

ZEPHANIAH: PROTOLOGY IN ESCHATOLOGY

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Zephaniah: Protology in Eschatology

ABSTRACT  
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This thesis serves to explore the book of Zephaniah in its context, and in doing so examines how Zephaniah utilizes protological themes to construct an eschatological picture. The context is that of pre-exilic Judah experiencing somewhat of a revival through the program of reformed instituted by King Josiah. Josiah's rediscovery of the Deuteronomic code provides a basis for Zephaniah's ministry of Covenant prosecution. Zephaniah himself is of royal lineage, which seems to open up opportunity for him in Josiah's court. His ministry in the court takes place during the decline of the Assyrian Empire, which grants to God's people a new ability to heed the prophet's warnings.

After a brief introduction, the theme of covenant is explored. Not only how it is seen in the world surrounding Judah, but as it is seen as a pattern throughout Scripture. As Zephaniah, being heavily influenced by the Deuteronomic code, is structured covenantally, this exercise in systematic theology gives further insight into Zephaniah's ministry. Following the systematic section on Covenant Theology, the surrounding context of the book of Zephaniah is examined. This is seen Zephaniah's background, the dissolution of the Assyrian empire, and the event and implications of the discovery of the Deuteronomic code during Josiah's reforms.

The majority of the paper then turns toward an examination of the book of Zephaniah, and finds within the book significant eschatological teaching formed within the framework of

protological themes. Themes such as creation, the exodus event, the flood, and Babel form a foundational grid upon which Zephaniah builds its doctrine of last things. The disorder seen in the fall, flood, and the confusion of languages at Babel moves toward God's purification of his people and the restoration of a pure language for his people. At each turn where judgment is pronounced upon the evildoer, that same judgment holds forth overtones of hope for the faithful remnant.

To my  
dear Michele, my  
loving wife who shows  
me each day what it means for the  
eschaton to intrude into the present;  
what it is like for heaven to be on earth.

and

To my children,  
My lifelong friends  
Kevin, Austin, and Carolyn  
Who have made life's wilderness journey a lot more fun.

## CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER TWO: SYSTEMATIC STUDIES.....	3
I. Covenant: A Theme Considered.....	3
A. Covenant Structure.....	3
1. Ancient Near Eastern Patterns.....	3
2. Applied Patterns to Biblical Passages.....	4
B. The Covenant of Redemption.....	4
C. The Covenant of Works.....	5
D. The Covenant of Grace.....	6
CHAPTER THREE: HISTORICAL STUDIES.....	8
II. Context: A Time of Crisis.....	8
A. The Disclosure of Four Generations – Zephaniah 1:1.....	8
B. The Dissolution of the Assyrian Empire.....	9
C. The Discovery of a Covenant Treaty.....	11
E. The Deuteronomy Link.....	12
CHAPTER FOUR: BIBLICAL STUDIES.....	14
III. Consideration: The Text Contemplated.....	14
A. Judah in Context – 1:1.....	14
B. Justice is Coming – 1:2 – 2:3.....	15
1. The Announcement of Judgment – 1:2-6.....	15
a. The Description of the Judgment – vs. 2-3b.....	15
1) Scope – vs. 2.....	15
2) Specification – vs. 3a.....	15
3) Stumblingblocks – vs. 3b.....	17
b. The Direction of Judgment – vs. 3c-6.....	18
1) The Sons of Adam – vs. 3c.....	18
2) A Specific Nation – vs. 4a.....	19
3) The Sacrilegious – vs. 4b, 5.....	19
4) Sinners in General – vs. 6.....	21
2. The Agony of Judgment – 1:7-18.....	22

a.	The Announcement of the Day – vs. 7-9.....	22
1)	A Command to Silence – vs. 7.....	25
2)	The Consequences of Sin - vs. 8, 9.....	25
b.	The Account of the Day – vs. 10-13.....	27
c.	The Anguish of the Day – vs. 14-18.....	29
1)	The Immanence of the Day – vs. 14.....	29
2)	The Intensity of the Day – vs. 15-18.....	30
3.	Action and Judgment – vs. 2:1-3.....	34
a.	Abasement – vs. 1.....	35
b.	Anger – vs. 2.....	37
c.	Action – vs. 3.....	38
C.	Judgments Conveyed – 2:4-3:8.....	40
1.	A Foreign People Warned – 2:4-15.....	41
a.	Warning to Philistia – vs. 4-7.....	41
1)	Punishment – vs. 4, 5.....	41
2)	Promise – vs. 6, 7.....	42
b.	Warning to Moab and Ammon – vs. 8-11.....	44
1)	Punishment – vs. 8-11.....	44
2)	Promise – vs. 9b, 11b.....	46
c.	Warning to the Descendants of Cush - vs. 12.....	46
d.	Warning to Assyria - vs. 13-15.....	47
1)	The Prophecy of Destruction.....	48
2)	The Pattern of Babel.....	49
2.	A Favored People Warned – 3:1-8.....	52
a.	Declaration of Woe – vs. 1.....	52
b.	Detailed Accusation – vs. 2-4.....	53
1)	The Indictment – vs. 2.....	53
2)	The Itemization – vs. 3, 4.....	55
a)	Violence - Princes – vs. 3a.....	55
b)	Greed – Judges – vs. 3b.....	56
c)	Treachery – Prophets – vs. 4a.....	57
d)	Defilement – Priests – vs. 4b.....	59
c.	Disclosure of Judgment– vs. 5-8.....	60
1)	The Character of God – vs. 5.....	60
2)	The Corruption of Works – vs. 6, 7.....	61
3)	The Climax of Judgment – vs. 8.....	62
D.	Joy and Conquest – 3:9-20.....	66
1.	True Security – 3:9-13.....	66
a.	A Purified Language – vs. 9, 10.....	66
b.	A Posture of Humility – vs. 11, 12.....	68

c. A Place of Security – vs. 13.....	69
2. The Triumph of the Savior – 3:14-20.....	70
a. From Sorrow to Singing – vs. 14-17.....	70
1) The Command to Sing – vs. 14.....	71
2) The Cause for Singing – vs. 14-17.....	72
a) God Stays with His People – vs. 15, 17a..	72
b) God Strengthens His People – vs. 16, 17.....	73
c) God Sings over His People – vs. 17c.....	75
b. From Sorrow to Salvation – vs. 18-20.....	77
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION.....	79
REFERENCE LIST.....	87

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

When the Book of Zephaniah is interpreted in the context of pre-exilic Judah, one finds a portrait of the Day of the Lord fashioned with such Pentateuchal imagery as covenant, creation, flood, exodus, and Babel.

Zephaniah is a book best understood when interpreted in light of both protology and eschatology. Themes of creation, covenant, and consummation resound. When these themes are explored in the context of pre-exilic Judah, one finds significant revelation concerning the Day of the Lord. This revelation is seen in a tri-level prophetic expectation.

On the first level, this Day speaks of the coming judgment upon Judah as she was taken into captivity to Babylon—an event immanent to Zephaniah’s audience, and a judgment that would reach its climax in the captivity of Judah in 586 BC. While there are suggestions that the prophetic voices understood that there remained a more consummate fulfillment of their utterances, this more linearly immediate fulfillment was the primary focus of their concern.

At the second level of expectation, Zephaniah speaks of the coming of Yahweh, and the consummation of the covenant promise that “I will be with you” (Gen. 26:3; Deut 31:8).<sup>1</sup> This coming was thought to be that of Yahweh himself—the coming of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who would exact cataclysmic judgment against the unfaithful and

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are given in the New King James Version, unless otherwise indicated.

unbelievers, and provide for the restoration of his people. This expectation, a shadow to Old Testament prophets like Zephaniah, was fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ.

The third level of prophetic expectation commences with the coming of the Messiah. With the coming of Christ one finds the “Day of the Lord” theme of Zephaniah reaching its fulfillment in a three-fold fashion: in the resurrection of Christ, the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and in the climax of the Day of the Lord—the “second coming” of Christ and the consummation of redemptive history.

CHAPTER 2:  
SYSTEMATIC STUDIES

I. Covenant: A Theme Considered

A. Covenant Structure

Biblical covenants are a means by which a superior party forms a relationship with an inferior party<sup>1</sup> (Von Rad 129).<sup>2</sup> The book of Zephaniah is a covenant document in which the superior party (God) is calling people to account for violations of his covenant, and offering the promise of deliverance for his own on the basis of that covenant.

1. Ancient Near Eastern Patterns

There is a close parallel between the structure of biblical covenants and the covenant arrangements prominent in ancient Near Eastern alliances.<sup>3</sup> In these alliances the ruler would address his vassals by means of a treaty which regulated his relationship to them (Kline, *Structure* 27). These treaties typically consisted of six parts (Kline, *Structure* 132): The preamble, the historical prologue, the stipulations, the particular conditions of the treaty, the calling of witnesses to the treaty, and the promise of blessing for obedience and cursing for disobedience to the treaty stipulations.

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<sup>1</sup> Such as may be observed in Josh. 9:6ff; I Kings, 20:34; and I Samuel 11:1ff.

<sup>2</sup> This is *not* the same thing as saying the covenant *is* a relationship with the inferior party, but rather an agreement by which the relationship is established.

<sup>3</sup> See George E. Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Near East*. Pittsburgh: Biblical Colloquium, 1955; Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1962; Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1961; Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963.

## 2. Applied Patterns to Biblical Passages

These ancient treaty patterns may be observed in the arrangement of Scripture as a covenant document. Deuteronomy, for example, may be outlined in the following way (Kline, *Structure* 133): (1) Preamble (1:1-5); (2) Historical Prologue (1:6-4:49); (3) Stipulations (5-26); (4) Curses and Blessings or Covenant Ratification (27-30); and (5) Succession Arrangements or Covenant Continuity (31-34).

