**Zephaniah Commentary**

**Zephaniah Chapter 1**

Zep 1:1

**Zephaniah.** He was the great, great-grandson of the godly King Hezekiah, and that explains why the genealogy in Zephaniah 1:1 is so long, going back four generations. He apparently lived in Jerusalem because he called the city “this place” (Zeph. 1:4). He is the only prophet with such a long genealogy, but it was important to tie him back to Hezekiah and show his relationship to the royal family in order to understand the impact of the prophecies in the book of Zephaniah. Zephaniah was the only prophet of royal blood and a distant cousin to the reigning king, Josiah (reigned 640-609 BC). Thus, he was also a distant cousin to Josiah’s sons, who reigned after Josiah was killed and who were evil in the sight of Yahweh (2 Kings 23:31-37). Zephaniah had likely finished his prophecy or had died by the death of Josiah since he is only mentioned as prophesying during his reign. Zephaniah’s blood relation to the royal family would have made his prophecies personal and uncomfortable to them when Zephaniah prophesied against Josiah’s evil sons (Zeph. 1:8) and foretold destruction for Jerusalem (Zeph. 1:4-6). But followers of God and Jesus do the right thing even when it is difficult. Jesus spoke about this when he said his followers would have to carry their own cross (Matt. 16:24).

Zep 1:2

**“sweep everything off of the face of the earth.”** This statement is a hyperbole designed to catch our attention and emphasize to us the tremendous destruction that will occur on earth during the Great Tribulation, the horrendous period of time that is portrayed in the book of Revelation. Many of the statements fit well with the destruction of Judah by Babylon, and thus many scholars think that is the destruction coming that Zephaniah is referring to, but there is much in what God says that does not fit the Babylonian destruction but does fit with the Great Tribulation and Armageddon. Thus, the destruction of Judah by Babylon is at best a partial fulfillment of Zephaniah’s prophecy.

[For more on the prophecies of the Great Tribulation, see commentary on Isa. 13:9.]

Zep 1:3

**“the birds of the heavens.”** The word “heavens” (or “heaven”) is always plural in Hebrew; thus the phrase could be translated “the birds of the sky.” In Zephaniah 1:3 God mentions much the same things as in the destruction of Noah’s Flood, except this list has “fish,” while Genesis had “creeping things” (Gen. 6:7), and this list adds “stumbling blocks. However, this next destruction will not be by water.

**“the stumbling blocks with the wicked.”** The Hebrew word can mean “stumbling blocks,” and that seems to make good sense here, although many modern English versions have “ruins” or some equivalent. In the Day of Yahweh, not only will the wicked be destroyed, but also the stumbling blocks that they have created. For example, the idols of Syria caused Israel to stumble (2 Chron. 28:23), and God said that he would destroy the idols (Ezek. 30:13). It is also very possible that it was because of this verse that Jesus said that God would gather both the lawless people, the wicked, and all the stumbling blocks (likely the idols) and cast them into the fire (Matt. 13:41-42).

Zep 1:4

**“the remnant of Baal.”** That Baal was being worshiped in Judah and Jerusalem shows how insensitive the people of Israel had become to God and His ways. Baal was the top god of Canaan, the Canaanite storm god, and his worship involved sacred prostitution and occasionally child sacrifice. The sacred prostitution was a kind of sympathetic magic in which humans on earth engaged in sex which then was somehow tied into pleasing Baal and getting him to fertilize the earth so there would be a bountiful harvest. Only a blinded heart can worship both Yahweh, who promotes family and godly sexual practices, and Baal, who promotes promiscuity and then occasionally sacrifices the baby that is the fruit of the sexual union. No wonder Yahweh will put an end to Baal.

**“idolatrous priests.”** The exact meaning of the Hebrew word is uncertain and is debated. Presumably, it refers to the priests who had turned to idols, but that may not be accurate.

Zep 1:5

**“worship.”** Or “bow down to.” The same Hebrew verb, *shachah* (#07812 שָׁחָה), is translated as both “bow down” and “worship;” traditionally “worship” if God is involved and “bow down” if people are involved, but the verb and action are the same, the act of bowing down is the worship. The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body to the earth.

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

**“on the housetops.”** The worship of the heavenly bodies was tied to the gods those heavenly bodies represented in the mind of the people (such as during the time of the Greeks the planet Mars represented the god Mars). The fact that these planets and stars were worshiped “on the housetops” shows that they were worshiped by families and friends, not only as some form of corporate worship done at a national level by idolatrous priests and pagan priests. Zephaniah’s words were not heeded, and so half a generation or so later, in the time of Jeremiah, the practice was still going on (Jer. 19:13). In fact, although it seemed to have stopped after Jerusalem was destroyed, the women regretted stopping (Jer. 44:19). This worship of the heavenly bodies is parallel to the practice of astrology today, which is usually done on an individual level and involves the worship of the planets and stars. Although devotees of astrology would say they do not “worship” the stars, from a biblical perspective of looking to them for advice and guidance and giving one’s time to them, they are worshiping them and also disobeying Deuteronomy 4:9; 17:3; and 18:9-12.

**“their ‘king’”.** This is apparently a sarcastic referral to a god (perhaps Baal) that the people worshiped. Although the Hebrew text is debated and many versions prefer “Milcom” or “Moloch,” the meaning of the verse is not. The people of Israel were going through the motions of worshiping Yahweh but were also heavily involved in the worship of pagan gods. This kind of worship made a mockery of the first great commandment about not having any other gods.

Zep 1:6

**“have not sought Yahweh or asked anything of him.”** Genuinely worshiping Yahweh means more than going through the motions of doing the sacrifices and things He requires. A true worshiper believes Yahweh exists and cares for His people, and so they seek a relationship with Him and ask things of Him in prayer. So Zechariah 1:6 gives us another proof the people did not worship Yahweh in their hearts but had another “king” and other gods, because they did not ask anything from Yahweh.

Zep 1:7

**“Be silent in the presence of the Lord Yahweh.”** Zephaniah says the Day of Yahweh is at hand (is near), so Yahweh is also near. Be reverently silent in the presence of the Most High God, creator of the heavens and the earth.

**“the Day of Yahweh is at hand.”** The “Day of Yahweh” (“the Day of the LORD” in most English translations), is a general phrase, and the “Day of Yahweh” has many parts, including the Tribulation (see commentary on Dan. 12:1), the Battle of Armageddon, the judgments, and the coming Kingdom of Christ on earth. The reader must pay close attention to the context to figure out which part of the Day of Yahweh is being emphasized in any given verse. Often the Day of Yahweh is simply called “the day” or “that day” (cf. Zeph. 1:9, 10; 2:2; 3:8, 11, 16). For example, in most of Zephaniah, “the Day of Yahweh” refers to the Tribulation and Armageddon, which will come with destruction on earth (cf. Zeph. 1:7, 8, 14, 18; 2:2, 3; 3:8). However, in Zephaniah 3:11 and 3:16, “the day” refers to the time after God’s wrath when Christ will reign on earth and things will be godly again.

The Day of Yahweh begins with terrible tribulation on earth (see commentary on Dan. 12:1), then comes the Battle of Armageddon, the Sheep and Goat Judgment (Matt. 25:31-46), the First Resurrection (Rev. 20:1-6), and then Christ’s reign on earth. There was no knowledge of the 1,000-year Millennial Kingdom of Christ in Zephaniah’s time, so that was not included in their thinking. According to Zephaniah 1:7, the Day of Yahweh was very close, but it turned out that God delayed it (and has continued to delay it) for His own purposes. It is noteworthy that at no point in Zephaniah’s prophecy is there any mention of any course of action that would cool God’s wrath and stop the Day of Yahweh from coming. The Day of Yahweh was going to come, but an individual could repent and not be an object of God’s wrath. The Day of Yahweh is mentioned ten times in five verses later in the chapter (Zeph. 1:14-18).

