



BIBLE EXPOSITORY

Commentary

Daniel - Malachi



EXPOSITORY

Commentary

VOL. VII

Daniel–Malachi

Daniel

Mitchell L. Chase

Obadiah

Max Rogland

Zephaniah

Jason S. DeRouchie

Hosea

George M. Schwab Sr.

Jonah

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ZEPHANIAH

Jason S. DeRouchie

INTRODUCTION TO ZEPHANIAH

Overview

The book of Zephaniah is the Savior's summons to satisfaction. Following the superscription (1:1), the prophet provides a setting for the summons by portraying the nearness and nature of the Lord's punishment on Judah and the world (1:2–18). He then unpacks the substance of the summons itself, calling his listeners to seek the Lord together (2:1, 3) in order to avoid punishment (2:1–3:7), and then to wait on the Lord (3:8) in order to enjoy satisfying salvation (3:8–20).

Author

The name Zephaniah means “Yahweh has hidden.” That Zephaniah's parents used “Yahweh” as part of his name suggests they trusted in the Lord, which is especially significant in light of the fact that Zephaniah was likely born during the shadowy reign of Manasseh (2 Kings 20:21–21:18). From Zephaniah 1:1 we know that Zephaniah's great-great-grandfather was righteous King Hezekiah (2 Kings 18–20; Isaiah 36–39), making him a member of the royal family and therefore a reminder of the hope of the Davidic covenant even in an age of darkness. His social status may explain why he was aware of the international climate (Zeph. 2:4–15) and the ethics of Jerusalem's political and religious leadership (1:4, 8–9; 3:3–4). His likely biracial heritage (cf. 1:1) made him an especially appropriate spokesman for the Lord's promise of global restoration (3:9–10).

Date and Occasion

Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of King Josiah of Judah (640–609 BC) (1:1), just prior to Jerusalem's destruction by Babylon in 586 BC (1:4; 3:7). Because Zephaniah's message shows signs of Deuteronomy's influence while also stressing a high need for spiritual growth, he likely ministered early in 622 BC after Josiah found the Book of the Law but before the king's reform movement was fully underway (2 Kings 23:4–20; 2 Chron. 34:8–35:19).

Genre and Literary Features

At its heart, Zephaniah is “the word of the LORD” (1:1; cf. 3:20) cast as a prophetic oracle of exhortation (2:1, 3; 3:8a, 14) motivated by messages of warning (1:2–18;

2:4–3:7) and hope (3:8b–20). The book varies its addressees between the members of the remnant community (using masculine plural forms; e.g., 2:1, 3; 3:8, 14b, 20) and the collective city of Jerusalem (using feminine singular forms). When addressing Jerusalem, the book speaks to the city’s corrupt and pre-punishment state on the one hand (3:7; cf. 3:1) and its purged, rescued, and transformed state on the other (3:11–12, 14–19). That Zephaniah uses second-person speech (“you/your”) to address not only the “shameless nation” of Judah (2:1) but also foreign nations like Philistia (2:5) and Cush (2:12) highlights that his message of worldwide punishment and salvation (3:8–10) was ultimately for all who would hear and heed.

Frequently within the book the identity of the speaker changes without any clear signal (e.g., the prophet refers to Yahweh in the third person in 1:7, but then Yahweh speaks in first person in v. 8). Nevertheless, the sermon still reads as a cohesive whole. The voices of Zephaniah and the Lord work together to proclaim a single “word” (1:1) *as if* a single voice were speaking.

Theology of Zephaniah; Its Relationship to the Rest of the Bible and to Christ

THE SERIOUSNESS OF GOD’S WRATH AGAINST SIN AND THE POSSIBILITY OF A SATISFYING SALVATION

Throughout the Prophets, the phrase “day of the LORD” often refers to God’s final and decisive move to execute justice and reestablish right order in the world. The phrase also points to any number of historical foretastes of this ultimate day, wherein the Lord punishes on a smaller scale in anticipation of the full onslaught of his wrath. Zephaniah strongly anticipates the “day of the LORD” (1:7, 14), which he characterizes as a time of both vengeance (1:15, 18; 2:2–3; 3:8) and hope (3:11, 16, 19–20). The book anticipates Babylon’s impending desolation of Judah (1:4–13; 2:2; 3:7) while also envisioning God’s destruction of all evil in the world (esp. 1:2–3, 14–18; 3:8). Yahweh’s desire for the world to reflect the glory of his goodness, justice, mercy, and love leads to passionate zeal against sin and rebellion (1:17–18). His patience will not last forever, so people must respond now before his anger consumes his adversaries (2:2).

Because Zephaniah is so certain that Yahweh’s war against sin is near (1:7, 14), his book operates much like a basic-training manual, clarifying the fundamentals of the faith that will ready his faithful people to be delivered when the King and his armies arrive in fury. The humble and upright must now seek the Lord together and wait upon him (2:1, 3; 3:8), rejoicing today in the hope that Yahweh will indeed save and satisfy (3:14, 17; cf. Rom. 5:2). Patiently pursuing the Lord together will manifest itself today in fleeing idolatry and looking to the Lord in prayer and devotion (Zeph. 1:4–6), nurturing humility and loving others (2:3), heeding his voice and learning from his discipline, and trusting and drawing near to him (3:2). These are the basics of one’s relationship with God. Finding refuge in the Lord today alone supplies assurance that God will protect us from his wrath tomorrow (2:3). Therefore, those in Judah and beyond must patiently trust together (2:1, 3; 3:8a) that the Lord will faithfully preserve and fully save (3:8b–20).

THE GLORIES OF CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH

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; 1 Pet. 1:10–11; cf. Luke 24:26–27, 45–47). Zephaniah never explicitly predicts the messianic deliverer, instead highlighting how far Judah’s sin had distanced them from that hope. Nevertheless, when we read it in light of the rest of Scripture, we see Zephaniah anticipating the Messiah and his mission in at least two ways: (1) Zephaniah portrays the day of the Lord as God’s sacrifice by which he satisfies his wrath and gains victory over evil. The biblical authors apply the images of both sacrifice and victory to Christ’s first and second comings. (2) Zephaniah envisions the church age, wherein Christ’s death initially fulfills Zephaniah’s vision of Yahweh’s day of wrath against sinners and inaugurates the multiethnic gathering of worshipers in the presence of the King.

For Zephaniah, the day of the Lord is a time of war when Yahweh will pour out his wrath on the rebellious of the earth (Zeph. 1:15–17). It is a time when “the fire of his jealousy” will consume the ungodly (1:18; 3:8), whom the prophet portrays as a “sacrifice” ready to be consumed (1:7–8; 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 either 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 (cf. Lev. 9:1–10:3), those in Jerusalem and beyond were exposing themselves to *becoming* the sacrifice.

Within the law, God had already identified the relationship of animal sacrifice to his war against sin. We see this, e.g., in the way the “pleasing aroma” of Noah’s burnt offerings provides the context for the Lord’s promise never again to destroy the earth by water (Gen. 8:20–22). The link is similarly apparent in the way God’s holy fire consumes both burnt offering and Aaron’s wicked sons within the same context (Lev. 9:24; 10:2). We see correspondences in the way the Lord employs the imagery of his “consuming fire” to warn Israel to fear him as he was preparing to destroy the wicked of Canaan, whom Israel resembled (Deut. 9:3, 6, 27; 10:12). We may expand this thought in two different but related directions:

1. *Christ was the sacrificial object of God’s wrath.* Aligning with the above passages and similar ones, the law sets forth a clear pattern of substitution (e.g., Ex. 12:12–14; Lev. 16:15–22, 33–34), and prophets like Isaiah show that this pattern was pointing to the sufferings of the royal servant (Isa. 52:13–53:12). Within the Minor Prophets, the Davidic royal deliverer (Hos. 3:5; Mic. 5:2–5; Zech. 6:12–13; 9:9–10) triumphs only through deep tribulation, for he cleanses “the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem . . . from sin and uncleanness” only after he has been “pierced” (Zech. 12:10; 13:1; cf. 3:8–9; 13:7). Thus Zephaniah’s link between the day of the Lord and sacrifice falls within a salvation-historical and canonical context that points ahead to the sacrificial work of the Messiah, Jesus.

Because “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb. 10:4), Christ the God-man would be “pierced for our transgressions” and “crushed for our iniquities” (Isa. 53:5). He would bear God’s wrath against the “many,” taking upon himself the curse of sin so that his righteousness could in turn be credited to them (Isa. 53:10–11; cf. Gal. 3:13–14). “For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21; cf. Rom. 5:18–19; Phil. 3:9; 1 Pet. 2:24).

Each of the Gospel writers highlights the darkness that accompanied Jesus’ crucifixion (e.g., Luke 23:44), and Peter’s citation of Joel 2:30–31 in Acts 2:19–20 suggests that Peter 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 what Zephaniah said would happen at the day of the Lord.

2. *Christ the warrior will unleash God’s wrath against his enemies.* In one sense, Christ’s first appearing initiates the day of the Lord; at the same time, if people do not find refuge in him, the great day of fiery punishment is still approaching (Zeph. 1:18; 3:8). “By fire will the LORD enter into judgment, and by his sword, with all flesh; and those slain by the LORD shall be many” (Isa. 66:16). In this sense, the day of the Lord is yet to come (2 Thess. 2:2–3). As Peter asserted,

The heavens and the 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)

Significantly, just as the biblical authors see the coming Messiah as the one who represents the people *before God* through his death and resurrection, so too they view this same Davidic royal figure as representing God *before the people* in his victorious, peace-establishing reign. That is, Yahweh accomplishes both the deliverance and the destruction associated with the day of the Lord *through* his Messiah. This Davidic figure would be the dragon-slayer (Gen. 3:15) who would overcome all hostility toward God and reestablish peace on a global scale (cf. Rev. 19:11–21 with Rom. 16:20). He would “possess the gate of his enemies,” and in him would “all the nations of the earth be blessed” (Gen. 22:17b–18). His hand would “be on the neck” of his enemies, and to him would “be the obedience of the peoples” (Gen. 49:8, 10). He would “crush the forehead” of all oppressors, dispossess them, and “exercise dominion” on a global scale (Num. 24:17–19; cf. Zeph. 3:15, 19). His kingdom would be worldwide and include both a reunified Israel and a remnant from the nations (Isa. 11:10; Jer. 30:9; Hos. 3:5; cf. Zeph. 3:10, 15). He would rule forever with justice and righteousness, and all would know peace (Isa. 9:7; 11:3–5; Jer. 23:5; Ezek. 37:24–25; Mic. 5:4–5; Zech. 9:10; cf. Zeph. 3:5).

Another of the minor prophets noted that the day of the Lord's fiery judgment would be preceded by the coming of a new Elijah and accompanied by the return of Yahweh to his temple (Mal. 3:1–2; 4:1, 5–6). Matthew identified John the Baptist as this Elijah (Matt. 11:9–15), who both anticipated the outpouring of God's fiery fury to distinguish the righteous from the wicked and identified Jesus as the one through whom God would bring destruction (Matt. 3:11–12). With regard to the return of Yahweh, John the apostle recognized Jesus as God's tabernacling presence and temple (John 1:14; 2:21). Furthermore, in his discussion of the triumphal entry, John applied Zephaniah's portrait of King Yahweh's victory over evil to Jesus. While John partially cites Zechariah 9:9, he also alludes to Zephaniah 3:14–15 by calling Jesus "the King of Israel" whose coming victory means the "daughter of Zion" should "fear not" (John 12:13, 15; cf. comment on Zeph. 3:14–15). It is to Jesus that the multiethnic crowds cry, "Hosanna!" ("Please save!"; John 12:13), and it is by Jesus that "the ruler of this world" is, even now, "cast out" (John 12:31).

The NT authors stress that it is *through* Jesus that God stands both present and able to deliver: "The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save" (Zeph. 3:17). Jesus is "God with us" (Matt. 1:23) who has now been given "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:18). Through Jesus' death and resurrection God has already "disarmed the rulers and authorities" (Col. 2:15) and has "put all things under [Christ's] feet" (Eph. 1:22). And when Christ returns, all of God's enemies "will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when [our Lord Jesus] comes on that day to be glorified in his saints" (2 Thess. 1:9–10). In that day Christ will be called "Faithful and True" and "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Rev. 19:11, 16). "In righteousness he judges and makes war. . . . From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty" (Rev. 19:11, 15). And all God's enemies will be like a sacrificial feast before the Lord (vv. 17–18).

In one sense the day of the Lord that Zephaniah envisioned has already begun, but in another sense, it is still to be completed. At his first coming, Christ stood as the substitutionary *object* of God's wrath for the elect, and at his second appearing he will be the *instrument* through whom God will pour out vengeance on all evil on behalf of the elect.

We must also note how Zephaniah envisioned a multiethnic community that would survive God's punishment and gather to worship the Savior King with offerings in the new Jerusalem (Zeph. 3:9–10, 14–15, 17–20). This future day of the Lord intruded into the present in the death of Christ, suggesting that his resurrection and the outpouring of his Spirit at Pentecost have already inaugurated Zephaniah's vision of the new creation (3:9–20). In Jerusalem, Jesus initiated a great second exodus in which many peoples would be saved (Luke 9:31; cf. Zeph. 3:10, 19–20). 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). The church today, made up of believing Jews and Gentiles in Christ, is fulfilling this vision.

