

BIBLE COMPANION COMMENTARY: ZEPHANIAH

ZEPHANIAH

PREFACE

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Are there errors of thought and intellectual process in these volumes? Surely there are. Let me know about them. But don't fail to see the wood for the trees. Never let the wonder of the simple, basic Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and His Kingdom become obscured by all the angst over correctly interpreting this or that Bible verse. Believe it, respond to it, be baptized into Him, and let the word become flesh in you as it was so supremely in Him.

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Duncan Heaster

ZEPHANIAH CHAPTER 1

Zephaniah Chapter 1

Zephaniah 1:1 *The word of Yahweh which came to Zephaniah, the son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah-* The detail is perhaps given because the "Hezekiah" could be king Hezekiah, although the generations would have been quite short. In this case, Hezekiah would have been a relative of king Josiah, in whose reign he was prophesying. Putting the listed names together here we have "Yahweh is strength He has spoken, He is great but blackness has come (to His people) because He has hidden His face". The fact Hezekiah had a son with the 'Yah' Name in it might indicate that he did not totally lose faith in his last 15 years.

In the days of Josiah, the son of Amon, king of Judah- 'Top down' leadership was never very effective in Israel; repeatedly there is evidence that the reforms of Judah's good kings had little effect upon the people. They practiced idolatry at the very same time as the reforms took place, and publicly returned to it as soon as the King was dead. Zephaniah's prophecy is full of exposure of Judah's sins- which were going on at the very time of Josiah's apparently sweeping reforms. The way that "all" in Asia turned away, after all Paul's work there, is proof enough that one good leader, no matter how charismatic and sincere (as Paul was) will not

necessarily develop a faithful community. God has always worked with individuals through direct personal relationship.

Zephaniah 1:2 *I will utterly sweep away everything off of the surface of the earth, says Yahweh-* "The earth" here is not the *eretz* but the literal ground or soil. The total destruction of everything on "the surface of the earth" at the time of the flood is in view. But "sweep" is the word translated "gather" in Gen. 6:21 concerning the gathering of animals, people and food into the ark to avoid that destruction. As always with the threats of judgment, there is the hint that a remnant would survive- if they responded.

Zephaniah 1:3 *I will sweep away man and animal. I will sweep away the birds of the sky, the fish of the sea, and the idols along with the wicked. I will cut off man from the surface of the earth, says Yahweh-* A cataclysm similar in nature to the flood is in view; see on :18. Such total destruction of even birds and animals from the "earth", the ground / soil, recalls the language of the flood. But something of this nature never happened; I suggest that God formulated the plan, but relented because of the intercession of the righteous remnant; or perhaps simply from pity for His own creation. We note that "man" and "idols" are mentioned as being swept away along with absolutely everything else. Perhaps the idea is that we get a picture of the huge collateral damage caused by human idolatry. This is the nature of sin- that it has such collateral damage to others, far beyond a man quietly bowing before an idol in a "high place" in some remote rural spot.

Zephaniah 1:4 *I will stretch out My hand against Judah, and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. I will cut off the remnant of Baal from this place: the name of the idolatrous and pagan priests-* Zephaniah prophesied during the time of Josiah, who later in his reign tried to extinguish Baal worship. But there was a "remnant" of Baal still in the temple, from where Zephaniah was prophesying ("this place"). Judgment was to come on all because of this; so whether Zephaniah prophesied before or after Josiah's reforms is irrelevant. Those reforms didn't in fact extinguish Baal worship, not even from the Jerusalem temple (see on :1). "All" were to be judged for the sake of a remnant of Baal worship remaining in the temple, and pagan priests being allowed to operate there. Presumably these were priests of Yahweh who taught that Baal worship was an acceptable form of Yahweh worship; see on :5. Such attempt to do our own thing in the name of serving God has always been the toughest temptation for us all. It was not that the majority ("all the inhabitants") were punished for the sin of a minority. That majority empowered and enabled that minority, just as a population often get the leadership or teachers they themselves really want in their hearts; quite regardless of whether any system of democracy is used or not.

The AV and some other versions offer: "the name of the Chemarims with the priests", literally the black ones, perhaps a group of priests who wore dark clothing rather than the white clothing of the Levitical priests.

Zephaniah 1:5 *Those who worship the army of the sky on the housetop-* Clearly Josiah's reforms were not as they appeared. The housetops of Jerusalem were full of worshippers of the stars, and this was tolerated within society. Hence the condemnation of "all" Jerusalem society in :4.

Those who worship and swear by Yahweh and also swear by Malcam- As noted on :4, the priests were advocating the worship of Baal in the name of Yahweh worship. It is this dualism which is the abiding temptation of every believer of all ages. 2 Kings 23:10 records Josiah's reforms specifically targeting Molech worship. But clearly the population wriggled around this by saying that their worship of Molech was in fact Yahweh worship; even though the Mosaic law mentioned the sin of offering children to Molech more than any other idol is mentioned

(Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5). Such wriggling around plain Divine teaching is unfortunately something we are all adept at. "Molech" is formed from the same consonants in *melech*, "king"; hence the LXX speaks of those that "swear by the Lord, and them that swear by their king". They had two kings. But the Lord Jesus observed that no man can serve two masters. We cannot have two kings.

Zephaniah 1:6 *Those who have turned back from following Yahweh, and those who haven't sought Yahweh nor inquired after Him-* This was God's perspective. As explained on :4 and :5, the people had not formally rejected Yahweh. But their claim to worship other gods in His Name was seen by Him as turning their backs on Him. Ez. 8:16 describes men within the temple having their backs toward the sanctuary as they worshipped the sun. They had turned their backs on Him, but claimed they had not. This is all helpful challenge to ourselves in our self-examination. To seek and inquire after Yahweh is to worship Him; but worship doesn't mean we know it all. We are searching and seeking Him closer, and this is understood by Him as worship.

Zephaniah 1:7 *Be silent at the presence of the Lord Yahweh, for the day of Yahweh is at hand-* The silence called for may be an appeal for repentance; a call to respect Him and no other king or god. Such times of literal silence in meditation, without distraction, will also elicit our repentance.