[For more on the Great Tribulation, see commentary on Dan. 12:1. For more on Christ’s Millennial Kingdom, see Appendix 5: “Christ’s Future Kingdom on Earth.”]

**“Yahweh has prepared a sacrifice.”** This is covenant language, and the “sacrifice” is all the wicked people on earth. This is covenant language because under ordinary circumstances God would never do a “sacrifice” because there would be no God that He could offer the sacrifice to, nor any reason for Him to offer a sacrifice. But God had established covenants with Israel and had also promised a New Covenant. Israel had broken the Old Covenant, and humankind had lived in rebellion against their Creator. Now Zephaniah foretold a time when God would show Himself to be Creator and Lord of the universe by destroying His enemies and also fulfilling the curses of the covenant He made with Israel (Deut. 28:20-26).

The context of Zephaniah 1:7 is the Day of Yahweh, and that those people who will be killed during the Great Tribulation and Armageddon are referred to as a “sacrifice” points both backward and forward. It points backward to the fact that the sacrifices made at the inauguration of a covenant were a form of self-maledictory oath (an oath of destruction of oneself if the covenant was broken), and so dire consequences were coming because people had lived in rebellion against God. They had broken the covenant, so they will be sacrificed just as they sacrificed animals when they made the covenant. The “sacrifice” of God also points forward to the fact that a sacrifice is offered to inaugurate a new covenant, and God’s “sacrifice” of all the wicked people makes the way ready for Jesus to set up his Millennial Kingdom on earth and fulfill the New Covenant promises.

Jesus Christ himself was both a sacrifice that fulfilled the self-maledictory oath and the sacrifice that inaugurated the New Covenant from the standpoint of human salvation (cf. commentary on Luke 22:20). But Jesus knew that there was also going to be planet-wide destruction coming as a consequence of sin (the “Great Tribulation”), and he taught about the tribulation at different times in his ministry (cf. Matt. 24, esp. Matt. 24:21. Luke 11:50 also mentions a generation suffering because of sin and bloodshed).

**“He has consecrated his guests.”** This borders on sarcasm, but there really will be “guests” at the great sacrificial feast of God. The “guests” that God will call to His “sacrifice” and sacrificial banquet, which will be given due to the worldwide destruction coming on the earth, are the animals and birds that will feast on the dead bodies. They will especially gorge themselves on flesh after the Battle of Armageddon (Rev. 19:17-21; Ezek. 39:17). Most of the sacrifices that people offered according to the Law of Moses allowed for the people to eat some of the meat of the sacrifice, and so too, after Armageddon, God’s “guests” will gorge themselves on the meat of God’s “sacrifice.”

Zep 1:8

**“I will punish.”** The sentence changed abruptly from third person to first person. This kind of change happens quite often in the Old Testament and a number of times in Zephaniah. This is the kind of thing that supports that the book was inspired by a divine Author—God. A professional scribe, and even a fairly well-educated prophet, would not normally write in that seemingly broken fashion.

**“the officials.”** There are three categories of people mentioned: the officials, the king’s sons, and those people who were wearing foreign clothing. Why not the king? The answer is that Josiah was a godly king.

**“the king’s sons.”** This is a very important detail because the godly king Josiah was the only king of Judah or Israel to have three of his sons reign as king after him, and all three were evil in the sight of Yahweh. The three were Jehoahaz (2 Kings 23:30); Eliakim also called Jehoiakim (2 Kings 23:34), and the last king of Judah, Mattaniah who was called Zedekiah (2 Kings 24:17).

**“clothed with foreign clothing.”** Although some commentators think this refers to Judeans who adopted the ways and clothing of foreign lands, especially during Zephaniah’s time in the country of Babylon, that is not likely because God never condemned any specific kind of clothing unless it had pictures or pagan designs woven into the fabric. Besides, the clothing of the common people of the ancient Middle East was mostly quite similar. One great exception to that was the priests of the various gods and goddesses. The pagan priests, just like the priests of Yahweh, had distinctive garments that set them apart from the rest of the people. For example, at the time of Jehu, the worshipers of Baal had distinctive garments that were specifically used in the worship of Baal (2 Kings 10:22). So there is good evidence that the people who were wearing foreign clothing were the Judean priests. Zephaniah 3:4 says the priest profaned the Temple of God, and it would make sense that one of the ways they had done that was by dressing like the priests of pagan gods. There is no reason to assume that the atrocities committed by the priests of Judah that are revealed in Ezekiel were not already being committed in Jerusalem a generation earlier, even if they were not as open or widespread (cf. Ezek. 8:5, 10-17). Josiah’s reform did away with many of the atrocities but did not remove them from the hearts of the people, so they were hidden and then came right back when Josiah was not around.

Zep 1:9

**“In that day.”** “That day” is the “Day of Yahweh” (see commentary on Zeph. 1:7).

**“those who leap over the threshold, who fill the house of their Lord with violence and deceit.”** The custom of stepping over the threshold is not well understood. In the time of the Judges the ark of the covenant was captured from Israel by the Philistines, who took it to a temple of Dagon, and because of what happened the priests of Dagon do not step on the threshold of the temple “to this day” (that is, the day when Samuel was written; cf. 1 Sam. 5:5). But how that custom or a custom like it could have come into Israel and been practiced at the time of Josiah is not known.

What can be clearly seen, however, is the hypocrisy of the practice, because the same priests who were careful not to step on the threshold went on to fill God’s house with violence and deceit. Thus, they cared about things that made no difference and cared nothing about things that mattered greatly. So 600 years before Christ, the priests were straining out a gnat but swallowing a camel, just as they were at the time of Christ (cf. Matt. 23:23-24).

**“the house of their Lord.”** This is God’s Temple.

Zep 1:10

**“In that day.”** “That day” is the “Day of Yahweh” (see commentary on Zeph. 1:7).

**“and a great crashing from the hills.”** The hills around Jerusalem had idols and temples for idols, and it is likely that the great crashing from the hills in the Day of Yahweh is the idols and idol temples being destroyed (cf. Ezek. 6:3-6, 13), as God foretold in Leviticus (Lev. 26:30-31).

Zep 1:11

**“the Mortar.”** The meaning of this is uncertain. It could refer to a part of Jerusalem that was bowl-shaped like a mortar where trading occurred, or, more likely, it refers to all of Jerusalem, which was surrounded by hills, making Jerusalem itself like a mortar in which the people and idols would be pounded and ground up in the Day of Yahweh.

**“merchant people.”** The Hebrew could be “the Canaanites,” but since the Canaanites were known to be merchants and traders, the term “Canaanite” came to refer to a merchant or trader, which is the meaning in this context. Jerusalem was a prosperous center of trade, wealth, power, and luxury, but all of that would come to an end.

Zep 1:12

**“I will search Jerusalem with lamps.”** On the day of God’s wrath, no one will be able to escape. There will be no dark corners to hide in. The “lamps” were the common oil lamps in use at the time, they put off the same amount of light as a candle.

**“*like wine* comfortably settled on the lees.”** This refers to the custom of letting wine age and develop strength and flavor by leaving it on the lees instead of straining it (cf. Isa. 25:6). Wine bought in bottles today is well strained and very rarely has any lees, which is a fine sediment at the bottom of the wine bottle or wineskin, but homemade wine almost always has lees. The lees at the bottom of a wine bottle are easily stirred up into the wine if the bottle is moved, so for people to be like wine comfortably settled on the lees is a picture of people who are completely comfortable sitting in their sin. They are not disturbed by their sin and have no intention of moving to correct it. They do not think that God would act against them and they certainly do not think about any future Judgment Day, but their unbelief will not change the reality that a day of reckoning is coming.

**“Yahweh will not do good, nor will he do evil.”** The essence of this phrase is picked up in the more paraphrased NET translation: “The LORD neither rewards nor punishes.” The people treated Yahweh as an unimportant and powerless god.

