

# Minor Prophets: Zephaniah

## Introduction

The book of Zephaniah nicely fits into three chapters that speak of God's judgment coming against Judah now as it came against Israel earlier in history because of the evil of the kings of Judah lately and of the people. The society is so corrupt at every turn that God will rather destroy the city. It cannot be healed or restored; it is so far gone. So judgment is coming from God on Judah and its neighbors. The book most likely was written before Josiah began his religious reform program.

## About Zephaniah the Prophet

Zephaniah may have been a descendant of King Hezekiah and lived and ministered before Jeremiah in the times of Josiah, king of Judah from 640-609 BC. There is debate about the Hezekiah being mentioned in the fourth generation of 1:1 as the king Hezekiah or another Hezekiah. Those who say it is King Hezekiah of Judah say that there was no need to add "king of Judah" onto his name but those who say it is someone else expect there to be the title "king of Judah" after his name.

The name means "The Lord hides me." The implication in some of the Psalms where the verb his name is built off of is hiding from evil or disaster. This is a fitting name considering he prophecies that Judah's payment of disastrous judgment is coming, and yet speaks of the safety of those who are faithful to the Lord, the remnant. His message seems to line up with this name well.

While several scholars suggest that Hezekiah did not have a son named Amariah, but that his son's name was Manasseh, the most wicked king of Judah for 55 years, can be explained in that Hezekiah, like almost every king, had many sons and daughters and not all of them are in the history books or genealogies. This would make Zephaniah and Josiah cousins through two different sons' lines. That might explain why Zephaniah had such a part in first preaching the message of religious reformation and then wholeheartedly taking part in it (2 Chron 34).

## Zephaniah in History

Zephaniah ministered after some of the worst kings of Judah and in the beginning of one of the best kings of Judah. It is believed according to internal evidence in the book that Zephaniah ministered in the early part of Josiah's reign before he began to annihilate idolatry in Judah. Just before King Josiah was the longest reigning worst king of Judah, Manasseh who brought every form of wickedness and idolatry into Judah's society and culture. Josiah was a complete reversal of Manasseh in that he restored worship of YHWH alone in his time, but his reign would not be enough to stem the tide of God's wrath against Judah.

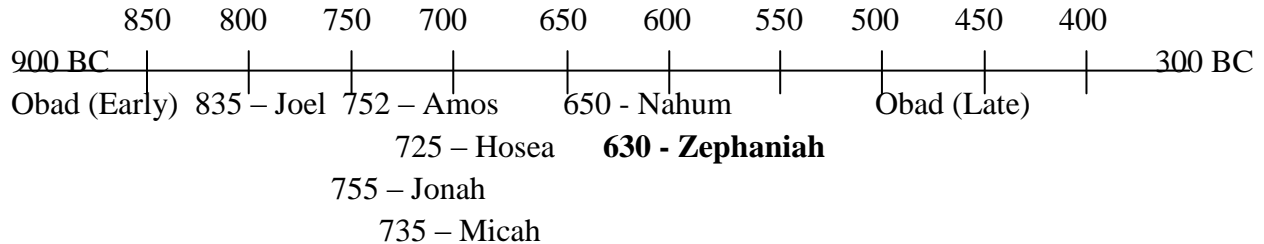
About 70 years before was the king Hezekiah and the ministry of Isaiah. He appears to have written his scathing rebuke of Judah before Josiah initiated his program of religious reform

and return to YHWH in 622 BC. The two kings before this transitional period initiated by Josiah were wicked kings Amon and Manasseh. It is believed that Zephaniah was a cousin of Josiah, the first good king since Hezekiah.

This book was written before 612 BC, the fall of Nineveh, because the city still stands (2:13) and before religious reforms of Josiah (2 Chron 34; 2 Kings 22-23) in 622 BC, most likely meaning that Zephaniah prophesied early in Josiah's reign. Cush is the controlling leadership of Egypt at this time and Assyria is still at full strength. The book's date can be placed around 630 BC, about 10 years into Josiah's reign to maintain the idea that four generations of about 25 years have passed since Hezekiah if Zephaniah is related to him.

## Dates and Timelines

\* I am using James Smith's Survey of the Minor Prophets as a guide.



## Outline of Zephaniah

- I. God's judgment day is coming upon Judah soon (1:1-18).
  - A. God's universal judgment will come swiftly (1:1-6).
  - B. The Day of the Lord will be inescapable and unstoppable (1:7-18).
- II. God will also judge the wicked nations in Judah's neighborhood (2:1-3:8).
  - A. The cities of the Philistines will be laid to waste (2:1-7).
  - B. The Moabites and Ammonites will not escape His anger (2:8-11).
  - C. Egypt's and Assyria's cities will be demolished in that day (2:12-15).
  - D. God will not even spare Jerusalem in His wrath (3:1-8).
- III. God will convert the nations and restore Israel in the end (3:9-20).
  - A. God will humble the nations and they will walk in His ways (3:9-13).
  - B. The mighty Savior will be in the midst of Israel and they will rejoice (3:14-20).

## The Prophetic Message of Zephaniah

### Chapter 1

#### **1:1 The word of the Lord which came to Zephaniah, son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah, son of Amon, king of Judah.**

Zephaniah begins mostly like other prophetic writings do with the typical word of the Lord coming forth through him. This is a common way of opening or introducing the content of a prophet's ministry on scrolls for records. What is most interesting about our start in Zephaniah is the genealogy, another common part of introduction, that tells us about the prophet. This one is interesting for several reasons.

Zephaniah links himself to none other than King Hezekiah. As was mentioned in the introduction to our book, scholars cannot be 100% sure that the Hezekiah at the end of these four generations is the King Hezekiah in the time of Isaiah's ministry. However, the arguments for him being a cousin to Josiah linked by four generations from one of Judah's greatest kings is helpful to explain his involvement in the religious reformation of Judah during Josiah's time.

It is believed by many that Zephaniah's prophecies, probably spoken early on in Josiah's reign, helped to bring the king to make such sweeping changes. Historically, Josiah was a breath of fresh air, a much needed righteous king to at least stave off God's judgment for a time because of the longest and most wicked reign in Judah of the preceding king Manasseh. The two problems opponents have of this suggestion are first, why does it not simply say "king of Judah" after Hezekiah's name, and second, why are the names of Hezekiah's sons and line different than in the records we have?

Both of these can very simply be answered, though. First, Hezekiah was popular and everyone knew he was the king in his day. There would be no need to say the obvious, that he was the king of Judah four generations ago. That would be like asking if you're referring to David or Solomon as kings. Everyone knew they were. When I say Elvis, you know who I'm talking about. When I say Jesus, you know who I'm talking about. It was the same with Hezekiah. Everyone knew the guy. Second, kings tended to have at least several wives, and there were different lines that are not recorded by Kings or Chronicles or Samuel. We need to remember that just like Luke, these historians had a theological reason for recording the genealogies they did record. They do not account for every possible son or daughter that each person had.

So it is plenty likely that although Hezekiah's one son assumes the throne and so his line is recorded in these genealogy lists that this other son is not recorded because he does not attain a special office or maintain a place in the public eye. It is most likely that Zephaniah was from royal blood and possibly had easy access to his cousin Josiah and that he could then point Josiah

toward religious reform. Of course, Josiah wanted this anyway as the king, but his prophet cousin also being on board did not hurt.

**1:2 “I will absolutely remove everything from upon the face of the land,” declares the Lord.**

In verse two after the prescript that describes the prophet who is recording his prophecies, we now are thrust into his message. The first nine verses contain a segment on the day of the Lord coming to all the earth, and specifically to Jerusalem and Judah. The content in the first section (verses 2-9) points to Judah’s specific issues in the day of the Lord. The second section will be more general about the day of the Lord, describing more the events that will occur. This first section is mostly about the reasons for the destruction in the day of the Lord and the people that the Lord is after.

The word for remove here contains the idea of sweeping away or destroying. It is actually the reverse of the word’s normal meaning, to increase or add. The word from the Lord here speak of the day of the Lord being a time in which He destroys and removes everything from the earth. Nothing will be left. The word for land or earth here is adamah rather than erets. Erets usually speaks of the earth as a whole, the planet and the ground we walk on, while adamah generally speaks of a nation’s land, like the geography of the promised land. Here the word is adamah. The prophecy is broken up with a confirmation that the Lord is declaring it, so that it has His authority behind it.

**1:3 “I will remove human and beast. I will remove the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, and the rubble with the wicked, and I will cut off humanity from the face of the land,” declares the Lord.**

Once again we enter the Lord’s own speech and He will clarify what He will do in the day of the Lord. He will remove or destroy human and beast, bird and fish. He will remove all of the creation from the land, every living thing. This would remind us of the flood in which the Lord did this very thing, except that he saved all of the creatures and humanity. However, in the day of the Lord, there will be no such help.

This sweeping removal will mean that there is much rubble in the land and everything is vacant. The word for rubble here also implies stumbling blocks and destruction. Along with the rubble will lie the corpses of those who work wickedness of all kinds. The word for wicked implies the idea of guilt, so those who are guilty of wickedness will be destroyed. The Lord will cut off humanity from the earth. The word for face here can mean surface of the land. Everywhere a person may look, they will find no humans walking around or alive, no animals. It will be a solitary rock in space, empty and void of life.

**1:4 “And 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 with the priests,**

Next the Lord specifically calls out Judah as suffering during this day of the Lord. Jerusalem will not escape His judgment either. Jerusalem tends to think that they will escape much because they are God’s city. Indeed, the city of Jerusalem is not sacked as much as most capital cities throughout history. And even against the Assyrians, the people of Jerusalem were spared Senacherib’s attempts to gain both northern Israel and Judah. They might have been feeling special despite their idolatry.

The Lord reaches His hand toward Judah to enact His judgment. This judgment is meant for those who have been idolaters in the city. The word for cut off is the same word used to cut a covenant or to sever a social or cultural or national connection. God often talks about those who are not true Jews being cut off. Here, the image is of death for those who serve Baal or other idols. No longer will there be Baal worshipers in Jerusalem and Judah because God will cut them off from entering that place.

The remnant of Baal is those who have remained in Judah from the days of Manasseh and other idolatrous kings. Just as God left a remnant in the times of Ahab and Jezebel, so Baal has a remnant of true believers. God will cut them all off from the land. Some of the priests in Israel serve Baal instead of YHWH, so the Lord will cut them off and the name of Baal He will remove from the Judeans. We see this in Hosea as well, God promising to wipe out the name of Baal. The priests were mixed in their allegiances. This is in the beginning of Josiah’s reign, and the full reformation does not begin for 18 years into his reign.

