the region of ancient Havilah) to the Persian Gulf in Kuwait near the mouth of the Tigris and Euphrates, and this correlates strongly with Scripture's information regarding the Pishon. See James A. Sauer, “The River Runs Dry: Creation Story Preserves Historical Memory,” *BAR* 22.4 (1996): 52–57, 64; and John H. Walton, “Eden, Garden of,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, ed. J. Gordon McConville and Mark J. Boda (IVP Academic, 2012), 204. Significantly, a spring called “Gihon” is associated with Jerusalem, and “Cush” is the title usually linked with the region of the Nile River's headwaters. If the latter connection holds, then Gary A. Anderson is correct that “Eden would have been the source of all the great freshwater sources known to the ancient Israelite.” He further adds, “Because the Gihon Spring flows beneath Jerusalem (and Eden was associated with Jerusalem . . .), the Gihon River may also have been associated with this spring.” “Eden, Garden of,” in *NIDB* (Abingdon, 2007), 2:186. For a similar proposal, see Howard N. Wallace, “Eden, Garden of,” *ABD* (Doubleday, 1992), 2:283.

¹⁹ Ben Zvi fails to see Yahweh promising to reverse the tower of Babel punishment since he restricts his lexical search between Genesis 11:1–9 and Zephaniah 3:9 and does not include 3:10. *Book of Zephaniah*, 225n736.

mation as reversing the judgment at the tower of Babel.

In summary, Zephaniah 3:8–10 portrays the day of the Lord as both punishment (v. 8) and renewal (vv. 9–10) and uses these images to motivate the faithful remnant to wait for Yahweh. Yet in what part of salvation history is Zephaniah’s grand vision of the day of the Lord fulfilled? The rest of this article will argue that it relates not only to Christ’s second appearing but also to his first coming and the age of the church. Such is made clear when we consider how the New Testament uses and interprets 3:8–10.

NEW TESTAMENT REFLECTIONS ON ZEPHANIAH 3:8–10

In verses 9–10, God promises to develop his new creational, international community “at that time” (יָמָיו)—namely, during the day of Yahweh, when the fires of God’s judgment burn against the rebels of the earth’s nations and kingdoms. From one perspective, Paul asserts, “Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, . . . that day [of the Lord] will not come, unless the rebellion comes first” (2 Thess 2:1, 3; cf. 1:8–9). Similarly, Peter highlights the future, unexpected nature of this day:

The heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. . . . But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. (2 Pet 3:7, 10)

Nevertheless, while in one sense Yahweh’s day that Zephaniah envisions is still the future for all in this world, there is another sense in which the day of punishment for the elect is already past and Christ’s church is even now enjoying the transformed speech, unity, and worship envisioned in 3:9–10. Peter declared that “all the prophets” foretold Christ’s sufferings and subsequent glories, including the glories seen in and through the church (Acts 3:18, 24; cf. 1 Pet 1:10–11). Zephaniah never explicitly predicts Jesus’s coming, yet the prophet foretells the Messiah’s coming and mission in at least two ways: (1) As already seen in the first article, Zephaniah portrays the day of the Lord as God’s sacrifice by which he satisfies his wrath and gains victory over all evil. Growing out of this imagery, in Christ’s first coming he serves as the *object* of God’s wrath on behalf of the elect, but in his second coming he serves as

the *agent* of God's wrath on behalf of the elect.²⁰ (2) Zephaniah envisions the church age, wherein Christ's death initially fulfills Zephaniah's vision of the day of wrath against sinners and inaugurates the global ingathering of worshipers in the presence of the great King. I will briefly review the first of these and then delve deeper into the second.

CHRIST'S SACRIFICIAL DEATH INITIATES THE DAY OF THE LORD FOR THE ELECT

For Zephaniah, the day of the Lord is a time of conquest when Yahweh will pour out his wrath on the rebellious of the earth (1:15–17), whom the prophet portrays as a “sacrifice” ready to be consumed (vv. 7–8; cf. Jer 46:10; Rev 19:17–21). Right order exists only where God is exalted over all, and his just jealousy moves him to reestablish order by overcoming evil. He accomplishes this only by killing the sinner or a substitute (Lev 17:11; Heb 9:22). By failing to “draw near” to the Lord (Zeph 3:2), especially through his provision of a substitute sacrifice (Lev 9:1–10:3), those in Jerusalem and beyond were readying themselves to *become* the sacrifice.