As one studies through the book of Zephaniah, parallels with Deuteronomy become readily apparent,<sup>4</sup> and with good reason. Zephaniah ministered during the time of the rediscovery of the Deuteronomic code, and the book itself seems to be structured as a covenant document.<sup>5</sup> While it would be difficult to make the case that an accurate exegesis of Zephaniah depends upon finding a strict covenant structure in the book, covenantal elements do seem to be more obvious in Zephaniah than in the other minor prophets, quite possibly because of the heavy dependence upon Deuteronomy.

### B. The Covenant of Redemption

The Covenant of Redemption is that covenant made within the Godhead, in which each of the three persons of the Trinity covenants together to carry out their respective

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<sup>4</sup> See discussion below, and also Robertson, *Zephaniah* 254, 255 for numerous parallels with Deuteronomy—particularly Deut. 28-32.

<sup>5</sup> One possible arrangement of Zephaniah around the elements of ancient Near East covenant structure could be: (1) The preamble (1:1) in which Zephaniah (as the voice of Yahweh) provides his unusual authority and pedigree; (2) The historical prologue (implicit in 1:1, the Deuteronomic background, and the prominence of the Gentile nations with which Yahweh has dealt in power (esp. 2:4-14)); (3) The stipulations (1:12; 2:1-3; 3:1-3, 7, 11, 13, 14); (4) Curses (Ch. 1, 2) and blessings (3:9-12); and (5) Succession arrangements or covenant continuity (3:17-20).

redemptive functions<sup>6</sup> (Bavinck 266), and applies to the elect the redemption purchased by Christ, by working faith in them, and thereby uniting them to Christ in their effectual calling (John 3:5; II Thess. 2:13)(WSC #30). The covenant of redemption is “a pattern for the covenant of grace,” and the effective cause for carrying it through (Vos, *Redemptive* 252). Zephaniah demonstrates the outworking of the covenant of redemption in the offers and provision of salvation for God’s people seen throughout the book.

### C. The Covenant of Works

God’s condescension to man by way of covenant is first seen in the covenant of works made with Adam (WCF 7.1). Under this arrangement, life was promised to Adam and his posterity, upon condition of perfect obedience (WCF 7.2). This arrangement was a merit covenant, based upon a principle of God’s justice, in which the inheritance of heaven was to be earned by Adam through his obedience (Kline, *Kingdom* 107).

This works principle is recapitulated in the subsequent Mosaic administration of the covenant, which was informed by the principle of promised blessings for obedience and cursing for disobedience. That economy was indeed a gracious covenantal administration, but was nevertheless one which, on the geo-political level, was based upon the principle of works-righteousness (Kline, *Kingdom* 109), notably outlined in the sanctions of Deuteronomy 28, 29. The earthly, physical blessings promised for obedience pointed to the archetypical reality of covenant fulfillment in Christ Jesus and the heavenly kingdom. Thus,

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Isa. 46:10; Eph. 1:1; Luke 7:30; Acts 20:27; Rom. 8:29, 30; Eph. 1:4; John 6:37, 39; John 3:16; John 10; Heb. 9:14.

“under the Mosaic covenant works are judged in the sphere of typology (typical inheritance) apart from the substitutionary work of Christ (the principle of grace). The guaranteed, antitypical blessings for the elect rest exclusively upon the meritorious work of Christ” (Karlberg 55). The importance of this recapitulation of the works based covenant is seen in the sanctions pronounced by Zephaniah for those disobedient to the law (cf. Zeph. 1:2, 3, 8, 18; 3:3).

#### D. The Covenant of Grace

Evident from the sin of Adam in Gen. 3 and onward, Adam failed in his responsibility to keep the covenant of works, and thus his guilt, punishment, and corrupted nature were conveyed to all his posterity (Rom. 5:12-20; I Cor. 15:21, 22)(WCF 6.3). Man has no hope of fulfilling the covenant of works, for he is corrupted in sin, and unable to perform good works outside of Christ.

Rather than leave humanity in sin and death, God graciously provided the covenant of grace, through various covenantal administrations. This covenant is the means by which humankind may receive eternal life. This provision of life is not through their own works, but by the work of a Redeemer, who would buy his people back from slavery to sin and earn salvation for them. “Subsumed under the traditional designation ‘covenant of grace,’ is the whole series of redemptive administrations of the kingdom from the Fall to the

consummation, culminating in the New Covenant” (Kline, *God* 74).<sup>7</sup> In numerous ways at almost every turn, the new covenant administration of the covenant of grace is anticipated in the content of the old covenant administration<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Gen. 3:15; 6:18; 12:3; 18:18; 23:18; II Sam. 7; Rom. 1:3, 4

<sup>8</sup> See McLean, John. “The Prophets As Covenant Enforcers: Illustrated in Zephaniah.” *Michigan Theological Journal* 5 (Spring/Fall 1994): 5-25. While Mclean’s covenantal approach is different, as is his enumeration of the covenant administrations, he does an excellent job cataloging the various new covenant administration promises cited in the old covenant administration. As well, he provides a comprehensive breakdown of Zephaniah’s allusions to the various covenantal administrations.

## CHAPTER 3

### HISTORICAL STUDIES

#### II. Context: A Time of Crisis

The name Zephaniah means “the Lord has protected.” His name alone points to the importance of a consideration of the historical setting of the book, for it was indeed a time when the children of Israel needed a protector in the midst of looming captivity.

Zephaniah was born during the long reign of King Manasseh of Judah—the most wicked king in the nation’s history. It was a time of murder, idol worship, and compromise with the pagan nations surrounding Israel. Judah had become merely a vassal state—a weak collection of tribute paying cities.

#### A. The Disclosure of Four Generations – Zephaniah 1:1

In Zephaniah 1:1, the prophet’s lineage is traced back four generations to Hezekiah—the king who had initiate a great number of reforming practices within the kingdom of Israel. Zephaniah was also to be a part of the reformation of Israel’s worship, for he ministered during the reign of Josiah—the greatest reforming king Judah had ever seen. Zephaniah’s role was to encourage him in his reforms as he has discovered the book of the law—most likely the Deuteronomic code. Josiah began to read God’s law again and return Israel back to the way of her God, purging Jerusalem of idolatry, foreign gods and customs, and political compromise with pagan nations.

To appreciate Zephaniah's mandate, significance, and context, the importance of the first verse should be explored in terms of the historical context it establishes.

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

No other prophet of the Old Testament traces his lineage back four generations. In fact, eight of them have no family history recorded at all (Robertson, *Zephaniah* 252). Zephaniah's heritage emphasis is intentional: it highlights his connection with royalty (and his subsequent influence on Josiah)(Motyer 898), and underscores the parallel between Josiah's and Hezekiah's reforms (Robertson, *Zephaniah* 253). By tracing his lineage back to the time of Hezekiah, Zephaniah is demonstrating how Judah's sinful decline was setting the stage for God's intervention of both judgment and blessing.

## B. The Dissolution of the Assyrian Empire

The stage was also being set in world history. About 200 years before Zephaniah's ministry, King Ahaz (Hezekiah's father) had placed Judah under the domination of the Assyrian empire (II Kings 16:7ff). He was afraid of the kings of Damascus, and had made an alliance with the Assyrians by sending an enormous gift to Tiglath-Pileser. In effect, he made Judah a vassal state of Assyria (Bright, *History* 257).

This was the height of Assyrian domination as one of the largest and most powerful empires known on earth to that time. Everywhere her armies marched they were victorious—to the point where they even began to invade the northern areas of Egyptian empire (Durant

265). So great was her power that the apostasy of Israel was almost of necessity—an act not only of material interest, but self preservation. To be a vassal state meant acknowledging the gods of the greater empire. Judah had no will of her own, so the pagan practices of Assyria became Israel’s practices (2 Kings 21:1-9). Those who desired to continue in faithfulness to the true God of Israel were persecuted, hunted down, and killed (cf. 2 kings 21:16).

But in the midst of this treachery the Assyrian empire began to weaken. The extended military campaigns had taken their toll, civil war was eroding the fabric of the nation, and the empire was more and more held together by sheer force—even as forces began to spread thin (Durant 283ff). Just as Rome would experience in 4<sup>th</sup> century, barbarians such as the Sythians and Cimmerians began to collapse borders of Assyria. The Egyptians under the first Pharaoh of the 26<sup>th</sup> dynasty broke free of the Assyrian yoke. The Medes and the Babylonians all played a part. And beginning in 626 B.C. at the death of Ashurbanipal, the last great king of Assyria, the empire fell to pieces and vanished. In 612, the Babylonians under Nabopolassar and the Medes under Cyaxares (Keller 272), along with barbarian tribal armies, marched in upon Nineveh and ruthlessly destroyed her—slaughtering and enslaving her people (Durant 283).

None of this was outside the control and direction of Israel’s God. Nahum, prophesying against Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, said, “The LORD will take vengeance on His adversaries, And He reserves wrath for His enemies” (1:2). Ninevah was the “bloody city” full of lies and robbery (3:1)(Bright, *Kingdom* 102). “They stumble over the corpses—a

multitude of harlotries of the seductive harlot, the mistress of sorceries, who sells nations through her harlotries, and families through her sorceries” (Nah. 3:3, 4).

The significance of God’s working in the destruction of Assyria was that Judah, by default of the destruction of the Assyrian empire, was now free (Bright, *Kingdom* 102). No longer bound to apostasy as a method of self-preservation,<sup>1</sup> reforms could be instituted, which is what is taking place in the time of the book of Zephaniah. It is a brief window of reprieve in Judah’s vassal ship, enabling enough independence to begin a measure of reformation. Josiah came to the throne in 640 (Bright, *Kingdom* 102), about 10 years before the Assyrian empire began to fall apart. Her conflicts had weakened her enough that her grip on the vassal states was permanently loosened. Judah could function in fact like an independent nation.