One way this is seen is in Luke's depiction of the early church's growth in the beginning of Acts. In the context of explaining a mission of making worshipers "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8), Peter's Pentecost sermon in Acts 2:17–21 cites Joel 2:28–32, which depicts the day of the Lord and mentions calling on God's name in ways very similar to Zephaniah (Zeph. 1:15; 3:8–9). What is not found in Joel, however, but is present in Zephaniah 3:9–10 is the vision of transformed "speech" (LXX = "tongue") and united devotion, both of which Luke highlights in detailing the outpouring of "tongues" (Acts 2:4, 11) and the amazing kinship enjoyed by early believers (vv. 42–47). Significantly, Zephaniah 3:10 uses ancient Ethiopia/Cush as the sole example of global restoration, which explains the otherwise intrusive story of the Ethiopian eunuch's salvation in Acts 8:26–40. Luke appears to be highlighting the fact that Zephaniah's vision of restoration is beginning to be fulfilled.

Moreover, in broader fulfillment of Zephaniah's restoration hope in 3:9–10, the NT is clear that Jesus' 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). It also stresses that Jews and Gentiles in Christ together make up one people of God, the church (Gal. 3:8, 14, 29; Eph. 2:14–16). As a new covenant community, we have already gathered "to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (Heb. 12:22; cf. Gal. 4:26). With this, we are already offering sacrifices of praise and good deeds (Rom. 12:1; Heb. 13:15–16) as we carry out our duties as priests in the service of God (Rom. 15:16; 1 Pet. 2:5). Nevertheless, we still look ahead to the new heaven and earth, when "the holy city, new Jerusalem," will descend from heaven "as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev. 21:2) and there will no longer be "anything accursed" (22:3).

THE EXALTATION OF GOD

A key purpose of the book of Zephaniah is to exalt Yahweh God as the sovereign judge and supreme savior who deserves everyone's reverence. The proper name "Yahweh/the LORD" is his most common designation in the book (34x), and to this is often added descriptives, all of which highlight God's supremacy: "the LORD their/your God" (2:7; 3:17), "the Lord God" (1:7) and "the LORD of hosts" (2:9–10). He is also called "the God of Israel" (2:9), "her [Jerusalem's] God" (3:2), "the King of Israel" (3:15), and "a mighty one" (3:17). The prophet describes God's character as "righteous" (3:5) and notes that his homage-demanding presence is "awesome" (2:11) and is "in your [Jerusalem's] midst" (3:15, 17).

Yahweh's just "jealousy" for the honor of his own name kindles his sacrificial fires of punishment against the ungodly (1:18; 3:8; cf. Ex. 34:14). Because he has diminished "all the gods of the earth," every knee "shall bow" to him (Zeph. 2:11; cf. Isa. 45:23; Rom. 14:11; Phil. 2:10). In the end, he will celebrate his purified remnant of faithful ones (Zeph. 3:17), whom he is transforming into a people of joy (3:14) for *his* "praise" and *his* "renown" throughout the earth (cf. comment on 3:19–20).

Preaching from Zephaniah

This book of prophecy is an ideal choice for Christian preachers to memorize, recite, and preach from, start to finish, within the local church (cf. 2 Tim. 3:15–17; 4:2). Not only does it total only fifty-three verses, but also, perhaps better than any other Minor Prophet, it clearly delineates all three of the issues most commonly addressed by God’s OT mouthpieces: *sin*, *punishment*, and *restoration*. Nearly all of prophetic theology is captured in some way within Zephaniah’s three chapters. The book is a God-given means for magnifying the beauties of Christ and his gospel (Luke 24:27; John 5:46; Acts 3:18; 1 Pet. 1:10–12).

While some have preached solidly on the whole book in a single sermon,¹ it is also possible to preach the treasures of the book over the course of several sermons. Personally, I have preached through the book over fifteen weeks, but I have also worked through the whole in just five sermons:

1. The Savior’s Serious Response to Sin (1:1–6)
2. The Savior’s Demand to Revere Him (1:7–18)
3. Seeking Refuge in the Only Savior (2:1–3:7)
4. Waiting for and Savoring the Savior (3:8–10)
5. A Satisfying Salvation—True Motivation (3:11–20)

Note that each sermon title is tied to the book’s overarching theme, “The Savior’s summons to satisfaction.” With this, every passage unit aligns with the key structural divisions I see within Zephaniah’s flow of thought.

Outline

Main Idea: In light of the impending day of his wrath, the Lord summons his faithful remnant to pursue him together patiently in order to avoid punishment and to enjoy satisfying salvation, all for God’s joy and glory.

- I. The *Superscription* of the Savior’s Summons to Satisfaction (1:1)
- II. The *Setting* of the Savior’s Summons to Satisfaction: A Call to Revere God (1:2–18)
 - A. The Context for the Call to Revere God: Coming Punishment (1:2–6)
 1. Global Punishment against the Rebels of Humanity (1:2–3)
 2. Local Punishment against the Rebels of Judah and Jerusalem (1:4–6)
 - B. The Makeup of the Call to Revere God (1:7–18)
 1. The Call to Revere God (1:7a)
 2. A Reason to Revere God, Described Specifically with Respect to Jerusalem (1:7b–13)

¹ See, e.g., Mark Dever, “The Message of Zephaniah: What’s There to Be Thankful For?” in *The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 861–881; Mike Bullmore, “God’s Great Heart of Love toward His Own (Zephaniah),” in *The Scriptures Testify about Me: Jesus and the Gospel in the Old Testament*, ed. D. A. Carson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 127–143.

3. Another Reason to Revere God, Described Broadly with Respect to the Whole World (1:14–18)
- III. The *Substance* of the Savior's Summons to Satisfaction: Charges to Pursue the Lord Patiently Together (2:1–3:20)
 - A. Stage 1: Seek the Lord Together to Avoid Punishment (2:1–3:7)
 1. The Charge to Gather Together before the Lord (2:1–2)
 2. The Charge to Seek the Lord in Righteousness and Humility (2:3–3:7)
 - a. The Charge to Seek the Lord (2:3)
 - b. An Initial Reason to Seek the Lord (2:4)
 - c. Further Reasons to Seek the Lord (2:5–3:7)
 - (1) Reason 1: The Lamentable State and Fate of the Rebels from the Foreign Nations (2:5–15)
 - (2) Reason 2: The Lamentable State and Fate of the Rebels from Jerusalem (3:1–7)
 - B. Stage 2: Wait on the Lord to Enjoy Satisfying Salvation (3:8–20)
 1. The Charge to Wait for the Lord (3:8a)
 2. Two Reasons to Wait for the Lord (3:8b–10)
 - a. Reason 1: The Lord's Purpose to Punish All the Wicked of the Earth (3:8b)
 - b. Reason 2: The Lord's Promise to Create a Community of Worshipers from the Whole Earth (3:9–10)
 3. Promises to Motivate Waiting for the Lord: The Remnant's Satisfying Salvation (3:11–20)
 - a. The Promise That the Lord Will Not Put Jerusalem to Shame (3:11–13)
 - b. A Parenthetical Call to Rejoice as If the Great Salvation Had Already Occurred (3:14–15)
 - c. The Promise That the Lord Will Save Completely (3:16–20)

ZEPHANIAH 1:1

1 The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah the son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah.

Section Overview

In introducing this prophetic call to joy, the book's superscription highlights its nature, source, messenger, and historical backdrop.

Section Outline

I. The *Superscription* of the Savior's Summons to Satisfaction (1:1)

Comment

1:1 Like many of the prophetic writings (e.g., Hos. 1:1; Hag. 1:1; Zech. 1:1), Zephaniah opens with a superscription that characterizes the book as “the word of the LORD”—a title that infuses the book’s message with incomparable authority and requires any audience to hear and to heed. In this instance, God’s mouthpiece is Zephaniah, a prophet known only from this book. He is designated “son of Cushi,” a proper name related to the ethnic title “Cushite” and the place designation “Cush.”² Cush was the name of ancient Ethiopia (located in the area of modern Sudan), which was then the center of black Africa. We know that Judah made a number of political alliances with the nation of Cush prior to Zephaniah’s ministry (Isa. 18:1–2; 20:5–6) and that Jerusalem’s leadership had strong ties with Cushites (2 Sam. 18:21; Jer. 38:7; 39:16). The special attention Zephaniah gives the “Cushites” (Zeph. 2:12) and “Cush” (3:10) in his declarations of punishment and restoration only adds to the likelihood that Zephaniah was a biracial Jew (probably through Cushi’s mother, Gedaliah’s wife) and that his father’s name introduces the book’s motif of international reconciliation with God (cf. 2:9; 3:9–10).³

Among the prophets, only Zephaniah lists a five-generation genealogy, drawing attention to the last member, Hezekiah, who is likely the godly reformer and thirteenth king of Judah, who reigned from 729 to 686 BC (cf. 2 Kings 18–20; Isaiah 36–39). This link suggests Zephaniah was of royal descent and clarifies his interest in the royal court (e.g., Zeph. 1:8; 3:3–4) and awareness of international affairs. It also puts his role as spiritual and social reformer in context and highlights how God has preserved a faithful remnant in the Davidic line, even amid an age of darkness. This same generational faith is accented in the inclusion of God’s name in the personal names of Zephaniah (“Yah[weh] has hidden”) and three of his forefathers: Gedaliah (“Yah[weh] is great”), Amariah (“Yah[weh] has spoken”), Hezekiah (“Yah[weh] has strengthened me”). This transgenerational loyalty to Yahweh kindles hope for the fulfillment of the Davidic promises (2 Sam. 7:12–16).

Josiah, king of Judah, was Hezekiah’s great-grandson who took the throne at age eight after the murder of his wicked father, Amon (642–640 BC), and whose three-decade reign (640–609 BC) was marked by religious reform (2 Kings 22:1–23:30; cf. 2 Chron. 34:3–35:19). His reign followed the tragic, death-filled, rebellious days of Kings Manasseh (696–642 BC) and Amon (cf. 2 Kings 21), and Zephaniah’s preaching would have helped initiate or assist Josiah’s call for a return to the Lord.

² Zephaniah’s father may be identical to Jehudi’s great-grandfather (Jer. 36:14), who served as a royal official during the reign of Jehoiakim (609–598 BC).

³ Rather than simply meaning “Cushite,” “Cushi” could endearingly mean something like “my black one” or “my portion of Cush.” This name would express his parents’ delight in his ethnic heritage.

ZEPHANIAH 1:2–6

- ² “I will utterly sweep away everything
from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD.
- ³ “I will sweep away man and beast;
I will sweep away the birds of the heavens
and the fish of the sea,
and the rubble¹ with the wicked.
I will cut off mankind
from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD.
- ⁴ “I will stretch out my hand against Judah
and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem;
and I will cut off from this place the remnant of Baal
and the name of the idolatrous priests along with the priests,
- ⁵ those who bow down on the roofs
to the host of the heavens,
those who bow down and swear to the LORD
and yet swear by Milcom,²
- ⁶ those who have turned back from following the LORD,
who do not seek the LORD or inquire of him.”

¹Or *stumbling blocks* (that is, idols) ²Or *their king*

Section Overview

Before Zephaniah pleads for a unified, patient pursuit of the Lord as the means to the satisfied life (2:1, 3; 3:8, 14), he sets the stage for this entreaty by calling his audience to revere God in light of the nearness and nature of the Lord’s impending punishment on Judah and the world (1:2–18). Only those who pause to take seriously how their sin has offended God’s holiness can delight in salvation.

Section Outline

- II. The *Setting* of the Savior’s Summons to Satisfaction: A Call to Revere God (1:2–18)
 - A. The Context for the Call to Revere God: Coming Punishment (1:2–6)
 1. Global Punishment against the Rebels of Humanity (1:2–3)
 2. Local Punishment against the Rebels of Judah and Jerusalem (1:4–6)

Comment

1:2–6 As a means of introducing the call that follows, to revere God (vv. 7–18), Zephaniah opens his oracle with the Lord’s promise to bring devastating punishment on the world in general (vv. 2–3), and Judah and Jerusalem in particular (vv. 4–6), in light of rampant wickedness and idolatrous rebellion.

1:2–3 Like the gathering of a grape or fig harvest, where the primary purpose is to reap good fruit but the secondary purpose is to remove bad and unproductive fruit (cf. Jer. 8:13), the Lord commits himself to “gather” (ESV = “sweep away”) his earthly creatures for judicial assessment (Zeph. 1:2; cf. 3:8; Isa. 24:22; Mic. 4:11–12) and to “cut off mankind from the face of the earth” (Zeph. 1:3). The scope of his covenantal action includes “everything,” which means “man . . . beast . . . the birds . . . and the fish.” “From the face of the earth” likely recalls the flood judgment (Gen. 6:7), while the fact that the four objects of wrath are listed in reverse order from the sequence in which God created them (Gen. 1:20–28) suggests the impending doom will be a type of de-creation. The placement of mankind at the top of the list highlights humanity’s representational headship over the rest of creation (cf. Gen. 1:26, 28; Ps. 8:6–8).

The “rubble” (or “stumbling blocks”; cf. ESV mg.) likely refers to idols (cf. Ezek. 7:19–20; 14:3–4), which God collects along with the “wicked” who worship them (cf. Matt. 13:41). The language of “cutting off” joins the harvest imagery of Zephaniah 1:2–3 to signal the ultimate covenant curse of death (cf. Gen. 9:11; Ezek. 14:17). Its use here highlights that *all* mankind stands accountable to God, who operates as covenant Lord over all the world by virtue of being its Creator (Gen. 9:9–10; Isa. 24:5–6).