Yet God's law sets forth a clear pattern of substitution (e.g., Exod 12:12–14; Lev 16:15–22, 33–34), and prophets like David and Isaiah show that this pattern was pointing to the sufferings of the royal servant (Pss 16:9–11; 22:14–21; Isa 52:13–53:12). Each of the Gospel writers highlights the darkness that accompanied Jesus's crucifixion (e.g., Luke 23:44), and Peter's citation of Joel 2:30–31 in Acts 2:19–20 suggests that he identified this darkness with what the prophets said would precede the day of the Lord. Jesus is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29), and thus we should understand that when Jesus bore God's wrath as the sacrificial substitute on behalf of the elect, he was partially fulfilling Zephaniah's vision of cataclysm, conquest, and sacrifice associated with the day of the Lord.

THE CHURCH FULFILLS ZEPHANIAH'S HOPES FOR A RECONCILED COMMUNITY OF PEOPLES

If the fires of judgment foreseen in Zephaniah 3:8 were borne for the elect by Christ at the cross, then his resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost mark the initiation of Zephaniah's vision of new creation in verses 9–10. John the Baptizer said, “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me . . . will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matt

²⁰ See DeRouchie, “Revering God.”

3:11). In Jerusalem, Jesus initiated a great second exodus or ingathering in which many peoples would be saved (Luke 9:31; cf. Zeph 3:10, 19–20). In John’s comment on Caiaphas’s words: “[He died] for the nation [of Israel], and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad” (John 11:51–52; cf. Isa 49:5–6).²¹ The church today, made up of believing Jews and gentiles in Christ, is fulfilling Zephaniah’s vision.

One way this is seen is in Luke’s depiction of the early church’s growth in the beginning of Acts. Both Davis and Keener argue that Luke’s account of Pentecost alludes to Genesis 11:1–9 and portrays the birth of the church as an initial reversal of the tower of Babel punishment.²² Butcher goes further by noting ties between the Pentecost account and Zephaniah’s vision of punishment reversal in 3:8–10 and by holding that Zephaniah’s prediction likely supplied a controlling blueprint for Luke’s structuring of the early chapters of Acts.²³ Building off Butcher’s observations, at least seven lexical and/or conceptual connections support that Luke believed that Jesus’s death marked the intrusion of the day of the Lord as punishment and that Jesus’s resurrection and ascension inaugurated Zephaniah’s day of the Lord as restoration (Zeph 3:8–10).

1. Luke appears to see Jesus’s resurrection and ascension as partially fulfilling Zephaniah’s hope of Yahweh’s eschatological rise as global judge and savior.²⁴ The Septuagint of

²¹ The Greek verb for “gather” (συνάγω) in John 11:52 is also found in Zephaniah 3:8 (LXX), and the verb rendered “scattered” (διασκοπίζω) in John 11:52 is a legitimate equivalent to the Hebrew *hiphil* of פָּרַץ in Zephaniah 3:10.

²² Jud Davis, “Acts 2 and the Old Testament: The Pentecost Event in Light of Sinai, Babel and the Table of Nations,” *CTR* 7.1 (2009): 29–48; and Craig S. Keener, *Introduction and 1:1–2:47*, vol. 1 of *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Baker Academic, 2012), 840–44.

²³ Jerry Dale Butcher, “The Significance of Zephaniah 3:8–13 for Narrative Composition in the Early Chapters of the Book of Acts” (PhD diss., Case Western Reserve University, 1972). Butcher extends Clarke’s argument that Luke treats the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26–40 as explicitly fulfilling Zephaniah 3:10. See William Kemp Lowther Clarke, “The Use of the Septuagint in Acts,” in *The Beginnings of Christianity: Part I; The Acts of the Apostles*, ed. F. J. Foakes-Jackson and Kirsopp Lake (Macmillan, 1920), 101–3.

²⁴ Jerome’s Vulgate appears to read Zephaniah 3:8 as a reference to Christ’s resurrection (*in die resurrectionis meae in futurum*, “in the day of my resurrection in the future”), and Luther followed this interpretation as well. Martin Luther, “Lectures on Zephaniah,” in *Lectures on the Minor Prophets I: Hosea–Malachi*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, trans. Richard J. Dinda, vol. 18 of *Luther’s Works* (Concordia, 1975), 355. For a brief discussion of how the early church fathers interpreted Zephaniah 3:8, see Johannes Vlaardingerbroek, *Zephaniah*, HCOT (Peeters, 1999), 185.