For Yahweh has prepared a sacrifice, He has consecrated His guests- The sacrifice in view was the total burning of Jerusalem. The guests had been prepared; be they Babylonians, Assyrians or whoever. As noted on :3, God had framed a cataclysm against His people and Jerusalem in particular. It never happened on the scale planned, because of the repentance of a remnant and perhaps simply His pity. All manner of possible futures are prepared by God, but may never happen because He is so open to change in His great respect of human freewill decisions.

Zephaniah 1:8 *It will happen in the day of Yahweh's sacrifice that I will punish the princes, the king's sons-* The ruling dynasty would come to an end. These words seem particularly relevant to Zedekiah and his sons at the time of the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem. But "the king" in Zephaniah's context was Josiah who also had sons who were princes. This intended judgment was rescheduled and reapplied (see also on :4) because of the repentance of a remnant, perhaps in response to Zephaniah's ministry. Again we see the openness of God to human repentance, His supreme sensitivity to man.

And all those who are clothed with foreign clothing- We noted on :4 that the Chemarim wore back clothing and served as priests; but likely many of the Levitical priests were serving both as priests to Yahweh as well as to other gods, especially Moloch and Baal. It was this dualism which so angered God.

Zephaniah 1:9 *In that day, I will punish all those who leap over the threshold, who fill their master's house with violence and deceit-* The priests may particularly be in view, whose master was Yahweh and whose house, the temple, they had defiled by their idolatry. The leaping over the threshold was an imitation of the Philistine custom of not treading on the threshold, after the head and hands of Dagon were cut off on the threshold before the ark of Yahweh (1 Sam. 5:5). The idea is that the temple of Yahweh had been effectively turned into that of pagan gods- despite Josiah's apparent reforms. This whole message is a stern warning against mere tokenism in repentance and reform, and challenges to the core all our self-examination and the results thereof. These priests were filling Yahweh's house with the rewards of their violence and deceit. Typical of the prophets, Zephaniah focuses upon the apparently negligible (the

personal gains arising from deceit) rather than what we might consider the more obvious issues of offering children to Moloch.

Zephaniah 1:10 *In that day, says Yahweh, there will be the noise of a cry from the fish gate-* This was on the northern entry to Jerusalem, the point which the northern invaders (Babylon, Assyria) would reach first.

A wailing from the second quarter- A reference to the 'second city', "the city of David", original Jerusalem, being "the first". The second city was highly fortified, but there would be wailing from that too; for human defence cannot in any way stave off Divine judgment.

And a great crashing from the hills- The hills which famously surrounded Jerusalem.

Zephaniah 1:11 *Wail, you inhabitants of Maktesh, for all the people of Canaan are undone!-* 'Canaanite' and 'trader' are related words in Hebrew. Maktesh was the market quarter; there appears to be a play on words between *maktesh*, 'crushed to powder', and *makdosh*, a holy place. No longer was Jerusalem holy; it had already been crushed to powder in judgment. The prophets consistently criticize the Jews for deceitful business practices; we have just read of how deceit had led to material gains which were stashed in the temple storerooms (:9). It was appropriate therefore to focus upon the destruction of the market quarter.

All those who were loaded with silver are cut off- Their wealth, acquired by deceit of their brethren (:9), burdened them down so that they were unable to flee.

Zephaniah 1:12 *It will happen at that time that I will search Jerusalem with candles-* The Lord may have had this statement in view when He spoke of how the Father searches as a woman searches with candles to find the lost (Lk. 15:8). As with all the messages of judgment, there is the implication that the remnant are being searched for. The candle is used to represent the human conscience in Prov. 20:27. The purpose of the judgments was to elicit self-examination. Jeremiah perhaps alludes to this prophecy by urging the exiles to search themselves and repent (Lam. 3:40 s.w.).

And I will punish the men who are settled on their dregs- The same figure is used in Jer. 48:11 to describe those who had not experienced captivity in foreign lands, likened to wine being poured out into different vessels so that it doesn't become settled on its dregs. Yet again we see that exile was intended not only as judgment for its own sake, but to stir up the people to repentance and spiritual improvement.

Who say in their heart, Yahweh will not do good, neither will He do evil- The state of the human mind, our self talk, is of critical importance to God. There was the idea that God was somehow distant, unresponsive to good or evil, and never going to openly act. They were not atheists, but God was felt to be so distant that He would not act. This problem of thinking that God exists but is inactive and unresponsive... is an abiding temptation for all God's people of whatever generation.

Zephaniah 1:13 *Their wealth will become a spoil, and their houses a desolation. Yes, they will build houses, but won't inhabit them. They will plant vineyards, but won't drink their wine-* This is clear allusion to the curses for breaking the covenant in Lev. 26. To live unsatisfied lives, never enjoying the work or wealth acquired, is the great curse of those who live after the flesh. The threat that "the men who are [present] tense settled..." (:12) and the reference to the king's sons (:8) would imply that the threatened judgment was imminent. Those who had planted vineyards would not be there next harvest season. This situation was averted, it seems, by the repentance of a remnant in response to Zephaniah's ministry- and that of other prophets contemporary with him.

Zephaniah 1:14 *The great day of Yahweh is near. It is near, and hurries greatly, the voice of the day of Yahweh-* The judgment day of Yahweh is therefore not a fixed calendar date; for here we read that it is hastening, it was being brought forward in the Divine program, according to Judah's sin and lack of repentance. The last day can likewise be hastened by spiritual development and prayer (2 Pet. 3:12). The actual date is not set, although the preconditions are; there is a final, unknowable algorithm which will be mixed with God's basic pity and love to determine the day.

The mighty man cries there bitterly- Bitter weeping is the language of condemnation at judgment day. The man who trusted in his own might is pictured as already weeping. We too are to live as if future judgment is already upon us; for we live life every moment before the judgment presence of God.