1:4–6 Even God’s special covenant people are not impervious to the global judgment God has promised. Just as his “gathering/sweeping” will give rise to his “cutting off” at the worldwide level (vv. 2–3), so too the “stretching out” of his disciplining hand against Judah will result in his “cutting off” even the rebels from among his own people (v. 4).

1:4a God’s “stretching out” his hand is a regular image of divine retribution (Isa. 5:25; Ezek. 14:13). Here God pledges to work against Judah in the same manner in which he will work against the foreign nations (Zeph. 2:13). Jerusalem was the political and religious center of Judah (cf. 1 Kings 11:13, 36), but now the Lord would judge this capital city because of Baal worship (Zeph. 1:4b).

1:4b–6 Baal-Hadad was the false Canaanite storm and fertility deity who provided the most enduring threat to exclusive Yahweh worship in Israel, especially because the land of Israel was so dependent on rain (cf. 1 Kings 17–18). Trusting counterfeit gods like Baal for help was always evil in the Lord’s sight (cf. Deut. 5:7; Judg. 2:11–15; 3:7); such folly brought destruction to the northern kingdom (2 Kings 17:16–18) and rendered Judah’s destruction imminent (2 Kings 22:16–17; 23:26–27; 24:3–4). That paganism and apostasy continued in Zephaniah’s day was

deeply concerning, especially because it reached all the way to the religious and political leadership (Zeph. 1:4, 8–9; 3:3–4).

Some may read 1:4b as pronouncing judgment on two groups (the remnant of Baal and the priestly class), but the Hebrew construction implies that the clergy were a subset of the “remnant of Baal,” as were those mentioned with them in verses 5–6: “the remnant of Baal—*that is*, the name of the illegitimate priests along with the priests *and* those who bow down . . . *and* those who bow down and swear . . . *and* those who have turned back” (AT). Priests of the Lord were supposed to teach his law, guard knowledge, and preserve what was holy (Lev. 10:10–11), yet even they were corrupt (Zeph. 3:4). The “idoltrous priests” (1:4b) were most likely illegitimate, non-Levitical clergy who led in the worship of idols (1 Kings 12:31–32; 13:33–34) and whom Josiah would ultimately remove during his religious reforms (2 Kings 23:5; cf. Hos. 10:5). The fact that their “name” is “cut off” suggests complete annihilation and contrasts with the lasting “honor” (i.e., name) God would give his remnant at the restoration (Zeph. 3:19–20).

Along with the religious leadership (1:4), the remnant of Baal included three other groups: those revering the stars as gods (i.e., creation worshipers; v. 5a), those paying lip service to Yahweh but retaining other higher authorities (i.e., hypocritical syncretists; v. 5b), and those going their own way and failing to pray for guidance and help (i.e., the self-ruled and self-dependent; v. 6). Josiah would work intently to eradicate all instruments and individuals associated with any of these practices (2 Kings 23:4–5, 10, 24).

“The host of the heavens” almost always refers to stars, which God “allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven” (Deut. 4:19), along with the sun and moon, not as objects of worship but as instruments of divine providence (Gen. 1:14). They also pointed to the surety of God’s kingdom promises (Gen. 15:5; Jer. 33:22). God had already reproved the northern kingdom for creation worship (2 Kings 17:16–18), and now he promises comparable punishment on the south for doing the same (cf. 2 Kings 21:3, 5; Jer. 19:13).

Jerusalem’s Baal worship also included syncretism, that is, combining devotion to Yahweh with worship of other gods (Zeph. 1:5b). The ESV reads “Milcom,” the false god of the Ammonites, whose veneration was explicitly condemned (1 Kings 11:5, 33). The Hebrew could also be read as “their king,” but this royal title still appears to be referring to a god, which in context is likely Baal (Zeph. 1:4; cf. ESV mg.). The idea is that the remnant of Baal made oaths *to* Yahweh but did so *by* (i.e., under the highest authority of) *their king*, that is, by another god, invoking his power to serve as witness to the vow and to hold them accountable. This was directly against God’s instructions, and Josiah’s reform sought to put an end to it (2 Kings 23:4).

To “turn back from following the LORD” always depicts covenant disloyalty (Pss. 44:18; 78:57; Isa. 59:13). The covenant rebellion manifested itself through failure to “seek” and “inquire”—verbs often used as virtual synonyms and associated with reliance on God through prayerful repentance, request for help, or worship (cf.

Deut. 4:29; 2 Chron. 20:3–4; Ps. 105:3–4; Jer. 29:13). The terms can also refer to the pursuit of knowing God’s will or word (1 Kings 22:5; Amos 8:12). According to Zephaniah, turning from Baal will show itself in a commitment to Yahweh’s revealed will and a life characterized by prayer. These are fundamental to walking with God. In Zephaniah 2:3, the call to “seek the LORD” is explicated as a quest for “righteousness” and “humility” before God, which the prophet argues is the only potential means for avoiding divine judgment and which he later shows to be a necessary step in experiencing lasting joy (cf. 3:12, 14–15).

Response

TAKE SERIOUSLY THE WARNING OF GOD’S COMING JUDGMENT

It is often easy to think, “God’s punishment will not reach me.” Many thought this at the time of the flood, and Zephaniah faced the same attitude in his day. Yet sin is serious, and, like a deadly virus, it affects and infects everything it touches, creating shame, fear, and guilt. Because Yahweh’s holiness demands that he confront all failure to acknowledge his supremacy, he will bring “everything” into judgment (v. 2) and punish all the wicked (vv. 3–4).

When Christ returns, opportunity for repentance will be no more. In that day the wicked “will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matt. 25:46). Indeed, “The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 13:41–42; cf. Isa. 30:33; 34:10; 66:24; Dan. 12:2). We must heed Zephaniah’s warning of the impending divine wrath, for God’s kind forbearance and patience, which are intended to generate repentance, will not last forever (Rom. 2:4).

FLEE PLURALISM AND FOLLOW THE LORD ON THE ONLY PATH THAT LEADS TO LIFE

The god Baal exemplifies all that is hostile to Yahweh. We turn from giving the Lord his due whenever we begin to look to something other than him as our ultimate provider, protector, and treasure. Idolatry creates competing sovereigns, saviors, and satisfactions, but from and through and to the Lord are all things (Rom. 11:36). Zephaniah points to the truth that we as humans quickly prize people or position, power or possessions more than God. How quickly the fear of others trumps our fear of the Lord. How quickly pluralism becomes the norm.

Like a teacher of wisdom, Zephaniah depicts covenant unfaithfulness as going one’s own way rather than following God (Zeph. 1:6; cf. Ps. 1:6; Prov. 15:9). Prayerlessness and self-rule are sure symptoms of waywardness. The self-sufficient are self-condemned. Apart from Jesus, we cannot seek or inquire of the Father (John 14:6), and only in the path of Christ will we find life (Matt. 7:13–14; cf. Matt. 6:24; John 3:36). All who minimize sin and fail to seek the Savior will reap destruction.

ZEPHANIAH 1:7–18

- 7 Be silent before the Lord GOD!
For the day of the LORD is near;
the LORD has prepared a sacrifice
and consecrated his guests.
- 8 And on the day of the LORD's sacrifice—
"I will punish the officials and the king's sons
and all who array themselves in foreign attire.
- 9 On that day I will punish
everyone who leaps over the threshold,
and those who fill their master's¹ house
with violence and fraud.
- 10 "On that day," declares the LORD,
"a cry will be heard from the Fish Gate,
a wail from the Second Quarter,
a loud crash from the hills.
- 11 Wail, O inhabitants of the Mortar!
For all the traders² are no more;
all who weigh out silver are cut off.
- 12 At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps,
and I will punish the men
who are complacent,³
those who say in their hearts,
'The LORD will not do good,
nor will he do ill.'
- 13 Their goods shall be plundered,
and their houses laid waste.
Though they build houses,
they shall not inhabit them;
though they plant vineyards,
they shall not drink wine from them."
- 14 The great day of the LORD is near,
near and hastening fast;
the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter;
the mighty man cries aloud there.
- 15 A day of wrath is that day,
a day of distress and anguish,
a day of ruin and devastation,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness,
- 16 a day of trumpet blast and battle cry

against the fortified cities
and against the lofty battlements.

- 17 I will bring distress on mankind,
so that they shall walk like the blind,
because they have sinned against the LORD;
their blood shall be poured out like dust,
and their flesh like dung.
- 18 Neither their silver nor their gold
shall be able to deliver them
on the day of the wrath of the LORD.
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.

¹Or *their Lord's* ²Or *all the people of Canaan* ³Hebrew *are thickening on the dregs* [of their wine]

Section Outline

II.B. The Makeup of the Call to Revere God (1:7–18)

1. The Call to Revere God (1:7a)
2. A Reason to Revere God, Described Specifically with Respect to Jerusalem (1:7b–13)
3. Another Reason to Revere God, Described Broadly with Respect to the Whole World (1:14–18)

Comment

1:7–18 Like a herald readying an audience for an angry king's arrival, Zephaniah orders his audience to hush (v. 7a). He then provides the basis for his call to revere God. He details both the temporal nearness and the sacrificial nature of Yahweh's encroaching judgment against Judah (vv. 7b–13) and the whole world (vv. 14–18). From the perspective of content, therefore, the two major divisions of chapter 1 display an A-B-C-B'-A' pattern:

A – Global punishment (1:2–3)

B – Local punishment on Judah and Jerusalem (1:4–6)

C – Be silent! (1:7a)

B' – Jerusalem's fall (1:7b–13)

A' – The world's destruction (1:14–18)

Zephaniah's encircling of Jerusalem with wrath highlights that she will not escape judgment.

1:7a Zephaniah captures his audience's attention by calling them to "be silent." The Bible uses this charge to move potential worshipers of Yahweh to turn their attention reverently to the Great King (Hab. 2:20; Zech. 2:13).

1:7b “For” marks the reason for such awe-filled stillness: to prepare for the arrival of the sovereign God on his judgment day (cf. Rev. 8:1). The prophets apply the “day of the LORD” title both to the ultimate future day when God will finally eradicate all evil from the world and to the periodic intrusions of Yahweh’s punishment that anticipate it—against rebels from Israel (e.g., Joel 2:1–11) and the nations (e.g., Isaiah 13). Here God’s just anger is directed toward Jerusalem (Zeph. 1:8–13) in anticipation of his wrath against the world (vv. 14–18).

Significantly, the prophet portrays the day of the Lord as a “sacrifice” already prepared (cf. Jer. 46:10; Rev. 19:17–19). God must appease his just wrath, whether on the sinner or on the substitute. When atonement is not secured through faith in the provided substitute (Lev. 17:11; Isa. 52:13–53:12; Heb. 9:22), the fires of wrath will ultimately consume the offenders themselves (Zeph. 1:18; 3:8). While the “guests” God has “consecrated” could be the people of Judah as God invites them to their own slaughter, it seems more likely that those invited are the invaders the Lord has already set apart to destroy Judah.⁴ Most immediately this would be the Babylonians (Jer. 34:21–22; Hab. 1:6), but ultimately it will include the remnant of the godly who will stand with the King, executing God’s wrath on the nations of the world (Ps. 149:5–9; 1 Cor. 6:2; Rev. 2:26–27).

1:8–11 The Lord’s punishment would extend as far as Judah’s debauchery and idolatry did—all the way to the city’s political and religious leaders. Zephaniah focuses on the former group when he mentions the public leaders (“officials,” whether governmental or military), the royal court (“the king’s sons”), and all those influenced by alien, pagan values (“foreign attire”; v. 8). He targets the latter when he speaks of those who engage in what appears to be pagan superstitious activity associated with the temple doorway (“everyone who leaps over the threshold”; cf. 1 Sam. 5:3–5). These are the ones who “fill their master’s house” (= “their Lord’s [i.e., Yahweh’s] temple”; cf. Zeph. 1:9 ESV mg.) with “violence and fraud” (v. 9).⁵ Political and religious leaders were the central instigators of Judah’s covenant rebellion and ultimately caused its destruction (Zeph. 3:3–4; cf. Jer. 32:32; 34:18–19). Where selfishness, power, money, and pagan influence reign, oppression and deceit often prevail (cf. Isa. 1:23).

Having identified the initial victims of God’s punishment, the text now highlights their response to the outpouring of the Lord’s wrath (Zeph. 1:10–11). “Crying,” “wailing,” and “loud crashes” are all sounds of war and its accompanying deep pain and grief. The “Fish Gate” was the main entrance to Jerusalem from the north (2 Chron. 33:14; Neh. 12:38–39), and the “Second Quarter” was the city

⁴ The Hebrew reads, “The LORD has prepared a sacrifice; he has consecrated his guests.” The lack of the word “and” between the two clauses suggests the second is further describing the first in some way. This could mean the “guests” are themselves the sacrifice (option 1) or that the “guests” will devour the sacrifice (option 2). Elsewhere the biblical authors apply the term “consecrated” to both the sacrifice (Ex. 28:38; Jer. 12:3, ESV = “set them apart”) and the agents of slaughter (Isa. 13:3; Jer. 22:7), but the term “guests” appears restricted either to the instruments that carry out God’s punishment (Ezek. 23:23, ESV = “men of renown”) or to those who feast on a sacrifice (e.g., 1 Sam. 9:13; 1 Kings 1:41).

⁵ The Hebrew does not begin Zephaniah 1:9b with “and,” which implies that the violence and fraud are perpetrated by the superstitious leaders of the temple precinct.

section north of the temple (2 Kings 22:14). Zephaniah probably mentions them, along with the “hills,” to clarify the direction from which God would bring punishment. The location of the “Mortar” is not clear, but its association with “traders” and “silver” suggests the market district wherein “foreign” influence and “violence and fraud” commonly flourished (cf. Isa. 2:6; Hos. 12:7).