Zep 1:13

**“Their wealth will become plunder.”** On the day of God’s wrath, the people who had treated God as a powerless God and had said that He would not do good or evil will find out that they are the ones who are powerless; powerless to save themselves and the things that they coveted from the consequences of their sin.

Zep 1:14

**“Near...Near.”** Placing the word “near” at the beginning of the phrase emphasizes it. It was as if the Day of Yahweh was so close you could even hear it coming: “The sound of the Day of Yahweh.” Included in the sound of the Day of Yahweh are the screams and bitter cries of even the mightiest of men, as this verse says. Zephaniah said the Day was close, but as it has turned out, God has delayed that day for his purposes, and thus “the day of vengeance of our God” (Isa. 61:2) is still future.

**“the great Day of Yahweh.”** The Day of Yahweh is now mentioned ten times in five verses, Zephaniah 1:14-18 (see commentary on Zeph. 1:7).

**“the sound.”** The Hebrew word translated “sound” can also be “voice,” and the “voice” of the Day of Yahweh is people’s bitter cries. It can also be nuanced to “listen” (HCSB, NASB, NIV), but given what will surely be the cacophonous noise of the Tribulation, “sound” seems like the best choice.

**“The mighty man cries out bitterly.”** The Day of Yahweh will be a horrible time, and the cries of the hurt and dying will be everywhere.

Zep 1:15

**“A day of darkness and gloom. A day of clouds and thick darkness.”** This phrase is repeated in Joel 2:2. That the Day of Yahweh will be a dark time is also mentioned in Amos 5:18-20. The “gloom” is the same “gloom” as in Exodus 10:22, when Egypt was smitten with a “darkness that could be felt.”

Zep 1:16

**“shofar.”** The ram’s horn trumpet, not the metal trumpet. In the Day of Yahweh, there will be wars and conquests, so there will be trumpet blasts and battle cries (cf. Matt. 24:6; Rev. 6:2).

**“the high corner towers.”** The corner towers of a walled city were the most heavily fortified places in the city wall.

Zep 1:17

**“they have sinned against Yahweh.”** Although in many places God goes into great detail about how the people have abandoned Him and the various sins they have committed, here in Zephaniah God justifies the Day of Yahweh and the vengeance associated with it by simply saying that people have “sinned against Yahweh.” That is all that needed to be said.

**“their blood will be poured out like dust, and their bowels like dung.”** The contrast of blood and bowels with dust and dung is sharp and striking. Blood and bowels are the very life of the person, and in that sense they are priceless. In contrast, dust and dung are worthless. In effect, God is making the point that people who arrogantly spurn God and live a life of sinning against Him are ultimately worthless. Although many versions say “flesh” instead of “bowels,” the Hebrew word is not “flesh,” but a word used for the bowels, intestines, entrails.

[For more on the destruction of the wicked in Gehenna, see commentary on Matt. 5:22. Also see Appendix 4: “Annihilation in the Lake of Fire”].

Zep 1:18

**“Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to deliver them on the Day of Yahweh’s wrath.”** In the wars of the ancient world, often the weaker nation was able to give silver, gold, and other wealth to the stronger nation to pay them off and avoid total destruction. This was common and occurs several times in the biblical record (cf. 1 Kings 20:1-4; 2 Kings 12:18; 18:14; 23:31-33). But in this case, the people sinned against God, and unlike earthly rulers, God is not interested in gold and silver. No one can pay off God; sin deserves wrath, and His wrath will come! For more on the “Day of Yahweh,” see commentary on Zeph. 1:7).

**“the whole earth will be devoured.”** Although some scholars believe this is “apocalyptic language” and just refers to the land of Israel, the scope of Scripture argues against that (see commentary below, “on the earth”).

**“on the earth.”** Although this could also be translated “in the land,” the beginning of the chapter applies more to the whole earth (cf. Zeph. 1:1-2) and there are many other scriptures that refer to the tribulation on both Israel and the nations of the earth (see commentary on Dan. 12:1). Thus, there does not seem to be any good reason to restrict this wrath to just the land of Israel, and some very good reasons not to. The Messiah will rule over the whole earth, and so all the evil on earth must be destroyed and the whole earth cleansed in preparation for his rule. The book of Revelation describes the seal judgments, trumpet judgments, thunder judgments, bowl judgments, and Battle of Armageddon, and collectively they will involve the entire earth. In the end, there are only two ends facing each person, just as verses such as John 3:16 and Romans 6:23 state: each person will either “perish” or get saved and live forever.

**Zephaniah Chapter 2**

Zep 2:1

**“Gather yourselves together like stubble.”** Although most versions just have, “gather yourselves together,” the Hebrew verb is *qashash* (#07197 קָשַׁשׁ), and it was used of gathering stubble or sticks (cf. Exod. 5L7, 12; Num. 15:32-33; 1 Kings 17:10), so the translation “gather yourselves together as stubble” is justified, and certainly applicable here in Zephaniah 2:1, especially since verse 2 mentions “chaff.” When grain was harvested and threshed, the process of threshing produced three distinct products: the kernels of grain, stubble (or “straw”), and chaff. The stubble was the large pieces of the shaft, and the chaff was the tiny broken pieces of the stalk. The NET has, “Bunch yourselves together like straw.”

God’s wrath was going to be poured out with a fiery fury (Zeph. 1:18; 3:8; Mal. 4:1). The arrogant people lived in sin, so now it seems that God calls them to gather together to see if they can face God’s fiery judgment, but from reading the whole verse (Zeph. 2:1-2), we can see that God is warning the people that they have little time to repent. The “Day” is coming and will pass by quickly, like chaff blown by the wind, so if anyone decides to repent they should do it quickly. Once the wrath of God strikes it will be too late.

**“O nation without shame.”** That the people of Israel could sin egregiously against God and not have feelings of guilt and shame means that they had thoroughly hardened hearts.

Zep 2:2

**“before the decree becomes reality.”** The sheer number of different English translations testifies to the difficulty of understanding the clipped and figurative Hebrew text. What does seem to be clear is the general message of the verse, which is captured well in the paraphrased version, the NLT: “Gather before judgment begins, before your time to repent is blown away like chaff. Act now, before the fierce fury of the LORD falls and the terrible Day of the LORD’s anger begins.”

The “decree” was the Word of God that foretold the coming disaster. The phrase “becomes reality” is more literally “is brought forth” (is “born”). The scholars disagree whether the “decree” is brought forth, or if it is the decree that brings forth, i.e., the decree then brings forth all the specifics of the Day of Yahweh that have been foretold. In both cases, there is a reality coming when all kinds of disastrous things will happen on the earth.

**“the day passes on like the chaff.”** The “day” is the Day of Yahweh, and just as chaff is driven very quickly by the wind, the Day of Yahweh is coming quickly. Here again, we see no hint of anything that can stop the Day of Yahweh from coming.

**“the Day of Yahweh’s anger.”** For more information on “the Day of Yahweh” see commentary on Zephaniah 1:7.

Zep 2:3

**“righteousness.”** “Righteousness” can refer to a right standing in the sight of God, being accepted by God, or doing those acts that are “right” and godly in God’s sight and that put one into a right relationship with God. Although both meanings apply here, the fact that the people being addressed in the verse are already humble and obedient to God means that when God tells them to “seek righteousness” and “seek humility,” He is encouraging them to press into being humble and doing “righteous” things, things that are right and godly, especially godly and just things for others. This verse is similar in many respects to Matthew 6:33 in that it encourages people to seek “righteousness,” both vertically to God and horizontally to other people.

[For more on “righteous” referring to things we do that are right, just, and godly, see commentary on Matt. 5:6.]

**“It may be that you will be hidden.”** It “may be” indicated that there were no promises that any one person would be spared in the wrath. Judah had sinned egregiously and was about to suffer the wrath of God (Zeph. 1:4ff). Yet some people would be “hidden” and not get the full force of God’s anger. God does not say exactly who will be hidden, and the prophet certainly does not, but doing godly, righteous and just things for others would help ensure a person that they might be hidden. Jesus frankly told his disciples that some of them would be killed in the tribulation (Matt. 24:9).