### C. The Discovery of a Covenant Treaty

Josiah’s reforms (II Kings 22, 23) tell the story of a young king who did “what was right in the sight of the LORD” (II Kings 22:2). In his eighteenth year as king, he sent the scribe Shaphan to the temple to gather money and begin to commence repairs. While on this mission, Shaphan was told by the high priest Hilkiah that the priest had found the book of the law in the temple. Shaphan then took the book of the law to Josiah and read it to him. When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes, and immediately recognized that decisive action was needed. He commanded, “Go, inquire of the LORD for

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that self-preservation and the vassal condition was the *only* reason Israel apostatized, but her vassal condition more readily held her in that state, and made reform more costly.

me, for the people and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found” (II Kings 20:11-13). Josiah thus commenced the most significant reform and revival that Judah had ever seen—even to the point of extending his reform efforts into the north (Bright, *Kingdom* 104); effectively extending his domain and the influence of Zephaniah’s ministry.

#### E. The Deuteronomy Link

It has long been agreed that the law book Josiah found was a form of the Deuteronomic code, as Josiah’s reforms seem to correspond well to the demands of that code (Bright, *Kingdom* 103). The role of the prophet as covenant enforcer, but especially Zephaniah’s context of the rediscovery of God’s law, provides a significant connection with the book of Deuteronomy. While many of the Deuteronomic connections will be noted below with an exegetical overview of the corresponding verses, there are several prominent passages and features of this connection that are worth noting.<sup>2</sup>

The statement of the Great King’s righteousness is seen in 3:5 (Deut. 32:4).

Regarding covenant stipulations Deuteronomy/Zephaniah corresponding passages can be seen in 1:8, 13, 18 and 3:3 (Deut. 17:17-19); 1:14-2:2 and 3:1-7 (Deut. 17:9-11, 29:1, 9-21); 1:4-6 and 3:4 (Deut. 18:5).

With regard to covenant sanctions of cursing for disobedience Deuteronomy/Zephaniah corresponding passages can be seen in 1:13 (Deut. 28:30, 39); 1:15

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<sup>2</sup> See McLean, John. “The Prophets As Covenant Enforcers: Illustrated in Zephaniah.” *Michigan Theological Journal* 5 (Spring/Fall 1994): 5-25.

(Deut. 4:11 and 28:53, 55, 57); 1:17 (Deut. 28:29); 1:18 (Deut. 32:21, 22); 2:1, 2 and 3:1-7 (Deut. 29:22-28).

The covenant sanctions of blessing can be seen in Deuteronomy/Zephaniah corresponding passages such as 2:6-9 and 3:12, 15, 20 (Deut. 30:3-5); 3:9, 13 (Deut. 30:6, 8); 2:7 and 3:20 (Deut. 30:9); 3:17 (Deut. 38:63 and 30:9); 3:19, 20 (Deut. 26:19).

## CHAPTER 4:

### BIBLICAL STUDIES

#### III. Consideration: The Text Contemplated

##### A. Judah in Context – 1:1

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

This first verse reminds the reader of the importance of the context (see above).

Zephaniah, as the covenant prosecutor, of royal lineage and prophetic office, speaks the “word of the Lord” as his emissary. The word “came” is from the verb which means to be, or to exist, and includes the sense of active presence (Motyer 908). What Zephaniah will do is hear, receive, preach, and proclaim the very words of God that come to him. It is the very speech of God himself that is recorded in his prophecy.

A promise of redemption is seen in these opening words—both in the context of Zephaniah’s ministry and in the declaration of the word of the Lord. Amon, Josiah, and Josiah’s son Jehoiachin, important in the kingly succession, are also mentioned in the genealogy of Christ—the successor to the throne of David (Matt 1:10, 11). While prosecuting violators of his covenant, God is at the same time moving the world toward the preparation of the coming again of the Word made flesh—God with us. God will indeed judge sinners, but his favor, mercy, grace, and salvation are bestowed upon all those who will repent—a gift made possible by the coming King.

## B. Justice is Coming – 1:2 - 2:3

### 1. The Announcement of Judgment – 1:2-6

#### a. The Description of the Judgment – vs. 2-3b

##### 1) Scope – vs. 2

*(2) "I will utterly consume everything From the face of the land," Says the LORD;*

Zephaniah opens his prophecy with the declaration of utter destruction. All will be utterly destroyed. This is quite a startling statement—one designed to shake the unwarranted confidence of the hearers that God would not judge them as he would the wicked Assyrians.

For Zephaniah's hearers, the message is that of utter destruction. "I will utterly consume everything from the face of the land." To "consume" means "to sweep away" (Baker 92) as one would sweep away the dirt of a room, with the intent of leaving no trace. This is the act of purifying the house for coming of the King, who can tolerate no wicked thing. The comprehensive nature of the impending judgment is seen in the phrase "face of the land," which speaks of judgment upon the entire globe. The scope is universally comprehensive (Baker 92).

##### 2) Specification – vs. 3a.

*(3) "I will consume man and beast; I will consume the birds of the heavens, the fish of the sea,*

At the onset of the book, the protological reference becomes obvious. It is not Zephaniah's intention merely to provide a checklist of judgment. Here, creatures are mentioned in exactly reverse order (man, beast, birds, and fish) in which they appear as created in Genesis 1 (fish, birds, beasts, and man) (Barker and Bailey 413), enabling the reader to appreciate Zephaniah's theological framework. This prophecy of judgment is presented as an undoing of God's creative activity. What he had pronounced good has become corrupted and will pass away, replaced by that which is new. This specification, then, puts judgment in a covenantal context, as Zephaniah uses the protological covenant of creation to speak of the eschatological new creation, by pointing forward to the cataclysmic judgment of the day of the Lord.

Zephaniah also appears to make a connection to the Noahic covenant in the aspect of the consuming and all pervasive judgment which will take place (cf. Gen. 6:7, 8; 8:22 with Zeph. 1:2, 3, 15, 18; 3:7, 8). "While earth remains" (Gen. 8:22) corresponds to the judgment of Zephaniah in the final judgment of the world—a judgment universal in scope, carried out by God as he gathers the rebellious (Zeph. 3:8). This gathering, the pouring out of the judgment, may remind the reader of the flood waters of Noah—a pouring out of judgment upon the wicked (Kline, *God* 87). The judgment of water poured out becomes a judgment of the devouring fire of God's jealousy (Zeph. 3:8; cf. 2 Peter 3:10).

This judgment is commensurate with the pervasive violence and deceit of the rebellious (Zeph. 1:9). In Zeph. 3:7 "the description of those who 'rose early and corrupted

all their deeds' is an echo of the condition of humanity in the days before the flood, when humankind 'had corrupted their way on the earth'" (Gen. 6:12) (Robertson, *Zephaniah* 324). In the judgment of the flood, God declared, "The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with violence through them; and behold, I will destroy them with the earth" (Gen. 6:13). So also Zephaniah the prophet declares, "All the earth shall be devoured with the fire of my jealousy" (3:8).

But the judgment exacted upon God's enemies also serves to provide relief and salvation to God's children. "For Noah's family the Deluge was a redemptive judgment—a salvation event. As Peter says, they were 'saved by the means of the water' (I Pet 3:20). It was for them a redemptive experience" (Kline, *God* 86). The flood was redemptive in that it rescued the godly remnant from the ungodly race, disinheriting the ungodly from the land, and providing a new earth for God's covenant people (Kline, *God* 86). So also in Zephaniah the godly are rescued from the ungodly, who are disinherited from the land while the righteous obtain their inheritance (cf. Zeph. 1:3, 18; 3:19).

### 3) Stumblingblocks – vs. 3b

*And the stumblingblocks along with the wicked.*

All of the wicked will be destroyed, as will all of that which makes them stumble. There is a distinction made between the "stumblingblock," and what is called "wicked." The sin of Judah had taken the good things of God's creation and perverted them into causes for sin—objects of worship, lust, and pride. They had "changed the glory of the incorruptible

God into an image made like corruptible man -- and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things” (Romans 1:23). The created order—material objects—are not morally reprehensible, but they too struggle under the curse of the fall (Romans 8:22), a “groaning” made more pronounced by humanity’s abuse and perversion of the good things God has created—of that which is not inherently wicked (Kline, *God 23*).

Here a glimmer of redemptive hope is found in this prophetic judgment. God will destroy the stumbling blocks. This was already being seen in the reforms of Josiah, but would further be seen as the Judahites would have stripped away from them all material elements which captured their loyalties. Ultimately, this destruction would not merely be retribution upon humanity, but the eradication of all sin. It is a new creation and the anticipation of Revelation 21:5—where God will make “all things new.”

b. The Direction of Judgment – vs. 3c-6

1) The Sons of Adam – vs. 3c

*I will cut off man from the face of the land," Says the LORD.*

The last part of verse three provides a judgment against humanity in a broad sense. To be “cut off” is a covenant term, used frequently to speak of being separated from God’s people or inheritance. Here it is a curse which meant the intended would be “annihilated,” or cut off from the living (Baker 92). To be “cut off” was a significant curse. When used in the context of God’s people, it was a death sentence (a term used to speak of the death penalty in

Ex. 31:14 and Lev. 20:3-6). To be cut off from land was rejection by God. Here it is clear that Judah, her captors, and ultimately all sinful humanity will face the judgment of death.

## 2) A Specific Nation – vs. 4a

*(4) "I will stretch out My hand against Judah, And against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem.*

Narrowing the scope from the broader sentence upon humanity, Zephaniah now focuses his attention upon Judah. All humanity is guilty, but specifically Judah, the people of God, is more so. She had entered into covenant with God, and yet violated the covenant's stipulations with impunity. But now God would stretch out his hand against her as he had against Pharaoh. Judah has become a pagan people!