1:12–13 Zephaniah now further discusses the devastating nature of God’s judgment upon Jerusalem. The Lord’s search of the city “with lamps” points to the thoroughness of the search (cf. Luke 15:8) and highlights that none will escape punishment (Isa. 24:17–18; Amos 5:18–20). It may also hint that the onslaught of wrath will come “like a thief in the night” (1 Thess. 5:2; Rev. 3:3; cf. Joel 2:9). The prophet characterizes these rebels as “complacent” by comparing them to wine left too long in a jar (Zeph. 1:12 ESV mg.; cf. Jer. 48:11–12). While recognizing the existence of Yahweh, they live as deists, believing God would never fulfill his promises of blessing or curse, “good” or “ill” (cf. Jer. 5:12; Amos 9:10; Mic. 3:11). Instead of leading to deeper humility and gratitude for mercy, God’s delayed punishment had resulted in the people’s failure to fear God’s wrath or to desire his blessing. Yet such practical atheism is foolish (Ps. 14:1), for Yahweh’s patience did not mean he would automatically clear the guilty (Ex. 34:6–7). Soon their end would come, as God would target all their false securities (“goods . . . houses . . . vineyards”; cf. Zeph. 1:11, 18; Deut. 28:30–31, 39; Amos 5:11; Mic. 6:15).

1:14–18 With an echo of verse 7b, verse 14 opens a new unit that builds on the previous reason given for revering God in verses 7b–13. Here the nature of God’s day of wrath is first characterized (vv. 14–16) and then developed (vv. 17–18) with respect to the whole world.

1:14–16 In contrast to his wording in verse 7, Zephaniah now describes the coming day of wrath as “great.” This addition may only mark a shift in scope (from local to global) or it may also identify a change in time, with verses 7–13 addressing immediate punishment on Jerusalem in 586 BC but verses 14–18 detailing the final judgment associated ultimately with the first and second comings of Christ (Mal. 4:5; Acts 2:20; Rev. 16:14).⁶ To speak of this latter day as “near and hastening fast” would be to see history with respect to eternity and God’s timeline. Regardless, what is clear is that the imminent timing (Zeph. 1:14a), the torturous sound (v. 14b), and the sheer terror of the day (vv. 15–16) make an immediate response imperative (cf. Isa. 13:6).

The “bitter” noise of the day may recall the cries and wails of Zephaniah 1:10, and it is likely that this connection led the ESV translators to treat the “mighty man” of verse 14 as a valiant soldier crying in defeat. Nevertheless, because 3:17 uses the same term (“mighty man/one”) for Yahweh the warrior (cf. Deut. 10:17), it is possible that the last line of Zephaniah 1:14 refers to God’s war cry (NIV = “the Mighty Warrior shouts his battle cry”; cf. Isa. 42:13). If so, then from the

⁶ Cf. the “great tribulation” in Matthew 24:21; Revelation 2:22; 7:14.

perspective of the offending parties, this cry is “bitter” because it means the Lord’s fury is against them.

With great clarity, Zephaniah 1:15–16 details the horror of God’s judgment. A summary statement characterizes the day as one of “wrath” (v. 18). What then follows are five pairs of features of the day. The terms “distress and anguish” echo curses promised to Israel (Deut. 28:53, 55, 57) but are now applied to the whole world (cf. Deut. 30:7). “Darkness . . . gloom . . . clouds . . . thick darkness” are all common cataclysmic images associated with the day of the Lord. They express God’s fierce presence and a reversal of creation (from life to death, from light to darkness) for those he is punishing.⁷ “Trumpet blast and battle cry” are sounds of alarm that prepare people for war (Num. 10:9; Jer. 4:19). Often they are associated with God’s temporal or future judgment (e.g., Joel 2:1; Zech. 9:14; Matt. 24:31) and are directly linked to the second appearing of Christ (1 Thess. 4:16). Even the most secure strongholds are unable to withstand the Lord’s destructive power (cf. Zeph. 2:8, 15; 3:6).

1:17–18 Zephaniah now develops the nature of the punishment by asserting Yahweh’s action (v. 17a) and then explaining (v. 17b) and synthesizing (v. 18) its destructive effects. God promises to “bring distress on mankind” (v. 17a); while he will use human and natural agents, he is always the decisive mover in punishment. Zephaniah initially highlights the effects in two ways (v. 17b). First, humanity’s sin against the Lord will result in blindness—a covenant curse (Deut. 28:28–29) that likely points to a spiritual inability to see God’s beauty and one’s own neediness. Second, the pouring out of the victims’ “blood” and “flesh” like “dust” and “dung” mixes images of sacrifice and war—sacrifice in the sense that the worthless and repulsive parts of the victims are emptied out in the process of slaughter, and war in the sense that the victims are dismembered, with small fragments scattered over the landscape (cf. Jer. 16:4 and Mal. 2:3, though both with different terms for “dung”).

Zephaniah 1:18 synthesizes the destructive effects of the Lord’s deeds of wrath, first negatively and then positively. First, God’s punishment will result in an impossibility of deliverance. Whether “silver” and “gold” refer to money (v. 11; Ezek. 7:19) or to the idols shaped from them (Zeph. 1:3, 5; 2:11; Isa. 45:20–21), no form of earthly or spiritual power can rescue the rebel from God’s wrath (cf. 1 Sam. 12:20–21). Such salvation comes “not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Pet. 1:18–19).

Second, drawing again on the imagery of sacrifice, the Lord’s punishment means complete destruction for every earthly rebel, all because “the fire of [God’s]

⁷ The OT uses the imagery of darkness to describe both the temporary, small-scale intrusions of the day of the Lord and the more ultimate future day against both Israel (Isa. 5:30; 8:22; Joel 2:2, 30–31; Amos 5:18, 20; 8:9) and the nations (Isa. 13:10; Ezek. 30:3; Joel 3:15). The NT applies the same foreboding descriptions to the outpouring of God’s wrath with respect to both Jesus’ death on the cross and the final judgment (Matt. 24:29; Acts 2:20; Rev. 6:12; 8:12). Darkness is a common physical phenomenon associated with war and death, so it is difficult to know if the biblical authors envisioned actual atmospheric changes or were simply depicting the personal distress of the objects of God’s wrath, for whom life was coming to an end.

jealousy” was aroused (Zeph. 1:18; 3:8). Scripture often associates Yahweh’s jealousy with his blazing desire to be worshiped as the only God (e.g., Deut. 4:23–24; Ps. 79:5; Ezek. 23:25). Like a just judge committed to what is right, Yahweh’s consuming passion for the honor of his name will soon burst forth in unquenchable fires of wrath against the ungodly of the earth (Isa. 66:15–16; Mal. 4:1; 2 Thess. 1:7–8), paralleling the earlier judgment by water (2 Pet. 3:5–7).

Response

ALLOW THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE DAY OF THE LORD
TO MOVE YOU TO REVERE GOD

Zephaniah 1 portrays a God who demands reverence (v. 7), whose just jealousy can be kindled into flames of wrath (v. 18), who works to appease all affronts to his holiness (vv. 7, 12–13), whose justice shows no prejudice (vv. 8–9), and whose punishment is both terrible and complete (vv. 11, 15–18). The words Zephaniah uses to describe the outbreak of divine anger are breathtaking (v. 15). Could the situation be more ominous? The tragedy of the 586 BC destruction of Jerusalem (cf. Lamentations) was but a foretaste of a climactic retribution still to come, which Christ will bring

in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might. (2 Thess. 1:8–9; cf. 2 Pet. 3:10)

How dreadful to have the source of all power and the upholder of all life working against you. Having learned that the living God is approaching in anger, we must reverently quiet our speech, hearts, and activity before the Sovereign One, and, like Zephaniah, call others to do the same (Zeph. 1:7).

CELEBRATE GOD’S GIFT OF A SUBSTITUTE SACRIFICE

It is significant that the Lord portrays his war of punishment against sin as a “sacrifice” (1:7; cf. Introduction: Theology of Zephaniah; Its Relationship to the Rest of the Bible and to Christ). The offering of animals prescribed in Leviticus was a means by which the heavenly warrior engaged in a conquest against evil to reestablish peace, punishing a substitute rather than a sinner. Similarly, at the cross, God’s war against evil manifested itself in his cursing Christ on behalf of the elect (Isa. 53:11; Gal. 3:13). “He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace” (Isa. 53:5; cf. Rom. 4:25; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 2:24). And, by his substitutionary act of love, Christ secured our right standing with God (Rom. 5:1, 18–19), having canceled “the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands” (Col. 2:14). Now, we need not fear the future day of the Lord’s wrath (Rom. 5:9–11).

CALL OTHERS TO TAKE SIN SERIOUSLY AND TO REVERE
GOD WHILE THERE IS STILL HOPE

For those identified with Jesus by faith, his future return and the final day of the Lord will bring eternal salvation, not harm (Zeph. 3:8–20; 1 Thess. 5:9; 2 Tim. 4:8). Yet Scripture is clear that, while there is “no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1) and all who have “been justified by his blood” will be “saved by him from the wrath of God” (Rom. 5:9), this very wrath “remains” on everyone who fails to surrender to Jesus (John 3:36). For these, the future day of the Lord is still ominous, for God will at that time destroy his enemies (Isa. 66:15–16; 2 Thess. 1:8–9; Heb. 10:27; 2 Pet. 3:7). As such, before “the day of vengeance of our God” (Isa. 61:2), the church must proclaim to a needy world the terms of peace and the good news that reconciliation with God is possible through faith in Christ (Rom. 1:16–17; 10:15; 2 Cor. 5:18–20). We must join Zephaniah in calling others to “be silent before the Lord GOD” (Zeph. 1:7)—to take sin seriously and to revere the One who will come in blazing wrath against his enemies. “Our Savior Christ Jesus . . . abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Tim. 1:10). He is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). This is the good news we must proclaim.

OVERVIEW OF

ZEPHANIAH 2:1–3:20

The book’s main section unpacks the substance of the Savior’s summons to satisfaction. It uses six imperatives to charge the righteous remnant to pursue God patiently together, both to avoid judgment and to enjoy satisfaction (2:1–3:20). The main commands are found in two places: 2:1, 3 (“*Gather* together, yes *gather* . . . *Seek* the LORD . . . *seek* righteousness; *seek* humility”) and 3:8a (“Therefore *wait* for me”). This multifaceted command is motivated by the impending curse God will bring on the rebels of the world (2:4–3:7) and by the blessing of joy in God and God’s joy in his remnant who persevere through judgment (3:8b–20).

ZEPHANIAH 2:1–3:7

- 2** Gather together, yes, gather,
 O shameless nation,
² before the decree takes effect¹
 —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.
- ³ Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land,
 who do his just commands;²
 seek righteousness; seek humility;
 perhaps you may be hidden
 on the day of the anger of the LORD.
- ⁴ 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.
- ⁵ Woe to you inhabitants of the seacoast,
 you nation of the Cherethites!
 The word of the LORD is against you,
 O Canaan, land of the Philistines;
 and I will destroy you until no inhabitant is left.
- ⁶ And you, O seacoast, shall be pastures,
 with meadows³ for shepherds
 and folds for flocks.
- ⁷ The seacoast shall become the possession
 of the remnant of the house of Judah,
 on which they shall graze,
 and in the houses of Ashkelon
 they shall lie down at evening.
 For the LORD their God will be mindful of them
 and restore their fortunes.
- ⁸ “I have heard the taunts of Moab
 and the revilings of the Ammonites,
 how they have taunted my people
 and made boasts against their territory.
- ⁹ Therefore, as I live,” declares the LORD of hosts,
 the God of Israel,
 “Moab shall become like Sodom,
 and the Ammonites like Gomorrah,

a land possessed by nettles and salt pits,
and a waste forever.

The remnant of my people shall plunder them,
and the survivors of my nation shall possess them.”

- 10 This shall be their lot in return for their pride,
because they taunted and boasted
against the people of the LORD of hosts.
- 11 The LORD will be awesome against them;
for he will famish all the gods of the earth,
and to him shall bow down,
each in its place,
all the lands of the nations.
- 12 You also, O Cushites,
shall be slain by my sword.
- 13 And he will stretch out his hand against the north
and destroy Assyria,
and he will make Nineveh a desolation,
a dry waste like the desert.
- 14 Herds shall lie down in her midst,
all kinds of beasts;⁴
even the owl and the hedgehog⁵
shall lodge in her capitals;
a voice shall hoot in the window;
devastation will be on the threshold;
for her cedar work will be laid bare.
- 15 This is the exultant city
that lived securely,
that said in her heart,
“I am, and there is no one else.”
What a desolation she has become,
a lair for wild beasts!
Everyone who passes by her
hisses and shakes his fist.

3 Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled,
the oppressing city!

- ² She listens to no voice;
she accepts no correction.
She does not trust in the LORD;
she does not draw near to her God.
- ³ Her officials within her
are roaring lions;
her judges are evening wolves
that leave nothing till the morning.
- ⁴ Her prophets are fickle, treacherous men;
her priests profane what is holy;
they do violence to the law.
- ⁵ The LORD within her is righteous;
he does no injustice;

every morning he shows forth his justice;
 each dawn he does not fail;
 but the unjust knows no shame.