Zephaniah 1:15 *That day is a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness-* Other prophets use the same language, perhaps borrowing from Zephaniah, who at this point doesn't name the invaders because of the principle discussed on :14- that there could be different outworkings of these prophecies, in accordance with whether Judah repented. "Distress" is the word for "trouble", and is used of the time of Jacob's trouble (Gen. 35:3; Jer. 30:7; Dan. 12:1); and this time has a distinctly latter day application, when Zephaniah's words will come fully true. The time of darkness and gloom is that of Dt. 28:29 [s.w.]- the punishment for unfaithfulness to the covenant.

Zephaniah 1:16 *A day of the trumpet and alarm, against the fortified cities, and against the high battlements-* We have here an intentional mixing of meaning. The trumpet was sounded as an alarm to prepare the cities for an invasion. But the day of the alarm is also the day of judgment (:15). In this we see the intensity of the prophetic message- the day of sounding the alarm was also the day of judgment. God had formulated and stated His judgments, they were as good as executed (see on :14); but in the gap between the statement and the execution of it, there was still the chance for repentance. And this was and is the intensity of the moments in which we live, just as Judah lived in them. Repentance and total surrender to God must be urgent, and our appeal for it and baptism of people upon their repentance must likewise be done with a speed appropriate to the urgency of men's position before God.

Zephaniah 1:17 *I will bring distress upon men-* "Distress" is the same word translated 'siege', the punishment for breaking the covenant (Dt. 28:52 s.w.). The "men" are therefore Israel and Jerusalem in particular; "men" is *adam*, alluding to Adam's representation of Israel in his sin and resultant punishment, of being sent out of the *eretz* to the east, just as was to happen to Judah. But the men of Judah had themselves distressed or besieged the just (Am. 5:12 s.w.); what they had done to their brethren was to be done to them. And that is a principle of Divine judgment which challenges us today.

So that they will walk like blind men, because they have sinned against Yahweh- Walking like blind men suggests walking in a line with their hand on the shoulders of the blind man in front of them. This was a picture of Judah being led into captivity. And yet the very same term is used in Is. 42:16 of how the blind will 'walk' or be led back to the restored Kingdom of God.

And their blood will be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung- The sense of the Hebrew is that this would happen immediately- hence GNB "and now their blood will be poured out like water, and their dead bodies will lie rotting on the ground". As noted on :8 and :13, the judgment was imminent. It was to happen right away. The day of the alarm being blown

was the same day of judgment (:16). It only didn't come in Zephaniah's time because God graciously responded to the repentance of a remnant.

Zephaniah 1:18 *Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to deliver them in the day of Yahweh's wrath-* There is the vain hope in human beings that wealth can purchase all things, even salvation. Only in the day of judgment will some people learn this; it is for us to learn it before then.

But the whole land will be devoured by the fire of His jealousy- Fire was the result of jealousy in the practice of husbands burning adulterous wives. As found in Hosea, God like Hosea had emotions. Judah's unfaithfulness to Him meant that He felt like burning them for ever; but His love for them was yet greater than that legitimate rage and fury. And so He relented, just as Hosea did of his plans to destroy Gomer. Likewise the whole land was not devoured; always a remnant was saved and in wrath God remembered mercy.

For He will make an end, yes, a terrible end, of all those who dwell in the land- As explained above, God intended to make a total end of everyone in the land of Judah; but He didn't. A remnant was saved, and far from everyone was slain. As explained on :3, God had prepared a cataclysm similar in nature to the flood, intending to destroy all animal and bird life, and certainly every human being. But such is His sensitivity to the prayer and spirituality of a minority that this didn't happen, just as Nineveh was not in fact destroyed after 40 days- because there was repentance. "A terrible end" is literally 'a hastened end'; as explained on :14, the day was being hastened, speeded up; and yet a stop was put to that accelerated program by the likes of Zephaniah and the minority who responded to him. Such is God's sensitivity to every thought and act of spirituality and repentance.

ZEPHANIAH CHAPTER 2

Zephaniah Chapter 2

Zephaniah 2:1 *Gather yourselves together, yes, gather together, you nation that has no shame-* Although judgment was so closely upon them that it had effectively arrived, Zephaniah calls the people to repentance. He calls those who "had no shame". He means that those who had not repented should gather together and repent. Shame is associated with condemnation; to have no shame means they had not yet been condemned. To repent means that we bear shame for what we have done; we realize that what we have done or been condemned us, we feel that condemnation ahead of judgment day, and repent; and thereby the verdict is changed. Paul develops this idea throughout Rom. 1-8.

Zephaniah 2:2 *Before the appointed time when the day passes as the chaff, before the fierce anger of Yahweh comes on you, before the day of Yahweh's anger comes on you-* Zephaniah had clearly stated that that day had already come; see on Zeph. 1:14-16. But still there was a desperate, last moment opportunity for repentance. This was and is the intensity of the appeal. The day of judgment would be one of threshing and winnowing, when the chaff would be blown away. They were the chaff and needed to become the wheat.

Zephaniah 2:3 *Seek Yahweh, all you humble of the land, who have kept His ordinances. Seek righteousness; seek humility. It may be that you will be hidden in the day of Yahweh's anger-* As explained on chapter 1, God's purpose is open ended. The day of judgment was being brought closer at an accelerated speed because of their lack of

repentance (Zech. 1:14); but the Divine intention was that they would repent. He had planned the cataclysmic destruction of absolutely all people in Judah; see on Zeph. 1:3,4. But "it may be" that the righteous remnant would be spared and hidden. And Is. 26:20 suggests that this possibility was as it were agreed by God. There was to be no assumption that the remnant would be spared destruction; it would be by grace. Although they were already righteous and humble, they were to even more intensively seek those things. A truly spiritual person will never consider they have arrived at a position of enough righteousness or humility. That itself would not be humble.

Zephaniah 2:4 For Gaza will be forsaken, and Ashkelon a desolation. They will drive out Ashdod at noonday, and Ekron will be rooted up- "For..." warns God's people that their neighbours were to be judged by the same invaders. And their level of responsibility was far less. There are many word plays here, e.g. between the Hebrew for "Gaza" and "forsaken", "Ekron" and "rooted up", as if Zephaniah intended this to be memorized. In the era of mass illiteracy, such devices would have been necessary. If these four Philistine cities were to be judged, then Judah should be the more aware that they were even more responsible and would be judged the more. Israel should have driven out the Philistines; they ought to have made those cities to be forsaken by the Philistines, they should have desolated and rooted them up. But although they didn't do so, Divine judgment all the same would come upon the Philistines. Judah are also hereby warned not to consider that they were somehow superior to the Gentiles. They had acted as Gentiles, worshipped their idols and intermarried with them; they were no better.