## 3) The Sacrilegious – vs. 4b, 5

*I will cut off every trace of Baal from this place, The names of the idolatrous priests with the pagan priests—(5) Those who worship the host of heaven on the housetops; Those who worship and swear oaths by the LORD, But who also swear by Milcom;*

These judgments are being leveled against the worshipers of false gods—in violation of covenant stipulations (Ex. 20:3). A number of categories of false worshipers are mentioned:

1. Those who still worship Baal—though the book is written during the reforms of Josiah, Baal worship was still prevalent, being so deeply ingrained in society. Baal was the general name for the false god. The name meant “ruler” or “lord” and quite often signified the variety of pagan gods found in the Canaanite lands. The Assyrians in

particular had a god named Bel, quite possibly intended here (Motyer 912). Jeremiah speaks of the shame that would come upon “Bel” who would have to spit out the nations that he had swallowed up (51:14). The Babylonian king Belshazzar, meaning “Bel’s Prince,” (Brand, Draper, and England 184) was named after this pagan deity, and his worship, statues, symbols, and practices dominated the landscape. God would “cut off every trace of Baal from this place,” even to the point of “the names of the idolatrous priests with the pagan priests” (vs. 4). Both the priests from tribe of Levi who ministered at the altar of God in temple, but worshiped Baal, and the priests of the pagan nations would be cut off. The “idolatrous priests” were those who attempted to serve both Yahweh and Baal (Barker and Bailey 419).

2. Not only the priests are indicted, but the worshipers who follow them (vs. 5– “Those who worship the hosts of heaven”). Paganism held the belief that the sun, moon, stars were living beings or superhuman spirits. Some believed that the “star-angels” had been set over the pagan nations to rule them with God’s permission, and some in Israel then took to worshipping them as lesser deities (Vos, *Biblical* 260). Hence another reference to the perversion of the created order is seen, as men worship the creature rather than the Creator. This was not new in Judah, for Manassah had instituted the worship of the hosts of heaven, a violation for which Deuteronomy prescribes death.

Compounding the confusion of the worship of the heavens, was the lack of spiritual leadership in Israel. The designation of the worship of the heavens taking place “on the

rooftops” seems to speak of individualized worship (Robertson, *Zephaniah* 264), where each worshiped as he pleased—a compounding of sin, as worship was to be offered in the temple among the people of God .

3. The hypocrite is not spared either, as “Those who worship and swear oaths by the Lord, but who also swear by Milcom” (vs. 5) are indicted. There were many who would masquerade as people in the service of God, but who would also function as servants of Baal. They served “Milcom,” an Assyrian god, translated with a word which means “king.” Quite possibly this is in reference to chief god of Assyria (Robertson, *Zephaniah* 265). Swearing to this pagan deity was a violation of God’s covenant. “To swear to” is an Ancient Near Eastern phrase which means entering into a covenant oath by which you were bound to another. The conditions of Judah’s inheritance were clear—“You shall not make mention of the name of their gods, nor cause anyone to swear by them; you shall not serve them nor bow down to them” (Josh. 23:7). Following the example of *their* great King, not the pagan monarchical deity, the people of Judah were to swear fealty to God alone, and thus obtain the blessings of the covenant (Heb. 6:13, 14). To emphasize this contrast, Zephaniah declares in 3:15, that “the King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst” (Motyer 913).

#### 4) Sinners in General – vs. 6

*(6) Those who have turned back from following the LORD, And have not sought the LORD, nor inquired of Him."*

Coming full circle, in perhaps a chiasmic structure, vs. 6 parallels 3c in presenting the judgment with a broad stroke against all those who had violated God’s covenant. The verse

provides a summary of the indictments for those practicing false religion in numerous ways, representing a whole range of religious response (Baker 94). Here there is no pretense of following after God. Though they are aware of the truth of God's words, they have turned from him in deliberate rebellion—a condition which draws upon them God's righteous judgment (Barker and Bailey 421).

Verse six names first in judgment those who have seen the word of God most clearly and rejected it—"those who have turned back from following the Lord." The people of Judah were to follow after God's commands and seek his face. Instead, they have turned back, and "not sought the Lord, nor inquired of him" (vs. 6).

## 2. The Agony of Judgment – 1:7-18

### a. The Announcement of the Day – vs. 7-9

The Day of Lord is the central theme of Zephaniah (Robertson, *Christ* 264), with many verses speaking of "the day of the Lord" (1:7; 1:14), "that day" (1:10, 15; 3:11, 16), "the great day of the Lord" (1:14), "the day of the Lord's wrath" (1:18), "the day of the Lord's anger" (2:3), and others. 1:15 is most descriptive, using repetition to emphasize the severity of the day: "That day is a day of wrath, A day of trouble and distress, A day of devastation and desolation, A day of darkness and gloominess, A day of clouds and thick darkness." As the theme constitutes so much of the book of Zephaniah it warrants at least some further examination within the Old and New Testaments.

The Old Testament view of “day of the Lord” was that it was a day of both judgment and salvation, and a day in which both could be seen on three levels: The immanent day of judgment in captivity to Babylon, and the subsequent restoration under Cyrus in 536 B.C.; the incarnation—the day of the coming of the Messiah, and his bearing of judgment upon the cross, and provision of salvation through his death and resurrection; and the consummation—the coming of Jesus Christ to judge the world and bring salvation for his people.

In *Interpreting the Prophetic Word*, Willem VanGemeren provides a helpful breakdown of the characteristics of the day of the Lord (174ff). It is a day of:

1. God’s coming—The Old Testament conception of coming of Yahweh was not necessarily understood by Old Testament prophets as day of Christ’s coming, but the day God himself would visit them (Vos, *Eschatology* 38). In fact, the term “Day of the Lord” in the Old Testament seems always to anticipate their fulfillment being found in the coming of Yahweh himself (Von Rad 119) (cf. Mal. 3:1).

For the faithful remnant about to be taken into captivity, they have a wonderful promise of a restoration—that the Lord himself would visit them. This was the heart and core of covenant promise that I will be your God and you will be my people (Ex. 6:7).

2. A judgment upon all the created order.<sup>1</sup>

This judgment upon created order is seen in that the origin of the day of the Lord concept is found in the creation days. Each of the days of creation contains the

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<sup>1</sup> See discussion of 1:2, 3 above.

pronouncement of moral “good” upon the work of that day. The seventh day, however, is the Lord’s Day, or the day of the Lord. The Sabbath rest of the day is a judicial session of the Creator—an ongoing work of judgment that occupies the King until his return (cf. John 5:17)(Kline, *God* 187). So too the day of the Lord is seen in the judgment presence of God coming upon the created order for Adam’s sin (Gen. 3:8) (Kline, *God* 188).

3. A judgment of past and future significance. The day of the Lord was an eschatological day which had connection with past prototypes, most notably the exodus event. God’s acts of judgment and salvation take place throughout the history of redemption, and each such event is a microcosm of the final act of judgment which will be upon all creation (Van Gemeren, *Interpreting* 175).<sup>2</sup>

4. The day of the Lord will be a day of the submission to the regal rule of God. Willing or unwilling, “every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear” (Isaiah 45:23 cf. Rom. 14:11, 12). It is for this reason that Zephaniah calls for silence in 1:7, for the court is in session and God stands as judge (cf. Hab. 2:20). This submission points to the submission that all will demonstrate before Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:10, 11).

5. The day of the Lord is also a day of purification—a day of the separation of the righteous and wicked, as the light from the darkness as the dawn of creation (cf. Zeph. 1:13; 3:12, 13 cf. Matt. 24:32, 33). Throughout, Zephaniah speaks of judgment ringing the chords of terror for unbeliever, but which chords are at the same time the song of salvation for the

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<sup>2</sup> As an example, the judgment upon the tower of Babel is the scattering of languages. This diffusion of languages will be reversed in the consummation as a unified language will be restored and humankind will be regathered (Zeph. 3:9, 20) (Kline, *Kingdom* 278).

believer who will be brought out from them (Zeph. 3:14). Joel speaks of the Day of the Lord as the day in which people would be “calling on the name of the Lord” (Joel 3:5). On that day the nations of the earth will be healed from the devastating effects of sin. There will be a deluge of fire to cleanse the earth from impurity, and the Lord will execute “a thorough ethnic cleansing of the satanic genotype. The genocide is total; all fallen men and angels are eliminated from the world of the saints” (Kline, *God* 209).

6. Most significantly, the day of the Lord is also a day of redemption, which will be explored below in more detail in Zephaniah 3:13-20. While the day of the Lord was certainly one of judgment, the faithful anticipated hope and salvation (cf. Micah 7:8, 9). The people of Judah had a legitimate expectation of salvation after the judgment.

1) A Command to Silence – vs. 7

*(7) Be silent in the presence of the Lord GOD; For the day of the LORD is at hand, For the LORD has prepared a sacrifice; He has invited His guests.*

Vs. 7 emphasizes the creator/creature distinction. In the presence of the Creator, the creature must be silent. He cannot protest his judgment, nor offer a defense of his sin. It is God who “gives to all life, breath, and all things” (Acts 17:25), and humanity is utterly dependent upon him. Humanity has no wisdom to offer to improve upon God’s wisdom (Ps. 36:9; Col. 2:3), and humanity’s wisdom will be judged against the ultimate standard of God’s revelation. “Silence” is thus the appropriate response to God’s verdict, and the basis of this is that the day of the Lord is “at hand.”