**1:5 “even those who worship on the roofs the host of the heavens and those who worship, swearing to the Lord while also swearing to Milcom,**

Because of these idolaters, God’s judgment through the day of the Lord is coming upon the people of Judah and the city of Jerusalem. But God will continue with His plans for eradication. There are other groups of idolaters in Jerusalem and Judah. He next mentions on his list those who worship the host of heaven. This is most likely angels or stars or some persuasion, celestial beings and portents. We have record from other prophets about this type of worship. One talks about worshipping star constellations and another mentions portents.

Spirituality has different flavors. I think it is most important to realize this in our culture especially. When people say they are spiritual, they are not saying they are Christian. Spirituality can have an eastern flavor like new age spirituality or it can be some kind of theism or something from mythology. When people mention they are spiritualist, you should ask what they mean and what they believe. People still worship the stars with astrology today.

The word for worship that I have translated means to bow down as well, to give one’s allegiance to an idol, as one gives allegiance to a king by bowing down. It means to worship. The

people gather on their roofs to worship the stars and angels. The next group is a group of syncretism between YHWH and Molech. Although the word here is Milcam, its root is Molech. Syncretism is mixing religions and gods with Christianity, like mixing Jesus with Budha or any other god or belief system.

It happened a lot when the conquistadors would conquer and force natives to become believers or die. Eventually, Christian belief and theology and words would get mixed in with the ancient beliefs in that culture and society. One common mixture is that of dualism and Christianity in which the devil is given more power and ability so that evil and good are in an eternal struggle. That idea is nowhere near biblical.

The words for bowing down and swearing speak of allegiances. The people in this third group are people who are “turning back” to YHWH but also holding on to Molech or any other idol at the same time. Their worship is not purely for YHWH. It is mixed with paganism and is therefore unacceptable to the Lord. We must be clear when we see syncretism happen in our world. We must stand up against it and point out the differences. One common way to be syncretistic is under a false understanding of tolerance in which people claim that the God of the Bible and Allah are the same, or that all religions lead to the same path to God or anything like that.

Molech is seen throughout the Old Testament as Baal is. Molech in Hebrew is literally translated “their king.” Molech is an idol of the Ammonites to Judah’s east. Molech is a god who demanded child sacrifices and allegiance. There are scholarly arguments over whether this is the name of an actual deity or if it is the name for a kind of sacrifice, mainly burning a child or animal upon an altar to a deity such as Baal. Either way, it does not give the people’s allegiances to the Lord.

### **1:6 “even those who turned away from following the Lord and who do not seek the Lord nor inquire of Him.”**

Another group is those who are the backsliders, who turned away from the Lord. These are people who serve other gods exclusively and who look to these idols for counsel and understanding, who seek their wills and their ways. These people do not serve the Lord in any facet, not even half-heartedly in syncretism. They are wholly allied with idols. The Lord will cut them off from the face of the earth in the day of the Lord.

### **1:7 Hush in the presence of the Lord God! Yes, near is the day of the Lord, for the Lord has appointed a sacrifice; He has consecrated those He calls.**

In verse seven, the Lord is no longer speaking but the prophet is now responding to the words of the Lord. These next two verses are the prophet speaking about what the Lord has said, until we see the first person singular in the middle of verse eight. The prophet calls all the people listening to be silent in the Lord’s presence. He does this in two ways.

First, he commands the people to be silent. The word here carries the same quickness and surprise as our “shut up!” command that is commonly used today. It is a demanding of respect and awe in God’s presence. Second, He uses a compound form of God’s name, the Lord God, literally Adonai YHWH. Adonai is the word for Lord or Master and YHWH is the covenant name of God. The compound name is meant to remind the people of God’s greatness.

Literally it says *before the face of* but this is most commonly understood as being in the presence of a person or of God. It is a common way of expressing God’s personal active presence among the people. Then the prophet uses an intensive by using the usual marker of a conclusion or explanation, *chiy*. The intensive continues grammatically as the next word is the ending of the sentence rather than the verb. He stresses the nearness of the day. Instead of saying “The day of the Lord is near,” the Hebrew reads, “Near is the day of the Lord.” Anytime where Hebrew changes the verb → subject → object typical grammar pattern, it is to intensify or bring special meaning.

Then the prophet describes the cause for being silent in the Lord’s presence. He has appointed a sacrifice and chosen people by calling them. The word for calling here is usually understood by many as guests to a banquet and the sacrifice is what will be served at the banquet. I believe the people just spoken of, those who have turned their backs on YHWH are the ones called to be the sacrifice unto the Lord. That is how I read this verse in context with the others. The Lord will make sacrifices for Himself out of those whose idolatry has brought this day. They will be sacrificed and are called to be the sacrifices.

### **1:8 Thus it will happen on the day of the Lord’s sacrifice, “So I will punish the officials and the king’s sons and all who dress in foreign garments**

The prophet now focuses on what the Lord says again as the verb switches to the first person singular again in the quotation. The Lord says that He will punish people in the day of the Lord. The word punish is used throughout the prophets and is literally translated “visit” but has the idea of visiting punishment upon someone. The Lord is personally involved and is the agent of the punishing.

Who will He punish? He will punish the king’s officials. He will punish the king’s sons. He also apparently has a problem with foreign clothing? Let’s take a look at this. Does this mean that the Lord is angry with Josiah’s officials? It depends on what they are doing. Remember that the image here is of a future day of the Lord, not the current day of Josiah. At the least, it refers to the day that Judah falls to the Babylonians in 586 BC. At the most, it can be any day of calamity that the Lord claims when His people are not pure and wholehearted before Him, up to the final day of the Lord at the end of human history and time.

On that day of judgment, Josiah will not be the king. Someone else will be the king and someone else will be the king’s sons, those who will be king after the king. The Lord wants to end human rule in Jerusalem because from the very beginning He knew that a human king would lead the people astray, or at least had the great potential to lead them astray from Him. The

officials will also be on God's hitlist because they put whatever ungodly practices that evil king wants into practice.

Finally, what's the deal with foreign clothing? Does God have something against Burkas or Jeans or any other cultural or foreign clothing? Nope. This is an image of those who have the interests of idolatrous foreigners above Israel's interests. These are those who make deals and pacts with foreign nations instead of turning to the Lord. To dress in foreign garments was to put on the desires and alliances of other nations rather than Israel's desires.

**1:9 “and I will punish all who jump over the threshold. On that day *I will punish* those who fill their master's house with violence and deceit.**

The Lord will also visit punishment upon those who jump over the threshold. This is the image of someone who breaks into a house to steal something, or into the storehouse. The threshold is the place of separating wheat from chaff, and then it is stored usually close to, if not in the same building as the threshing floor. These are thieves who take away from the resources of God's people. They sneak in and steal God's resources. They will be punished on the day of the Lord.

Also God will punish those who fill their master's house with violence and deceit. The word for violence in Hebrew is hamas. Deceit speaks of false dealings such as fraud or any kind of lying or deception. These are slaves or servants who do not care about their master's demands upon them. They instead cheat their master and fill the house with lies and violence. They do not do as they are commanded and they terrorize from within.

The verb for punish is not in the second phrase, although it is understood from the first phrase. This is common in Hebrew syntax. A samek ends the section explaining why the Lord is angry on His day and with whom He is angry. The next section speaks of the actions of the day of the Lord and what He has planned against these groups.

**1:10 “So it will happen in that day,” declares the Lord, “that a loud cry from the Fish Gate, and a howling from the Second Quarter, and a loud crash from the hills.**

This verse starts a new section in which the subject is the same, and yet this will contain the perspective of humanity as reaction to God's action in the day of the Lord is noticed. The Lord now lays out some of the actions of the day of the Lord. He starts with declaring that there will be loud cries, howlings and a loud crash. The question is where these places are on a map.

The Fish Gate, according to commentators, is the northernmost gate of Jerusalem, situated on a hill and the most vulnerable place in the city. The Second Quarter or the New Quarter is a newer part of the city. Even today there are several quarters of the city, such as the old city, the ancient part of the city and the new city that is more modern.

So the Second Quarter is the more modern part of Jerusalem. The hills are the more generalized areas around the city on its outside. The imagery then is of invasion and attack upon



the weakest and newest parts of Jerusalem, even surrounding from all sides, which is a general military tactic of surrounding and then besieging a city. The loud noises are those of crying out for help, of howling in pain based on invasion or violation of some sort, and loud crashes from the hills that come from invading armies. On the day of the Lord, there will be armies that take Jerusalem.

**1:11 “Howl, O inhabitants of the mortar, for all the Canaan peoples are ruined; cut off are all those who weigh out silver.”**

The question we must ask concerns these inhabitants. The strange word here is mortar. When I originally think of mortar, I think of the glue between bricks or cinder blocks. And so I would then be led to think of those who work with mortar and their profession in Israel. However, this word for mortar comes from the verbal root “to pound.” And it is not pounding to make mortar as we know it or to pound metal or anything like that. It is the pounding of dough, that job of the baker.

Another way that we understand mortar is something shot from a canon or the hat that the graduates wear. But the mortar in the Bible is used only three times. Once here, referring to the pounding of wheat and grain into flour for bread, also in Proverbs in the same type of context and then in Judges it speaks of the hollow place, which is of a different meaning. The reason we see mortar as speaking of the bakers is that the context warraents we speak of the market system in Israel, the business section.

The Canaanite peoples refers to the merchants and the economic system. Canaanites and Phoenicians have long since had the reputation of merchants, so sometimes throughout the prophets, the word for Canaanite is used to refer to any merchant rather than the people who live in Canaan. We know this is the proper interpretation of this verse because all three of these groups refer to merchants. The final clue that speaks to the image of the merchants and the ending of the economic system is that of the people who weigh out silver.

Although silver was not the only form of currency to barter with, it was the most common in the economic system of this day. The merchants had a weight system in which they would weigh out an amount of silver. Today we use a counting system, like 4 quarters equals a dollar. Back then, so many pounds or ounces (they would have used different weight denominations like shekels) would equal whatever they were buying.

Today we have the same weight to each coin, but back then there was no industry to make each piece of metal the same weight and size. It was close, but not exact. So this last group is the people who weigh out the money, like the people at the checkout line who take your card. Thus, interpretation of context tells us that the prophet was warning the people that the economic system was about to suffer gravely and that the merchants would howl and cry out and be ruined.

**1:12 “So it will happen at that time that I will search Jerusalem with lamps and I will punish the men who are complacent, the dregs of the wine, who say in their hearts, ‘The Lord will do neither good nor evil.’”**

The Lord next will search out Jerusalem, looking for those who are complacent. The word complacent here has the imagery of being congealed or becoming thick and rigid, to be immovable and hard, like pasta that is left to congeal and become a solid lump over time. He will use lamps of light to search in the darkness of the city. This speaks of the spiritual darkness. He will find few who are spiritually alive in the city. The word for punish, as we have seen before in the prophets, is the word for visiting upon. The idea is to visit punishment upon the object.