- ⁶ “I have cut off nations;
 their battlements are in ruins;
 I have laid waste their streets
 so that no one walks in them;
 their cities have been made desolate,
 without a man, without an inhabitant.
⁷ I said, ‘Surely you will fear me;
 you will accept correction.
 Then your⁶ dwelling would not be cut off
 according to all that I have appointed against you.’⁷
 But all the more they were eager
 to make all their deeds corrupt.”

¹Hebrew *gives birth* ²Or *who carry out his judgment* ³Or *caves* ⁴Hebrew *beasts of every nation* ⁵The identity of the animals rendered *owl* and *hedgehog* is uncertain ⁶Hebrew *her* ⁷Hebrew *her*

Section Overview

Zephaniah opens the book’s main body with the first of two stages of the Savior’s summons to satisfaction (2:1–3:7). With five imperatives (2:1, 3) the prophet charges those identifying with the righteous remnant of Judah to pursue the Lord together (“gather . . . seek”) in order to avoid the coming wrath. The commands themselves are initially grounded (“For”; 2:4) in the fact that God’s judgment will come to the neighboring Philistines. The reasoning is then expounded upon in two extended units that each begin with the particle “Woe” and bemoan the state and fate of the rebels from the surrounding foreign nations (2:5–15) and from Jerusalem (3:1–7). Jerusalem’s rebellious and defiled nature (3:1) will make her a co-recipient of God’s wrath with her neighbors, and the people’s only hope for survival is to seek the Lord together.

Section Outline

- III. The *Substance* of the Savior’s Summons to Satisfaction: Charges to Pursue the Lord Patiently Together (2:1–3:20)
 - A. Stage 1: Seek the Lord Together to Avoid Punishment (2:1–3:7)
 - 1. The Charge to Gather Together before the Lord (2:1–2)
 - 2. The Charge to Seek the Lord in Righteousness and Humility (2:3–3:7)
 - a. The Charge to Seek the Lord (2:3)
 - b. An Initial Reason to Seek the Lord (2:4)
 - c. Further Reasons to Seek the Lord (2:5–3:7)
 - (1) Reason 1: The Lamentable State and Fate of the Rebels from the Foreign Nations (2:5–15)
 - (2) Reason 2: The Lamentable State and Fate of the Rebels from Jerusalem (3:1–7)

Comment

2:1–2 Chapter 1 described Judah’s idolatry and complacency (1:4–6, 12) and the resulting horrific punishment awaiting them (1:7–18). With two conjoined commands to “gather,” Zephaniah now transitions to a message of instruction and further warning for all in Judah who have ears to hear. The Hebrew root translated “gather” is usually used for the collection of straw or sticks and often appears in contexts of chastisement (Ex. 15:7; Isa. 5:24; Nah. 1:10). Here, however, the imagery appears more positive. Just as desirable straw or grain is collected after separating the chaff, the remnant of faithful ones must bundle themselves in unity and separate from all that is destined for the fires of God’s just wrath (2 Chron. 20:4; Joel 1:14–15; cf. Heb. 10:24–25).

The prophet calls his listeners in Judah a “shameless nation,” literally one that “does not long” for the Lord (cf. the use of the same verb at the beginning of Ps. 84:2). He then asserts that there is hope for any who act quickly and return to God. Zephaniah’s repetition of the preposition “before” highlights how fleeting the opportunity to repent truly is, and his double use of “the anger of the LORD,” first with “burning” and then with “the day of,” emphasizes the seriousness of his call (cf. Heb. 10:31). Like a mother in labor, Yahweh’s purposes will soon “give birth” (ESV = “take[s] effect”) to his “decree” to punish the wicked. Repentance cannot wait! The day of wrath will come and go quickly, like windblown “chaff” (cf. Isa. 29:5).

2:3 The gathering of the remnant was for a more ultimate purpose—that they may together “seek the LORD,” which is then described as pursuing “righteousness” and “humility.” While rebels, proud in their own way, turn their backs on God (1:6; 3:2), the humble “do his just commands” (likely those given through Moses; cf. Ps. 15:2; Prov. 21:15). Repentance demands that people reorient their entire being toward God (cf. Isa. 51:1; Amos 5:6), and it is something experienced only by the “humble,” those broken in spirit (i.e., “bowed, bent” under life’s pressures) who recognize their neediness and live in earnest dependence on God (Zeph. 3:12; cf. Ps. 37:11; Isa. 11:4). Turning from self-exaltation to God-exaltation, the “humble” must “seek humility” at even deeper levels.

Furthermore, having spurned the chaos of injustice and rebellion, those treasuring right order (evidenced in the keeping of God’s “just commands”) should “seek righteousness.” Yahweh’s righteousness (Zeph. 3:5) includes both his right regard for his infinite value and his commitment to act in accordance with this value and align everything with it. Human righteousness is evident wherever God’s righteousness is mirrored—wherever people define correct order in the cosmos (Pss. 89:14; 119:75) and community (Gen. 18:19; Deut. 16:20; Ps. 15:2) as the valuing of God and of his image in others. Thus righteousness is often associated with acts of justice, especially for the marginalized (cf. Isa. 1:21–23). Zephaniah’s Judah too quickly departed from this type of righteousness (Zeph. 1:9; 3:1–5).

While the Lord will find and destroy every rebel on his day of judgment (1:12, 18; cf. Deut. 7:20; Amos 9:3), heeding Zephaniah’s threefold charge opens the

possibility of being “hidden,” with God as one’s refuge (cf. Ps. 27:5; Jer. 36:26). By using “perhaps,” Zephaniah helps his hearers hope in—but not presume upon—divine favor (Joel 2:14; Amos 5:15; Jonah 3:9; Acts 8:22). Elsewhere, the prophet emphasizes both the true potential of reconciliation with God (Zeph. 3:7) and the certainty that the Lord will preserve a humble remnant (2:7, 9; 3:11–20).

2:4 As clarified by the causal conjunction “For,” God’s promise to destroy the foreign rebels from nearby Philistia is part of Zephaniah’s motivation to Judah to heed his call to pursue the Lord. The point appears to be that the punishment is close to home and will reach them if they fail to repent (cf. 3:6–7). Ordered south to north, “Gaza . . . Ashkelon . . . Ashdod . . . Ekron” are four of the five Philistine cities located west of Israel along the Mediterranean Sea. Gath’s absence from the list is common among the prophets (cf. Jer. 25:20; Amos 1:6–8; Zech. 9:5–7) and is likely due to either its early destruction (Amos 6:2) or its close association with Israel throughout history (e.g., 1 Sam. 27:1–7).

Response

COMMIT TO COMMUNITY WITH OTHER BELIEVERS

God never intended us to attempt to cross the deserts of life alone, nor does he want us to celebrate his provisions and protections on our own. Other people are part of his means for helping us persevere, and they are to be partners in our praises to God. This is why Zephaniah’s charge opens by calling the remnant to “gather together” (2:1). The writer of Hebrews urges his readers to “exhort one another every day” (Heb. 3:13) and “consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, . . . and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Heb. 10:24–25). This “Day” is the very “day of the anger of the LORD” to which Zephaniah points (Zeph. 2:2–3). Partnership with other believers, especially through active local church membership, helps us continue to grow in holiness, “without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14).

CONTINUE SEEKING THE LORD, PURSUING RIGHTEOUSNESS AND HUMILITY

Zephaniah yearns for his audience to have an all-consuming hunger for the Lord—a sense of personal need for God and a treasuring of him that awakens both love for others and longing for more than the world offers (2:3). Jesus highlighted how God’s kingdom is reserved for “the poor in spirit” and how it is the “meek” who will inherit the earth (Matt. 5:3, 5; cf. Ps. 37:11). He also stressed the priority and blessing of seeking God’s “kingdom” and “righteousness” (Matt. 5:6; 6:33), which includes extending mercy to others and working for peace (5:7, 9)—the same mercy and peace we have received from the Lord (Deut. 10:17–19; 1 John 4:10–11). Righteousness and humility thus go hand in hand, for right order exists only when we turn from all forms of pride and instead value God above ourselves and also value his image in others.

Comment

2:5–3:7 Zephaniah now develops the basis for his charge to “seek the LORD” (2:3–4). The righteous remnant should patiently pursue the Lord together because he has promised to judge not only the rebels of the foreign nations that surround them (2:5–15) but also those from Jerusalem (3:1–7). Each expanded reason for looking and longing begins with the term “Woe” (2:5; 3:1) and laments the state and fate of the respective groups.

2:5–15 Building off the initial sentence delivered against Philistia in verse 4, Zephaniah now builds a four-pointed compass of punishment around Judah, beginning with the neighboring rival Philistines to the west (vv. 5–7), then the Moabites and Ammonites to the east (vv. 8–11), and then the imperial powers of the Cushites and Assyrians to the south and north (vv. 12–15). It is implied that the divine punishment spanning the populated world will reach Judah (cf. Hab. 2:16–17), so their only hope is to return to the Lord and become part of the preserved remnant (Zeph. 2:3, 7, 9).

2:5–7 The term rendered “woe” (v. 5) expresses angst due to disgust over covenant rebellion and idolatry (e.g., Hab. 2:12, 19) and/or dismay over impending doom (e.g., Jer. 30:7). Both possibilities seem operative here. Zephaniah employs the particle to introduce his two reasons why Judah should patiently pursue the Lord (Zeph. 2:5–15; 3:1–7). He directs his “woe” at “the Cherethites,” a people known more commonly as the Philistines, who dwelled on the Mediterranean’s eastern “seacoast” just west of Judah (2:5; cf. Ezek. 25:16). God promises to eradicate the evil ones completely, changing their cities of wickedness into “pastures” for “the remnant of the house of Judah.”

The prophets regularly employ pastoral imagery to depict fertility and peace for the remnant of God’s people (Zeph. 2:7; 3:13; Isa. 5:17; 65:10), especially in relation to the age of restoration that will be led by a shepherd from the line of David (Jer. 23:1–8; Ezek. 34:11–16, 20–31; Mic. 5:2–4).⁸ Yahweh’s “mindfulness” (Zeph. 2:7) points to his active care and redemption—he will “restore their fortunes” (Deut. 30:3; Jer. 30:18; Hos. 6:11). That the remnant will lodge in what was Philistia (Zeph. 2:7) suggests that the earthly kingdom of God’s reign is beginning to expand to include the whole planet, as was the goal from the beginning (Gen. 1:28; 22:17b–18; 26:3–4; Rom. 4:13). All this will come about after God pours out his wrath on the world.

2:8–11 The section continues with God’s promising to punish the Moabites and Ammonites, Judah’s cousins to the east (cf. Gen. 19:36–38), who had a history of oppressing Israel (Deut. 23:3–4; 2 Kings 13:20; 2 Chron. 20:1). Their more protected, elevated location on the Gilead Plateau east of the Jordan often resulted in

⁸ The NT points to Jesus as the one great or chief shepherd who has, through his sacrificial death and triumphant resurrection, already initiated the hoped-for rest for all who believe in him, whether Jew or Gentile (John 10:14–16; Rev. 7:15–17).

a superiority complex characterized by delight in others' destruction (cf. Isa. 16:6; Jer. 48:27–30; Ezek. 25:3, 6). Therefore, with a strong oath, Israel's all-powerful God ("the LORD of hosts [armies]"), promises to act on behalf of his own (Zeph. 2:9). He will confront the fresh "boasts" (v. 8) and "pride" (v. 10) of these highlanders by making them "like Sodom" and "Gomorrhah," the very cities overcome by curse in the days of Lot, the forefather of these peoples (Gen. 19:24–26; cf. 2 Pet. 2:6; Rev. 11:8). Rather than being a place of life, this agrarian society would be devastated and depopulated, like a desert wasteland (cf. Gen. 13:10; Isa. 7:23–25; Jer. 17:6).

As with the judgment sentence on Philistia (Zeph. 2:6–7), this portrayal of complete desolation is tempered by the fact that a remnant of survivors from Judah will both "plunder" and "possess" the Moabites and Ammonites (v. 9). This disinheriting shows partial fulfillment of God's original commission for his human image-bearers to fill and subdue the earth (Gen. 1:28). Even more, the possession likely includes not only the claiming of territory (Deut. 31:7) but also the inclusion of a remnant of these once-enemy peoples within the newly transformed people of God (Isa. 14:2; cf. 56:6–8), all of whom would together serve Yahweh their God and the new David their king (cf. Jer. 30:9 with Hos. 3:5; Amos 9:11–12 with Acts 15:16–18).

Zephaniah 2:11 opens by declaring that Moab and Ammon are confronted with the Lord's "awesome" nature—that overwhelming quality associated with his incomparability in character and deed, often manifested in his wars of judgment (Ex. 15:11; Deut. 7:21; Joel 2:11, 31; Mal. 4:5). This encounter is certain because ("for") the Lord "will famish all the gods of the earth." Here the focus is on the sole sovereign of the universe (Deut. 5:7; 10:17; Ps 95:3) diminishing all evil spiritual powers standing against him (cf. Jer. 50:2; 51:44), whether actual or imagined (Deut. 32:17; Ps. 106:37; 1 Cor. 10:19–20). And though it is not evident to the English reader, the Hebrew form of the verb "will famish" stresses that the Lord's intention is so certain that it is as if he has already overcome. He will indeed defeat all evil! Those in Judah should thus stop seeking help from "gods" that cannot save (Isa. 43:10–11; 45:21; Hos. 13:4), for in the end, foreign rebels and remnant alike from the most distant "lands" will recognize Yahweh as preeminent (cf. Zeph. 3:9–10, 15, 19; Isa. 45:23; Phil. 2:10–11).