2) The Consequences of Sin – vs. 8-9

*(8) And it shall be, In the day of the LORD's sacrifice, That I will punish the princes and the king's children, And all such as are clothed with foreign apparel. (9) In the same day I will punish All those who leap over the threshold, Who fill their masters' houses with violence and deceit.*

These two verses address sins in the royal court. The kings of Israel were to lead the people in righteousness and emulate holiness (I Kings 10:9). In an implicit reference to violations of the Davidic covenant, the royalty is indicted. There is a notable omission of punishment of the king himself (presumably Josiah), but his sons, the “princes,” seem to be alluded to here. Three of Josiah’s sons went on to sit on the throne. Jehoahaz reigned three months. Jehoiakim, the most evil king of Judah besides Manasseh, and the murderer of Uriah the prophet, submitted to the power of Nebuchadnezzar, but after three years rebelled (II Kings 24:1), leading to a siege of Jerusalem. The youngest son of Josiah, Zedekiah, was on the throne as a puppet of the Babylonians (Bright, *Kingdom* 113), and was there when Babylon sacked Jerusalem in 586. Zedekiah was taken to Nebuchadnezzar, where his own sons were executed in front of him, his eyes were gouged out and he was then sent to Babylon to die (Bright, *Kingdom* 115).

Not only would the king’s sons face punishment, but God would “punish all those who leap over the threshold,” a reference perhaps to the custom of the Philistines who would not step on the threshold of the temple of Dagon, but would step over it (Baker 96). The irony is found in 9b, as they are those “Who fill their masters’ houses with violence and deceit.” In adopting the worship of the pagans, they were so concerned about the particulars

and minutia of pagan false worship, but yet filled house of the true God with violations of his law (Robertson, *Zephaniah* 278).

b. The Account of the Day – vs. 10-13

*(10) "And there shall be on that day," says the LORD, "The sound of a mournful cry from the Fish Gate, A wailing from the Second Quarter, And a loud crashing from the hills. (11) Wail, you inhabitants of Maktesh! For all the merchant people are cut down; All those who handle money are cut off. (12) "And it shall come to pass at that time That I will search Jerusalem with lamps, And punish the men Who are settled in complacency, Who say in their heart, 'The LORD will not do good, Nor will He do evil.' (13) Therefore their goods shall become booty, And their houses a desolation; They shall build houses, but not inhabit them; They shall plant vineyards, but not drink their wine."*

On “that day,” the great day of the Lord, a mournful cry would come from the fish gate, the second quarter, and from the hills—all three designating various parts of the city and the hills surrounding the city. While their precise location is not known, most interpreters believe their location to be in the northern section of the city, considering the ample fishing trade in Tyre (Baker 96, 97). This fits quite well with the fact that the geography of Judah determined that the most likely place for invasion and weakness would be in the north, as Israel served as a land bridge between the Mediterranean Sea and the desert (Barker and Bailey 433). Thus Jeremiah speaks of the judgment that would come from the north, as “disaster appears out of the north” (6:1), as a “people comes from the north country” (6:22). This picture emphasizes the all comprehensive nature of God’s judgment, as the false source

of security—altars of gods in hills (Robertson, *Zephaniah* 278)—is being destroyed. There is nowhere for the people of Judah to hide.

The word “Maktesh” in vs. 11 perhaps refers to the merchant district (NIV—“market district”). But the word, used only in Prov. 27:22 (“grind a fool in a mortar”) means a “molar” or “mortar” (Holladay 195), perhaps emphasizing how God would grind the city to dust—returning humanity to the point of their origin in another reversal of creation. All would be destroyed—including the wealth in which they had trusted.

The searching and penetrating light of God’s judgment would fall upon Judah. The one who created light from out of nothing would call forth light in the desolation of the darkness of Judah and “search Jerusalem with lamps.” The reason for this punishment? Their complacency and self-deception. The people of Judah had fooled themselves into believing that God was irrelevant. He would not live up to his covenant promises, and he would not enforce his covenant sanctions. “The Lord will not do good, nor will he do evil” (vs. 12). The penetrating light would not just shine in Jerusalem, however, but in the secret places of their hearts.

God would not fail to enforce his covenant, but their labor would come to nothing. Here the emphasis on the economic disaster that would befall them speaks of the full effects of the curse—both in the physical and spiritual realms. 1:13 references Deuteronomy 28:39 in the prophetic declaration that in Israel’s disobedience, “you shall plant vineyards and tend them, but you shall neither drink of the wine nor gather the grapes; for the worms shall eat

them.” In the day of God’s judgment, the full effects of the curse would fall upon them, and they would not drink of the vine they had planted, but would drink the wine of God’s wrath (cf. Rev. 14).

c. The Anguish of the Day – vs. 14-18

1) The Immanence of the Day – vs. 14

*(14) The great day of the LORD is near; It is near and hastens quickly. The noise of the day of the LORD is bitter; There the mighty men shall cry out.*

As discussed above, the day of the Lord in its near term fulfillment in the Babylonian captivity was approximately 40-50 yrs away. The expectation of the prophet was that judgment would be visited upon Judah by the Babylonians, which judgment reached its climax in 586 B.C. It was important that the nearness of this day of judgment was recognized by Zephaniah’s audience, as nearness is integral to judgment preaching. A “preacher who cries out: ‘Repent, for after thousands of years judgment will come!’ does not make a strong impression” (Vlaardingerbroek 36). The Judahites were to hear the warning as an impending judgment which drives them to repentance. For the day of the Lord would indeed be a day of great calamity, death, and destruction, but would result also in deliverance, when in 539 B.C. Cyrus would issue his decree allowing the Israelites to return home to rebuild. Within a generation of Zephaniah’s prophecy, this day of the Lord came to fruition in the captivity to Babylon.

Beyond this, however, Zephaniah speaks also of the coming of Yahweh in a greater

sense. The Babylonian captivity was the typological, or first level fulfillment of Zephaniah's prophecy. As the kingly line was typological of the kingship and kingdom of Christ (Deut. 17:14-20, cf. Luke 1), as the nation of Israel was typological of the spiritual seed of Abraham, the Church (Gen. 12:2; 13:16, cf. Gal. 3:16-29), and as the land of promise was typological of the eternal inheritance of God's people (Joshua 21:43-45, cf. Heb. 11:10-16) (Kline, *God* 99ff), so also the day of the Lord was typological of a greater coming of the King.<sup>3</sup>

The eschatological significance of that day in the Old Testament was not so clear. For them it was the looming judgment of the Babylonian aggression. Few would have recognized that it had reference to the coming of the Messiah, and the inauguration of his kingdom. As discussed above, however, the day reaches full significance in New Testament. There one can observe the theme of this present evil age and the age to come (Gal. 1:4), which is now realized in principle (in what Christ has done for us reaching back to us), and that which will be fully realized in eternity (Kline, *God* 188).

## 2) The Intensity of the Day – vs. 15-18

The day of judgment is mentioned seven times in the next two verses:

*(15) That day is a day of wrath, A day of trouble and distress, A day of devastation and desolation, A day of darkness and gloominess, A day of clouds and thick darkness, (16) A day of trumpet and alarm Against the fortified cities And against the high towers.*

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<sup>3</sup> While Zephaniah itself contains very little in terms of a direct expectation of the Messiah King (Robertson, *Christ* 267), the corresponding New Testament conception of the day of the Lord takes the expectation of the Yahweh warrior and reveals it as ultimately fulfilled in the coming of Christ the warrior King. See Longman pp. 293-300.

In this set of five couplets of parallel meaning, the Day is cast in terms of the exodus event. The day of the Lord would be for them a:

- day of wrath (cf. Ex. 15:7–“You sent forth Your wrath; It consumed them like stubble”).
- day of trouble and distress (cf. Ex. 3:17–“I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt”). The Hebrew word for trouble, *tsarah*, is translated “affliction” in the NKJ. God would now become the afflicter of Israel.
- day of devastation and desolation (cf. Lev. 26:31, 31, and the covenant sanctions of desolation for disobedience after God’s deliverance).
- day of darkness and gloominess (cf. Ex. 20:22–“there was thick darkness in all the land of Egypt three days”).
- day of clouds and thick darkness (cf. Ex. 13:21 and the cloud which was to the Egyptians “a cloud and darkness to them,” and at the same time a light to the children of Israel).
- day of trumpet and alarm (cf. Ex. 20:18 and the appearance of God in the giving of his law).

In other places Zephaniah also uses terminology familiar to the exodus event. In 1:4 the Lord declares that “I will stretch out my hand.” This phrase is used to describe God’s judgment against Pharaoh during plagues, and the manner in which he would deliver his people from captivity in Egypt (Ex. 6:6). This punishment would be delivered against Judah

because she was “the oppressing city” (3:1) a transgression which had been a theme of the exodus event.

I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel has come to Me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. (Ex. 3:7, 9)

Delivered from oppression, God called upon Israel to show mercy, kindness, tenderness, and to provide for the helpless—to be a picture of the undoing of oppression. Instead, “he looked for justice, but behold, oppression; For righteousness, but behold, a cry for help” (Isa. 57:7).

God gave to his people the voice of his prophets to call them back to faithfulness. But “She has not obeyed his voice” (Zeph. 3:2). Exodus. 5:2 describes Pharaoh as one who would not obey the voice of God. “Who is the LORD that I should obey his voice? I do not know the LORD.” But obedience to the voice of the Lord was a condition of God’s covenant with his people, and prescribed in the context of God’s covenant provision of redemption from Egypt (cf. Ex. 19:4-6).

In the exodus event, God led his people out of bondage by inflicting judgment upon the enemy for the purpose of the salvation of his people (Von Rad 124). In this the exodus event was a prototype of the day of the Lord—the release of God’s people from a godless captivity, demonstrating that the salvation of the day of the Lord was not only something to

be anticipated, but something to look back upon (Goldsworthy 224).