Zep 2:4

**“For Gaza.”** The rest of Zephaniah chapter 2 is about the nations surrounding Israel, starting with the west, then moving east (Moab and Ammon, v. 8), then moving south to Ethiopia (the “Cushites,” v. 12), then moving north (v. 13, Assyria).

**“Gaza…Ashkelon…Ashdod…Ekron.”** There were five chief Philistine cities that contributed men to a council that ran the government, these four that are mentioned in Zephaniah 2:4, and the city of Gath (cf. Josh. 13:3; 1 Sam. 6:17-18). The reason Gath is missing from this list is unclear, but the most likely explanation is that it ceased to be a city, or a city of any importance, by the time Zephaniah wrote. Gath was attacked and destroyed by the Assyrian king Sargon II in 715 BC, and it disappeared from history after that. In fact, today archaeologists are not completely sure where Gath even was. If it was where archaeologists think it was, it was the easternmost of all the chief cities of the Philistines, which explains why David conquered it, so he would not have any quick surprise attacks from Gath into southwestern Judah (1 Chron. 18:1). However, at some later date, Gath regained its independence from Judah and was considered a Philistine city again, as it was when Sargon conquered it. The prophets who wrote after the Assyrian conquest do not mention Gath when they mention the other chief Philistine cities (cf. Jer. 25:20; Amos 1:6-8; Zeph. 2:4-6; Zech. 9:5).

Zep 2:5

**“I will destroy you.”** God briefly speaks in the first person for emphasis.

Zep 2:7

**“And the coastland will be for the remnant of the house of Judah.”** This is a prophecy of the restoration of the land for the tribes of Judah. Ezekiel 47 and 48 show a much more complete picture of Israel in the Millennial Kingdom. In Christ’s future Millennial Kingdom on Earth, the tribes of Israel will be restored and given territory. The west boundary of the tribes of Israel will be the Mediterranean Sea (Ezek. 47:20). The “house of Judah” in this context refers not just to the tribe of Judah, but the tribes of the Kingdom of Judah, and in the prophecy of Ezekiel, given some decades later, the area of the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and Simeon did indeed stretch westward to the Mediterranean Sea and thus cover the area where the chief Philistine cities had been located (Ezek. 48:7, 24, 25).

**“restore their fortunes.”** The Hebrew text may be read as “restore their fortunes” (HCSB, ESV, NASB, NIV) or “return their captivity” (ASV, DBY, JPS, KJV), depending on which way the Hebrew text is vowel pointed. However, in the original Hebrew text which had no modern vowel pointing, the phrase could be naturally read both ways and is an amphibologia, a double entendre, in which both meanings are equally true. God will visit Judah and end their captivity and restore their fortunes.

Zep 2:8

**“I have heard the reproach.”** Once again God speaks in the first person for emphasis.

Zep 2:9

**“surely Moab will be as Sodom, and the children of Ammon as Gomorrah.”** The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were not picked at random. God could have used any number of examples of destruction, such as the destruction at the time of the Flood, the destruction of Egypt, the fall of Jericho, etc. But the countries of Moab and Ammon overlooked the Dead Sea region to the west of them, and the sites where Sodom and Gomorrah had been would have been clearly visible (those sites are now lost in history). So Sodom and Gomorrah should have been a warning to Moab and Ammon not to defy God, but that warning went unheeded, and eventually, Moab and Ammon were mostly destroyed, a destruction that will be completed in the Great Tribulation and Battle of Armageddon.

**“and the survivors of my nation will inherit them.”** This can be confusing because according to Ezekiel 47 and 48, in the Millennial Kingdom, the tribes of Israel will be on the west side of the Jordan River, while traditionally Moab and Ammon were on the east side of the Jordan. But early on in history when Moab and Ammon were born as sons of Abraham’s nephew Lot, they were born on the west side of the Jordan River, in the territory that would become Israel, because Abraham conceded that territory to Lot (Gen. 13:10-11).

Zep 2:10

**“This they will get.”** The narrative now shifts back from first person to third person.

**“pride.”** Pride was often associated with Moab (Isa. 16:6; Jer. 48:29).

Zep 2:11

**“starve.”** The Hebrew word is very rare and only used here in the whole Bible. It most likely means something like “make lean,” with “starve” (or “cause to waste away”) being a very likely translation. Various English translations include, “starve,” “waste away,” “shrivel,” “weaken,” and “destroy.” The gods of the nations will not be worshiped; there will not be any sacrifices or sacrificial offerings burned to them, so they will starve to death. This is a graphic way of saying the idols and the gods that they represent will disappear or be destroyed (see commentary on Isa. 2:20).

**“will bow down to.”** Or “will worship.” The same Hebrew verb, *shachah* (#07812 שָׁחָה), is translated as both “bow down” and “worship;” traditionally “worship” if God is involved and “bow down” if people are involved, but the verb and action are the same, the act of bowing down is the worship. In this context, “bow down to” seems better because some may not really “worship” even if they bow down. The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body to the earth.

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

**“each one from his own place.”** There are scholars who say that “from his own place” refers to the fact that the nations will travel “from” their own place to Jerusalem to worship.[[1]](#footnote-22706) While that will certainly happen (Isa. 2:3; 60:6; Mic. 4:1; Zech. 14:16; Matt. 8:11), that is not the primary emphasis of this verse. In the Millennial Kingdom people all around the whole world will worship Yahweh, and that will not only be when they travel to Jerusalem; they will worship from their own homes and lands. This will be a fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham that “all of the nations of the earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 18:18; cf. Gen. 22:18). God intended that the blessing of salvation and knowing Him would be available to everyone everywhere, but years after Abraham lived, that blessing was obscured by the Jews who tended to view Yahweh as their personal possession and denigrated the Gentiles. But God’s promise to Abraham did not mean that people would be blessed if they traveled to Jerusalem to worship, especially since God spoke to Abraham more than 400 years before there even was a Jewish nation and “Old Covenant,” and more than 850 years before Jerusalem was the capital of Israel and the site of the Temple.

In the Millennial Kingdom, people all over the world will worship Yahweh right at home as well as travel to Jerusalem to worship Him. For example, many years before Zephaniah lived, the prophet Isaiah said that there will be an altar to Yahweh in Egypt and a pillar erected to honor him at the border between Egypt and Israel (Isa. 19:19). Even the Assyrians and Egyptians, historical enemies, will worship Yahweh together (Isa. 19:21-25). Isaiah also said that even though there will be relatively few people left alive on earth after the Great Tribulation, people will praise and honor God all over the earth (Isa. 24:13-16). Isaiah foretold that people around the world would honor God, and because of that God would bring them to Israel and they would worship at His Temple (Isa. 56:3-8). Malachi also prophesied that Yahweh’s name would be honored with incense and offerings all over the world (Mal. 1:11).

So although Zephaniah 2:11 certainly includes the fact that in the Millennial Kingdom people from around the world will travel to Jerusalem to worship, when Christ reigns as king over the whole world people will also worship Yahweh right where they live. Jesus basically said that also, because he told the woman at the well that it would not just be in Jerusalem that people would worship, but Jesus knew from the Old Testament prophets that the holy spirit of God would be poured out on people in the Millennial Kingdom, he said that people would worship “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:20-24).

[For more on the Millennial Kingdom, see Appendix 5: “Christ’s Future Kingdom on Earth.]