2:12–15 Zephaniah's compass of punishment now continues by highlighting the Cushites to the south and the Assyrians to the north. The Cushites were black Africans from ancient Ethiopia, located south of ancient Egypt in the region of modern Sudan. At times Israel looked to them rather than to God for help (Isa. 20:5–6), but the Lord here declares their judgment and his sufficiency. Most English versions understand this to be a prophecy of the future (so ESV), although it is possible the Hebrew could refer to a past event, which in this case could be Assyria's destruction of the twenty-fifth (Cushite) dynasty of Egypt in 663 BC, a generation before Zephaniah's ministry (cf. Isa. 20:1–6). If so, the reference to Cush/Egypt's demise would supply proof that Assyria's empire, highlighted in the

following verses, would also fall (Zeph. 2:13–15; cf. Nah. 3:8–13). In either case, the fact that the Lord refers to his own “sword” makes clear that the destruction is from his hand.

Turning to Assyria, the Lord promises to “stretch out his hand” of vengeance against them (Zeph. 2:13; cf. 1:4). Assyria was the notorious northern superpower who controlled the Near East from 870 to 626 BC and conquered the northern kingdom’s capital of Samaria in 723, resulting in Israel’s exile (2 Kings 17; cf. Isa. 10:5). The Lord pledges that Nineveh, Assyria’s onetime capital, would become a wasteland (cf. Nah. 3:7), with domestic and wild animals replacing humans as the inhabitants of what used to be a center of human power (Zeph. 2:13–14). The buildings will be ruined, and their strong, imported framing (2 Kings 19:23; cf. 1 Kings 5:6; 7:2; Ezra 3:7)—once a sign of grandeur and security—will be rendered useless (Zeph. 2:14; cf. Ezek. 31:3).

The Lord detests pride and will root it out (Zeph. 3:11; cf. Isa. 47:8, 10; Ezek. 28:2). Nineveh “lived securely,” claiming a preeminence reserved for God alone (Isa. 45:5–6, 18, 21–22; 46:9; Mark 12:32). Their security was false, and their destruction certain. Zephaniah’s confidence that God would soon act led him to talk as if Nineveh’s judgment were already accomplished—“What a desolation she *has become*” (Zeph. 2:15). Those passing by will express both horror and affirmation as they observe how the brutal oppressor has fallen (cf. Jer. 19:8; Nah. 3:19)—a feat accomplished by the Medes and Babylonians in 612 BC.

3:1 The preceding lament against the rebels from foreign nations (2:5–15) implied Judah’s coming destruction, but 3:1–7 now makes her ruin explicit and clarifies that it will be experienced by Jerusalem in particular (vv. 5–7). Indeed, the inclusion of “Woe” in 3:1 corresponds with 2:5, so that 3:1–7 stands parallel to 2:5–15. In short, God’s judgment overviewed in 2:5–15 will ultimately fall on Judah, resulting in her ruin. Why? Because Jerusalem was “rebellious and defiled” (cf. 1:4–6, 12). Far from displaying pure and undefiled religion by imaging the impartiality and justice of God toward the marginalized, Jerusalem became characterized by oppression (cf. 1:9; 3:3–5; Isa. 1:21–23; Ezek. 22:6–7, 29). The Lord called Israel to be holy, to display his unique and absolute worth to the nations through lives of surrendered obedience (Ex. 19:5–6; Lev. 20:25–26; Deut. 7:6; 26:19; cf. 1 Pet. 2:9). Instead, Judah’s idolatry (Zeph. 1:4–5), oppression of the weak (1:9; 3:1, 3–5), and heartlessness toward God (1:6; 3:2) polluted them, rendering them unfit for lasting relationship with the Lord (cf. Isa. 59:3; Mal. 1:7).

3:2 At the core, Jerusalem was both deaf and stubbornly heedless, neither listening to the voice of the prophets nor learning from God’s correcting hand (cf. v. 7; Jer. 7:28). God’s discipline was designed to lead them to repentance (Lev. 26:18; Ps. 119:71; Hos. 6:1), but they remained indifferent (Jer. 5:3; Amos 4:6; Hag. 2:17; Rev. 16:9). The result of their internal resistance was a lack of any response to God; the rebel majority had neither trusted the Lord nor drawn near to him in faith. The latter image may point to approaching God through his provision of a sacrificial

substitute (Lev. 9:1–10:3). In failing to trust, they turned from their only help and shield (Pss. 62:8; 115:9–11). In refusing the King's invitation to access, they were rejecting their only refuge and consigning themselves to divine wrath (Ps. 73:28; cf. Heb. 4:16).

3:3–5 Jerusalem's civil and religious leaders had been instigators in the city's oppressive character (cf. 1:8–9). The first group (3:3) includes the "officials," who oversaw governmental and military affairs, with some influence on religious life (cf. 1:8; Jer. 26:10; 36:12, 21; 43:5), and the "judges," who settled legal disputes (Ex. 18:21–22; Deut. 16:18–19; 17:9). Rather than serving as shepherds who guard their sheep, they had become like wild beasts, threatening and ravenous to the weak and poor (Ezek. 22:25, 27; cf. Mic. 3:1–3). The second group (Zeph. 3:4) includes the "prophets" and "priests." Rather than serving as God's mouthpieces and covenant ambassadors (Deut. 18:18; 2 Kings 17:13; Zech. 7:11–12), the "prophets" had sought false visions and divined lies, tickling sinful ears with destructive words that did not come from God (Jer. 23:16–22; Ezekiel 13; 22:25, 28). Similarly, turning from their two main responsibilities of defining holiness and teaching God's law (Lev. 10:10–11; Deut. 33:10; Mal. 2:5–7), the "priests" had failed at both points and had led others to do the same (Ezek. 22:26; Mal. 2:8–11).

In contrast to these "unjust" overseers who showed no sense of disgrace ("no shame") for their sins, the Lord "is righteous" (Zeph. 3:5). That is, the one inhabiting Jerusalem is unswerving in his passion to preserve and display right order, wherein he is shown to be supreme, justice is upheld, and his image in others is respected (cf. comment on 2:3). This God "does no injustice" (cf. Deut. 32:4; Job 34:10; Ps. 18:30). Loving legal order (Ps. 37:28), he is constantly working justice within the community (Deut. 32:4; cf. Deut. 1:17; Isa. 51:4) and will establish it wholly at his day of judgment (Zeph. 3:8; cf. Pss. 9:16; 96:13). The question for those in Jerusalem is whether they would be recipients of God's mercy (Lam. 3:22–23) and operate as agents of God's justice (Jer. 21:12) or would stand as objects of his wrath (Isa. 28:18–19).

3:6–7 Building off the remark in verse 2 that Jerusalem "accepts no correction," God now clarifies the context (vv. 6–7a) and nature (v. 7b) of his people's stubborn heedlessness. The context is the Lord's destroying many of the surrounding earthly kingdoms (v. 6; cf. comment on 2:12–15). We are told that he did so as a lesson to Judah—his purpose being to motivate his own people to take sin seriously and "fear" him, here defined as accepting "correction" (3:7a). "Fear" is the proper human disposition of respect or worship toward God arising from awe of his sovereignty (Eccles. 3:14; Isa. 8:13). Godward fear is evident when people magnify God's greatness and ability (Mal. 1:5) and are ashamed of ever looking to created powers for ultimate help (Isa. 20:5–6). Fearing gods other than Yahweh instigated the collapse of the northern kingdom (2 Kings 17:7), and the very covenant curses God "appointed" would soon reach Judah as well, resulting in the full removal of God's provision and protection (Zeph. 3:7; cf. Lev. 26:14–39; Deut. 28:15–68).

At its core, Judah’s “corrupt” activity and stubborn heedlessness (Zeph. 3:7b; cf. Deut. 32:5; Isa. 1:4; Jer. 6:28; Hos. 9:9) was a failure to “fear” Yahweh, which showed itself in sustained idolatry (Zeph. 1:4–5), self-rule and lack of God-dependence (1:6; 3:2), apathy (1:12), lack of passion for the Lord (2:1), and social and religious oppression and manipulation (1:9; 3:1, 3–4). All of this foolishness paralleled the “corruption” that brought about the flood (Gen. 6:11–12), and it would result ultimately in a comparable fate (cf. Zeph. 1:2–4, 18; 3:11; 2 Pet. 3:5–7).

Response

TURN FROM PRIDE AND OPPRESSION TO HUMILITY
AND LOVE, WHILE THERE IS STILL HOPE

Zephaniah takes great effort to equate the state and fate of the faithless Israelites in Jerusalem—earlier called “the remnant of Baal” (1:4)—with those of their pagan neighbors. Like the nations who elevated themselves at the expense of others (2:8, 10, 15), Jerusalem, under the direction of its leaders, was oppressive and unjust to its own (3:1, 3–4). And just as Yahweh promised to destroy the nations for their sin (2:5, 9, 13), he would also cut off Jerusalem, desolating the city (3:7). In famishing the gods of the earth, the Lord promises to remove every false security in which mankind foolishly trusts, and the result will be that every human will bow to him, whether as faithful remnant or defeated rebel (2:11; cf. Phil. 2:10–11; Rev. 5:8–14). He “will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Matt. 3:12; cf. Zeph. 2:1–2).

Convinced of the fleeting nature of the world and its desires, we must today, with John, “not love the world or the things in the world” (1 John 2:15, 17; cf. Rom. 13:11, 14). If it was foolish in Zephaniah’s day to trust in foreign powers, whether spiritual or earthly (Zeph. 2:11; 3:6–7), how much more foolish is it today now that Christ has *already* “disarmed the rulers and authorities . . . by triumphing over them” (Col. 2:15). “Before the decree takes effect” (Zeph. 2:2), we must turn from pride and oppression to humility and love, for only in such a context is there hope for being part of the remnant that God will save (2:3, 7, 9).

FEAR GOD AND LEARN FROM HIS MERCIFUL DISCIPLINE

Zephaniah stresses that our righteous God (3:5) is ever ready to pardon and restore any who “fear” him, who “accept correction” (v. 7). Sinners should stand in wonder over this promise, awed by a merciful God whose revealed purpose in discipline is to redeem rebels (Lev. 26:14–16, 18, 21, 23–24, 27–28). Rather than bringing immediate death, God often bestows kindness, forbearance, and patience in order to generate repentance (Rom. 2:4) and awaken new or sustained faith in his future grace (Rom. 11:20–22; cf. Rev. 3:19). The majority in Judah remained unresponsive to God’s correction (Zeph. 3:2, 7). Will we?

For those in the new covenant, Christ has fully borne the curse on our behalf (Gal. 3:13), taking upon himself the punishment for our sin, freeing us from the Lord’s wrath, and reconciling us to God (Isa. 53:5, 11; Rom. 5:9, 18; 2 Cor.

5:21). Nevertheless, in this overlap between the old and new creation, we still face many of the original effects of the fall and thus we need divine discipline to shape within us the “holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). God “disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness” (Heb. 12:10). May we not spurn the Lord’s merciful pursuit of our souls through discipline. Instead, may we fear him, resting in his new covenant promise that he will enable for his elect the very fear and passionate following that he commands (Jer. 32:40).

ZEPHANIAH 3:8–20

- 8 “Therefore wait for me,” declares the LORD,
 “for the day when I rise up to seize the prey.
 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.
- 9 “For at that time 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.
- 10 From beyond the rivers of Cush
 my worshipers, the daughter of my dispersed ones,
 shall bring my offering.
- 11 “On that day you shall not be put to shame
 because of the deeds by which you have rebelled against me;
 for then I will remove from your midst
 your proudly exultant ones,
 and you shall no longer be haughty
 in my holy mountain.
- 12 But I will leave in your midst
 a people humble and lowly.
 They shall seek refuge in the name of the LORD,
- 13 those who are left in Israel;
 they shall do no injustice
 and speak no lies,
 nor shall there be found in their mouth
 a deceitful tongue.
 For they shall graze and lie down,
 and none shall make them afraid.”

- 14 Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter of Jerusalem!
- 15 The LORD has taken away the judgments against you;
he has cleared away your enemies.
The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;
you shall never again fear evil.
- 16 On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
“Fear not, O Zion;
let not your hands grow weak.
- 17 The LORD your God is in your midst,
a mighty one who will save;
he will rejoice over you with gladness;
he will quiet you by his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing.
- 18 I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival,
so that you will no longer suffer reproach.¹
- 19 Behold, at that time I will deal
with all your oppressors.
And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.
- 20 At that time I will bring you in,
at the time when I gather you together;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes,” says the LORD.

¹The meaning of the Hebrew is uncertain

Section Overview

Earlier Zephaniah called the remnant of Judah to “seek the LORD together” (2:1–3) in order to avoid punishment. He now adds that they must “wait” for the Lord (3:8) in order to enjoy satisfying salvation. He initially gives two reasons why they should wait upon God, each beginning with the conjunction “For” or “because.” They should pursue him with patience *because* he still intends to punish evil (v. 8b) and *because* he is still committed to purifying a global community of worshipers (vv. 9–10). Zephaniah then ends the book by developing the ultimate motivation for why the remnant should persist in their trust. Declaring what will take place “On that day” (vv. 11–13, 16–20), and calling the remnant to rejoice (vv. 14–15), Zephaniah highlights the satisfying salvation awaiting all who endure.