At the same time, the exodus event hearkened back to the scene of creation. The day of the Lord in judgment is the destruction of the old by fire, and the creation of the new. It is both judgment for sin, and salvation for the remnant, and thus is cast in terms of the creation scene. The allusion to the exodus event in description of the clouds and thick darkness (Zeph. 1:14, 15) is significant in that “Moses depicts the operation of the Shekinah cloud in behalf of Israel in the wilderness in terms that recall the creational situation described in Gen. 1:2” (Kline, *God* 34). From the parallel use of both “cloud” and “thick darkness,” it is evident that there is a dark cloudedness (Vlaardingerbroek 109), reminiscent of the cloud the Egyptians saw just before they met their destruction (Ex. 14:20). God will manifest his royal authority in the “day of clouds and thick darkness” as he manifested himself at creation, exodus, the giving of the law, the incarnation of his Son (Matt. 17:5), and the consummation, when the Son will come in a cloud in great power and glory (Luke 21:27).

The exodus event, as the day of the Lord, was a new creation event—a people of God being called out (as the world was called out by the word of his power). He would re-create his people “by his outstretched arm.” But as Zephaniah 1:3 saw the reversal of the creation work, vs. 1:4 sees the reversal of the exodus event, and the outstretched arm which saved Israel now becomes the outstretched arm directed against Israel.

Verse 16 brings this out clearly as it depicts the “trumpet and alarm” against “fortified cities” and “high towers.” In Joshua 6:5, 20 the words “trumpet” and “alarm”

occur together in a formation that indicates a military campaign—demonstrating that God has declared war against the ungodly (Vlaardingerbroek 110). Through his power he would unravel the seemingly impenetrable and secure facilities of man. The word “fortified” gives the picture of a city designed to be impenetrable due to the height and strength of its defenses (Vlaardingerbroek 110). But God would scatter those defenses.

*(17) "I will bring distress upon men, And they shall walk like blind men,  
Because they have sinned against the LORD; Their blood shall be poured out  
like dust, And their flesh like refuse."*

The picture here is that of a confused and lost people, bound by a sense of helpless bewilderment (Isa. 59:10) (Motyer 924) in the face of captivity. Can anything save them from utter destruction?

*(18) Neither their silver nor their gold Shall be able to deliver them In the day  
of the LORD's wrath; But the whole land shall be devoured By the fire of His  
jealousy, For He will make speedy riddance Of all those who dwell in the  
land.*

Certainly the answer is not to be found in their material possessions, which are unable to deliver them from impending captivity. At this point it seems certain that the inheritance of Judah will be sent to a speedy and thorough destruction.

### 3. Action and Judgment – vs. 2:1-3

The people of God are here called to measure themselves against the words the prophet has spoken, and challenged to a response. The Divine judgment is coming upon them, and Zephaniah urges them toward reflection and repentance.

The occasion must be seized, the place for repentance must be found, occupied, secured. They have forgotten and abandoned the Lord their God; let them seek the Lord. They have been unrighteous; let them seek righteousness. They have been proud and self-confident; let them seek humility. In this radical change of spiritual character, attitude, bias, lies their only hope, their sole chance of escaping destruction (Cox 287).

a. Abasement – vs. 1

(2:1) *Gather yourselves together, yes, gather together, O undesirable nation,*

The people are told to “gather together”—a repetition of the Hebrew word for gathering straw (Robertson, *Zephaniah* 289) (Cf. Ex. 5:7; Num. 15:32, 33). The picture here is that of the helpless and scattered position of Judah—blown about by the whims of the empires. But they are to gather themselves before Lord. This gathering will be for judgment by fire—gathered straw to be burned and devoured by the fire of God’s jealousy (cf. 1:18; 3:8)—a judgment pictured in Isa. 5:24: “as a tongue of fire consumes stubble and dry grass collapses into the flame.”

The picture of God as a consuming fire is both protological and eschatological. It is seen in the judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:24), in the plague of fire and hail upon Egypt (Ex. 9:23), the pillar of fire that “troubled the Egyptians” (Ex. 14:24), and it is reminiscent of the Sinai covenant, where God is seen as a consuming fire as he gives his law (cf. Ex. 24:17; Deut 4:24). At the same time this picture looks forward to the judgment of

stubble in Christ, as John declares that “He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matt. 3:13). This judgment is that of the fire of the day of the Lord, in which heaven and earth will be dissolved by a consuming fire, and all the elements will be consumed with a fervent heat (II Pet. 3:10).

Like the chaff left over from the threshing of the wheat, Judah is small and insignificant (VanGemeren, *NIDOTTE* 1: 1003). They are unworthy-like stubble that will be burned away in day of judgment, being “undesirable.”

Some translations have rendered the concept of undesirable as shameful (NIV), or as a nation without shame (NASB),<sup>4</sup> in that they are so far removed from covenant keeping that they have no concept of their sin. God created humanity in his image for fellowship with him. He was the crown of creation, given dominion over the kingdom, to reign as king in the garden temple where God walked with him. Now Judah is reduced to a nation with no awareness of God’s presence or holiness. The law reveals sin (Rom. 3:20), and their inability to be shamed by it speaks to the ignorance of God’s covenant law. Upon his sin, Adam, knowing the law of God, was ashamed and wanted to hide from the presence of the Lord. The Judahites were arrogant in their sin, flaunting it even in the temple.

Genesis 2 closes with the remark that in their innocence, under the covenant of works, Adam and Eve were “both naked, man and his wife, and they were not ashamed” (vs. 25). Though the word “ashamed” in Gen. 2:25 is different from that of Zephaniah 1:2,

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<sup>4</sup> This seems to be the preferred translation, as there is a negative ‘al in the Hebrew.

Zephaniah 3:5 uses the same word as Gen. 2:25, creating a link between the concept of the lack of shame in Zephaniah because of humanity's sin, and the lack of shame in innocence. The word "naked" in Gen. 2:25 means more than they were without clothing, but that morally they had nothing to hide. But when sin enters the picture, man becomes shameful and he hides himself. There is an undoing of creation as destruction enters. Instead of building in the garden temple, Adam is expelled from it. Instead of guarding the temple, he is guarded from it. Weeds and thistles now have the upper hand and the creation will work against Adam. From this point there is a scattering and an undoing. Man is driven from the garden, annihilated from the earth (save Noah and his family), and dispersed from Babel. So in Zephaniah there is a regathering of people who have lost all concept of God's law, and all concept of the shame known by Adam and Eve. As the first parents were "not ashamed" in their innocence, the Judahites are "without shame" in their wickedness—the result of sin. Indeed, Zephaniah 3:5 reads, the condition of the unjust is that he "knows no shame."

b. Anger – vs. 2

*(2) Before the decree is issued, Or the day passes like chaff, Before the LORD's fierce anger comes upon you, Before the day of the LORD's anger comes upon you!*

Opportunity for repentance is given before the anger of God burns against them. The word for anger, *harôn*, is a word which speaks of heat or burning, which refers to the sudden explosion of anger which will take place at the day of the Lord (Motyer 927).

Scripture is not shy about pronouncing the judgment of a loving God against sin. He is not merely a loving God, but his justice demands that he is also an angry God. But this anger is not a lack of the self-control, or a pointless emotional response. It is anger directed. Ps. 7:11-13 declares that “God is angry with the wicked every day.” The punishment set aside for the covenant violators is not unjust, but the just payment due them for their sinfulness (Rom. 6:23). The wrath of God will be thus poured out upon the unbelieving people of Judah—a picture of the wrath of God poured out on the day of the Lord upon the disobedient.

Is there no hope then for the sinner? Is this judgment inevitable? Not at all, though many will go in that way (Matt. 7:13). Instead, a response is demanded to this warning of the day of the Lord.

c. Action – vs. 3

*(3) Seek the LORD, all you meek of the earth, Who have upheld His justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility. It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the LORD's anger.*

In the provisions of the covenant of grace, humanity is not left inevitably to perish for the violations of the covenant of works. Instead, he may turn to the Lamb who has been slain on his behalf, seek his face, and turn from their wicked way (II Chro. 7:14).

There is a threefold admonition to “seek.” First seek Yahweh, then seek righteousness, and finally, seek humility. To seek the Lord is almost a technical term for obedience (Barker and Bailey 447). Certainly, Judah sought deliverance, but most sought

deliverance without obedience. However, even for those who desired to obey, there was a recognition that man cannot possibly keep the law, and so he hides from the judgment of God. Since the time of Adam's hiding in the garden at the sound of the judgment coming, men have sought to hide from judgment. But there is nowhere to hide (Ps. 139:8)—or, more correctly, only one place to hide, for “you will be hidden.”

But even this promise of a hiding place is conditional. “It may be,” *‘ulay*, is no certain thing. It means “perhaps” you will be hidden (Robertson, *Zephaniah* 293), echoing the message of Joel 2:14: “who knows, whether he will not turn and relent.” This certainly undermined the self-confidence of the self-righteous. Some had taken the attitude that they could violate God's covenant sanctions at will and repent at their leisure. But repentance is not mechanical function. This is why repentance is urged now (II Cor. 6:2)—before the decree is issued. For those who do seek the Lord, rather than needing a place to hide, they will be hidden by him (Isaiah 2:10).

In the most dramatic example of salvation offered up to this point in Zephaniah, the prophet points to the fact that there is a refuge for those who are hidden by God. How one is hidden is disclosed by Paul in Col. 3:3-6. As he writes of Christ's coming and the corresponding wrath of God in judgment against sin, he reminds the reader that “your life is hidden with Christ in God.”

Hiding in Christ is most necessary for survival! For “who can endure the day of his coming? And who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire” (Mal. 3:2).