Zephaniah 2:5 Woe to the inhabitants of the sea coast, the nation of the Cherethites! The word of Yahweh is against you, Canaan, the land of the Philistines. I will destroy you, that there will be no inhabitant- The "seacoasts" are a very small geographical area. This prophecy has never had such a fulfilment- but God's word will come true. The final victory in the area, however, will be by a "remnant" of Israel, suggesting the majority perish in the last days, just as required in Zech. 14. The fate of Gaza is connected with that of Ashkelon (:4), which is currently in Israeli hands. It would appear that this city must briefly be taken by the Palestinians / Philistines. We note too that the Palestinians / Philistines in Gaza are connected with the people of Cush [:12; North African Moslems, many of whom are attracted to Islamic jihad at this time], Moab and Ammon [Jordan / Kurdistan], and a latter day Assyria [which is reforming in the form of Islamic jihadism]. The connection between these groups and Hamas in Gaza is clearly established. The destruction of the 'coastlands', the Gaza Strip, is prophesied as being due to a direct Divine 'intervention'; and that surely speaks of the return of Christ to save the remnant of Israel. The 'remnant' is a term used in Bible prophecy not merely with reference to a numerical minority within Israel, but specifically to the righteous, repentant remnant. The picture seems to be of Israel being crushed militarily until a remnant remain, who repent and turn to Christ. And then He appears for their salvation and the final destruction of their enemies. It's not good news for secular Israel, whatever short term military victories they may achieve in their own strength.

"The Cherethites" is literally 'the destroyers' or 'cutters'. The root word is used in Ps. 83:5 of how Israel's latter day enemies will cut a covenant to destroy Israel. These people are located by Zeph. 2:5 as being in the Gaza Strip. And this is exactly the location of the Hamas destroyers of Israel. The word is also found in Am. 1:7: "I will send a fire on the wall of Gaza, and it will devour its palaces. I will

cut off the inhabitant from Ashdod, and him who holds the sceptre from Ashkelon; and I will turn My hand against Ekron; and the remnant of the Philistines will perish, says the Lord Yahweh". If this has a latter day application, we could expect Ashdod and Ashkelon, currently in Israeli hands, to fall to their enemies in Gaza, who will 'cut them off' but then be themselves 'cut off' by Yahweh's final judgments. They will 'hold the sceptre' in Ashkelon for a brief time, i.e. become rulers there- before being themselves cut off.

Zephaniah 2:6 The sea coast will be pastures, with booths for shepherds and folds for flocks- Instead of the intensive agriculture required by the large urban populations, the land would be used for grazing. This suggests a very sudden change, with the majority of the Philistine inhabitants slain or deported. But this didn't happen under either the Assyrians nor Babylonians; rather did the Philistines only gradually become subsumed into the Persian empire. This then was the prophetic potential, the Divine 'Plan A'; but the whole scenario didn't work out as planned. A remnant in Judah did repent, and so the scenario of mass cataclysm upon the whole area planned by God in Zeph. 1:4 didn't come about, and thereby indirectly the Gentiles within the land were saved from the planned destruction.

Zephaniah 2:7 The coast will be for the remnant of the house of Judah. They will find pasture there. They will lie down in the evening in the houses of Ashkelon- Again the prophetic potential didn't come about; most of the Jews didn't want to return from exile, most of those who did still wouldn't repent, and so this picture of returned Judean captives pasturing their flocks in the ruins of Ashkelon didn't happen as planned. So much Divine potential is wasted; so much is possible, but human short termist thinking precludes it.

For Yahweh their God will visit them, and restore them- What Judah prayed for by the rivers of Babylon was indeed heard. There they had asked that God would "visit" them and "return" them (Ps. 80:14). The same two Hebrew words are to be found in Jer. 27:22, where we read that God would exile His people to Babylon and then "visit" them and make them "return". We meet the same two words in Zeph. 2:7, where God would 'visit and return' the captivity of the remnant of Judah. But when God did "visit" His people, just as when He 'visited' His people in the gift of His Son, they didn't want to 'return' or respond. Those who had desired 'the day of the Lord' at that time had been praying for it, when it was 'to no end' for them. And we have to ask ourselves whether we really mean our prayers for the Lord's return.

Zephaniah 2:8 I have heard the reproach of Moab, and the insults of the children of Ammon, with which they have reproached My people- God is intensely aware of every word said and thought even by Gentiles. And He is particularly sensitive to what is said or felt against us His people. This should stop us in our tracks in any hard thoughts or words against any who are God's children.

And magnified themselves against their border- God had given bounds to the Gentile nations in relation to Israel (Dt. 32:8). Any attempts to break Divinely imposed limits may appear to initially succeed, but will incur His judgment. And again we have here a challenge for all time.

Zephaniah 2:9 Therefore as I live, says Yahweh of Armies, the God of Israel, surely Moab will be as Sodom, and the children of Ammon as Gomorrah, a possession of nettles and salt pits, and a perpetual desolation. The remnant of My people will plunder

them, and the survivors of My nation will inherit them- The prophetic potential was that the returned, repentant exiles would pasture their flocks in the deserted Philistine cities (:7); Moab and Ammon would be struck with Divine judgment in a form as dramatic as that upon Sodom, and then the Jews would plunder them and inherit their territory. This didn't happen when the exiles returned from Babylon, just as the temple system they could have built in Ez. 40-48 didn't happen. In essence, the possession and judgment of Judah's neighbours will come true in the last days, but perhaps not in every literal detail. We notice the language of nettles, recalling the judgment upon the land for Adam's sin.