Section Outline

- III.B. Stage 2: Wait on the Lord to Enjoy Satisfying Salvation (3:8–20)
1. The Charge to Wait for the Lord (3:8a)

2. Two Reasons to Wait for the Lord (3:8b–10)
 - a. Reason 1: The Lord’s Purpose to Punish All the Wicked of the Earth (3:8b)
 - b. Reason 2: The Lord’s Promise to Create a Community of Worshipers from the Whole Earth (3:9–10)
3. Promises to Motivate Waiting for the Lord: The Remnant’s Satisfying Salvation (3:11–20)
 - a. The Promise That the Lord Will Not Put Jerusalem to Shame (3:11–13)
 - b. A Parenthetical Call to Rejoice as If the Great Salvation Had Already Occurred (3:14–15)
 - c. The Promise That the Lord Will Save Completely (3:16–20)

Comment

3:8a The opening “Therefore” highlights that the trustful endurance for which verse 8 calls is the necessary logical response to the global and local rebellion and the prospect of punishment detailed in the previous unit (2:4–3:7). In the Hebrew, the command “wait” is in a form different than the verbs in the preceding verses but similar to those in 2:1, 3. This suggests that Zephaniah’s focus has turned away from warning back to positive exhortation, as found in 2:1, 3. The prophet’s main charge directs the remnant to persist patiently in hope for the salvation that God will bring on the other side of punishment (cf. Ps. 33:20; Isa. 64:4; Dan. 12:12; Hab. 2:3), which will occur only after God rises as righteous accuser and judge.

Debate surrounds the translation of one word in the last part of verse 8a, which is understood either as a term for “prey” (so ESV: “for the day when I rise up to seize the prey”), or, with the slightest change to the Hebrew, as a term for “witness, to testify” (so NIV: “for the day I will stand up *to testify*”). The term “witness” occurs in similar contexts (Jer. 29:23; 42:5; Mic. 1:2; Mal. 3:5), but either translation is plausible and fits the context here.

3:8b–10 There are two reasons why the remnant from Judah should continue to “wait” for the Lord: (1) because he intends to punish the wicked of the earth (v. 8b), and (2) because he will save a remnant from the nations, reversing the effects of the Tower of Babel (vv. 9–10).

3:8b The first reason the remnant of Judah must persist in their hope of salvation is that God’s intention to punish all the earth’s rebels remains unrealized (cf. Hab. 1:2; 3:17–19). Nevertheless, like those who prepare metal for melting (Ezek. 22:19–22) or prepare sheaves for threshing (Mic. 4:12–13), God has determined to “gather” (Ezek. 16:37; Joel 3:2; Zeph. 3:18; Zech. 14:2–3) all people groups (“nations”) and political powers (“kingdoms”) for judicial assessment (cf. Isa. 24:22). At that time, his molten jealousy for the honor of his name will finally “pour out” upon “all the earth,” destroying all those hostile to him (cf. Zeph. 1:17–18). Because the coming

punishment is certain, the remnant of Judah must continue to wait in hope, confident that God will act (Isa. 64:4).

3:9–10 The second reason Zephaniah gives for Judah’s remnant to persist in Godward trust is that on the very day of his judicial sentencing (“On that day”; 1:9), the Lord will cleanse the surviving peoples’ speech, generating a unified profession that will result in unified service to him (3:9; cf. Rev. 7:9–10). The imagery of speech purification implies the overturning of judgment (Ps. 55:9) and likely alludes to a reversal of the Tower of Babel episode, where a communal pride against God resulted in his confusing of “language/speech” and his “dispersing” the rebels across the globe (Gen. 11:7, 9). To call on Yahweh’s name (cf. Zeph. 3:12) is outwardly to express worshipful dependence on him as one’s savior, king, and treasure (Ps. 116:4, 13, 17). The prophets often linked calling on Yahweh’s name with the day of the Lord and the future work of God in the messianic era (e.g., Isa. 12:4; Joel 2:28–32; Zech. 13:9). The apostles believed that Christ inaugurated this period of God-centered speech and heart-change at Pentecost and that it included salvation for Jews and Gentiles alike (Acts 2:21; Rom. 10:13).

“Cush” was ancient Ethiopia, at that time the center of black Africa (located in modern Sudan). Its “rivers” were likely the White and Blue Nile (cf. Isa. 18:1–2). As if following the rivers of life back to the garden of Eden for fellowship with the great King (Gen. 2:13; cf. Rev. 22:1–2), the prophet envisions that even the most distant lands upon which the Lord has poured his wrath (Zeph. 2:11–12) will include a remnant of “worshippers” whom God’s presence will compel to the new Jerusalem. As many prophets anticipate (e.g., Isa. 2:2–3; Jer. 3:17; Zech. 8:23), the people of the new covenant—here described as a “daughter” of the dispersed—will include a worldwide, multiethnic community descending from the seventy families the Lord “dispersed” in punishment at Babel after the flood (Gen. 11:8–9). Indeed, even some from Cush, Zephaniah’s own heritage (Zeph. 1:1), would gain new birth certificates declaring that they were born in Zion (Ps. 87:4; Isa. 45:14). This entire picture is now realized eternally in the church (Matt. 28:18–20; Romans 11; Eph. 2:11–22; Rev. 5:9–10; 7:9–10).

Response

REJOICE THAT THE CHURCH FULFILLS OT HOPES FOR A SINGLE
RECONCILED COMMUNITY FROM EVERY TRIBE AND TONGUE

After the day of divine wrath, Zephaniah envisions God’s blessing of reconciliation reaching the nations (3:9–10), thus fulfilling the hopes of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:3; 22:18). The prophet is, therefore, painting a picture of the messianic new covenant age of the church, in which Jews and Gentiles in Christ are now one flock (John 10:16; cf. 11:51–52; 12:19–20), a single olive tree (Rom. 11:17–24), and one new man (Eph. 2:11–22).

Pentecost inaugurated the change of speech and unity that Zephaniah predicted (Zeph. 3:9–10). While Peter’s sermon in Acts 2 directly cites the latter-days predic-

tion from Joel 2:28–32, the day of the Lord imagery and the stress on calling on the Lord’s name (Acts 2:19–21) closely parallel what was anticipated by Zephaniah (Zeph. 1:15; 3:8–9). Zephaniah 3:9 predicts transformed “speech” (LXX = “tongue”) and united devotion, neither of which Joel emphasizes but both of which Luke’s narrative highlights by noting the early church’s transformed “tongues” (Acts 2:4), which led to a united commitment “to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). Furthermore, Zephaniah’s use of ancient Ethiopia/Cush as his sole example of God’s end-time redemption of a multiethnic community of worshipers helps explain Luke’s otherwise intrusive narrative of the Ethiopian eunuch’s salvation in Acts 8:26–40. Luke is noting the initial fulfillment of Zephaniah’s vision of restoration. In Christ’s atoning work, the blessing of God has moved from “Jerusalem . . . to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8; cf. Luke 24:47).

Accordingly, in fulfillment of Zephaniah’s hopes for an international remnant of worshipers bringing offerings to God’s presence (Zeph. 3:10), the NT stresses that the Lord is already shaping the church into “a kingdom and priests” “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9–10; cf. Rev. 7:9–10). Already, as priests, we 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, we 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).

ACT ON THE FACT THAT GOD SAVES WORSHIPERS WITHOUT PREJUDICE

Convinced that the fires of God’s wrath have already fallen on Jesus for *all* who will call upon the name of the Lord, regardless of ethnic heritage (Zeph. 3:8–10), we cannot help but desire that all peoples have the chance to call out to him for mercy and grace. We must hear Paul’s urgency:

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? . . . So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. (Rom. 10:14–15, 17)

May the joy of knowing that God saves worshipers without ethnic prejudice compel us to share the good news with others, that they too may call upon the name of the Lord! The marvel of salvation should motivate missions.

WAIT FOR THE LORD

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 but *before* he has eradicated all evil

and carried out the final judgment. The *already* aspects require us to call on his name and serve him together (Zeph. 3:9–10). The *not yet* aspects necessitate that we heed Zephaniah’s charge to persist in patient trust in the Lord (“wait”; 3:8), 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 of doubt, compromise, fear, and anxiety. Yet before us is the “crown of life,” and everyone “who remains steadfast under trial” will receive it (James 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 may we “hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering” and “consider how to stir up one another to love and good works . . . encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Heb. 10:23–25). “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).

Comment

3:11–20 These verses supply the most personal, ultimate motivation for the faithful in Judah and beyond to continue “waiting” for God. The restoration to come on the other side of God’s judgment will include the Lord’s removal of shame and his preservation of the humble (vv. 11–13), his bringing their joy to completion in light of his irreversible victory (vv. 14–15), and his culmination of worldwide deliverance for the glory of his name (vv. 16–20).

3:11a “On that day” of judicial action (cf. v. 8a), God will *not* put to shame the city of Jerusalem that once rebelled against him. Whereas Zephaniah addressed all members of the remnant community in verses 8–10, the Hebrew makes clear that the prophet now returns to speaking directly to the city as a collective unit (cf. vv. 1–7). In divine mercy, his “appointed” decree to curse Jerusalem (v. 7; cf. 2:2) will not result in complete annihilation. He will protect his faithful remnant (cf. 2:3, 7, 9) so that, while the rebels will be punished, the city itself will not be put to shame (cf. Isa. 45:17; Joel 2:26–27; Rom. 10:11).

3:11b–13 Jerusalem will not experience shame because the Lord will perform two contrasting actions related to those in Jerusalem, each with shame-averting results for the city. First, God will expel from his “holy mountain” the self-reliant, complacent abusers (v. 11; cf. 1:8–13; 3:1–4; Mal. 4:1) so that man-centered pride will no longer characterize the city, and the mountain’s heights will testify to God’s greatness, not mankind’s (cf. Isa. 2:2, 11).

Second, the Lord will leave the “humble and lowly” (Zeph. 3:12). Relinquished of its rebels, the (new) covenant community will be made up only of the regenerated remnant, whose own lives reflect that of the messianic king (Zech. 9:9; Matt. 11:29; Phil. 2:7–8). These are the afflicted but dependent who, before “the day” of wrath took effect (Zeph. 2:2), heeded the prophetic call to pursue the Lord together, persevering through suffering and finding shelter in God (2:1, 3; 3:8; cf. Isa. 14:32;

Matt. 5:3). This multiethnic throng of worshipers, gathered to Jerusalem for praise and prayer (Zeph. 3:9–10), makes up the newly defined “remnant of Israel” (3:13 AT; cf. 2:7, 9; Psalm 87; Rom. 11:17–24; Gal. 6:16; Eph. 2:11–16). They will continue to “seek refuge” in God (Zeph. 3:12), delighting in his presence and protective care (2:3; 3:5) and resting in his character, power, and promises (Isa. 14:32; 57:13; Nah. 1:7). They will “do no injustice” and “speak no lies” (Zeph. 3:13; cf. 1:9; 3:1–5), as their “pure speech” (3:9) will cancel all deceit (3:13; cf. Rev. 14:5).

These faithful will flee from sin because (“For”) their souls will be at rest, and “none shall make them afraid” (Zeph. 3:13). Like sheep under the care of a good shepherd (Psalm 23; cf. Zeph. 2:6–7), the remnant of the new creation will enjoy provision, protection, and no fear of created things (Jer. 30:10; Ezek. 34:28; Mic. 4:4), and this delight will overflow into commitment to God. Stated differently, the reversal of the curse of being another’s prey, in addition to the realization of the restoration blessing of fearlessness (Deut. 28:26; Jer. 7:33), will generate holy living (Lev. 26:5–6; cf. Jer. 32:40; Ezek. 34:25–27).

3:14–15 Zephaniah’s excitement over the portrait of hope unveiled in verses 11–13 now erupts into an unexpected call to celebrate. Here he stacks four imperatives (“Sing aloud,” “shout,” “rejoice and exult”; v. 14), more than in any other single verse in the book (cf. 2:1, 3; 3:8). He also “crowds the stage” in a climactic way by addressing a number of chief figures from Zephaniah’s audience: “daughter” (v. 10), “Zion” (v. 16), “Israel” (2:9; 3:13, 15), and “Jerusalem” (1:4, 12; 3:16).

The prophet supplies two reasons to rejoice, which relate to (1) what the Lord has done and (2) where the Lord is and what this means. The remnant of Jerusalem should rejoice because Yahweh has removed the curse of enemy oppression and has established himself as sovereign in Israel’s midst. In contrast to the rest of the book, which highlights that the day of wrath is still *future* (e.g., 1:7; 2:2; 3:8, 11, 19), in 3:15 Zephaniah acts as though the time of punishment has *already passed*: “The LORD *has taken away* the judgments against you; he *has cleared away* your enemies.” The shift from future to past perspective in verse 15 is unexpected and suggests that, for Zephaniah, the certainty of *future* joy after the day of the Lord generates *present* joy amid pain. God’s trustworthiness makes the fulfillment of his promise certain and therefore allows our future desire to become present delight (cf. Heb. 12:3 with Hab. 3:17–19; Rom. 5:2).

Jerusalem’s great deliverer is “the King of Israel, the LORD” (Zeph. 3:15), who stands “in your midst.” This highlights Yahweh as the true sovereign and only Savior of creation, who reigns preeminent over the gods of the nations (2:11; cf. Isa. 44:6). He is neither complacent nor powerless (Zeph. 1:12), as his overpowering of “all the gods of the earth” has shown (2:11; cf. 3:8). Because this God is for them and with them, they need not fear others (3:15).