These men are described as the dregs of the wine, meaning that they are the very bottom of the barrel. They are the leftovers that do not do as the rest does. They say in their hearts, meaning that they believe that the Lord will not respond to them. They think that He will ignore them as the rest of society has and will leave them at the bottom of the glass of wine, but the Lord will indeed respond to these complacent men with punishment.

Their belief that the Lord will do neither good or evil allows them to take advantage of a period of mercy and grace. Their beef with the Lord is not that He does calamity (evil in the Hebrew) or that He blesses those who don't deserve it, but that He does neither, that He stands off aloof to everything in their time. But the Lord's mercy is being misunderstood by these men, and they will be punished for their wishy-washey attitudes. Their beliefs are about to be challenged.

We must never come to a place where we begin to believe that God is not at all intersecting our space and time. God has always intervened in human history so that His will would be done. He is sovereign over all of human history and creation. When God does not respond, we misinterpret this as doing nothing. Perhaps we are missing what God is doing in our midst because it is not what we wanted or expected. But we must not ever believe that we are being left alone in the dark to our own devices. God is a God who moves in our time in our lives for our good. Don't mistake grace for doing nothing!

**1:13 Then it will happen that their wealth will be a plunder, and their houses will be a devastation. Though they build houses, yet they will not dwell in them; though they plant vineyards, yet they will not drink wine from them.**

For the third time in this section, the prophet has used the phrase “and it will happen” or “so it will come to pass.” The first happened in the introductory verse to this section, 10, and then also in 12 and now in 13. This verse continues to outline how God will affect the merchants and the economics of Jerusalem and Judah. The wealth of the city and nation will be the plunder of the enemies. Everything that these people have worked hard to have that is worth any value to them will be taken in the plunder when Jerusalem and Judah fall to the Babylonians. Their

working will turn out to have been a waste. They will not enjoy what they have worked for, producing futile working ethic without fruit to enjoy.

The houses that they build will be destroyed. They will become a heap of rubble, a devastated and discombobulated mess, unlivable and broken. The phrase about their houses has been used by Micah in 5:11 referring to northern Israel and is now used for Judah. Because Amos wrote before Zephaniah, this could be a reference that Zephaniah makes to point to the same types of judgments that God made against the much more wicked northern kingdom, at least in the eyes of those in Jerusalem and Judah.

The final warning is that they will plant in the fields and not reap the yield and harvest. They will not drink the wine they work to produce. It is the same idea with a different image. Both are needs, food/drink and shelter. This part about vineyards and not enjoying the fruit of the vine, the new wine, also comes from Amos 5:11 and 9:14. It is most likely that Zephaniah is reminding his audience in Judah of the promises of God against the northern kingdom, so that the people see that God will also deal with their sin the way He dealt with the northern kingdom's sin. He treats all sin the same. He is the same in His judgment. Judah won't get special treatment for being a little less wicked.

God is the same yesterday and today and forever. He does not change His judgments or the way He works. He does not change the way He works with or against people. The Lord works in the same ways for the same goals. He does not confuse us with different responses to our actions. He has always stated the same stances. He doesn't switch things on us. We know that when we sin, He will discipline us. Always. Without a doubt. When we live out His righteousness, He rewards us. Always. Without a doubt. The Lord will deal with us in the same ways and His purposes and will have never changed. We are the ones who change. That is why He is the just Judge.

**1:14 Near is the great day of the Lord, near and hastening quickly; the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter. The mighty man cries out there.**

The emphasis which is usually not picked up in most English translations is on the nearness of the day of the Lord. This makes an awkward poetic sentence, but the original places this emphasis on nearness. The day is coming very soon. The warnings continue in this emphatic manner. The day is called the great day because of its scope. It will be a day not only in which Judah is judged, but the nations around Judah.

If the emphatic grammatical placement is not enough, the word for nearness is then repeated and a verb speaking of being at hand or being very quick, fast, or hastening is added as well. There can be no misinterpretation or misunderstanding of the prophet's point. The day of the Lord will be great and it is in the nearest of future, practically upon them already. It sounds strange to hear the sound of the day of the Lord and to call it bitter, a term usually used to describe a taste, but here it describes an experience of those who stand against the Lord.

The mighty man is a warrior, a hero, a mighty man of valor, strong and virulent, but crying like a baby when faced with the Lord's judgment. He experiences the bitterness of the moment and the sound is one of terror and tragedy. This verse harkens back to the sounds of howling and crying out for help in verses ten and eleven. Even the strongest will cry out and have bitter experiences when they stand against the Lord on His day of judgment.

**1:15 A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and affliction, a day of storm and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness,**

Verses 15 and 16 describe the day of the Lord. It is a day of wrath, distress, affliction, storm and devastation, darkness and gloom, and of clouds and thick darkness. These have all been attested to by other prophets who wrote before Zephaniah and prophets who write after him. Joel writes specifically concerning the darkness and gloom and cloudiness and thick darkness of that day of the Lord in his prophetic work.

The day of wrath is spoken of by almost every prophet and the distress and affliction are mentioned specifically here but their images are not unfamiliar to the prophets. The word for storm holds some interest, mentioning that God might even control weather patterns in His judgment. The word I have translated as storm to produce in the English reader's mind an image is translated by others simply as ruin, destruction or distress, all the result of a storm. It carries all of these horrifying meanings.

The overall picture presented by most of the prophets is a day that is not one of Israel or Judah's best days. It is the worst in their history and one that they should avoid. It will not be the day of Jewish folklore, a day of God's grace to Israel while destroying the rest of the nations. It will be a day that affects Israel as much as, if not more than, the other nations.

**1:16 a day of trumpet blast and war-cry against the fortified cities and against the exalted battlements.**

The images of verse 16, which carry the connotations of the last verse and are more descriptors of that same day speak more in the tones of Joel once again, the day of the trumpet blowing and the war-cry being raised. In Joel 2, this was the image of the nations rising up against God and the warriors of Zion. The trumpet here is the shofar, a ram's horn that made quite the loud sound when properly used.

The war-cry is used also in Joel to depict the armies of the earth gathering for battle against the Lord, and the Lord's people and armies in response cry back. This war cry and battle raising by the trumpet, which signals everything in Israel and Judah from celebration to warning to war, here is used of the Lord's armies as they prepare to attack the city of Jerusalem and the nation of Judah on that day of the Lord. There is no mistaking that while Zephaniah is borrowing from other prophets, especially Joel, that he also is warning the people of Judah that the day of the Lord will treat them no differently than it treated northern Israel.

The fortified cities are the ones that are to remain, built to last and withstand any kind of attack. But these cities and battlements will not be so foundational when the Lord attacks on His day. The words for battlements speak of the high towers of the cities, the lookouts and the strongest and most foundational parts. These are the corner towers that remain because of advanced warning. They will suffer the violence of the Lord's armies and fall to Him as part of His judgment against Judah. We must never forget one of the core messages of all the prophets, that our resources will not save us or help us escape the Lord's judgment. Only our repentance and His grace can accomplish such an improbable feat!

**1:17 “So I will besiege humanity so that they will walk like the blind because they have sinned against the Lord, and their blood will be poured out like the dust and their flesh like dung.”**

The word the Lord uses for besiege here speaks of an enveloping or surrounding, a cramping or hedging in. He will surround humanity, speaking more of the whole world, not of Judah only. This is centering once again on the universality of the day of the Lord rather than the local pangs that Judah and Jerusalem will feel. The Lord will surround them in the darkness and thick clouds that the day will bring and they will not be able to see.

This imagery speaks of a lack of revelation, but here may be quite literal in speaking of the day of the Lord's judgment. He will blind them in His surrounding them. Their spiritual blindness, their sin, causes the Lord to envelop them in blindness and darkness on that day. It is a day of confusion and of war and of death.

The blood of humanity will be poured out and its flesh will also be poured out. There is only one verb here, that of pouring out, so it applies to both lines. The images the prophet creates are of interest as well. The blood is poured out like the dust of the earth, and the flesh, the bodies, are poured out like dung. This second image seems to not fit so well.

One scholar suggests that both dust and dung are to show the vanity or worthlessness of humanity. This may be true. The people are left there as is and no one can help them because all of them are subject to the judgment. It is harsh and stark, and it is that way for a reason as part of the prophet's polemic against the sinners of Judah and of humanity.

**1:18 Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to deliver them on the day of the Lord's wrath, and in the fire of His jealousy all the earth will be consumed, for He will make all the inhabitants of the earth a complete and terrible destruction.**

Once again the prophet mentions the economic system. This is very similar to the warnings of Amos and others in the northern kingdom about trusting in wealth and human resource against the day of the Lord. God can't be bought off. Apparently, some of the people in Jerusalem and Judah thought this might be possible. silver and gold are obvious signs of riches

and wealth which was most likely gained by those in the market district of Jerusalem and by the merchants who were used in images earlier in this section.

These riches and resources could not help the people of Judah. They won't deliver the people. The word for deliver implies a deliverance through escaping. The people cannot escape the day of the Lord or the Lord's wrath. This talking point has also been seen throughout the other prophets we have studied. Human belief that any kind of escape is possible is wishful thinking in a time of God's grace. When the judgment comes, there will be no such possibility.

Next, to expound upon God's wrath on His day, Zephaniah speaks of the fire of jealousy and the consuming of the earth. The fire of jealousy reminds me of the book of Nahum in which that prophet opened with images of God's wrath and jealousy. The word for consume is the word for eating food, but it is often used as a verb in conjunction with fire. God's jealousy sometimes refers to the jealousy He has in love for His people, but here it is a jealousy for the abuse of His grace and holiness. His righteousness and holiness must be appeased in their violation by humanity's sinfulness.

The universal nature of the day of the Lord is consummated in the image of the Lord burning the whole of the earth with fire, a very real understanding of the eschatological day of the Lord, and of the whole of the earth being wiped out. The inhabitants of the earth are completely destroyed, a terrible and horrific event ending humanity and human history. These words produce the full picture of nothing being left. The devastation is total and the annihilation of humanity is certain. The picture could not be any clearer. The prophet ends this section with a samek and the next section begins in chapter two. The finality is fully felt in the samek completing the image and leaving the reader with the devastation.