Zep 2:12

**“slain by my sword are they.”** Several things about this statement draw the reader’s attention. The statement abruptly changes from the second person “you” to the third person “they” (although uncommon, that does occur in other places in the Bible, cf. Zeph. 3:18; Ezek. 28:22; Zech. 3:8). Also, the fact that when God turns from speaking to nations on the east and speaks to a nation on the south, we would normally expect it to be Egypt, the more powerful and important nation, or perhaps the traditional enemy Edom, but instead He addresses Cush (Ethiopia). Also very noticeable is the very brevity of this address. God spends much more time speaking to nations on the west, north, and east, but then only makes this very short but powerful statement to the Ethiopians. The evidence is that God mentioned Ethiopia because it was the furthest south of all the nations known (or perhaps just written about) by the Hebrews, and thus it was a way that God could express the fact that when His vengeance came upon the earth, it would come upon the entire earth—no one would be “too far away” to be affected (cf. Isa. 18:1).

Zep 2:13

**“Nineveh.”** The capital city of Assyria. Assyria was weaker than it was when it destroyed Israel but was defeated in Judah (2 Kings 17:6; 19:35-37). Nevertheless, it was still powerful enough to destroy Judah, and a prophecy that it would be destroyed would be welcome in Judah.

Zep 2:14

**“herds.”** The Hebrew word *eder* (#05739 עֵדֶר) can refer to both flocks and herds. The NET conflates the English to “flocks and herds” for clarity.

**“all the animals of the nations.”** The meaning of the Hebrew is unclear because it literally reads “all animals of a nation.” Most scholars feel that the phrase means “every kind of wild animal” (HCSB), and that seems to be the most likely way to understand the verse. However, O. Palmer Robertson[[2]](#footnote-10771) may be correct in constructing the genitive “of a nation” (“nation” is singular in the Hebrew text) as “making up a nation.” In that case, the phrase would be something like, “And herds will lie down in the middle of her; every animal constituting a nation.” Robertson points out that the locusts are referred to as a nation in Joel 1:6, and thinks that is the case here. If Robertson is correct, the “nation” of Assyria has defied God and so become replaced with a “nation” of wild animals. What is clear is that the animals will take over the capital city of the great country of Assyria.

**“desert owl and the screech owl.”** The exact identity of these animals is unknown. The desert owl is some kind of unclean bird, but the screech owl may be a bird or a rodent. The Hebrew vocabulary may be unclear but the point is not: Nineveh will be uninhabited ruins.

**“Devastation will be on the thresholds.”** The beautiful buildings of Nineveh will be destroyed, exposing the cedar beam framework. The stonework, decorations, etc., will fall down and cover the thresholds of the buildings, so the “devastation” will be on the thresholds. For ease of understanding, some versions nuance the text, e.g., “Rubble will cover the thresholds” (NET). Also, the Septuagint reads “raven” instead of “devastation,” so some English translations have “ravens.” The fact that Nineveh will go from a city of beautiful buildings with cedar woodwork to a devastated haunt of animals and birds shows that Yahweh is the Most High God and defying Him and hurting His people will only result in destruction.

Zep 2:15

**“I am, and there is none besides me.”** The people of Nineveh proudly boasted that they lived in the most exalted city on earth, but pride goes before a fall, and it certainly did in their case. It is one thing to be blessed by where you live, but it is quite another to think that somehow makes you better than others.

**“will hiss and wave his hand *in contempt*.”** The people who pass by Nineveh will show utter contempt for it. The actions of hissing and waving the hand in contempt, as a person does today when they are disgusted with or over and done with something shows how the feelings and actions of people are “very human” and have not changed in over 2,500 years.

We today still hiss at villains and “wave off” people and situations we have contempt for. Some modern translations have “shake the fist” (ESV, NAB, NIV), but “wave the hand” is the more literal translation of the Hebrew text. Nevertheless, both actions can demonstrate contempt.

**Zephaniah Chapter 3**

Zep 3:1

**“Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled, the oppressing city!”** The subject abruptly shifts from Nineveh to Jerusalem. Although Jerusalem is not mentioned by name in this section, she is the city where Yahweh Himself lives (Zeph. 3:5), and the accusation that she did not draw near to “her God” could only refer to Yahweh (Zeph. 3:2). God would never chide a pagan city for not drawing close to her chief idol. Jerusalem was “rebellious” because the people of Israel had made a covenant with Yahweh, and in disobeying it they rebelled against Him. Furthermore, the people of Jerusalem and Judah were “defiled” because as part of the covenant they agreed to God’s terms of purity, but they ignored them, eating defiled offerings and committing adultery with other gods (some translations have “polluted,” but this verse is not referring to pollution in our modern sense of the word).

**“the oppressing city.”** The word “oppression” is very descriptive of what happens among people when God’s laws and moral principles are abandoned: people oppress one another. Life feels “hard” and “heavy,” and living does not seem “fun” or “safe.” Sometimes people deliberately oppress others for their own benefit, and sometimes they oppress others simply by their willingness to ignore the plight of others and unwillingness to enforce godly laws and put a stop to evil.

The Devil promotes the lie that people are basically good, and if left to themselves will be fine, and many people believe that lie. The Bible says exactly the opposite. God specifically said that people are evil from childhood (Gen. 8:21), and that children who are left to themselves and raised without discipline and training will only become shameful and godless (Prov. 29:15; cf. Ps. 58:3). That is why the Bible has much to say about properly raising children. Anyone who has observed children knows that although they can be cute and fun, they are very selfish and have to be taught to be nice, to share, and to be respectful of others; they do not have those traits from the womb. The heart of human beings is corrupt and deceitful (Jer. 17:9), and people’s sin nature inclines them to evil and sin, which is why it is difficult even for Christians to live truly godly lives (Gal. 5:17; Eccl. 7:20). It takes much effort and godly laws and morals to have a decent society. God knows that, which is why the Bible has so much information about how to treat others and have a godly society. God has given laws, moral codes, wise counsel, and many good examples of how to have a safe and godly society, and He has given those directives because, without godly laws and moral codes, people end up oppressing each other.

Why would the Devil promote the lie that people are basically good? Because he himself is lawless and a rebel. He rebels against laws and rules, and therefore against God. Furthermore, he is evil and he knows the hurt and pain that exists in lawless societies; he has watched those barbarian societies for millennia. The Devil knows that if he can successfully promote the lie that people are basically good, then people will not be concerned about having and enforcing godly laws, after all, everything will be okay without them, right? Wrong!

In Zephaniah’s time, Judah had abandoned God’s laws with predictable results—the city had become full of various types of oppression. That happens any time and place that God’s laws are abandoned, and in our modern world, it is happening more and more. That too, is predictable, because as Jesus said, as earth moves closer and closer to the End Times, the love of many will grow cold, so people will begin to oppress each other (Matt. 24:12). The Bible describes exactly what people are like without godly laws, and sadly, it is a prophecy about how life will be in the End Times: “But know this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, without natural affection, unwilling to be reconciled *to others*, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, not interested in doing what is good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (2 Tim. 3:1-4).

The next life will be safe and fun because Jesus will be king and enforce godly law. That Jesus will conquer the earth and rule with a rod of iron is a well-established prophecy (Ps. 2:9; Rev. 2:27; 12:5; 19:15). If Jesus will need to have and enforce godly laws in his society, it goes without saying that we need to follow his example if we want our society to be godly.

Zep 3:2

**“She has not listened.”** The literal Hebrew is “she has not listened,” or “she has not heard,” the Hebrew word means “heard” or “listened.” In this case, the people did not “listen to,” that is, “obey” God, “the Voice.” In this context, the word “listen” means “obey” and some English versions translate it that way (ASV, HCSB, NIV), but the literal word “listen” carries the meaning well too.

**“the Voice.”** That is, God’s voice. God had spoken directly to Israel in a loud voice when He gave the Ten Commandments (see commentary on Exod. 19:9), but since that time, He had spoken through the prophets (Heb. 1:1).

**“did not trust…did not approach.”** These statements are pregnant with meaning because it is not that Israel did not trust or approach Yahweh with an offering because they had become atheists. They did not trust or approach Yahweh because they were trusting and worshiping other gods (2 Kings 21:1-9, 19-22). Josiah tried to reform Judah and bring them back to Yahweh (2 Kings 22-23; 2 Chron. 34-35) but the idolatry was too deeply established and as soon as he was killed in battle his sons and grandson returned to idolatry (2 Kings 23:31-32, 36-37; 2 Kings 24:8-9, 17-19).