Zephaniah 3:8 has the Lord declaring, “Wait upon me . . . for the day of my rising [or resurrection] as a testimony” (ὕπομεινόν με . . . εἰς ἡμέραν ἀναστάσεώς μου εἰς μαρτύριον). Correspondingly, Luke highlights how Jesus charges his disciples “to wait for the promise of the Father” (περιμένειν τὴν ἐπαγγελίαν τοῦ πατρὸς) (Acts 1:4),²⁵ and he notes how each of Jesus’s disciples serves as “a witness to his [Jesus’s] resurrection” (μάρτυρα τῆς ἀναστάσεως αὐτοῦ) (Acts 1:22; cf. 2:32; 3:8; 4:33; 10:41; 26:16).²⁶ Indeed, the only verses in Scripture where “witness” (μάρτυς) or “testimony” (μαρτύριον) occur with “rising, resurrection” (ἀνάστασις) are Zephaniah 3:8; Acts 1:22; and 4:33.²⁷

2. Luke uses vocabulary of judgment from Zephaniah 3:8 but applies it to the renewal foretold in verses 9–10.²⁸ In verse 8 Yahweh promises that his ingathering of the “nations” (ἐθνῶν) would result in his “pouring out” (ἐκχέω) his wrath on “all the earth.” Luke notes that Jews “from every nation [ἐθνους] under heaven” assemble in Jerusalem for Pentecost (Acts 2:5) and that God promises to “pour out” (ἐκχέω) his Spirit on all flesh (vv. 17–18, 33) to create a people who would be Christ’s witnesses “to the end of the earth” (1:8).
3. Both the transformed “speech/tongue(s)” and “calling” on the Lord’s “name” link Acts 2 with Zephaniah 3:9–10. While Peter in Acts 2:17–21 cites Joel 2:28–32 (3:1–5 LXX), the key term “tongues” (plural of γλῶσσα) (Acts 2:3–4, 11, 26) is lacking in Joel but present in the Septuagint version of both the tower of Babel episode (Gen 11:7; cf. 10:5) and Yahweh’s

²⁵ The link between “waiting upon” (ὕπομεινω) in Zephaniah 3:8 (LXX) and “waiting for” (περιμένω) in Acts 1:4 is close.

²⁶ Yahweh fulfills the promise of his rising in Zephaniah 3:8 in a multifaceted way: (1) God will rise as judge at the consummate day of the Lord during Christ’s second appearing and decisively pour out his wrath against all unrepentant sinners. (2) God the judge already arose to testify against the sins of the elect from the earth’s nations when he cursed Christ at the cross as a substitute wrath bearer. (3) God has already risen through Christ’s resurrection and ascension and by this has inaugurated his new creational work among his redeemed. In Luke-Acts, Luke appears to highlight fulfillments 2 and 3 (on the latter, see Luke 23:44–45; Acts 2:19–20).

²⁷ By adding the verb ἀνίστημι (“to raise up, rise, arise”), the number of texts grows (LXX Num 23:18; Ruth 4:10; 2 Kgs 23:3; Pss 34:11 [35:11]; 77:5 [78:5]; Job 16:8; Zeph 3:8; Acts 1:22; 2:32; 4:33; 10:41; 26:16). The texts from Psalms and Zephaniah are eschatological in nature.

²⁸ See Butcher, “Significance of Zephaniah 3:8–13,” 53–56, 67.

promise to purify the remnant’s “speech” in Zephaniah 3:9. Furthermore, the statement in Acts 2:21 that “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved” (πᾶς ὃς ἂν ἐπικαλέσῃται τὸ ὄνομα κυρίου σωθήσεται) draws directly from Joel 2:32 (3:5 LXX) but also closely parallels the hope in Zephaniah 3:9 (LXX) that the remnant “might call upon the name of the Lord” (τοῦ ἐπικαλεῖσθαι πάντας τὸ ὄνομα κυρίου).