## Chapter 2

### **2:1 Gather yourselves together, yes, assemble yourselves, O shameless nation,**

The new section now prescribes doom and gloom on the nations. This chapter is much like the standard oracles to the nations in which prophets of YHWH condemn other nations, pronounce woes upon them, and warn them that their sins (usually against Israel) will be punished by the Lord on the day of the Lord. The only confusing part here in verse one may be the switch from plural to singular.

This is a grammatical issue in which the people are plural, but seen as a collective singular. The nation is singular, leading me to believe it refers to Judah, the first of the nations that will receive the Lord's wrath on the day of the Lord. So the shameless nation is Judah, much like its brother nation Israel, which had no shame concerning its sins. This section is rather short, stopping with a samek after verse four, but the content against the nations rolls on through the end of the chapter.

### **2:2 before the decree is birthed, before the day passes away like chaff, before the Lord's burning anger comes upon you, before the day of the Lord's anger comes upon you.**

We get a picture in this second verse of the prophet taunting Judah and telling them that they had better hurry before the time runs out. Over and over in this verse we have the word for "before" and then a future event that is near in the prophet's visions. He warns Judah to gather together, most likely in solemn assembly via the context of verses one and three. They must hurry before what God decrees, that dreadful day, is birthed or begins to happen.

They must gather together to pray and seek the Lord before the day passes away like chaff. In this sense, he is referring to the current day, not the day of the Lord. Chaff is always an image of waste or emptiness in the Bible. Before the evening comes and the day fades into history, the people should repent in solemn assembly. The third phrase is missing the "before" but it is implied. This third phrase refers to the day of the Lord as the day of the Lord's anger, His burning rage against the nation for its sinfulness.

The burning anger of the Lord was referred to in chapter one when the prophet spoke about the fire of the Lord's anger consuming the earth. The final phrase with "before" starting it speaks of the general anger of the Lord, same word as the previous phrase. This is most likely meant for emphasis on the anger of the Lord against sinful practices of the people. Today is the day that they can repent before this day of the Lord's anger comes. It is an emphasis to warn the people of the extreme danger their sin is causing in the midst of God's grace. The word "before" in most of these phrases actually comes last instead of first in word order, another strange way the prophet grabs attention.

**2:3 Seek the Lord all you humble of the land who do His justice! Seek righteousness! Seek humility! Perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the Lord's anger.**

Now a command harkens from the prophet's mouth. He calls the nation first in verse one to gather together. The implication is to gather for a sacred assembly unto the Lord of repentance. Then in this verse, he commands the people with the present imperative, meaning to do this ASAP, to seek the Lord. Seeking the Lord is the foundation of repentance. Only in seeing the Lord can we see our sinfulness. It is in His holiness that we see how unholy we are. That is why we must seek Him.

But it takes humility to seek the Lord, because the result of seeking the Lord is taking His advice over our own, seeing His counsel over our own and obeying His commands rather than our own desires. That requires humility, an acceptance and obedience of God's commands over our own. Those who do the Lord's commands, who see justice happening in the land are those who are humble because they seek the Lord's commands over their own desires. We need to become a humble people who rather than be angry with the Lord when He challenges and chides us would rather come under His lordship in our lives than fight our perspective against His.

Those who are humble obey the Lord. In obeying the Lord, they fulfill justice and righteousness. In the action of being humble and obedient, they seek the righteous actions that come through that obedience. To seek humility is to put ourselves in a place where we can be humble and obedient to see justice and righteousness happen in our actions. But it requires a humble lifestyle seeking the Lord over our own desires.

The prophet grants that if the whole nation begins to seek the Lord, to do justice, to seek righteousness and humility, that the Lord just might then hide those who are humble from His humbling rage in the day of the Lord. The only way out of God's devastation is to humble themselves and seek the Lord and His ways over their ways. If they would do that, there's a good chance that the Lord will hide them.

This is the one time in the book that the prophet's name at least in content is referred to or applied. The root of Zephaniah means to be hidden by God. We know that those who trust in the Lord will indeed be hidden on the day of the Lord when His wrath comes! Praise God that He treats us with justice!

**2:4 For Gaza will be deserted and Ashkelon a devastation. Ashdod by noon will be driven out and Ekron will be uprooted.**

In this final verse of the section before the samek to split to the next list of nations, Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod and Ekron are mentioned. These are some of the main cities of the Canaanite land in the very beginning. Joshua took out these cities in taking the promised land. Gaza and the word for deserted rhyme in Hebrew ( ). We have seen this in other prophets in which the Lord's judgment rhymes with the city name or is in some way related to it specifically.



Ashkelon will be a devastation. This word speaks of total annihilation and destruction, of the waste of ruins. Ashdod receives a judgment of being driven out of the city, most likely by armies. There is also a curiously specific timeframe that this will happen by noon on that day. This could be a reference to Most scholars take this to mean that the city would fall quickly in the morning. It usually took days to besiege a city in the Old Testament. The city is no match for its adversaries.

Finally, Ekron and uprooted are from the same root and also rhyme like the first city named ( ). The idea of being uprooted means that the people will be taken out of their city. It does not necessarily speak of a destruction of Ekron, but more taking the people and planting them somewhere else to inhabit. The population will be uprooted, not the city itself as far as the standing buildings. This section finishes with a samek but the oracles against the nations continues until the end of the chapter.

**2:5 Woe to you, inhabitants of the seacoast, nation of the Cretans! The word of the Lord is against you, O Canaan, land of the Philistines, and I will bring you to ruin until there is no inhabitant.**

Although a new section starting with a woe, the barrage of oracles against the nations continues. Now we will discuss those of the coastlands, most likely Philistine provinces, and the Philistines themselves. The coastland here speaks of the coast near the Mediterranean Sea. This is the place where the Philistines had settled. It is believed that the Philistines were always a fishing people and a naval type of people. They came to the land from Crete, the island in the Mediterranean. This is what most scholars suggest.

There is for sure in this passage a linking from the Cretans to the Philistines to the Canaanites in this passage. The literal words for sea coast are the roping of the sea, the rope line along the sea. Here the Philistines are called the land of the Cretans. The Cretans would refer to those from the island of Crete, and this is the same area that Philistines inhabited.

The word of the Lord that is against the Philistines speaks of the Lord's hand, the decree of the Lord, the authority of the Lord. God is against them. He speaks against them and acts against them. Canaan is the land of the Philistines who came from Crete now. So the verse refers overall to all of the coastland peoples from Crete to Canaan. We switch to the first person singular, so that the Lord is speaking here and He declares that He will bring them to ruin or to waste, to desolate them as a people. The population will dwindle until there is no one left in the land. The Lord will take them all out.

**2:6 And you, O seacoast, will become a pasture with wells for shepherds and walls for flocks.**

What is the future or the result of the Lord's destruction and dwindling of the Philistine and coastland populations? There will be no one left, and so the seacoast itself will end up being

a grazing land for sheep and animals. The word for well or meadow rhymes with Keruthite or Cretan. The well speaks of a place for the shepherd to dwell and work as he tends sheep and the walls are a hedge that would keep the flocks from getting lost, probably the pen where they would be kept at night. What used to be the Philistines' lair is now a simple utility field to build up livestock for Israel. The Israelites were famous for their shepherding capabilities.

God decides how resources and even whole nations will be used, how their land will be allocated. He makes final decisions on these things. And when He is the one to bring a nation low, He is the one who decides what the winning nation will do with their boundaries and lands. So also in our own lives, God has plans for every bit of our resources. He wants to use us and what we have for His kingdom. We must ask ourselves, "What can God do with this resource or that resource?" Our understanding becomes one of stewards looking for God's will in each matter rather than thinking that we own our possessions.

**2:7 So the seacoast will become the possession of the remnant of the house of Judah on which they will graze, and in Ashkelon's houses they will lie down in the evening. Thus the Lord their God will visit them and turn back their captivity.**

This seacoast that once belonged to the Philistines with their great city states will now belong to Judah when the Lord brings His vengeance upon the Philistines. The remnant of Judah's house refers to the returning exiles who come back from the faraway lands. They are the people of Judah, the house or nation of Judah. They will take as a possession not only their own lands, but also the coast lands.

They will use the land for themselves, letting their animals graze in the fields and sleeping in the houses that belonged to the great city of Ashkelon. The people of Judah will gain more than their own land back and will be blessed by God. They of course as refugees and returning exiles will not have the power to do such things. Indeed, the first thing that they struggled through was building back up their own cities. How then can they have other cities and lands as well?

The Lord is the answer to the question. The Lord is the one who will do these things in response to their faithfulness to Him. He is the one who visits the blessings upon them. This word visit is usually used in the prophets as a negative, to visit punishment, but here the Lord is visiting prosperity on the returned remnant of exiles. Such prosperity is not something you earn from God. It is His gift when He is pleased with us and the way that we live for Him. Not only will God bless them with other lands and cities, but in that blessing, turn back the tide of their recent captivity. He will free them from captivity and give them more land than they had!

When God restores to us things that were lost in disobedience, He also wants to bring us to a greater place of blessing. He doesn't just want the old status quo. He wants to see us blessed by Him, happy in Him. He will not settle for just giving us back what is lost, but making it all even greater! That is His great love for us! But it is nothing we can earn in any way. We can't

tithe to get it. In fact, giving to get isn't anywhere in Scripture. God blesses us when we are faithful to Him. He knows the heart.

**2:8 I have heard the taunts of Moab and the defamation of the Ammonites, how they have taunted My people and make great boasts against their boundaries.**

The nations of Moab and Ammon are not unfamiliar to Judah. There is much history between Israelites and the peoples who were already in the land. One of the commands of God was to rid the land of these peoples so they would not cause especially spiritual problems for Israel, but the Israelites did not fulfill that commandment. Since that time, these other nations have done everything in their power to abuse the Israelites and lead them astray from the one true God.

But here we see these two nations taunting and defaming Israel. These kinds of actions upset God greatly, and these nations will pay for their verbal abuse toward His chosen people. The taunts and defamation are words of reviling and shaming the remnant of Judah. They are meant to ruin reputation and cut deep into their psyche. Not only are they using their words to hurt Judah, but are making boasts against Judah's borders. This probably means that they are seeking to steal Judah's land as they try to resettle it.

The most important words to us in this verse are what the Lord opens by saying, "I have heard." Many people think that when they are going through a hardship or an affliction, a testing or a trial, that the Lord is silent and that He has left them alone to deal with it on their own. They think that the injustices they face will never be evened up or returned. But the Lord hears everything that goes on. He doesn't sit back and watch, even laughing at our plight.

He is intimately involved in our lives, using what others mean for evil for our good. He is making us stronger and He will justify us and give us justice if not in this situation, it will be part of His justice at the end of time. The Lord does and will avenge His people! Don't accuse God of not being there. Know that He is there with you and hurts as much as you about the injustices. And He will rejoice with you when He justifies the righteous!