**“approach.”** This is the term used in the Mosaic Law for approaching God with an offering. Leviticus says, “When any one of you approaches with an approach-offering to Yahweh from the livestock, you may approach with your approach-offering from the herd or from the flock. If his approach-offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he is to approach with a male without blemish. He must approach to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting so that he may be accepted before Yahweh” (Lev. 1:2-3). The point Zephaniah was making was the people were not approaching God with offerings because they were worshiping other gods instead of Yahweh.

Zep 3:3

**“are roaring lions.”** Zephaniah uses the metaphor to express how powerful, dangerous, and fierce the leaders of Judah are. One of the inherent problems with figures of comparison (simile, metaphor, and hypocatastasis) is that one has to be very sensitive to the context to get the meaning. For example, in other places in Scripture the “lion of Judah” is strong, courageous, and protective (Rev. 5:5). The leaders are supposed to be shepherds who care for the sheep, instead, these leaders are lions who eat the sheep.

[For more on figures of comparison, see commentary on Rev. 20:2.]

**“wolves at evening.”** Wolves are fierce and merciless, and an apt metaphor for the judges who pervert justice and thus kill the dreams and aspirations of those they are supposed to protect by justice. The addition “at evening” is also apt, because just as evening wolves use the cover of darkness to make their kill, these unjust judges cover their sin and avarice with the darkness of lies, “reasons,” and wise-sounding words and “kill” justice. They don’t even leave “a bone” of justice in their decisions so the weak are helped out a little.

Zep 3:4

**“arrogant.”** The Hebrew word is *pachaz* (#06348 פָּחַז), which has a basic meaning of boiling up, boiling over, overflowing, and thus many versions take it to mean reckless or undisciplined, as if they speak whatever comes up for them, but it can also mean “haughty” (BDB Hebrew and English lexicon), and thus proud or arrogant. The NET translates the word as “proud” (cf. “arrogant” NIV84; NLT) and the NET text note says, “Applied to prophets, the word פֹּחֲזִים (*pokhazim*, ‘proud’) probably refers to their audacity in passing off their own words as genuine prophecies from the LORD (see Jer. 23:32).” However, both “arrogant” and “reckless” apply. Jeremiah was a contemporary of Zephaniah during the time of Josiah, and he had much to say about the prophets.

For example, according to Jeremiah 23, the false prophets were not sent by God and were ungodly, wicked, liars, and adulterers. They prophesied by Baal and led Judah astray, and they filled people with false hope as they spoke from their own minds, not from Yahweh (see commentary on Jer. 23:9). The word “arrogant” fit those false prophets very well. Furthermore, Zephaniah 3:4 adds that the prophets were treacherous; they were deceivers, believing their words and following their advice led only to destruction, personally and nationally.

**“her priests have profaned the holy place.”** The Hebrew could also be read, “her priests have profaned that which is holy.” Both readings can be found in the English versions, and both statements are true, but the emphasis is likely on the fact that the priests defiled the Temple, the dwelling place of Yahweh. It was the job of the priests to ensure that Israel would stay holy before Yahweh, but they did not do their job. In fact, they did worse than ignore their job, they themselves actually defiled the Temple and perverted the pure worship of God by bringing pagan gods and pagan and ungodly practices into the Temple.

What the priests in Zephaniah’s time did was not new. Hundreds of years before Zephaniah’s time the sons of Eli the High Priest were perverting the sacrifices and having sex with the women who served at the Tabernacle (1 Sam. 2:12-17; 22, 29). Also, many years after Zephaniah’s time the priests were still defiling God’s holy ways, and God said that He would rather have the priests close the Temple than pervert it (Mal. 1:6-10). The arrogance and ungodliness of the priests was one of the reasons God abandoned His Temple (Ezek. 8:6). Eventually the ungodliness of the leaders—the kings, officials, prophets, and priests—resulted in the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem and the people of Judah being carried captive to Babylon.

It would be naïve to think that the religious leaders of Israel were more or less perverted for thousands of years and there have been horrible perversions among the Christian leaders in centuries past but there is no such perversion today. There is perversion in Christian leadership today, and it comes out regularly in the news. Christian leaders have even higher standards of godliness than the average Christian, and it is up to the Christian believers to help leaders resist the temptations of their office and stay pure and godly, and also to remove them if they become ungodly. Specific guidance for how Christian leaders are to live can be found in places such as 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-9.

**“they have done violence to the law.”** The priests “did violence” to God’s Law, His Torah, by perverting it and twisting its meaning. The demonic pressure to pervert God’s Law and the evil or ignorant people who carry it out are still active today, which is why Christians need to learn God’s commandments for themselves, so they know how to rightly walk before God and obey Him.

Zep 3:5

**“*who resides* in the midst of her.”** Yahweh was in His Temple in the midst of Jerusalem.

**“is righteous.”** That is, God treats people with justice and equity (see commentary on Matt. 5:6).

**“Morning by morning.”** Although this is a general phrase meaning “over and over,” it was chosen on purpose to highlight the justice and love of God, because every morning, morning after morning, the priests offer the morning sacrifice in the Temple and portray how God cares for people and atones for people’s sin.

**“an unjust *person* knows no shame.”** In the honor-shame society of the biblical world, and still in the East and Middle East today, concern about “shame” (sometimes referred to as “losing face” in Asia) is very real, and avoiding shame and being honored is very important to people and a huge motivator to behave according to societal standards. But these unjust people were so committed to their sin and had such hard hearts that they did not experience (“know”) any shame over their horrendous acts against God and other people. They refused correction and so to protect other people from them God’s only course of action was to act powerfully against them. That situation is still true today, and is why laws must be enforced by police in today’s society and why death in the Lake of Fire is God’s righteous action against willful evil (Rev. 20:11-15).

Zep 3:6

**“I have cut off nations.”** The speaker abruptly changes from Zephaniah to Yahweh, and Yahweh reminds the people that rebellion against Him only results in destruction. It has happened in the past and will happen again, even to Judah and Jerusalem if the people do not repent and accept God’s correction (Zeph. 3:7).

Zep 3:7

**“because of all.”** The exact meaning of this phrase in Zephaniah 3:7 and the proper way to translate the sentence is unclear, which can be seen by the many different ways it has been translated in the English versions. However, the basic meaning of the text is quite clear. As God said in Zephaniah 3:6, nations had been destroyed because of sin against God and humanity, and the Judeans also knew Israel had been destroyed by Assyria for her sin, and now Judah was in danger of being destroyed. But because of the disasters of the past, God thought, “Surely you [Judah] will fear me; you will accept correction” so that you will not be completely destroyed. But alas! The Judeans rejected God’s reproof and “rose up early” (i.e., they committed themselves) to corrupt themselves in everything they did. We know from history that as a result Judah and Jerusalem were destroyed.

We should pay attention to the fact that God, the Creator of the heavens, earth, and humans, sets the standards of what is “corrupt” and what is not. If you took a poll of all the people in Judea in Zephaniah’s day, no doubt many of them would say the way they lived was “normal,” “fine,” and “a matter of personal choice.” But people do not get to dictate what is right and what is not; God does. The Psalmist correctly states: “The earth is Yahweh’s, and all it contains; the world, and those who dwell in it” (Ps. 24:1). God set standards for godly human behavior, and people ignore and defy those standards to their peril.

**“But they rose early.”** This is an idiom for being eager or excited to do something, thus the translations such as the NRSV: “But they were the more eager to make all their deeds corrupt.” But God shows how much He loved the people and “rose early” to guide and correct them (cf. Jer. 7:13, 25; 11:7; 25:3; 26:5; 29:19; 32:33; 35:14-15; 44:4).