In the NT, Jesus is revealed as the “King of Israel” (cf. Matt. 27:42; Mark 15:32; John 1:49), and it is in light of his coming that the “daughter of Zion” should “fear not” (John 12:13–16; cf. Ps. 118:15–26; Zech. 9:9). While no one questions

that John 12:13–16 draws from Zechariah 9:9 in describing Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the OT citation is not exact, for it includes the call to "fear not" rather than to "rejoice." Furthermore, Zechariah 9:9 may itself be built on Zephaniah 3:14–15, which alone among all OT texts includes together the phrases "King of Israel," "daughter of Zion," and "fear not"—all of which appear in John 12:13–16. It therefore seems likely that John saw Jesus' journey unto death and resurrection as initiating the fulfillment of God's enemy-overcoming end-time rule that Zephaniah foresaw. Jesus is already reigning as "God with us" (Matt. 1:23; cf. John 1:14; 2:21), indwelling his church through his Spirit (Matt. 28:20; John 14:16–20; Rom. 8:9–10; cf. Rev. 21:3), and in so doing he is fulfilling God's promise of divine presence with us (cf. Ezek. 37:23–24 with 2 Cor. 6:16). Christians do not need to fear.

3:16–20 The historical marker "On that day" (v. 16) refers to "the day" when God rises as judge (v. 8a; cf. 1:7–10, 14–16, 18; 2:2–3). This temporal phrase is identical to the one found at the head of 3:11–13 and thus marks off 3:16–20 as parallel to 3:11–13.

3:16–18 "On that day" (cf. v. 11 with v. 8a) when "the King of Israel" acts on behalf of his own (v. 15), personified "Jerusalem/Zion" will receive a double command to feel no fear ("Fear not") nor act fearfully ("let not your hands grow weak"; v. 16). "Weak" hands are figurative for a temporary paralysis of the will and body, often caused by shock in the wake of terror (2 Kings 19:26; Job 4:3; Isa. 13:7; Jer. 6:24). Zephaniah believed that, in the day of deliverance, the believing remnant must awaken out of their stupor, confident in God's presence, favor, and sovereignty (Isa. 35:3–5; Heb. 12:12).

The reason the city may rest at ease is that "the LORD your God is in your midst," not as a vengeful covenant Lord but as a delivering King (Zeph. 3:17; cf. v. 15). The Lord's position in Jerusalem bears two implications. First, as the "mighty one" (Deut. 10:17; Ps. 24:8; Isa. 10:21; 42:13), he will both save and celebrate over his own (Zeph. 3:17b–18). He will rescue the remnant from their sins (vv. 9, 11) and his judgments (v. 15; cf. Isa. 25:4, 8–9; 63:1) and will remove all proud oppressors (Zeph. 3:11, 15, 19). He will revel in his redeemed in a threefold way (v. 17), matching the threefold charge in verse 14: (1) Having cursed Israel (Deut. 28:63), he will again "rejoice/delight" over his restored people, as a bridegroom delights in his bride (Deut. 30:9; Isa. 62:4–5; Jer. 32:41). (2) With the same enduring affection that drove him to remain faithful to a rebellious Israel (Deut. 7:8; Isa. 63:9; Hos. 3:1), God will now "quiet" or calm a once-oppressed remnant with his "love" (Isa. 43:4; Jer. 31:3; Hos. 14:4), making their cries for help unnecessary (cf. Ex. 14:14; Isa. 41:1). (3) Like a parent who takes pleasure in a righteous child (Prov. 23:24–25), the Lord will "exult over" his city, now delivered from the world's cursed and broken nature (Isa. 65:19). Zephaniah 3:17 is the only text in Scripture that showcases how the Lord's treasuring of his beloved will overflow in his "loud singing." Isaiah links this period of divine joy with the new creation (Isa. 65:17–19), which the NT identifies

as beginning at Christ's first coming (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15) and culminating with the descent of the heavenly Jerusalem to earth (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1–2). Zephaniah is most likely referring to this same already-but-not-yet reality.

The second implication of God's presence in Jerusalem is that it indicates that the Lord has fulfilled his promise of a second exodus; having "gathered" the "daughter of [his] dispersed ones," he is now in their midst (Zeph. 3:10, 18). The Hebrew of verse 18 is very difficult (cf. ESV mg.), resulting in manifold interpretations throughout history. The ESV translates the verse as a promise that God "will gather" his remnant exiles who have been unable to attend any festal gathering in Jerusalem and have therefore suffered reproach. Another reading interprets the verse as declaring that, at the future day of the Lord, when Jerusalem is told not to fear (v. 16), God will have already gathered his remnant to Jerusalem, overcoming their reproach and proving that his presence in their midst has secured their complete salvation. In either reading we should identify this great ingathering of the remnant (v. 18) with the promised second exodus (Isa. 11:11, 16; 49:5–6; Jer. 16:14–15; John 11:50–52), which will happen at the same time as the ingathering for global punishment (Zeph. 3:8; cf. Matt. 3:12; 13:30, 40–42; 25:32).

3:19–20 In all likelihood, the arresting "Behold, at that time" in verse 19 returns the reader to the main voice of the prophet, with verse 18 concluding the speech begun in verse 16. "Behold" marks the significance of what follows and highlights that the book is coming to the end. Both occurrences of the phrase "at that time" in verses 19–20 refer to the day of the Lord, when God will rise as judge of the world (v. 8; cf. vv. 11, 16). "At that time" of future judgment, the Lord promises to "deal" with (i.e., eradicate) all of Jerusalem's "oppressors" (v. 19), thus reiterating that the King will remove every internal and external enemy (vv. 11, 15). With this, he will redeem the broken ("the lame") and the banished ("the outcast" in v. 19; cf. Mic. 4:6–7; Matt. 5:3–4). This restoration will fulfill his promises to replant a people for himself (Deut. 30:3–5; Isa. 11:12; Jer. 23:3) that would include engrafted members from the nations (Zeph. 3:9–10; cf. Isa. 56:8; 66:18). This great second-exodus ingathering of a worldwide remnant began in Christ's own ministry of healing (Matt. 11:5; cf. Isa. 42:3; 61:1–3) and recovery (John 10:16; 11:50–52), and the result was great praise to God.

God "will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth" (Zeph. 3:19), and the closest parallel texts suggest this admiration and acclaim would be given not to Jerusalem's remnant but to God for his great salvation of his people. Building on his old-covenant commitment (Deut. 26:19), Yahweh declared through Jeremiah that he had set his affections on Israel and Judah "that they might be *for me* a people, a name, a praise, and a glory" (Jer. 13:11); he asserts that the future new Jerusalem "shall be *to me* a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth" (33:9). This is the Jerusalem of which Zephaniah speaks. Similarly, Ezekiel notes that in the age of the new covenant, God will display his holiness before the eyes of the nations by working deliverance on behalf of his own (Ezek.

36:23). Zechariah also envisions the remnant flock of God as “the jewels of a crown” that radiate “his goodness” and “his beauty” (Zech. 9:16–17).

We see comparable wording in Zephaniah 3:20, although in the more personal terms used in Zephaniah’s main charges in the book’s body (cf. 2:1, 3; 3:8). “At that time” God will “bring” and “gather” in his remnant of faithful ones (Deut. 30:4–5) because (“for”) he will display them for renown and praise “among all the peoples of the earth” (Zeph. 3:20). The divine jealousy that drives the day of the Lord (1:18; 3:8) will finally be vindicated as “all the peoples of the earth” marvel at God’s majesty (cf. 2:11), now magnified in his victory over evil and his saving the righteous remnant, to whom he has restored their “fortunes” (cf. 2:7). Every eye “will behold the king in his beauty” (Isa. 33:17), not only because he will be with them (Zeph. 3:15–17) but also because he will display his great power by redeeming his people (cf. Ezek. 36:23; Zech. 14:9; 2 Thess. 1:10). These realities are already being fulfilled in the lives of every person whom God has saved (Eph. 2:8), is saving (1 Cor. 1:18), and will save (Rom. 5:9) in Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 15:10; Phil. 2:12–13; Col. 1:29).

The book closes where it began—by identifying its contents as coming from the Lord (“says the LORD”; Zeph. 3:20; cf. 1:1). Connecting the whole book to God in this way emphasizes the seriousness of the book’s commands, the certainty of its predictions, and the trustworthiness of its promises. Its readers must “seek” the Lord together (2:1, 3) and “wait” for him (3:8), relishing already the joy set before them (v. 14), for the delight and praise of the Savior (vv. 17, 19–20). Patiently pursuing the Lord together will most certainly result in prolonged pleasures in his presence, all for his glory and joy. This is the essence of the Savior’s summons to satisfaction.

Response

STAND FEARLESS BEFORE OTHERS AND PERSEVERE IN HOPE

Because “the King of Israel,” the Lord our God, is *already* with us through Jesus (vv. 15, 17; Matt. 1:23; 28:20), we *already* should not fear evil or give up (Zeph. 3:15–16; Matt. 10:28; John 12:15). In the death of Christ, God reconciled us who were once his enemies, making us his friends (John 15:5; Rom. 5:10). And if God, to whom every knee will bow (Zeph. 2:11; Isa. 45:23), “is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:31–32). “Tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword” (Rom. 8:35) become instruments of grace in the hand of God, for the Lord works “all things” for the good of those who love him (v. 28), and through “all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (v. 37). While we still await the day when God will *fully* “deal with all [our] oppressors” (Zeph. 3:19), through the cursing of Christ (Rom. 8:3; Gal. 3:13) God has *already* disarmed the “enemies” that once stood against us (Zeph. 3:15; Col. 2:15), thus transforming even our physical death into gain (Phil. 1:21). Therefore, knowing that the Lord is with us and for

us, our souls can find rest and push ahead in hope. May we boldly and willingly proclaim the good news in the hardest places and to the most difficult peoples on the planet, hoping in our God while not fearing others. And may we increasingly flourish in holiness, confident that God is with us (Zeph. 3:15).

CELEBRATE JESUS AS THE HOPED-FOR SAVIOR-KING OF ISRAEL,
WHOSE ARRIVAL INITIATES ZEPHANIAH'S DAY OF THE LORD

Zephaniah portrays Yahweh as “the King of Israel” who, on the day of the Lord, will heal the disabled, gather the outcast, and deliver his remnant from evil and oppression (3:15, 17, 19)—a remnant that will include worshipers from the nations (vv. 9–10). Many of the minor prophets assert that God’s future victory and peace-producing reign will happen through a Davidic royal representative, who himself would be called “king” (e.g., Hos. 3:5; Mic. 5:2–5; Zech. 9:9).

John identifies this “King of Israel” as Jesus (John 12:13, 15), who views himself as the ultimate temple (2:19–21; cf. 1:14) and center of people’s worship (4:23) whose life-saving, disability-overcoming, and outcast-gathering ministry (5:3–9; 10:16; 11:50–51; cf. Matt. 11:5) attracts the whole world (John 12:19–21). At Jesus’ triumphal entry, the crowd’s cry of “Hosanna” (“Please save!”; v. 13) and Jesus’ command to “fear not” (v. 15) together identify him as the One through whom God’s wrath would be averted and the Evil One overcome. These remarks also clarify Jesus’ emphasis later in the narrative: “Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (vv. 31–32).

Jesus’ death and resurrection are the initial means by which Zephaniah’s “judgments” are removed and the “enemies” overcome (Zeph. 3:15). The statement regarding Jesus’ being lifted up from the earth recalls John 3, where Jesus declared his coming crucifixion to be the only means for moving from death to life and being saved from God’s wrath (John 3:14–17, 36). Within John’s Gospel, Jesus associates his death and resurrection with the last “hour” (John 2:4; 4:21, 23; 5:25, 28; 7:30; 12:23), which is how the LXX of Daniel renders “end-of-days” language (e.g., Dan. 8:19; 12:1). From John’s perspective, Jesus’ first coming initiates what Zephaniah anticipated Yahweh would accomplish at the day of the Lord. We, therefore, should heed the prophet’s call to “sing aloud . . . shout . . . rejoice and exult!” (Zeph. 3:14).

DELIGHT IN THE LORD WHO SHOWS HIS SOVEREIGN CARE FOR
HIS PEOPLE BY RESCUING THEM FROM THEIR ENEMIES

We have a God who promises to sing over those he saves (3:17; cf. Ps. 147:11), and his mirth-filled melody is to be matched, line for line, by the rejoicing of his bride in his goodness (Zeph. 3:14–15; cf. Isa. 65:18; Jer. 31:10–14). The more impressive the pardon, the more splendid the praise! “The mighty one” (Zeph. 3:17) is praiseworthy. Even more than in Zephaniah’s day, we should celebrate our great Savior and the salvation he has *already* secured (vv. 14–15), knowing that doing so

magnifies the worth and greatness of our God (vv. 19–20). Our joy today is based not on present appearances but on what God has already done and promised to do (Hab. 3:17–19; Rom. 5:2–5; 8:32). Indeed, *already* the Lord has put “everything in subjection under [Jesus] feet” (Heb. 2:8). *Already* Christ has “disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them” (Col. 2:15; cf. Zeph. 3:11, 19). *Already* “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5). God has *already* begun to gather his remnant (Zeph. 3:18–20; John 10:16), *already* inaugurated the new creation (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15), and *already* secured the complete and future victory for which Zephaniah rejoiced (Zeph. 3:14–15). As was true for Jesus (Isa. 53:11; Heb. 12:2), the very future joy for which we aim becomes present joy that sustains. The “mighty one” who will completely save and sing over his redeemed (Zeph. 3:17) desires to satisfy us with his goodness (vv. 14–15). Our gladness redounds to his glory (vv. 19–20), so may we today patiently pursue the Lord together in joy, embracing the Savior’s summons to satisfaction.