**2:9 "Therefore, as I live," declares the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, "Thus Moab will become like Sodom and the sons of Ammon like Gomorrah, possessed by weeds and salt mines and a devastation forever. The remnant of My people will plunder them and the survivors of My nation will possess them."**

The Lord essentially takes an oath in this verse, calling Himself to Judah's defense. The phrase "As surely as I live" here is the beginning of an oath. Based on the Lord's own life and existence, since that is abundantly clear and certain, the Lord's actions that He promises in this oath will just as certainly come to pass for Ammon and Moab. Beyond the oath-taking opening, the Lord declares it. This declaration is a formula in the prophets calling God's guarantee and authority behind the following words.

The Lord of Hosts and the God of Israel are two of the Lord's titles. The first makes Him supreme commander of every army that He chooses to use and also the armies of angels. The Lord reigns and uses foreign armies and angels and celestial beings in His warfare, but they are all commanded by Him. And He is the God of Israel, the one God of the chosen nation. Because of these two things, His chosen people and His ability to command every army anywhere, the Lord has the power to back up that authority and this oath.

The Lord will make sure of it, see to it, that Moab and Ammon suffer greatly for their treatment of Judah. While these foreign nations have lobbed their taunts and great boastings, the Lord will bring the death knell. He will make these two nations like He made the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. In the book of Genesis, the Lord wiped out these two popular cities from heaven with fire and brimstone. He utterly destroyed them and they became useless and fruitless. So now like weeds and salt mines, there will be nothing special or worthy in Ammon or Moab. And God's people will take them as a possession.

Not only is the Lord for us, but He defends us with His own character and reputation. The Lord goes to bat for us. And when He does justice, it is perfect justice. We have a skewed view of justice because we are either offended and blow the offense out of proportion, or we cannot rightfully carry out the judgment for some reason. For instance, a mass murderer can only be killed once for many crimes.

A life for tens or hundreds of lives doesn't do justice on a mathematical level, unless you count the possible lives saved by ending the murderer's. But even then, he does not serve justice for the large crime. God can make justice a reality. Will we surrender God's place as Judge and trust in His judgments, or will we continue to usurp His place and take it for ourselves? The Lord will avenge us. And He will do it rightly, perfectly, and completely. He is the better judge.

## **2:10 This will be for them in return for their pride, because they taunted and boasted against the people of the Lord of Hosts.**

The Lord will turn their boasting and arrogance into humility and will crush their reputation and their cities. He will take their pride to heart and destroy them for it. The Bible never speaks well of pride. Proverbs tell us that pride is the cause of falling and disaster and James tells us in quoting the Old Testament that the Lord opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.

The Israelites have certainly been humbled by the Lord in the exile, but the Moabites and the Ammonites need a bit of a crash course in humility. There are people who love to kick you when you're down. They take your moment of humility or even weakness to exalt themselves. The Lord is going to deal with them in an extreme way. He will not let them go unpunished. He will duel out His justice to them.

We are the people of the Lord of Hosts. He will move heaven and earth to exact His justice for us. He will be the one to justify us. We need not justify ourselves. We don't have His resources to bring that perfect justice. But the Lord will avenge His people. He will use the host

of heaven and earth to bring even the biggest injustices of our world down. He opposes pride. It puts humans in His place. He will seek your justice as long as you walk the path of humility and don't take vengeance into your own hands. Let the Lord be your Hero and your Rescuer, your Savior.

**2:11 The Lord will be awesome against them for He will make all the gods of the earth dwindle and to Him each will bow down in its place, all the islands of the nations.**

This verse talks about the way in which the Lord will respond to the prideful nations around Judah. He will be awesome against them. The word for awesome is the same word we get for fear of the Lord, to reverence Him and to hold His character and deeds in awe. In this case, He will be feared by those against whom He is exacting retribution. He will terrorize them with His power as the Lord of Hosts. They will all shrink back in fear of Him and His ability.

The Lord's awesomeness, His frightfulness, comes in two ways. First, it is spiritual and religious. He will first take out all of the idols and false gods. God has a history of doing this among the nations. In Egypt, He fought against the gods of Egypt in the ten plagues and He has been known to lay waste to Baal's reputation, as well as Dagon, the fish god of the Philistines. God has no issue with bringing people out of the darkness of pagan rituals into the light of His truth.

But He will also make them dwindle. This word for dwindle might be translated famish because it speaks of an animal that does not have enough to eat. They grow lean without food or in a famine. This is the imagery used to describe an idol that is being attacked and losing the divinity battle and losing faithful followers. The other front of attack by the Lord of Hosts will be the nations themselves. He will take out the nations that do not serve Him. He will demand their allegiance and when they do not bow, He will remove them for their arrogance. The word for island here is the word for a coastal land, referring back to the Philistines.

The Lord will not share allegiance or tolerate any spotlight with any idol at all. He does not stand for such things. We must be a pure and holy people looking to no one and nothing else but the Lord for all things. The moment that we set our eyes on another, the Lord will include us in these groups He is vanquishing. He does not share. He is a jealous God. We must be a people pure and free from idols so that God will come to our rescue and defend us rather than be against us. There is no middle ground.

**2:12 Even you, Cush, will be slain by My sword.**

It almost seems like a byline in this section, but Egypt is not too weak at this point in history. Cush is the new center of Egyptian hierarchy and culture, the new ruling city after Thebes is removed from the picture. Cush and Ethiopia are the same area, so this refers to the Egyptians. So we have covered the Philistines, the Moabites, the Ammonites, and now to the extreme south to deal with Egypt in one solid line.

The claim of the prophet as He goes first westward, then eastward and now southward, is that Cush will not escape God's judgment for their part in these matters. The Lord is impartial. All will receive their judgment. The Lord will personally slay them by His own sword. He is a personal and intimate God indeed! Although this is just a one liner in the oracles to the nations, let us not think that Cush gets off the hook so easily.

God will punish completely. Even the little things are main things to Him. He will not allow one little infraction to go unnoticed or unresolved. We tend to let little things slide, but God does not. He is exacting and He will make sure that every part that is played is dually dealt its judgment. The Lord attacks the nations all around Judah for their deceptions, their evils and their pride. And all are deserving of the judgments given out. So too it will be against our own enemies today. The Lord will bring every judgment no matter how small or large the infraction seems to us.

**2:13 Then He will stretch out His hand against the north and destroy Assyria, and He will lay down Nineveh in desolation, a dry land like the desert.**

The oracle now moves to the final cardinal direction, north. In the north is Assyria, who by their pride and extreme violence took out all of northern Israel, including the capital of Samaria, and then wiped out most of the southern kingdom of Judah, only retreating after the Lord Himself intervened for Jerusalem. The Lord will stretch out His hand. As with the verb to visit, this could be good or bad. However, in the context of the oracles, it is not good for Assyria.

When he stretches out His hand, He will give them the gift of destruction. The giant empire of Assyria will dwindle in His presence. They will be destroyed. The Lord will lay down Nineveh, their great and chief city with all of its splendor. Perhaps pride is the common denominator between these nations and empires. He will flatten Nineveh until it is no better than desert land. The devastation will be complete, and we have had three prophets now confirm that Nineveh will be ruined. That event happens in 612 BC. The words lay down here suggest to lay down in death.

The Lord commands all things. We have this false idea that God does not lay down cities and nations today. When they are steeped in sin and pride, it is not beyond Him to be part of their demise. The Lord is sovereign and can do as He wishes. There is no need for Him to not do as He has done in the past. In fact, the Bible tells us that God does not change like the seasons or shift like shadows or clouds. God brings good to those who love Him and obey Him, but He also makes life miserable for those who work against Him. Let's not sugar-coat it with the qualities of God that we like the most. Let's preach the whole gospel!

**2:14 So flocks will lie down in her midst, all kinds of beasts. Even the pelican and owl will lodge in her capitals. A voice will sing in the window. Drought will be on the threshold, for her cedar-work will be exposed.**

When the Lord is done with Nineveh, the animals will be the only inhabitants of that thriving city. The flocks of sheep will use its rubble as pens and quarters. And Nineveh will become an equal-opportunity pen house. Any animal is welcome to find a place to dwell. The birds are going to get in on the action as well in the deserted rubble of the city. They will perch on its highest places and make it their home. Pelicans will lodge in her capitals. The capitals are the tops of the pillars of Nineveh.

The voice singing in the meadow refers to the noises the birds make, singing in the morning on the tops of the city. The drought will be evident as no grain is being harvested. The thresholds that once processed so much grain now are abandoned. The city is laid waste and no one dwells there. That place is for the birds! And beyond this, the city's once finely managed lots and buildings, its most precious building materials such as the priceless cedar woodwork will be exposed to the elements, abused by every wind and sand storm.

The Lord really knows how to tear up a place! He returns those things the prideful held on to in their arrogance and worshipped for its fine work and beauty to the animals and to nature. He takes these "great buildings," reduces them to rubble and gives them to the animals. Lest we think too highly of ourselves, He knows how to remind us of our roots. He really does oppose pride and He really will reduce us to the very basic to teach us humility. Let us learn the easy way before we are exposed to the elements and our most prized possessions and resources left desolate to prove His point.

**2:15 This is the exultant city that lived securely, that said in her heart, "I alone, and there is no one else." What a horror she has become, a lair for wild beasts. Everyone passing by her hisses and shakes his fist.**

Juxtapose the image of Nineveh in its heyday with the playground for animals and birds after the Lord's wrath comes. It used to stand so tall, but not anymore. It used to be a place of security and wealth. But now it is a place where birds perch and where animals roam. Nineveh was so elitist and thought that it was the only thing on the whole planet, and now no one is at Nineveh. We couldn't even find the city for so many years.

But now the city has been laid waste and is a horror to the sight. It is no special thing now, and in fact, it looks worse than it ever has. All that great city is now is a place fit only for animals. Those who pass by show their contempt by hissing and fist shaking. Remember that no one was sad to see the Assyrian empire disappear. Their arrogance and rudeness was known throughout the land.

Those who are the most prideful are the ones everyone hates the most. They stack up hate with every arrogant move and word. Those who don't learn humility will be laid waste and find themselves all alone. No one will come to their defense because everyone has been offended by them. Their arrogance is indeed their downfall. They become a person no one wishes to be around and will live in abandonment and aloneness. Arrogance teaches hard lessons that are much more easily learned in humility. Let us choose the easier road.