Zephaniah 2:10 This they will have for their pride, because they have reproached and magnified themselves against the people of Yahweh of Armies- We likely would have chosen many other reasons for the condemnation of Moab and Ammon before coming to "their pride". But this is typical of the prophetic perspective; God focuses on things like pride and injustice as the worst sins imaginable. And indeed they are. Thinking ourselves greater than God's people is a sin worthy of condemnation. We see these Gentiles being condemned for doing so; but in our church lives we continually interact with God's people. Our attitudes to them are so critically important in God's eyes. We note that the people of God in this context were spiritually weak and under Divine judgment; but all the same, Moab and Ammon are condemned for their attitude towards them.

Zephaniah 2:11 Yahweh will leave them awestruck, for He will starve all the gods of the land- There would be famine which would reveal all the fertility gods and the Baals to be frauds. Most of the idols were connected with fertility, and famine and drought revealed them as powerless and not in fact existent. We marvel at God's saving passion- He wished to convert even those Gentiles who had mocked and abused His beloved people.

Men will worship Him, everyone from his place, even from every border of the nations- Those who had once tried to push back those borders (:8) will now respect them, and worship Yahweh once they accept that their idols were as it were dead. This scenario could have occurred when the captives returned; but it didn't. Most of the exiles preferred to stay in captivity, they didn't repent, and neither did the Gentiles around them. But this will happen in the last days.

Zephaniah 2:12 You Cushites also, you will be killed by My sword- God's sword was Babylon and Assyria (Is. 10:5), and Ethiopia ["Cush"] was destroyed when Nebuchadnezzar attacked Egypt (Jer. 46:2-9; Ez. 30:5-9). Those whom Judah had relied on instead of Yahweh would be permanently destroyed; with the implication that Judah would be left with none but Yahweh to trust in.

Zephaniah 2:13 He will stretch out His hand against the north, destroy Assyria, and will make Nineveh a desolation, as dry as the wilderness- The northern enemy is here clearly defined as Assyria- not Russia. The making of Nineveh so dry would imply God changed the microclimate around Nineveh after the Medes sacked Nineveh. Or the reference may be to the destruction of the complex system of irrigation upon which Nineveh's fertility depended. But Jonah offered Nineveh a way out of this desolation, and for a time they responded. So again we see the openness of God's plan with people and nations. It has been pointed out that "the Hebrew verbs are not in the simple future,

but in the imperative or optative mood, "Let him stretch out his hand," etc.; as though the prophet were praying that the enemies of his people might be overthrown". And so we have an insight into the way God takes so many factors into account before acting in this world. The faithful had prayed for Nineveh's destruction, and yet Jonah offered them repentance and some of them prayed for the sentence of destruction to be voided.

Zephaniah 2:14 *Herds will lie down in the midst of her, all the animals of the nations-* The literal animals who would live in the ruins represented the wild nations. Perhaps in view are the Scythian hordes who also ransacked Nineveh along with the Medes.

Both the pelican and the porcupine will lodge in its capitals- Unclean animals.

Their calls will echo through the windows. Desolation will be in the thresholds, for He has laid bare the cedar beams- The desolated thresholds recalls the condemnation of Judah for fearing to step on thresholds (Zeph. 1:9), in that they followed the pagan fear of stepping on thresholds.

Zephaniah 2:15 *This is the joyous city that lived carelessly, that said in her heart, I am, and there is none besides me-* We bear the Name of Yahweh / Jehovah, by reason of our baptism into it. His Name is declared as His character- merciful, truthful, judging sin, patient etc. (Ex. 34:5-7). He who will be who He will be, manifesting His characteristics as He does so, must have His way in us too. Babylon and Nineveh were condemned for having the attitude that "I am, and there is none beside me" (Is. 47:8; Zeph. 2:15). Their self-perception was a parody on the Name and being of Yahweh: He alone can say "I am, and there is none else" (Is. 43:11; 44:6; 45:6,21) and seek to be who He is. He alone can seek to articulate the characteristics that make up His Name onto the lives of others, and onto the things that comprise His Kingdom. We are not to be who we are; to 'just be yourself'; to 'just do it', as foolish slogans and adverts encourage us. We are here to show forth His mercy, truth, judgment of sin, patient saving of the weak etc., not our own personality. We are, in the very end, Yahweh manifested to this world, through our imitation of the Lord Jesus.

The language here applied to Nineveh is used later about Babylon in Isaiah, as noted above. This could simply be because God's judgments have a similar theme and reason to them. But we could also consider that there were different prophetic scenarios which could have come about, as discussed on Zeph. 1:3,4. The intention to destroy Nineveh was as it were reapplied to Babylon. The focus was to move from Nineveh to Babylon. This refocusing and reapplication of Bible prophecy is common, as God's purpose adjusts to human behaviour; especially to repentance or lack of it.

How she has become a desolation, a place for animals to lie down in! Everyone who passes by her will hiss, and shake their fists- Note the confusion of tenses; she "has become...", but the judgment is yet future ("will hiss..."). This is God's perspective, speaking of those things which currently are not as if they are (Rom. 4:17); and the life and thinking of faith adopts that perspective, rejoicing in what is not yet as if it is.

ZEPHANIAH CHAPTER 3

Zephaniah Chapter 3

Zephaniah 3:1 *Woe to her who is rebellious and polluted, the oppressing city!*- This section could be applicable to both Jerusalem and Nineveh, which is the subject of the preceding verses. The relevance to Nineveh would be in that she had repented at the preaching of Jonah, so deeply that the Lord Jesus says that some of those Ninevites will be resurrected to salvation in His Kingdom. But the Ninevites had let it slip, and as

explained in commentary on Nahum, the community of believers there had declined, despite having been joined by some captives from the ten tribes.

Jerusalem was the oppressing city exactly because they had oppressed Gentiles and other vulnerable people (s.w. Ez. 18:12; 22:7; 47:8; Jer. 22:3 and often). And yet the same word is used of how Gentiles oppressed them. Again we see that all Judah's judgments were in essence what they had done to others. *Maarah*, "rebellious", is a word play on Moriah. Such literary devices were important in an illiterate society, where the words of the prophet would be repeated and reflected upon.