The fire of God is the coming judgment of Jesus Christ in the day when “the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to his temple” (Mal. 3:1), as God came to the garden temple of Adam and Eve to pronounce judgment. In Rev. 6:17 the unbelievers echo the words of Malachi, “for the great day of his wrath has come, and who is able to stand?” When the wrath of God comes, no-one will have the ability to endure it, unless they are found hidden in Jesus Christ.

The wrath of God was poured out upon Christ, so that he would endure the punishment of those hidden in him. Christ keeps the law of Moses—the covenant of works—and in doing so he merits (earns) obedience for those found hidden in him, and only he can satisfy the demands of the justice of a holy God. The law brings about wrath (Romans 4:15). It is Christ’s keeping of it, and yet still bearing that outpouring of anger (Zeph. 2:2) that brings salvation to God’s people (cf. Rom. 5:9).

Thus as the first section of Zephaniah closes with the coming of justice in the day of the Lord, this day of wrath is no longer day of dread for believers, but a day for which those hidden in Christ anticipate with joy, because it is a day of their deliverance. It is a day of the judgment of sinners, and the wrath of God against sin, but a day of the demonstration of the love of God for his people (cf. I John 4:10).

### C. Judgments Conveyed – 2:4-3:8

In this second main section Zephaniah conveys the prophecy of judgments against Judah and her tormentors. Some commentators consider this section, with Zephaniah’s

“poem of the Nations” (vss. 4-15), to be a demonstration of his literary skills at their very best (Motyer 931). At the very outset this appears to be the case. Zephaniah depicts the end of the pagan cities using poetic puns on their names, using words to describe their demise that have a poetic correlation to the cities (Smith 135).

### 1. A Foreign People Warned – 2:4-15

Vss. 4-14 deals with judgments leveled against the nations surrounding Judah. The judgments pronounced upon those nations outside the covenant vary with that of the nation of Israel. The nations are held accountable not for cultic or ritualistic sins, but for issues of justice, violations of human life and dignity, and sins against God’s people. Zephaniah indicts the pagan nations for their treatment of Israel—“the insults of the people of Ammon with which they have reproached My people, and made arrogant threats against them.” Judgment for their treatment of God’s people is established in the Abrahamic covenant in that God will curse those who curse Abraham (Gen. 12:3) (Pratt). Further, the lands removed from the pagan nations are reserved for the use of the house of Judah (cf. Zeph. 2:7).

In most of these warnings, there is a pattern of punishment and promise.

#### a. Warning to Philistia – vs. 4-7

##### 1) Punishment – vs. 4, 5

*(4) For Gaza shall be forsaken, And Ashkelon desolate; They shall drive out Ashdod at noonday, And Ekron shall be uprooted. (5) Woe to the inhabitants of the seacoast, The nation of the Cherethites! The word of the LORD is*

*against you, O Canaan, land of the Philistines: "I will destroy you; So there shall be no inhabitant."*

Vs. 4 names four prominent cities of land of the Philistines, who occupied a land 15 miles wide by 50 miles long on coast of the Mediterranean. They had long been a thorn in side of the Israelites. Solomon had brought the Philistines under temporary domination, and they were finally conquered by King Uzziah in about 760 B.C., though they held the territory west of Judah, blocking them from Mediterranean Sea (Cox 289). Israel failed to purge them from Gaza, Gath and Ashdod (Josh. 11).

The irony is that while history now sees the end of Judah, God will also put to an end that which Judah had failed to accomplish. Their land will be forsaken, desolate, driven out, and uprooted. The compilation of these words underscores the comprehensive nature of the destruction. This destruction would take place at noonday, which quite possibly has a double significance. Not only is there no need on God's part to employ military secrecy or night time surprise (Robertson, *Zephaniah* 298), but they would be driven out at noon—at the time when the inhabitants of the Middle East would find rest from the fierce rays of the sun and its intense heat. God would drive them from their place of rest and security, out into the burning sun of the noonday heat (Cox 289) and fires of judgment.

## 2) Promise – vs. 6, 7

Within this punishment directed at the pagan cities is also a promise for God's people. In fact, the result of the judgment is the fulfillment of a promise to God's elect.

*(6) The seacoast shall be pastures, With shelters for shepherds and folds for flocks. (7) The coast shall be for the remnant of the house of Judah; They shall feed their flocks there; In the houses of Ashkelon they shall lie down at evening. For the LORD their God will intervene for them, And return their captives.*

Ashkelon was the most central city on the coast of Philistia. The heart of their country would become Israel's dwelling place through God's intervention. Their land would become pasture land—an open or common land. In Numbers 35 the Levites were to be given pasture land that was to be used for the priests (cf. Josh. 21). The pasture land of the cities was land that considered safe and secure (cf. Ps. 23). God will turn the seacoast, a land now cut off from Israel by force, into the dwelling of peace.

This pasture dwelling of the remnant is a picture of redemption—a picture of God's people coming to him in worship because they have been delivered (cf. Ps. 95:6, 7; 100:3). A land torn with violence and death will now become a place for lambs to “graze as in their pasture” (Isa. 5:7). Again another antithesis is seen in a reversal of the fall. While chapter one saw a reversal of creation, here redemption is emphasized, and God takes the coastland and makes it a pasture—a place of prosperity and safety for his people, restoring them again.

Ezekiel 34 sees this restoration of the pasture land as a picture of Israel's redemption:

*I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd cares for his herd in the day when he is among his scattered sheep, so I will care for My sheep and will deliver them from all the places to which they were scattered on a cloudy and gloomy day. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and bring them to their own land (vs. 11-13b).*

Ezekiel's words are none other than a prophecy of the work of Jesus Christ, the shepherd of the sheep. It is Christ who finds his lost remnant and returns them to their pasture (cf. Luke 15:4-6). It is Christ who declares that "I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture" (John 10:9).

And so, Zeph. 2:7, in a prophecy of the return from Babylon and the work of the great Shepherd, declares,

*(7) The coast shall be for the remnant of the house of Judah; They shall feed their flocks there; In the houses of Ashkelon they shall lie down at evening. For the LORD their God will intervene for them, And return their captives.*

b. Warning to Moab and Ammon – vs. 8-11

1) Punishment – vs. 8-11

*(8) "I have heard the reproach of Moab, And the insults of the people of Ammon, With which they have reproached My people, And made arrogant threats against their borders. (9) Therefore, as I live," Says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, "Surely Moab shall be like Sodom, And the people of Ammon like Gomorrah -- Overrun with weeds and saltpits, And a perpetual desolation. The residue of My people shall plunder them, and the remnant of My people shall possess them. (10) This they shall have for their pride, Because they have reproached and made arrogant threats Against the people of the LORD of hosts. (11a) The LORD will be awesome to them, For He will reduce to nothing all the gods of the earth;*

Moab and Ammon lay on the northeast side of Judah, and had a long history of animosity toward Israel. Both nations were jealous of Israel, and desired her land, particularly now that these nations had gone into decline (Vlaardingerbroek 146). Their judgment is due to their pride—lifting up themselves against God, as did Satan, and like Satan,

they will be cast down. This pride and reproach and desire to humiliate Israel is most interesting because it was Ammon and Moab who should have known shame (2:1), born of an incestuous relationship between Lot and daughters (note the reference to Sodom and Gomorrah) (Robertson, *Zephaniah* 303). Instead, in their arrogance they had attacked Israel's borders and sought her lands.

Ammon in particular had attacked Israel both in terms of her cities and her seed—both geographically and generationally. Amos 1:13 reveals that Ammon had “ripped open the pregnant women of Gilead in order to enlarge their borders.” This was an attack corresponding to the enmity that would exist between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). It was Ammon's desire to snuff out the line of Messiah while taking over her lands (Robertson, *Zephaniah* 304). In these actions Ammon declares war upon God, and in response vs. 9, 10 give the only two uses of the term “Lord of Hosts,” *Yahveh Tseba'ôt*, or “Lord of the army” in Zephaniah. This term is usually associated with military passages which view the Lord as “a God of the armies fighting on behalf of the people of Israel” (Barker and Bailey 460). God would wage war against them and “be awesome to them, For He will reduce to nothing all the gods of the earth” (vs. 11). He guarantees their destruction with the use of the oath formula, “as I live,” a formula found 22 times in the Old Testament. The significance of this is found in that a person would not swear by his own life—and yet this is precisely what God does, as he is always the subject of the oath

(Vlaardingerbroek 146, 147). The judgment of the Assyrians is assured by God's covenant promise.

## 2. Promise – vs. 9b, 11b

*(9b) The residue of My people shall plunder them, And the remnant of My people shall possess them. (11b) People shall worship Him, Each one from his place, Indeed all the shores of the nations.*

Even in English a poetic element can be observed in these verses, “the residue shall plunder” and “the remnant shall possess.” The residue is “what is left over” of the people, after they have faced the fires of the Babylonian trial. The remnant is what God has preserved, parallel to the “residue,” but emphasizing his own special people. Indeed, the restoration of Israel in 586 was a restoration of a “residue” of people (cf. Ezra 2). The initial fulfillment was anything but glorious in and of itself.

But ultimately the promise of vs. 11b is a fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. The whole land promised to Abraham (Gen. 13:14, 15) and shown to Moses (Deut 34:1-4) is to be given to God's people. Not merely as an earthly inheritance, for that earthly model was but a shadow of what was to come. God's remnant will see the eternal inheritance—a heavenly land, whose riches far surpass that of the milk and honey of the earthly Canaan. Though the people did not possess the land as commanded, God will be the one to take possession in fulfillment of his covenant and give it to his people.

## c. Warning to the Descendants of Cush – vs. 12

*(12) You Ethiopians also, You shall be slain by My sword.*

Zephaniah now turns his attention to the Ethiopians. They were quite possibly the southernmost kingdom known to the prophet (Cox 292), underscoring the comprehensive nature of God's judgment upon all nations.