**“corrupted all that they did.”** Some 800 years earlier Moses had foretold that the Israelites would become corrupt. Here in Zephaniah that has occurred and Yahweh says that they corrupted “all” that they did.

Zep 3:8

**“wait for me.”** We must wait for God. His promises sometimes seem delayed, but they will come. Many people think and act like there will not be a Day of Judgment, but there will be. We must be patient and faithful. God does not lie, and He tells us to wait for His judgment.

**“I rise up to testify.”** At the time of the End, God will testify against humanity. God’s court will be seated and judgment will take place (Dan. 7:9-10; Rev. 4:2-5). The Hebrew text, if the vowels are added differently, can read “rise up for the prey,” but although the Masoretic Hebrew Text reads that way, it seems less likely. For example, the Septuagint reads “for a witness.”

**“for in the fire of my jealousy all the earth will be devoured.”** Although much destruction would occur to Israel and the nations between 600 BC and the Day of Yahweh (which is still future), this prophecy is for more than those short and local destructions. In the Day of God’s wrath, the Tribulation and Armageddon, all the earth will be devoured. Indescribable devastation is foretold for the earth during that time (see commentary on Daniel 12:1).

Zep 3:9

**“change.”** The Hebrew is “turn.” It may mean “restore” (HCSB), but that may be too much. It does mean “change” (ESV).

**“speech.”** The Hebrew is “lips,” here put for what is spoken by the lip, “speech” or “language.” The pure language does not mean Hebrew will be the universal language. The language people will speak in the future is unknown. The pure language in this context is the language of praise and honor to Yahweh, the Creator of all.

**“shoulder to shoulder.”** The Hebrew is idiomatic, “with one shoulder,” thus picturing the people crowded together serving Yahweh and calling upon Him in worship, bowing down before Him together. However, the idiomatic phrase “with one shoulder” is somewhat unclear in English, and we often render the concept with the phrase “shoulder to shoulder.”

Zep 3:10

**“beyond the rivers of Cush.”** “Cush” is Ethiopia, and “beyond the rivers of Cush” was a way of describing even the remotest lands, we might phrase it as, “the ends of the earth” (cf. Zeph. 2:12; Isa. 18:1).

**“the daughter of my scattered people.”** This is very telling because the fact that these were “my people,” means they were almost certainly dispersed Israelites. It would not be impossible that the Jews had been widely scattered, even to Cush and beyond by the time of Zephaniah. The people of Israel had been in Egypt for some 200 years, from their time with Joseph to the Exodus and it is likely that some of them were scattered during that time. Then, during the over 400 years of the time of Joshua and the Judges, they were attacked by many foreign nations and captives would have been taken, and the same happened during the kings period, including Judah being invaded by Shishak, Pharaoh of Egypt, soon after Solomon died (2 Chron. 12:1-9) and troops from Egypt, Libya, and Cush were part of Shishak’s army. Also, about 722 BC, before Zephaniah’s time, Israel was carried away captive by the Assyrians and scattered around the borders of Assyria. So God had “scattered people” at the ends of the earth, but they will be regathered to the land of Israel in the Millennial Kingdom. Furthermore, Gentiles who believe will also come to Jerusalem and worship (Zeph. 3:8-9; Isa. 66:18-21).

[For more on the ten lost tribes of Israel being regathered in the Millennial Kingdom, see commentary on Jer. 32:37.]

Zep 3:11

**“In that day.”** “That day” is the “Day of Yahweh.” Here in Zephaniah 3:11 and also in Zephaniah 3:16, the emphasis of “that day” is not the wrath of God, as was the case in the other occurrences of “that day” and the “Day of Yahweh” in the book of Zephaniah, but rather this part of “that day” refers to the peaceful reign of Christ on earth after God’s wrath has passed. The “Day of Yahweh” has many parts, and different parts are emphasized at different times (see commentary on Zeph. 1:7).

**“you will not be put to shame.”** The verb is feminine singular, and thus the “you” is singular, referring to Jerusalem, and thus by metonymy the people who live there. In the Millennial Kingdom, Jerusalem will be exalted (cf. Isa. 2:1-3; Mic. 4:1-2; Jer. 33:15-16).

**“remove from your midst.”** In the coming Tribulation, Armageddon, and judgments, especially the Sheep and Goat Judgment, the proud and arrogant people will be removed from Jerusalem, indeed, at the start of Christ’s Millennial Kingdom they will be removed from the whole earth. The Tribulation and Armageddon will kill many of them, and those who survive will be weeded out and thrown into the Lake of Fire at the Sheep and Goat Judgment (Matt. 25:31-46; see commentary on Matt. 25:32). After the judgment, the people who will be left will inherit the earth, just as Jesus taught (Zeph. 3:12; Matt. 5:5).

[For more on the Tribulation, see commentary on Dan. 12:1. For more on the Millennial Kingdom of Christ, see Appendix 5: “Christ’s Future Kingdom on Earth.”]

**“your *people*.”** The Hebrew text makes it clear that the proud people are Jews, not just Gentiles who live in the midst of the Jews. Many of God’s chosen people rejected God. It has always been that way and still is today.

**“rejoice in their pride.”** The Hebrew phrase refers to those people who are defiantly proud, they will not humble themselves and obey God. The phrase is translated differently in the different English versions as they try to capture the meaning of the Hebrew text: “take joy in arrogance” (CJB); “your proud, arrogant people” (HCSB); “proudly exultant ones” (ESV); “rejoice in thy pride” (KJV); “those who proudly boast” (NET); “rejoice in their pride” (NIV84); “arrogant boasters” (NIV2011).

From God’s perspective, a proud person is someone who will not humble themselves and submit to the rule of God. A humble person bows the knee to Jesus Christ and recognizes his lordship. A proud person might be a “nice guy,” but in their heart they are self-sufficient. The most recognized definition of a proud person is a person who outwardly shows that they have an excessively high opinion of themselves and/or are self-important, but from God’s perspective, a proud person is also one who is satisfied with themselves and their own qualities and achievements and does not or will not recognize God’s place and lordship in their lives. Thus, Zephaniah 1:6 includes among the people who will be removed “those who have not sought Yahweh or asked anything of him.” People who do not recognize the Lordship of God and Christ have no place in their kingdom.

Zep 3:12

**“But I will leave among you a humble and lowly people.”** After the Battle of Armageddon, when Christ sets up his kingdom on earth, all the proud and arrogant people will be weeded out, and the humble, meek, and lowly people who humbled themselves and obeyed God’s commands and were saved will be in Christ’s kingdom. This was why Jesus taught that the meek will inherit the earth (see commentary on Matt. 5:5). The “humble and lowly” are humble and lowly in their heart, not just their status in life. Many “lowly” people are bitter and arrogant, and that is not the kind of people Zephaniah is speaking about. He is speaking of those humble people who obey God and thus at the Judgment are granted everlasting life.

Zep 3:13

**“they will feed and lie down.”** This is a clear allusion to God’s people as the sheep of His pasture (cf. Isa. 40:10-11; Jer. 23:1-4; Ezek. 34:1-31).

Zep 3:14

**“Daughter Zion.”** The Hebrew is idiomatic for Zion itself, i.e., Jerusalem (see commentary on Isa. 1:8).

**“Daughter Jerusalem.”** The Hebrew is similar to that of Daughter Zion (see commentary on Isa. 1:8). In typical poetic fashion, Jerusalem is referred to twice in the verse by two different names, “Daughter Jerusalem” and “Daughter Zion.”

Zep 3:15

**“the judgments against you.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “your judgments,” which can also include God’s “punishments” on Judah, and some versions read “punishments.” But translating the sentence literally and saying, “Yahweh has taken away your judgments” could be misunderstood to be saying that the people will no longer be judgmental, and that is not what the verse is saying. When Christ comes back and sets up His kingdom God’s judgments and punishments against Judah and Jerusalem will be over. The people will be in a New Covenant and will have a new heart and new spirit (Jer. 32:36-41; Ezek. 11:17-20; 36:26).