Zephaniah 3:2 She didn't obey the voice. She didn't receive correction. She didn't trust in Yahweh. She didn't draw near to her God- This would be relevant to Nineveh, who had initially responded to the voice of God through Jonah, but now had slipped back into their old ways. We note the parallels between trust, obedience, receiving correction, and drawing near to God, which is an idiom for serving Him in the sanctuary. God had drawn near to His people (Dt. 4:7), but they would not respond. It is the scene of love unrequited, tragically so, seeing the colossal love of God was on offer. Judah "didn't receive correction" and this was the reason for giving her up to the Babylonians (Jer. 5:28; 7:28; 17:23; 32:33; 35:13 all use the very same phrase); :7 says that God tried to correct Judah so that she would not have to be given up to her enemies, but she refused to accept it. And yet in His grace, the punishment of destruction was also an attempted correction. This is why there were waves of invasions before the final onslaught, both in the Assyrian and Babylonian contexts. God's desire to teach us is amazing. And life gets more messy, with more collateral damage, the more we refuse to hear.

Zephaniah 3:3 Her princes in the midst of her are as roaring lions, her judges are as evening wolves; they leave nothing until the next day- Lions were the symbol of Assyria, and the same language is used of Assyria / Babylon as it is of Judah. They acted like Gentiles, and so were treated as Gentiles. Hence the dual application of this passage to both Nineveh and Jerusalem. These words are quoted specifically concerning the prophets, the religious leadership of Judah, in Ez. 22:25. This is how God sees false teaching, when it is designed to abuse and get gain. They are pictured here as totally destroying Judah, 'leaving nothing'. As explained on Zeph. 1:3,4, God had planned a total cataclysm upon Judah which would wipe out the entire area, including all people and animals. But this was amended, presumably because of the repentance of a minority, and the way that within His personality, the pole of His grace and pity is finally stronger than that of His anger and judgment.

Zephaniah 3:4 Her prophets are arrogant and treacherous people- We would likely have focused upon the actual false prophecies of the prophets; God focuses upon their arrogance. This is typical of the prophetic perspective, which sees pride as the cardinal sin, and all the more obvious sins and errors as arising fundamentally from that.

Her priests have desecrated the sanctuary; they have done violence to the law- It was the Babylonians and Romans who desecrated the sanctuary, but here the priests are described as having done this. Their actions were the judgment; sin is its own judgment and punishment. Is. 43:28 quotes these words in saying that "therefore have I desecrated / profaned the princes of the sanctuary". What they had done was done to them. There could therefore be no complaint on an ethical level concerning God's judgments of His people. These are the priests commented upon in Zeph. 1:4,8. Whilst professing obedience to the law, they taught breaking it by their legal 'get rounds' of Josiah's

reforms. Again, as noted on Zeph. 1:1, we understand how Josiah's reforms were got around; the law which he personally tried to uphold was 'taken away violently' by the priests. The taking away of the Law in the Lord's death was simply doing what effectively the Jews had already done.

Zephaniah 3:5 *Yahweh in the midst of her, He is righteous-* Yahweh's presence remained within the temple until the Babylonian invasion; this is symbolized in Ezekiel by the visions of the cherubim of glory departing from Zion and accompanying the captives to Babylon. God doesn't operate 'guilt by association'; He remained in the midst of a sinful people for generations. His righteousness was not infringed by doing so. It is a very presumptuous attitude which claims that because God finally acted, therefore so should we in quitting association with the weak and sinful people of God. In terms of the individual sinners within Judah over those generations of patience, He remained patiently trying to correct them until throughout their lives. And who really can claim to have exercised the awesome patience of God before drawing a line and telling a fellow believer: 'That's it, you're out, I'm gone'. There may be short term discipline within the family of the local congregation, just as Yahweh tried to correct His people, but that isn't the same as a breaking of fellowship. The Jews thought that Yahweh's presence in their midst was their guarantee of salvation (Mic. 3:11 s.w.), just as many assume that their membership of a Christian group means that somehow all shall be eternally well with them.

He will do no wrong. Every morning He brings His justice to light. He doesn't fail, but the unjust know no shame- Court decisions were typically announced in the morning, as in the Lord's trial. Despite their injustice, Yahweh's justice was declared by simply allowing them to continue living day by day. And yet they had done wrong, and deserved justice. As explained throughout Romans 1-8, God's grace operates in such a way that those who justly deserve judgment are not immediately judged. Day by day they are allowed to continue living, with the intention that this goodness of God should lead them to repentance (Rom. 2:4). It was the same at this time; but the unjust would not repent, they refused to know shame, to realize and feel the shame of condemnation ahead of time, and to repent. For this is what repentance is all about; perceiving that we are worthy of the shame of condemnation, and changing that verdict by throwing ourselves in repentance upon God's grace. We need to imagine how it would be to appear at the judgment seat and be condemned. And in awe and deepest gratitude accept the change of verdict which there is in Christ.

Zephaniah 3:6 *I have cut off nations, their battlements are desolate; I have made their streets waste, so that no one passes by. Their cities are destroyed, so that there is no man, so that there is no inhabitant-* The nations around Judah had been judged by the hordes of Scythians, Assyrians, Babylonians and Romans. The Olivet prophecy taught the same- that there would be a time of war and domination of other nations before it came to Israel. God's people were intended to learn from that, to perceive that they were no better than the Gentiles, and deserved the same judgment. It was likewise God's plan to so destroy Judah that not a man would be left, literally (Zeph. 1:3); only by grace was that plan changed.

Zephaniah 3:7 *I said, Just fear Me. Receive correction, so that her dwelling won't be cut off, according to all that I have appointed concerning her-* The AV is correct: "I said, Surely thou wilt fear me, thou wilt receive instruction". We have here a classic example of the willful self-limitation of God. Just as He can limit His omnipotence, so

He can limit His omniscience in order to fully enter into our experience and to engage with us in genuine relationship. Just as an educated, wealthy woman may self-limit in order to enter into a legitimate relationship of equals with an uneducated, simple man from a backward village in a developing country. Therefore God expresses shock, anger, disappointment, dashed hopes and expectations. "Surely they will reverence My Son..." is the greatest example (Mk. 12:6). God had appointed total destruction of Judah; see on Zeph. 1:3. But He was 'certain' that they would respond to all His repeated initiatives to correct and teach them. Hence His anger, disappointment and 'frustration' when they did not.