4. Both Acts 2:20 (cf. Joel 2:31 [3:4 LXX]) and Zephaniah 3:9 (LXX) employ the verb “to turn, cause a change in a state or condition” (μεταστρέφω) with respect to God’s new creation work. Luke, though, uses it with reference to the altering of the atmosphere and heavenly bodies, whereas Zephaniah applies it to the change of speech.
5. Pentecost is a harvest feast of ingathering, which conceptually aligns with the ingathering motif in Zephaniah (1:2–3; 3:8, 18–20).
6. Zephaniah’s image of serving Yahweh in unity (3:9) may have moved Luke to include the comment in Acts 2:42–47 regarding the early saints’ corporate surrender and worship.
7. Luke stresses how God saved devout Jews “from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5) to prepare the context for the global ingathering that follows. Strikingly absent from the list of peoples and nations in verses 9–11 are “Ethiopians” (Αἰθίοπες) or residents of “Ethiopia” (Αἰθιοπία), the Greek title meaning “burnt face” and rendering the Hebrew term for “Cush” (כּוּשׁ). Recall that “Cush” was the only region Zephaniah highlighted to represent Yahweh’s global community at the end of the age. Thus, Luke never mentions Ethiopia in the Pentecost narrative, probably because he desired to note how God’s saving the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–40) directly fulfills Zephaniah’s prediction that worshipers from the region of Cush would lead the ingathering of the nations to Yahweh at the end of the age (Zeph 3:9–10).²⁹

²⁹ See Psalms 68:31; 87:4; Isaiah 18:7; 45:14. Whereas the mention of the “Ethiopian” directly fulfills Zephaniah 3:10 and related texts, Luke’s highlighting that he was both a foreigner and a “eunuch” builds off Isaiah 56:3–8. For more on the significance of Black Africa in Scripture, see Jason DeRouchie, “The Long History of God’s Love for Africa,” *Desiring God* (blog), April 7, 2022, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/>.

Taken together, the lexical and conceptual parallels between Zephaniah 3:8–10 and the early chapters of Acts suggest that Luke believed that Jesus’s death marked the intrusion of the day of the Lord as punishment and that Jesus’s resurrection and ascension inaugurated God’s end-time restoration that Zephaniah announces.

With this, in broader fulfillment of Zephaniah’s restoration hope in 3:9–10, the New Testament is clear that Jesus’s first coming marks the beginning of the end of the first creation and initiates the new creation, which corresponds to the new covenant (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15; Heb 8:13). In this age Jews and gentiles in Christ together make up one people of God, the church (Gal 3:8, 14, 29; Eph 2:14–16), which Revelation 5:9–10 says Jesus is shaping into “a kingdom and priests” “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (cf. 7:9–10). Aligning with Zephaniah’s prediction that the offspring of those once dispersed would bring Yahweh offerings, we as royal priests are offering sacrifices of praise (Rom 12:1; Heb 13:15–16; 1 Pet 2:5) at “Mount Zion and . . . the heavenly Jerusalem” (Heb 12:22; cf. Isa 2:2–3; Zech 8:20–23; Gal 4:26). Nevertheless, Christians await the day on which the “new Jerusalem” will descend from heaven as (or to) the new earth (Rev 21:2, 10; cf. Isa 65:17–18), when our daily journey to find rest in Christ’s supremacy and sufficiency (Matt 11:28–29; John 6:35) will come to completion in a place where the curse is no more (Rev 21:22–22:5).

A PROPER RESPONSE

COMMUNE REGULARLY WITH OTHER BELIEVERS TO AID PERSEVERANCE

The masculine plural imperatives in Zephaniah 2:1 and 3 stress every individual’s responsibility to observe the exhortations; yet those heeding them are to fulfill them together. No believer is to “seek Yahweh” alone (v. 3). Therefore, Zephaniah’s initial charge opens by calling those who will listen to gather themselves in unity (v. 1). God’s coming punishment will explode on the earth, and in his love, Yahweh wants people not to feel isolated but to find strength in united surrender. We must seek the Lord together.

The writer of Hebrews urges his readers to “exhort one another every day” (3:13) and to “consider how to stir up one another to love and good works . . . and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (10:24–25). “The Day” is the ultimate “day of the anger of the LORD” to which Zephaniah points (2:2–3). Partnership with other believers, seen especially through active local church membership, helps us continue to grow in holiness, which properly prepares us to see the Lord (Heb 12:14).