### **3:1 Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled, the violent city!**

Zephaniah finishes his tour of the nations in the oracles with Jerusalem. He had started with Judah in 2:1-4 and now he deals with the city of Jerusalem specifically. He starts out not with great news but with a woe. Woes are often used almost as pity by the prophets, a precursor to opening their volley against a city or nation or person. The adjectives Zephaniah uses to describe Jerusalem might be shocking out of context of what the people of Jerusalem were doing.

When reading the Judean prophets after the fall of the northern kingdom for its idolatry, one gets the sense of *déjà vu*. It seems Jerusalem was becoming just as callous in their injustice as they neared their end. They were helped along by evil kings and wicked religious leadership, as will be pointed out in the upcoming verses. The city is defined as rebellious, but the people of Israel had always had a propensity toward stubbornness. This kind of rebellion is exactly that, a stubbornness that refuses God's will and advice, an obstinate nature unmatched.

Another adjective used is defiled. This word speaks of an impurity, a stain or desecration, a blemish, but a large one. Defiled means that idolatry just like in the northern kingdom had come to Jerusalem like a pariah, like a disease, a cancer that would not be removed. The final word would surprise most, but is true of a place in which moral fortitude and godliness that follows the law.

The word violence speaks of the people's propensity to hurt one another in any way possible, mostly physical, but not limited to physical violence. This specific type of violence was also practiced in the northern kingdom before its downfall, an oppression, probably of the poor, and a mistreating of fellow human beings. Do any of these words describe you on any level? We as believers are to avoid having such a reputation. But we must remember that the prophet is speaking about the people of God here. May we never think that we are so far above being evaluated by the searchlight of God. May he never find any form of violence or defilement in His children and may we never be considered obstinate and rebellious. Let us obey what He says with pure hearts and consciences and work against the violence in our world!

### **3:2 She does not listen to *any* voice. She does not receive discipline from the Lord. She does not trust in her God. She does not draw near.**

We receive more of a picture of the obstinate nature of Jerusalem. The city will not listen to any voice, let alone the voice of God. The people have decided to go their own way. Jerusalem is often spoken of in the feminine third person, as a woman, throughout the prophets and elsewhere in Scripture. The people have decided in their stubbornness and rebellion to not heed any wisdom or voice of reason.



Thus they will especially not listen to the voice of the Lord or to receive discipline from Him. The word discipline implies instruction or training to better her. It is not the same word as the word for the law or instruction, the Torah. The word receive has the connotation of grasping or seizing, much like a person who is dehydrated will grab a water bottle out of your hand while collapsing. Though the Lord would gladly offer her correction, she will not hear of it.

Jerusalem's problem is much deeper than morals or the lack of wisdom. The foundational issue from which such rebellion and defilement and violence stem is that of religious apostasy. The city of people will not hear the Lord because they do not trust in Him. He is not their foundation and their everything. They are not confident in Him nor do they lean on Him for support or rely upon Him.

The people refuse to draw near to God. They shun Him for their idols instead. The Lord is left without the people He made! May we never be so hard and calloused spiritually that we do not open up to the Lord, run after Him and seek Him, drawing near into His embrace. The spiritual problem of not wanting God cannot be fixed by any gimmick or even by solid teaching.

The desire for the Lord must be part of our very make-up. If we do not receive enjoyment in Him, then we are not His people at all. That problem is the most serious spiritual problem anyone could have. Do not let your heart grow cold toward the Lord. Trust in Him and lean on Him in all things.

### **3:3 Her officials in her midst are roaring lions. Her judges are evening wolves that leave nothing by the morning.**

These problems are deep and painful, almost impossible without God to fix. But the Lord turns to the leadership of the people and the blame rests squarely on their incompetence and their own hardness first before it rests on the people who followed them. First, the Lord attacks through the prophet the officials who serve the king. These were most likely the civic officials who judged cases and took care of civic needs in the community.

The Lord is not cold or uncaring toward politics. He cares deeply whom we are willing to follow and place in leadership over us. These leaders may not have been chosen by the people, but the story is different for American Christians. We must follow leadership that also gives account to God in our civic world. We must look for the most godly leaders so that we will not fall prey to the evils of depraved leadership. These leaders are described as roaring lions, and they are ripping apart the city at their own leisure.

The judges are also described as evening wolves that leave no remains for the morning. The judges were the ones to make decisions for the people in cases they would bring against others. These judges are the farthest thing from justice, and so they are at fault for the wickedness and oppression the people place on one another. While the people have their own choices to make in the matter, they are led into sin by the sinful leadership and judges. The wolves eat all things and nothing is left. They pick the people clean of all justice.

Christians can make a difference in our political and civic world. We must be careful not to take political issues out of balance or to begin to play the game of politics as if it was what we were placed on this earth to do. The Kingdom of God is greater than any civic governance, but the Lord has placed these evil civic leaders in His sights. Let us look for godly leadership in every branch of our government and pray for those God puts in power over us. This is not always easy, but we must maintain a balance. We cannot ignore politics or not talk about it at all. But we must also not put all our hope in this candidate or that candidate. Let us seek godly leaders for office, but let us remember what Kingdom business we are about.

### **3:4 Her prophets are undisciplined, men of treachery. Her priests defile what is holy; they do violence to the law.**

The city's prophets are next in line after the civic officials for the lashing. Right after the civic politicians are the religious leadership. The prophets were very special in Israel and held a select place in their society. While we usually talk about the predictive nature of prophetic speech, it was actually only used to provide authority to the rest of the statement, which was usually against some sin in the camp. Prophets were used by God to keep the political leadership, especially the king, in spiritual check.

These were the watchdogs for the nation of Israel. They critiqued Israelite society, exposing the practices and beliefs that opposed the law and the Lord. They were looked up to and admired, as well as listened to by the whole nation, until of course sin and idolatry had their ways with the nation. Then the prophets were no longer listened to. They would peddle their words from the Lord and they were undisciplined, meaning that they were reckless and fickle, deciding what they wanted to preach instead of preaching the message of the Lord.

They were charlatans who would speak on anyone's behalf if it pleased them, not waiting for the voice of the Lord. They were fakes. It might seem kind of funny for Zephaniah to poke at these prophets, but they were false prophets who were in prophesy for the fame of it all, not to speak the word of God. We have preachers all around the world today that look to do the same.

They preach what people want to hear and they get paid well for their feel good messages. They do not seek the hard word from the Lord in times of sin, but would rather not talk about sin. They do not hear God's encouragement to the people but instead offer some quick fix or even unbiblical doctrine to appease the masses. They look to see which way the wind blows, and they then preach that way. We need preachers who are not afraid to preach the unbridled word of God in all things and encourage, reproof, rebuke and repent. Do not follow such preachers. They are not in it for you or the Lord.

Their public sway and false prophecies make them men of treachery. They can deal a mighty blow to anything God wants to do in the people of the land. They are utterly faithless and have no foundation in God. They are the ones who are preaching one moment and running away ahead of the people from the danger they said would never come.

But the Lord is not done undressing the false religious leadership. While the prophets were to speak His word and deal with all kinds of maladies in the society that did not line up with His word or law, so the priests were to do the duties of the law as well and were failing miserably. Concerning the priests Zephaniah tells us that they take the holy things of God, those things set apart for His special use, and defile them. This is the same word used earlier to describe the city in the opening verse of chapter three.

They are profaning, using for common use what is meant to be used only in the temple or using for a different function what was meant for something else. Beyond this, they are doing violence to the laws of God. The priests were the ones to teach the children and people what the law of God demanded from them. The word for violence is the same also as used in the opening verse. Here it has the context of stripping down the laws until they are not even followed. They have become lax in their teaching and instruction. The people don't know the law of God because the priests water it down.

Preachers must never water down the Word of God. Its power alone has the strength to mend the human condition and to break the coldest heart of stone. Those who strip the Word of its authentic and life-changing message strip the people from the true power of God that can save, heal, and deliver! Don't go to churches where the Word of God is not held in highest esteem and the preacher does not preach the whole counsel of God! It is the preacher's job to teach you what God expects of you. When you listen to these types of preachers, you are not prepared for eternity or to live godly lifestyles now.

**3:5 The Lord is righteous in her midst; He does no injustice. Morning by morning He gives His justice. Every dawn He does not fail; yet the criminal knows no shame.**

While the religious leadership has so much to be desired, the Lord is not at fault. While the prophets and priests are supposed to represent the Lord before the people, it is not the Lord who is at fault for their spiritual condition. The religious leaders have done all the destruction. Instead the Lord stands in stark contrast to the religious leaders. He is righteous where they are nowhere near righteousness. He is also in the midst of Israel even though they are deeply entrenched in their sin.

The Lord is an example to the people of justice. He does not violate the people as do the judges and the priests. He is not concerned with telling them what they want to hear. He stands alone and the religious leadership has abandoned Him for gimmicks and false gods. The Lord also is contrasted with the criminal, which might be referring to the priests and prophets. The word here is the word for someone who sins or transgresses God's law, who is unrighteous and unjust.

There is never a time when the Lord is not just and righteous. He pours out His justice morning by morning. The idea here is that the Lord is always just no matter what the time of day. He does not fail in justice at any point, even in the dawn when the day is just beginning. When I first wake up, it's not a good thing to ask me deep questions or even to speak to me. You won't

get much of a response until I feel awake. But not so for the Lord. He is always on top of His justice and righteousness. No time can change the timeless God of the universe.

The lesson we can learn from this verse is that no matter what religious leadership will fail us, God never will. Those who serve us in religious leadership are human. They sin. They make mistakes. They do injustices. But the Lord never does that! He is a solid rock. He will never let you down. He is not subject to being a “morning person” or a “night person” or being hungry or any other situation that a human might fail us in. The Lord is our foundation and He never lets us down. Ever.

**3:6 “I cut off nations; their corner towers are ruined. I have dried up their streets so that no one passes by. Their cities have been laid waste, so that there is no man, so that there is no inhabitant.**

While there is no literary break like a samek or peh, the subject matter shifts from the city of Jerusalem to the nations as God moves from the specific city to the general nations. The word cut off here is the same word used to make a covenant. They would cut a covenant because they would sacrifice an animal or cut it up. So also, the Lord cuts off the nations from His covenant for their insolence against Him.

He does this through war. We see the word for corner towers here once again, the battlements of the city. These were the highest towers on the corners of the walls of a city, the most fortified and strongest parts. If the Lord can take out those foundational parts which are usually left unscathed and still standing, then nothing is hidden from His destructive force when He takes His armies to the nations.

The Lord speaks of the people in the streets as a river that is dried up. This means that He has killed them all. He has left no one alive. There is no one to pass in the streets. They are abandoned and empty. Not only are there no people on the streets, but the cities themselves have been desolated and laid waste so that they also lay in ruins like their corner towers.