But they rose early and corrupted all their doings- Judah abused God's amazing patience and entrance into their lives and limitations. They purposefully, intentionally corrupted themselves in unfaithfulness to Him; the kind of tragedy played out in the Hosea : Gomer relationship.

Zephaniah 3:8 *Therefore wait for Me, says Yahweh, until the day that I rise up to seize the prey-* God here likens Himself to a lion, the symbol of Babylon and Assyria.

For My determination is to gather the nations, that I may assemble the kingdoms, to pour on them My indignation, even all My fierce anger; for all the land will be devoured with the fire of My jealousy- God returns to His "determination" of Zeph. 1:3, to bring a cataclysm upon Judah which would totally eradicate all life from the area, including all the Gentile nations in the *eretz* promised to Abraham. But even then, He relented, such is His grace.

Zephaniah 3:9 *For then I will purify the lips of the peoples, that they may all call on the name of Yahweh, to serve Him with one neck-* As with the situation at the flood, God considered that a total destruction of the entire area was going to be necessary in order to produce a purified people; see on Zeph. 1:3. And that purified people would be comprised "of the peoples" dwelling within the area He would cleanse by literal fire (:8). As is true today, unity between the peoples would be achieved by a common consent to put their necks under His yoke. The Lord Jesus ultimately will fulfil this intention, seeing that He is the yoke which alone brings about unity between those who come beneath it in order to serve Yahweh; see on Mt. 11:30. It would be a reversal of Babel, when all the *eretz* was of one lip (s.w. Gen. 11:1). There is implied here a psychological change, brought about by the working of the Holy Spirit in the spirit of men; hence the GNB: "Then I will change the people of the nations, and they will pray to me alone". This is the work of the new covenant.

Zephaniah 3:10 *From beyond the rivers of Cush, My worshippers, even the daughter of My dispersed people, will bring My offering-* It is doubtful whether the Jews were ever dispersed beyond those rivers, presumably referring to the great river of Cush [an intensive plural], the Nile- referring to what is now South Sudan, "beyond" or at the limits of that river. This was part of the potential scenario which never quite came about because of God's grace and the intercession of a minority. But "the daughter of" the dispersed Jews could refer to a group similar to but not identical with them- perhaps to be fulfilled in Africans turning to the Lord Jesus and coming to Zion when the Kingdom is established on earth. We already have a spiritual foretaste of that in the conversions to Christ in those areas.

Zephaniah 3:11 *In that day you will not be ashamed for all your doings in which you*

have transgressed against Me- The total removal of shame is the sign of forgiveness so deep that it involves the psychological action on the mind of the forgiven, so that they feel no shame any more. This is the work of the Spirit promised in the new covenant. The process of judgment reveals all our "doings", our sins; and yet we are left able to see them all tabulated, as it were- and yet we are without shame, so confident are we that they have all been dealt with.

For then I will take away out of the midst of you your proud exulting ones, and you will no more be arrogant in My holy mountain- Again, for all the sins committed on Mount Zion, it is pride and arrogance which was seen as the worst. A difference is made between those who "transgressed against Me", and those who were "proud exulting ones". The idea of the original is that they were proud about "My holy mountain"; they were proud of the externalities of their religion, but would not exalt [s.w. "be arrogant"] God Himself (Is. 13:3 s.w.). This is intensely relevant to those who were raised as Christian believers and socialized into their denomination and all its symbols of faith, rather than grasping the wonder of who God really is on a personal level. The same Hebrew words are used here as in Is. 13:3, where the faithful are those who exult in God's pride or highness.

Zephaniah 3:12 But I will leave in the midst of you an afflicted and humbled people, and they will take refuge in the name of Yahweh- This appears to be a flashback explaining how the situation in :11 is arrived at. The tiny remnant were intended to repent and be humbled, and turn to God, the only "refuge" from the tribulation. But this didn't happen after the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions, nor after the Roman one. So the prophecy is rescheduled to the latter day tribulation, which will elicit this humbled and repentant people out of Judah. There may be a parallel with :5, where Yahweh Himself is "in the midst of you"; manifest through the humbled and afflicted. We noted on Zeph. 1:3 that God had intended to bring upon Judah a cataclysm as total as the flood. There are allusions to the flood narrative throughout Zephaniah. "Leave" here is the same word used in Gen. 7:23 of how only Noah and the chosen animals "remained alive". This was how small the minority was to be. But the people were urged to be "humbled" before the tribulation came (Zeph. 2:3 s.w.); but they would not, and so they had to go through the tribulation in order to be humbled. And it is the same for God's people in the last days; whether or not they pass through the tribulation depends upon whether they have responded to His word in the lead up to it (see on Rev. 3:10). Again, God's plans are in this sense open ended.

Zephaniah 3:13 The remnant of Israel will not do iniquity, nor speak lies- This quotes :5, which states these things about God who will be in the midst of Israel. Yet as noted on :12, it is the humbled and afflicted remnant who will be left "in the midst". The remnant will have taken refuge in the Name of Yahweh (:12), which refers to His characteristics. They will have the Name counted to the, just as we do through baptism into that Name. All that is true of God, His righteousness, is counted to us.

Neither will a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth, for they will feed and lie down, and no one will make them afraid- They will be so at peace with God, without fear of men, that they will no longer need to be deceitful. Out of all their many sins, having a deceitful tongue might be thought to be well down the list. But typical of the prophetic perspective, this is focused upon. These words are alluded to in Rev. 14:4,5, where they are applied to the latter day repentant Jews.

Zephaniah 3:14 Sing, daughter of Zion! Shout, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your

heart, daughter of Jerusalem- The mention of "Israel" rather than Judah suggests the final reunion of God's people when they repent and marvel together at the extent of their forgiveness. For common experience of grace, repentance and forgiveness is what binds together. Disunity is caused by a lack of personal experience of these things.