CONTINUE SEEKING THE LORD, PURSUING RIGHTEOUSNESS
AND HUMILITY

Motyer has rightly noted, “In the Bible the only way to flee *from* God is to flee *to* him.”³⁰ Zephaniah yearns for his audience to be free from the fear of death (cf. Heb 2:15) and to experience “the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (12:14). He thus urges his audience to hunger for the Lord with a proper orientation of life (righteousness) and a proper disposition of heart (humility). Treasuring God should awaken love for others and nurture a sense of personal need for something more than the world offers (Zeph 2:3; cf. Matt 5:6).

To seek the Lord by pursuing righteousness and humility (Zeph 2:3), we must first turn from self-reliance and self-exaltation to radical God-dependence and God-exaltation. With John the Baptist, we each must say, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). In our piety and ministry, we must serve in God’s strength, not our own, and seek God’s commendation over that of men (Matt 10:28; Acts 5:29; 2 Cor 4:2; 10:17–18; 1 Pet 4:11). In our suffering, we should “not be anxious about tomorrow” (Matt 6:34) but must be “casting all . . . anxieties upon [God], because he cares” (1 Pet 5:7; cf. Phil 4:6–7). In our victories, we ought to declare, “By the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Cor 15:10). When we boast, we should “boast in the Lord,” knowing that God commends only those who celebrate that “Christ Jesus . . . became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor 1:30–31; 2 Cor 10:17–18; cf. Rom 2:6–7). The impoverished, not the proud, engage in prayer and praise, and by these God-treasuring acts, we magnify the Lord’s greatness and sufficiency. “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (1 Pet 5:5; Jas 4:6). Only in seeking the Lord is there any hope for protection on the day of his wrath.

Second, to truly seek the Lord by seeking righteousness and humility (Zeph 2:3) requires living impartial and loving lives rather than abusive ones. We must image God’s character (Deut 10:17–19) and value those made in his image (Gen 9:6; Jas 3:9). Too easily, our God-given proficiency, power, or possessions move us to forget Yahweh as the great giver (Deut 8:14, 17; Hos 13:5–6) and to elevate ourselves over others, even at their expense. This was the case in Zephaniah’s day. Outsiders “taunted and boasted

³⁰ J. Alec Motyer, “Zephaniah,” in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey (Baker Books, 1998), 3:927.

against the people of the LORD of hosts” (Zeph 2:10). Insiders, especially leaders, shamelessly engaged in “violence and fraud” and like wild beasts unjustly oppressed others (1:9; 3:1, 3–5). In contrast, “Yahweh is righteousness. . . . He never does wrong. Morning by morning he gives his judgment for the light” (3:5, author’s translation; cf. Deut 32:4). The Lord is one “who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth” (Jer 9:24), and knowing him means that we will mirror in practice his delight in such things. So, with Paul, I urge you: “Flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart” (2 Tim 2:22). This type of living is what Zephaniah meant by “seek the LORD, . . . seek righteousness, . . . seek humility” (2:3).

WAIT FOR THE LORD

We live in a beautiful but broken world—beautiful because the creation displays the grand design of its Creator and broken because the Adamic curse affects and infects all things (Rom 8:20–21). Family celebrations are tempered by car accidents and cancer, and marvelous vistas become contexts for mass executions of Christians. City parks designed for child’s play become the place of riots and kidnappings. Disease runs rampant; earthquakes destroy thousands; people lose jobs; the world economy plummets. The global pandemic of alien guilt continues to produce sinners who sin, leading them to perform injustice against the living God and to devalue his image in others. Believers today live in the overlap of the ages—*after* Yahweh has atoned for the sin of his elect through the death of his Son yet *before* he has eradicated all evil and carried out the final judgment (Heb 9:28). The *already* aspects require that we call on his name and serve him together (Zeph 3:9–10). The *not yet* aspects necessitate that we heed Zephaniah’s charge to patiently trust in the Lord (“wait,” v. 8), holding unswervingly to the only God who “acts for those who wait for him” (Isa 64:4).

Waiting is not easy, for great are the temptations to doubt, compromise, fear, or become anxious. Yet we must remember, “If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful” (2 Tim 2:11–13). Amid trouble, the call is “Humble yourselves . . . under the mighty hand of God . . . casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you” (1 Pet 5:6–7; cf. Phil 4:6–7). “Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted” (Heb 12:3).

Before us is “the crown of life,” and everyone “who remains steadfast under trial” will receive it (Jas 1:12). “The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment” (2 Pet 2:9). So “let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful” (Heb 10:23). “And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you” (1 Pet 5:10).