He has completely demolished the cities of the nations. I believe this is speaking of the end of time in the eschaton when God strikes down the nations after gathering them together against Jesus in the battle of Armageddon. I will show you why in the next couple of verses. Needless to say, there is not one inhabitant left. The towns are all ghost towns now.

**3:7 “I said, ‘Surely you will fear Me. You will seize discipline.’ Then your dwelling would not be cut off, all that I have appointed against you. Surely they arose early to corrupt their deeds.**

The Lord now recounts His thoughts on the matter of attacking the nations. The reasoning is in His dialogue. He said that the people of the nations would surely fear Him because of who He is and would seek His wisdom and counsel, would worship Him and grab

His discipline. But just like the people of Jerusalem, the nations did not do as the Lord thought they would have. Of course, this was the smarter path, but the nations were unwise.

If the people would have listened to the Lord and would have accepted and grasped His discipline, they would have rescued themselves from His wrath against the sin in their midst. He would not have to cut them off from their dwelling places and destroy their cities and kill the people in the streets. But instead, they chose a much different path. So the Lord visited their punishment upon them. The word I translated appointed here is the word common in the prophets for visiting, usually with a negative connotation so it is often translated punished.

Despite the path of wisdom the nations should have chosen, they brazenly joined the path of Jerusalem and even became more brazen in their own wickedness. They arose early in the morning to commit their sinful deeds. They used more of the time of day for evil so they could pack more evil deeds into each day! They took God's mercy and correction and reversed it so that they were using what should have been seen as grace as a time to do wickedness.

May we never act like the nations and seek the discipline and counsel of the Lord so that we might be wise. When the Lord disciplines it is out of love. But when we don't accept it or grasp it, the Lord must bring the visitation of punishment for not taking His discipline. Let us be a people quick to hear and obey the commands of the Lord so that we may know His wisdom and also keep ourselves from incurring His wrath.

**3:8 “Therefore, wait for Me,” declares the Lord, “for the day when I rise up against the prey, when My judgment is to gather the nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out upon them My indignation, all My anger, for in the fire of My jealousy all the earth will be consumed.**

Because the nations did not respond to God in His grace period, the time has come for them to wait on Him, and then He will pour out His judgment. God is outside of time, though He often operates surgically in human time and history. The command to wait for the Lord might suggest waiting in awe and fear for His day. On that day He will rise up against the nations. They will gather against Him, which is part of His plan.

He will attack them like an animal attacks prey. He will gather the nations together into one place, centralizing them and then taking them all out with one fell swoop. God will pour out His indignation, or the curse and denunciation. Often, the image of a cup being poured out is the imagery behind this type of language, especially in Isaiah and others when they drink the cup of God's wrath.

If the word indignation was not clear, there are synonyms, such as His wrathful anger and also the fire of His jealousy. This prophecy of fire being part of the end of the earth is not unusual or uncommon in the prophets. The fire will consume all the earth, whether that means the people on the earth or the land itself. Nothing will be left. There is a time coming in which all evangelistic efforts will be stopped. The time is short, and then after that time, there is no more window of opportunity. When God starts His judgment, it will be too late for those who have not

begun to serve the Lord. We have quite a job to do in this period of grace. Let us do the work diligently while it is not too late.

**3:9 “For then I will change the peoples to a pure speech, so that all of them may call upon the name of the Lord, so that they may serve Him with a unified shoulder.”**

This verse is very interesting in its context. We are speaking of the time at the end of time, the eschaton, in which the Lord brings the Day of the Lord. And here He says that He will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech. The Hebrew word for change is the word for turning and repentance. I found that the NIV doesn't even contain the idea of changing in its translation, but that's understandable when it is a concept-for-concept based translation.

The prophet here speaks of changing the people's speech to something pure. What we must ask is if he's referring to their language or if he is referring to the way they speak with profanity. Let's take a look at both of these. First, let us deal with the first option, that God will change their language to something more pure. One might suggest that no language is impure in and of itself. For instance, English or German or Hebrew is not in and of itself pure or impure.

However, a Pentecostal eye picks up on this idea of changing the language of the peoples. Throughout the Bible, there are key moments that deal specifically with languages. There is the Tower of Babel incident when God changes the languages of the people so that they can not be unified against Him for evil purposes. And there is Acts 2 where God makes His glories known in other languages while these were unlearned by the speakers. So it is of great interest to a Pentecostal that God promises to change languages in that day.

One point of Hebrew prophecy that we must keep in mind as we consider this to be speaking about the end of time is that there are often double or even triple fulfillments throughout time. There are points of fulfillment of prophecy that may fulfill certain details throughout human history. They may not fulfill the whole of the prophecy but be guideposts and markers of that prophecy. I believe it is at least interesting to wonder if the Day of the Lord might be considered in Acts 2, because Peter in his sermon quotes a passage from Joel concerning the Day of the Lord and says, “This is that.” So could it be that this prophecy is partially fulfilled in this idea about changing languages? It is up to you to decide. I will show that there are other parts of this prophecy that partially point to other moments in history as well, so we cannot simply discount this possibility.

The other point that can be made is that God is changing the profane speech of the peoples of the nations into pure and undefiled speech. He is in a sense washing their mouths out with soap. He is cleaning their speech so that it glorifies Him instead of evil and wickedness. It makes allusions to God rather than double-entendre about sensuality. It has as its goal God's things rather than debase and profane uses of God's things. This is at the very least what this prophecy means. It also has a tradition within the bounds of Scripture. Isaiah's lips kissed burning coals on the altar of God to make his words holy and throughout the Bible there is the

message that God does not dwell with profanity. He is a holy God and everything around Him must be holy.

The rest of the verse also gives us this impression as it speaks of having to be purified before the nations can call on the Lord's name. The name of the Lord speaks of His reputation, which is holy and cannot be profaned. So God cleans their speech to holy speech so their calls can be heard by Him and responded to. Coupled with the image of calling on the name of the Lord is serving the Lord in unity.

The Hebrew text literally says, "Serve the Lord with one shoulder." This is the image opposite that of the Tower of Babel, where God made many languages to diversify the people because of their profane and wicked attempts. Now, the Lord speaks of bringing them back together in unity under His name and to serve Him. God only allows unity when it is for His glory. And this is another point of Pentecost, that when the Church was glorifying God, He opened up the language barrier. The term "one shoulder" seems strange to us, but it has the idea of a team of people moving as one man in sports. Unity compounds the efficiency of a project.

Unity is key in our service to the Lord. So is a clean mouth that glorifies God only and gives no quarter to profanity or unholy speech of any kind. We need to be a people with pure hearts and pure lips. The mouth only speaks what is in the heart, so if the mouth is dirty, the heart is the issue. We need to be people who live out God's mandates from the inside out. We need to work in unity for the Lord. We need to carry His name and reputation to the ends of the earth.

### **3:10 "From far away to the rivers of Cush My worshippers, the daughter of My dispersed ones, will bring My offering.**

Here is another indicator of partial fulfillment in verse 10. The Lord speaks of a large amount of territory from far away, which is usually referring to lands so far they are unknown to the people of the land at this time in history. Then it goes the whole way to Cush, a familiar place. The point of the geographical references is to include those the people don't know to those they are familiar with. The Lord will have worshippers from lands and peoples that these nations are completely unaware of at this time in their history. It shows God's greatness and that He is the God of the whole world.

He will have people who bow down to Him, who worship Him from everywhere. Then He refers to the daughter of His dispersed ones. This is the dispersion, the exile. For this reason, partial fulfillment of the worshippers beyond Israel refers to those who may have been converted from foreign lands that were settled by dispersed Jews in the exile, and the lands of the Gentiles to which they were brought. So this part of the prophecy is fulfilled at least partially by the exile and return. These are the worshippers who bring their offering to the Lord and worship Him even in ritual offerings.

The Lord has worshippers everywhere in the world. He is worshipped by people of nations you and I have never heard of. He will be worshipped by every tongue and tribe and

nation, the Word of God says. We have a God who is glorified in unity and diversity. So many different nations and peoples all unified to give the one true King praise! And you and I are part of that group of peoples. Let us do our due diligence before the Lord in worship as well and bring Him our greatest and most prized offerings!

**3:11 “On that day you will not be ashamed for all the deeds by which you rebelled against Me, for then I will turn aside from your midst your arrogant exulting ones, and you will no longer be haughty on My holy mountain.**

Once again we see a series of “on that day” starters beginning here. The Lord continues to promise great things to His people on the Day of the Lord. They will not be ashamed even though they had done rebellious acts. The Lord will forgive them and set aside their prideful and boasting ones. The reason they won’t be ashamed by their rebellion is that the Lord will take out those who were arrogant. He will remove the haughty people whenever they are on His holy mountain. The holy mountain refers to Zion or especially the temple mount.

The Lord takes away from the land of Israel the arrogant sinners. This part of the prophecy could be referring to the exile and the reasons for the exile, to remove the boastful and proud and sinful from Israel and send them into exile. The Lord is always against the prideful and arrogant in the Bible because those people are usurping God’s place in thinking they are high enough to make His judgments and be Him. We must remember that humility is a much more desirable quality in God’s people than pride. It is also the harder of the two to achieve.

**3:12 “But I will leave in your midst a poor and lowly people, and they will take refuge in the name of the Lord.**

If we are referring to the time of the exile and the return from the exile, then this passage speaks of those who were left in the land after the higher social strata were taken by first the Assyrians in the Northern Kingdom and the Babylonians in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. There were waves of exile in Judah until all that were left were the lowly and poor peasants. The left people are the remnant. This remnant was left in the land as the poorest people who could not hurt the empires that took their lands. These people were in their midst. They had nothing so they could only turn to the Lord and seek refuge in Him. He was their only protector. They didn’t have their own resources to trust in. They had to trust in the Lord and in His name, His reputation.

We as believers in Jesus are in the same situation that this remnant was in. We don’t have any resources of our own. If we do, they don’t have the power to get us out of our problems. Some of us in America are trusting in our own resources and getting comfortable here, but we are the exiles. We are the ones who don’t belong here. We shouldn’t be comfortable. We shouldn’t trust in earthly resources of any kind. I would rather have the name of the Lord, the



reputation of the true King that I could hide in and take refuge in. Let us take our refuge in the Lord. Let us seek Him and His name over all other things in our world.

**3:13 “Israel’s remnant will not do injustice nor will they speak lies, nor will there be found in their mouths a deceitful tongue, for they will graze and lie down and no one will make them tremble.**

Here the word remnant is used instead of those left behind as in the last verse. I believe this is another one of those skips forward in prophetic timing in which at least partial fulfillment may refer to the people who return to Israel after the exile, which is also referred to as the remnant of Israel. More than this, the remnant is said to not do injustice and to not speak lies. I think these lines speak about the final remnant in all of human history at the end of time, those who are the saints of the Lord.