These words in the LXX are applied by Gabriel to Mary in Lk. 1:28-31. The teenage, poor village girl Mary is set up as the representative and epitome of all Israel / the people of God should have been. She was the seed of David, the daughter of Zion from whom Messiah came. The "highly favoured...blessed" woman (Lk. 1:28) is the daughter of Zion of Joel 2:21-27; Zeph. 3:14-17; Zech. 2:14,15; 9:9. She "rejoiced" as the daughter of Zion was to rejoice at the coming of her king. She was the "servant Israel", the "handmaiden" (the female form of "servant") who was now "helped" by God (Lk. 1:54). The daughter of Zion had not responded as she ought to have done; and so Zephaniah's words were reapplied and rescheduled, to be fulfilled both in the last days and in Mary and her Messianic child.

Zephaniah 3:15 *Yahweh has taken away your judgments-* To "take away" judgments means to not carry out legal judgments; the same phrase is translated to "decline from... sentences / judgments" in the sense of not carrying out judicial decrees (Dt. 17:11). Here again we have an Old Testament version of Paul's argument in Romans. The judgment is and was to condemnation; but it has been taken away, it will not be carried out, because as explained on :13, God has imputed righteousness to His repentant people who have identified themselves with His Name, just as we are baptized into that Name and abide within it.

He has thrown out your enemy. The King of Israel, Yahweh, is in the midst of you- God has stated that He was right then in the midst of them (:5). Yet here, the time in view is clearly that of the Messianic Kingdom of the future, seeing that in practice the remnant refused to fully repent and accept their king. The Kingdom age will therefore be but a literal manifestation of the spiritual situation which there already is amongst God's people, for whom He is already their King in their midst, and they His dominion or kingdom.

You will not be afraid of evil any more- This must therefore speak of the last days.

Zephaniah 3:16 *In that day it will be said to Jerusalem, Don't be afraid, Zion-* This is the same message to Zion as recorded in Is. 40. Zion will be assured that she need not fear God's judgments any more; for she really has been forgiven. The preachers of that message will be us, and indeed we ought to be telling Jewish people right now.

Don't let your hands be weak- The words spoken to the returned exiles as they rebuilt Jerusalem (Ezra 4:4; Neh. 6:9). But those exiles did not finally restore the temple nor the kingdom as intended; the temple commands of Ez. 40-48 were not fulfilled in that they were not obeyed. Weak hands were a result of fear of Divine judgment to come (Ez. 7:17; 21:7 s.w.). But the reassurance of the new covenant and of God's gracious forgiveness meant that they need not have fear nor weak hands.

Zephaniah 3:17 *Yahweh your God is in the midst of you, a mighty one who will save. He will rejoice over you with joy, He will calm you in His love, He will rejoice over you with singing-* They needed calming from their fear of judgment for their sins. His strength and might are particularly manifest in His desire to save, even the most sinful. Any review of His majesty in creation must be taken further to this very personal conclusion; that all that might and power are nothing compared to His might and power to save and transform sinners. 'Rejoicing over with joy' is the language of the groom

rejoicing over the bride (s.w. Is. 62:5; 65:19). God presents Himself as in love, with all the giddiness of emotion when finally the intended climax of commitment is reached with the beloved. He is presented as He Himself singing as an expression of that joy. Zion, the beloved, is presented as the young woman who needs calming before the expression of all this love, fearful and nervous. And this is on one hand the only appropriate response, for we who are so unworthy to become the object of such love. This rejoicing over Judah to do them good could have come about at the restoration from Babylon (s.w. Jer. 32:41), had the returning exiles entered into the new covenant. It was indeed tragic that they did not.

Zephaniah 3:18 I will gather those who mourn with longing for the appointed feasts, you will no longer suffer reproach- They could have gathered themselves before the traumas of captivity (Zeph. 2:1); but chose not to. And so the tribulation had to come, so that they would desire to be gathered. Again the primary reference is to the captives, unable to keep the feasts in captivity but longing to do so, mocked as they sat by the rivers of Babylon. But when they were "gathered" through the decree of Cyrus allowing them to return, relatively few did; and as the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai and Malachi make clear, those who did return were not very penitent and had their own selfish agendas rather than any desire to re-establish God's Kingdom. So much potential was wasted. And so the prophecies of the restoration, which form a large part of the prophets, became reapplied and rescheduled to those who wish to appropriate them to themselves in Christ now, and to the remnant of Judah who will repent in future, around the time of the Lord's return.

Zephaniah 3:19 Behold, at that time I will deal with all those who afflict you- The restoration from Babylon didn't lead to this; Judah's lack of repentance meant that the intended scenario didn't happen as planned. But as noted on :18, it will happen in the last days.

And I will save those who are lame, and gather those who were driven away- The allusion is to limping Jacob being regathered to his own land after "the time of Jacob's trouble" in the last days (Dan. 12:1). Jacob, like Judah and Israel, was driven away for his own deceit and sinfulness. And yet the focus is upon the joy of restoration, rather than mentioning the past sins. The language of "driven away" is used of the exiles who were once driven away being regathered (Neh. 1:9 s.w.); but they refused to realize the huge potential for restoration.

I will give them praise and honour, those whose shame was once in all the earth- The gift of such honour alludes to the gift of imputed righteousness, covering the shame associated with condemnation, which we have alluded to above.

Zephaniah 3:20 At that time will I bring you in, and at that time will I gather you- The repeated emphasis upon "at that time" (as in :19) is to underline the point that Judah's triumphant return will coincide with the time of judgment upon their enemies. The fall of Babylon was supposed to be the signal for Judah to return of their own will. But they didn't; and so as soon as Cyrus was established over Babylon, in the first year of his reign, he was moved by God to make a decree urging the Jews to return, offering them material incentives to do so. The fact the majority still didn't return is a tragic example of men refusing to go the way God's grace wishes them to. And so the prophecies will have their rescheduled fulfilment in the salvation of the repentant remnant at the fall of latter day Babylon.

For I will give you honour and praise among all the peoples of the earth, when I return your captives before your eyes, says Yahweh- This 'giving' is the gift of grace, of imputed righteousness, as noted on :19.