**“You will not be afraid of evil any more.”** Feeling and being safe in one’s person and possessions is so vital to people’s enjoying life that it is no wonder that God has much to say about Christ’s future kingdom on earth being safe: (cf. Isa. 11:6-9; 32:18; 54:14-17; 60:11,17,18; 65:17-25; Jer. 23:4; 30:10; 32:37; 33:6; Ezek. 28:26; 34:25-31; Mic. 5:4,5; Zeph. 3:13-17).

[For more on the wonderful attributes of the Millennial Kingdom, see Appendix 5: “Christ’s Future Kingdom on Earth.”]

Zep 3:16

**“in that day.”** “That day” is the Day of Yahweh. See commentary on Zephaniah 3:11.

**“Do not let your hands fall limp.”** Letting the hand “fall limp” is idiomatic and based on the experience of being afraid and/or discouraged. Often when a person is physically scared, discouraged, confused, etc., they do not have the motivation and strength to get to work and deal with the situation they are in. Some English versions translate the idiom out of the text: “do not be discouraged” (NAB); “Don’t be afraid” (NLT); “Do not lose courage” (GW). But being that specific in the translation leaves out all the other possibilities that a person’s hands might fall limp, so in this case it is best to leave the idiom in the text.

Zep 3:17

**“He will calm you with his love.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “He will be silent in his love,” but that God would be “silent” makes very little sense in the context and especially so since the preceding sentence is about God rejoicing with joy over the people, and rejoicing is not silent. Quite a few English versions and commentaries, along with the REV, say that God will calm His people with His love, and given all the other verses about the blessings people will have in the Millennial Kingdom, that is a most plausible meaning. Some scholars believe that the text saying God will be “silent” in His love refers to Him feeling His love for people very deeply and contemplating plans for the good of His people, but although the Hebrew can read that way, expressing that would be rare and unusual. Some English translations see the difficulty in the Hebrew text and so follow the Septuagint, which reads “He will renew you in his love,” but leaving the Hebrew text for the Greek is not necessary here. The Hebrew text can be understood to mean “He will calm [or “quiet”] you with His love, and many English versions including the REV have a reading similar to that.[[3]](#footnote-32148)

We can see why God would have a wonderful verse about Him quieting the worries and fears of His people here at the end of Zephaniah. The first two and a half chapters of Zephaniah were about destruction coming on Judah and the world, and those prophecies of destruction are echoed in the books of Zephaniah’s contemporaries, Jeremiah and Nahum, and it is likely that Habakkuk was a contemporary as well. Given the destruction the prophets foretold for Judah and Jerusalem, we can see why the people would be worried and anxious. But although God does not promise health and well-being in this life, it is comforting to know that there is another life coming that will be full of joy and good things.

Ever since Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden, there has always been a lot of anxiety and fear in human life. Life is uncertain and there are innumerable things to worry about. Life itself is fragile and death or disability can come without warning at any time for oneself or loved ones. Staying healthy is never guaranteed, and neither are the simple comforts of having food to eat, clothes to wear, or a bed at night. The Bible has many verses about worry and anxiety, and almost 1,000 years before Christ, Solomon said, “Anxiety in a person’s heart weighs it down, but a good word makes it glad” (Prov. 12:25). But in contrast to the constant worries of this life, Christ’s future Millennial Kingdom will be a time of great joy. Many verses attest that people will be healthy, safe, well-fed, and joyful. What a wonderful promise of the future God gives us here in Zephaniah, that God will calm people with His love. Having a peaceful heart and mind is a wonderful blessing from God.

[For more on Christ’s Millennial Kingdom, see Appendix 5: “Christ’s Future Kingdom on Earth”].

Zep 3:18

**“I will.”** The text abruptly changes from the third person to God speaking directly to the people via the prophet’s mouth and pen, and the close of Zephaniah, Zephaniah 3:18-20, is spoken by Yahweh.

**“gather together those who grieve.”** The Hebrew text of this verse is very choppy and it is unclear exactly how to construct it in English, which explains the large number of different renderings in the English versions. The marginal note in the NET Bible says, “Any translation of this difficult verse must be provisional at best.” Nevertheless, the overall meaning of the end of Zephaniah is clear: despite the opening of the book which speaks of disaster, God shows that there will be a happy final end for good people.

**“they came from you.”** The scattered people in this immediate context came from Judah, so here Judah, or more likely even Jerusalem, is the “you.” The speaker and the subject often change abruptly in the prophetic books, and this is an example. Usually, a knowledge of the scope of Scripture and a careful study of the context allows the reader to figure out the meaning of the text.

**“the reproach *of exile* is a burden.”** Jerusalem (and Judah) was constantly degraded, derided, and mocked due to the judgments of God that fell upon her. The nations ridiculed her, and that reproach was a burden.

**“to you.”** To Jerusalem (and Judah). The Hebrew text reads “her,” but many English versions nuance the English to “you” for clarity. The reproach was a burden to Jerusalem.

Zep 3:19

**“those who are lame.”** God is portraying the people as sheep, and in that context, the word “lame” is not only an allusion, but a synecdoche of the part, where “lame” stands for more than just “lame,” it refers to people who are injured or hurt or wounded in any way.

[See Word Study: “Synecdoche.”]

**“gather.”** Many prophecies speak of the future time when God will gather together the scattered people of Israel and bring them back to their land (see commentary on Jer. 32:37).

**“scattered.”** This continues the allusion to the people of God being sheep. In other contexts it would be “driven away” or “banished,” but when used of animals “scattered” is the implication.[[4]](#footnote-20032) The NET has “scattered sheep” for clarity.

**“I will change their shame into praise and a name in all the earth​​.”** There are two major ways in which this sentence has been translated (and there are also some other variations), and the scholars and translations are divided. Part of it has to do with whether the Hebrew word *erets* (#0776 אֶרֶץ), refers to “land” (an individual country) or to “earth” (the whole earth). Both meanings are valid, and there are arguments in support of both translations. The two major ways of translating can be seen in the difference between the ESV (“and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth”) and the KJV (“and I will get them praise and fame in every land where they have been put to shame”).

Zephaniah 3:19 is about Christ’s conquest of the earth and the glory of Israel in the Millennial Kingdom. After the Tribulation, Jesus will come and fight the Battle of Armageddon and conquer the earth (Isa. 63:1-6; Rev. 19:11-21). At that time God “deals” with the wicked (Isa. 11:4), and reestablishes the kingdom of Israel (Ezek. 40-48) which will be the glory of the earth; it will be a thing of praise and renown.

Some scholars see this verse in Zephaniah as referring to Judah returning from the Babylonian Captivity, but although many Judeans did return from Babylon, there are a number of reasons why that was not the fulfillment of this prophecy. For one thing, God’s “sheep” had been being scattered for centuries, and this prophecy is more universal than just referring to the Babylonian Captivity. Also, although many Judeans returned back to Judah from Babylon, historical records show that more people stayed in Babylon and Persia than returned, so God’s sheep were not gathered to Israel as they will be in the future. Also, although many Judeans returned to Israel from the Babylonian Captivity, Israel was not the praise and renown of all the earth, the people were disgraced and Judah was in ruins (cf. Neh. 1:3).

[For more on the future Millennial Kingdom, see Appendix 5: “Christ’s Future Kingdom on Earth.”]

Zep 3:20

**“restore your fortunes.”** See commentary on Zephaniah 2:7.

1. Cf. Keil and Delitzsch, Commentary on the Old Testament: The Twelve Minor Prophets, 2:145. [↑](#footnote-ref-22706)
2. O. Palmer Robertson, The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah [NICOT]. [↑](#footnote-ref-10771)
3. Cf. Barker and Bailey, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah [NAC], 496-97. [↑](#footnote-ref-32148)
4. Koehler and Baumgartner, HALOT Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament. [↑](#footnote-ref-20032)