Once again we see a reference to language and tongue, specifically a deceitful tongue no longer being within the mouths of the remnant. This was spoken of before in verse nine in which the defiled and profane speech of the nations is turned into holy and pure speech. Here the deceit and lying in the speech are taken away. Finally a former promise is repeated that the remnants will be able to use the land for grazing for their cattle and sheep and also that they will lay down securely in the land without the fear of invasion. They will no longer be afraid of the nations around them, which was referenced in 2:7 referring to Ashkelon and the seacoast of the Philistines. A samek here ends the section and will lead us into the final section of celebration and restoration and protection from the Lord here.

As we have seen before, there are several points of partial fulfillment throughout this prophecy not uncommon to the prophets. We as believers are part of this remnant and these passages speak about a pure speaking people that give glory to God and rely in His reputation and name alone. Are we really those people? Do others see that in us? Do we do injustices? Does it even bother us when we see injustice? We need to be that remnant that stands up to such things in our world.

**3:14 Sing out, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with a whole heart, O daughter of Jerusalem.**

Because of the samek, the mood and intensity of the prophecy shifts into a new section or rejoicing. It starts out with commands to sing out or cry out or shout to the Lord. The next command is to shout and then to rejoice and exult the Lord. The description of exulting the Lord is with a whole heart, not half-heartedly worshipping God. Half-hearted worship is no worship at all. The Lord desires the whole heart in worship. We must worship Him with everything.

Many times we allow our circumstances and surroundings to dictate how much of our heart is in our worship of the Lord. But we must be a people who worship the Lord on matter what situation we find ourselves in. We can worship Him wholeheartedly in different ways. For

instance, in a time of prosperity, we can be grateful to the Lord that He prospers us and remember through giving our tithe and operating within the bounds of the understanding that we are merely stewards of God's things rather than them being owned by us. In a time of struggle and affliction, we can rely upon the Lord to not only strengthen and encourage and build us up, but to walk with us through our trials and teach us about Him. We can worship Him completely in these polar situations and everything in between.

But it is not only the commands that change the section. The audience that is to hear these commands is also imperative. The daughter of Zion could be Jerusalem or Israel or the people of God. If you go with this first name referring to Jerusalem, then it parallels in the third line of this verse or, as we call it, forms an inclusio with Israel in the middle. If you go with the name being the people of God, it can refer to Israel and all the people of God throughout time, which I am particularly fond of. The other option is Israel itself, in which literarily it will smack into the second phrase. I like the idea of Zion being either Jerusalem or the people of God.

Israel as a whole, not as the northern kingdom only, is the second name or audience for these commands, and then the daughter of Jerusalem is the people living in Jerusalem. At this moment, things aren't looking good for Israel because the exile is a few years from happening and they have a very small place on the world stage between the Assyrians and Babylonians. They are in the middle but have no power or say in these empires. But in this time, the prophet looks ahead with God's vision and calls them to rejoice in the day when the Lord is their defense and He makes them strong again. Life may not be going well now, but the Lord is our strength and in the end, we will be victorious with Him.

### **3:15 The Lord has removed your judgments; He has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst. You will never fear evil.**

In this time later in the future, most likely as a result of the Day of the Lord in the eschaton, the Lord stands up for Israel and does the work that their own kings and officials could not do. He exercises His power and forgives them of the judgments He will send upon them for their wickedness against Him. Not only does He forgive them, but He also clears away or pushes out their enemies and the nations against them. The word for clear away here has the image of cleaning a house or sweeping with a broom.

Now we have a confirmation of what God has always wanted in Israel politically. The prophecy refers to the King of Israel, not the human king, but then we are given a modifier of who that king is, the Lord YHWH. The Lord is the true King of Israel unlike any human king. He has Israel's very best in mind as He acts. The Lord has never left Israel as King. He has always been their king, but human kings have not always listened to His wise counsel. The Lord is in their midst. He has not left them to their own devices or to the devices of human kings. He is taking care of them even now!

With the Lord as King, Israel need not fear any calamity or evil. He will do what a good king does, protect His people from all evils that are conceivable and real to them. We need not be

a people who fear the evils of this world. The Lord will protect us from all things. He will protect us and respond in justice to the injustices we face. The Lord will be our refuge as was said earlier. We have no one to fear when God is on our side. Let us not fear anything that may come, for our God is stronger!

**3:16 In that day, it will be said to Jerusalem, “Fear not, O Zion! Do not let your hands grow slack.**

That day most commonly refers to the Day of the Lord, the eschatological day at the end of time. The speaker of this quote that follows is not known to us, whether it may be the Lord speaking comfort to Israel Himself or perhaps the nations are speaking it to Israel. We don't really know who speaks it, but the word is of encouragement.

It starts with a command that tells Zion, or Jerusalem or the people of God in general, to not fear. This would be fear of what is around them, the future, or any other fear that we human beings can conjure up. There is no need to fear because of what is said in verse 17 next. Another command, both negative, tells them to not let their hands grow slack. They must keep on doing the work that they have been called to do. They must not grow weary in well doing, as Paul says.

We must take this message to heart, because as far as I'm concerned, we as believers are part of Zion. We must not fear anything because the Lord is on our side. And we must continue to do the work of ministry without allowing ourselves to grow weary. We must do ministry with excellence and not allow ourselves to slack off in the area of excellence. We must continue to do God's work with expert care until He returns “in that day”!

**3:17 “The Lord your God is in your midst, a Hero who will save; He will rejoice over you with jubilation. He will quiet you with His love. He will rejoice over you with a loud song.**

The reason why the people of Zion need not be afraid or become complacent in the work of their hands is that the Lord is with them. He is in their midst and He is a hero that will save them. The Hero is Jesus, the Messiah. Because He is in our midst and constantly working on our behalf, we need not fear anything that comes our way and we must work hard for Him until the end of time.

The Lord among us, Jesus, rejoices over us with jubilation. Think about that for a moment. I hear so many Christians telling me that they fear God when they sin, but Jesus is singing songs of jubilation over us! He's not standing over us with a club or bat, but rather He's standing over us singing His love into our lives and situations. All of the turmoil and noise in our lives and hearts, in our minds, is quieted by His love for us.

The song pours forth. Jesus is quite fond of you. He's not after you or expecting perfection and beating you when perfection is not obtained. He loves you for who He made you to be. In your becoming like who He made you to be, He rejoices over every victory and sings

loud the songs of jubilation at your transformation, and He calms the storms of your life with His love songs. He truly is a mighty Hero to each of us!

**3:18 “I will gather those who grieve for the festival, from you they became a tribute, a disgrace to her.**

Verse 18 is very hard to translate and fit into this section. In a section expounding the great joy in that day, this verse seems out of place because it speaks of those who are sorrowful for the feasts and God’s gathering the sorrowful. The word I have translated “tribute” refers to paying a tribute to another king, a tax. And the final word of disgrace does not fit either, but it further modifies the tribute. These words seem to not follow the context of joy.

There are two possibilities to explain how it does fit in this section. The first is to see a partial fulfillment in the exiles returning to Jerusalem and rebuilding the smaller temple. The older generation of Israelites wept at the sight of the new temple because it lacked the luster of Solomon’s Temple. But their weeping could barely be overheard by the rejoicing of the rest of the crowd who rejoiced over the temple being built. That would explain God gathering these who are grieved in a time of joy. They became a disgrace or tribute to the city because they were looking back in history and mourning on a day of rejoicing.

The second possibility is that this is the end time in which there will be people sorrowful during a time where they should be rejoicing. The Lord will remove those who react with grieving in a time of rejoicing because they are a disgrace to the group of people. The text is not clear on why this would be, but the verse is here. Perhaps its place is to set up the wretched ones in the next verse. Nevertheless, we should be people who know when to mourn and when to rejoice, and we should do these things in their proper times and seasons.

**3:19 “Behold, I will deal with all your wretched ones at that time. And I will save the lame and the outcast I will gather, and I will lay down their shame for praise and for a name in all the earth.**

The promises continue to roll as the Lord talks further about the Day of the Lord. He tells them that those who are wretched among them, the emaciated and bent over ones, the people who bear the look of many sufferings that have beaten them down over the years, will be dealt with in the time of the end. These are the ones who have suffered in the land. The Lord further explains that He will gather to Himself those who are lame and the outcasts. He will save them from their plights.

The outcast might refer to the scattered and exiled people of Israel, as that is a connotation that fits within the context of this prophecy. There it would be a partial fulfillment in the return from the exile, the exiles being gathered to the place where the Lord dwells. However, we can also take this for the people of God who are outcasts in our world because of Jesus. God

will gather us to Himself in the end and He will save those who are lame and can't walk anymore. He will do the great saving works that He has promised in that day!

The Lord will also lay down the shame of His people. He will exchange their shame for glory and a praise, for a name, a reputation, that is worthy throughout the whole earth. The fame of God's people will be greatly increased when He restores us! We are looking forward to that day indeed! The word for lay down speaks of laying down a garment. So the shame will be laid down like a coat and the reputation of God's people will be exchanged for that shame.

**3:20 “At that time I will bring you in and at that time I will gather you together, for I will give you a name and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I reverse your captivity before your eyes,” says the Lord.**

Also at that time or in that Day of the Lord, the Lord will also bring us in to Himself and gather us all together as the people of God. Finally the whole family will be together with Him! The promise then is reiterated to the people of God that was mentioned in verse 19. The Lord will give His people a name, a reputation, and we will be praised among the peoples and nations of the earth.

The book of Revelation talks about receiving a name from the Lord that is very special, a name no one else but the Lord and us know. The name is important in the Bible because it speaks often of one's reputation. And we see that God will reverse the fortunes of His people. Some translations actually say this, that God will reverse the fortunes of His people, but the literal rendering is that He will reverse the captivity of His people.

This promise can be taken in partial fulfillment at the time of the return of the exiles for Israel, but I believe its complete fulfillment is in the end of time when God takes us out of this land and brings us home to be with Him. That is the time in which our captivity in this foreign land will be completed. He will do all of these wonderful miracles for us before our very eyes. We will watch Him work His miraculous power to set us up for His blessing and favor!

We need God's favor now also in this harsh land. And He will bring us that favor in a small part here and now, and in a huge way at the end of time. This prophecy is complete in the words, “says the Lord.” The Lord puts His stamp of approval on the promises that He rains down upon us. We are truly blessed to be God's people here and in the future. I can't wait for the culmination of all things. It's going to be the biggest party the world has ever known! And we're going to be front and center for it!