Some commentators note the brevity of this prophecy of judgment (one verse; no elaboration) as a literary tool highlighting the swiftness of God's judgment upon them (Robertson, *Zephaniah* 309). The sword of God's judgment features prominently in the expulsion from the garden of Eden, and the Cherubim who guarded the garden with a flaming sword. Originally, Adam had been charged with the task of guarding God's dwelling place (Gen. 2:15), but in his sin he was expelled from the garden, and the guarding task (*shamar*) was given to the Cherubim, guarding the sanctity of the garden *from* Adam (Kline, *Kingdom* 85, 86). This use of the sword demonstrates God's judgment is not vindictive, but out of concern for his holiness and glory—which cannot be spoiled by man's sin. Death would fall upon any who attempted access to the tree of life through the sword of the angel.

d. Warning to Assyria – vs. 13-15

*(13) And He will stretch out His hand against the north, Destroy Assyria, And make Nineveh a desolation, As dry as the wilderness. (14) The herds shall lie down in her midst, Every beast of the nation. Both the pelican and the bittern Shall lodge on the capitals of her pillars; Their voice shall sing in the windows; Desolation shall be at the threshold; For He will lay bare the cedar work. (15) This is the rejoicing city That dwelt securely, That said in her heart, "I am it, and there is none besides me." How has she become a desolation, A place for beasts to lie down! Everyone who passes by her Shall hiss and shake his fist.*

## 1) The Prophecy of Destruction

The judgment against Assyria presents another element of the reversal of the created order caused by sin (Robertson, *Zephaniah* 312). Originally humanity was given dominion over the created order. Now, however, creation has seized power from what was up to that time the most powerful empire in the world, and translated it back into a wilderness. “Chaos has supplanted civilization” (Robertson, *Zephaniah* 312). Indeed in Gen. 3:17-19 one of the consequences of the fall is the curse upon the created order (cf. Romans 8:22), which seeks to reclaim dominance over humanity.

Notable also is the fact that the animals lodging in the city (vs. 14) are ceremonially unclean animals (cf. Lev. 11:18; Deut 14:17), a picture of the defiling of the wicked city of Nineveh (Cox 313). The pelican is found in list of unclean birds in Deut. 14. The “Bittern” probably speaks of a swamp bird which customarily perched upon columns; a picture of their destruction. The call of the bittern is one described as “dismally hollow.” “It is like the interrupted bellowing of a bull, but hollower and louder” (Cox 313)—an appropriate echoing cry from a vanished empire.

The irony of this is noted in vs. 15, where it is seen that animals of the pasture dwell securely, restored by God. The theme of beasts making their home here is significant in that one of the principle leisure activities of Assyrian royalty was hunting. Now, the beasts dominate. The mighty empire of Assyria has become a deserted shell.

What is the reason for such severe judgment? The pride and autonomy of the pagans, and a denial of the creator/creature distinction, attempting to dethrone God from the first commandment and placing self upon the throne: “I am it, there is none besides me” (vs. 15). “I am it,” in the Hebrew is simply the first person singular pronoun for “I.” “I’m all that is being” the pagan would say, putting himself in God’s place. However, it is God who says, “I am” (cf. Ex. 3:14), and who declares his self-sufficiency. For this self-sufficiency, Assyria is brought low (McLean 20).

## 2) The Pattern of Babel:

The near term fulfillment of this prophecy seen in the destruction of Nineveh in 612 B.C., within a generation of Zephaniah’s prophecy. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the prince of paganism, a city which in Scripture has a connection with Babel.

Nineveh is first mentioned in Gen. 10:11, as a city built by Nimrod—a great grandson of Noah, grandson of Noah’s son, Ham. His father named him “let us rebel,” and intentionally planned that Nimrod would not submit to God, but would instead become a leader and motivator of the rebellious, an intention which Nimrod lived up to. He plans a rebellious scheme of human government which seems successful for a time, but is ultimately defeated.

God’s plan cannot be thwarted, so he begins to plan a new nation. He prepares Abraham, a descendant of Shem, to be a father of his chosen people (Currid, *Lectures*), who receive hope in the prophecy of the destruction of the city of Nimrod in Zephaniah. And in

August of 612 the City of Nineveh was destroyed by a combined army of the Babylonians and Medes. For the next 300 years the site laid vacant (Bromiley, *ISBE* 3: 540)—a stark demonstration of the veracity of Zephaniah’s prophecy.

Nimrod also founded another godless city: Babel—which saw the judgment of the scattering of languages. God takes the initiative and confuses the languages of humanity—scattering the peoples across the face of globe. But Zeph. 3:9, 10 paints the image of a reversal of Babel. The diffusion of language will be reversed in the consummation as a unified language will be restored, and humankind will be regathered (Kline, *Kingdom* 278). In the day of restoration, God gathers the peoples to restore a purity of language. “In the accomplishing of this redemptive goal the dispersive effects of the diversification of tongues would be reversed. A pure language would be restored and there would be a regathering of the new mankind to receive a name of praise” (Kline, *Kingdom* 278). The intention is to see a redemption that is thoroughly global. A reversal of the rebellious Babel (Acts 2),<sup>5</sup> and the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, that “in you all the families of the earth will be blessed (Gen. 12:3) (Larsen 13).

So in Zephaniah, the builder of Babel and Nineveh is leveled, and God judges the pagan nations. This judgment is a picture of the human culture which will ultimately prove

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<sup>5</sup> Sam Larson considers Acts 2 not to be a reversal of Babel, but a “healing” of Babel. “At Babel, humankind lost a common vocabulary and language structure, resulting in confusion and conflict. The cause of this was not diversity alone, but the simultaneous loss of a unifying way of communicating with and understanding one another—a *lingua franca*, so to speak. At Pentecost the diversity of languages was not reversed. Rather, the languages were affirmed as the Spirit enabled the apostles to speak in the full array of languages present that day. It was the *content*, not the language, of their message that was unified” (Larsen 12).

unable to provide salvation. Zephaniah points forward to the destruction of the city of man, and the ultimate triumph of the city of God. Indeed, as vs. 11 predicts, “He will reduce to nothing all the gods of the earth; People shall worship Him, Each one from his place, indeed all the shores of the nations.”

The cities of man can never provide ultimate salvation. God’s wrath against humanity in sin is depicted in Zephaniah as a judgment directed against these political structures which have failed in their responsibilities. The common order arrangement of the secular state will disappear and give way in that final day to the Kingdom of Christ which will set back in order the perversion of the created order by the ushering in of a new creation. This new creation will have room not for the rebellious kingdoms of humanity, but the kingdom of God alone (Kline, *God 23*). There are many governments of man which lift up their arm in rebellion against him, but there is only one true nation of God—one city of his construction. Human governments are substitutes, temporary in nature, which serve only until the permanent consummation culture (Kline, *God 23*) of the community of a glorified humanity.

The judgment of God is thus a radical upheaval of the common order, and the coming kingdom not an earthly theocratic kingdom during a millennial period, but a full fledged kingdom of Glory that is consummated upon the destruction of the enemies of God (Kline, *God 212*). The culture of the nations will pass away, and pagan human government, with its opposition to God as depicted in tower of Babel, will become obsolete (Kline, *God 23*). The

nations will be purged of impurity and folded into Christ until there is one nation—one true people of God. This is a reversal of the scattering of Babel (cf. Zeph. 3:8). Instead of the unrighteousness being scattered, there is a gathering—not for restoration, but indignation.

## 2. A Favored People Warned – 3:1-8

### a. Declaration of Woe – vs. 1

(3:1) *Woe to her who is rebellious and polluted, To the oppressing city!*

Judgment now comes upon Judah for violations of God’s covenant. A specification of charges does not appear against the Gentile nations in Zephaniah, for Israel had specific covenant obligations as God’s covenant people. They were vassals in God’s covenant, commanded to remain pure and unpolluted by the nations surrounding her. Instead, they had become rebellious and polluted.

The concept of pollution was that of a defilement of that which was to be holy. Adam was placed in the garden to guard—*shāmar*—the garden from defilement, but failed in that task. His pollution disqualified him for the task of guardianship (Robertson, *Zephaniah* 317), and so he was kept out of the garden lest he should introduce impurity.

As Nineveh had been declared unclean, so also Judah was unclean. This uncleanliness was a word used of the prophets and priests in Lam. 4:13, 14, who had corrupted their office with the shedding of innocent blood (Robertson, *Zephaniah* 317). They had become an “oppressing” city (vs. 3, 4), and the oppressors were the princes, judges,

and prophets. The very office bearers who were supposed to deliver from the oppressor, became the oppressors. They carried in their actions the marks of the seed of the serpent—the wicked who prey upon the helpless (cf. Psalm 10:8). Judah had only been able to prove, time and time again, that she was utterly incapable of meeting the demands of the law.

b. Detailed Accusation – vs. 2-4

1) The Indictment – vs. 2

*(2) She has not obeyed His voice, She has not received correction; She has not trusted in the LORD, She has not drawn near to her God.*

Four specific charges are leveled against Judah:

First, “she has not obeyed his voice.” This characteristic of Judah plants her squarely in the camp of the enemy and the oppressor. The “voice” –*qol*– of the Lord is a manifestation of the authority of God. It is first seen in the garden after the fall when Adam and Eve heard the “sound” of God “walking” in the garden. It was not God speaking in friendship that they heard, but his approach in judgment against them (Kline, *Images* 98). The “voice” was that of authority in judgment as they had violated the stipulations of the covenant of works.

On Sinai, the “voice” of the Lord is again heard, accompanied by lightning, thunders, and the quaking of the mountain. As God declared his covenant with them, he did so with the revelation—not of a figure—but of his voice—*qol* (Kline, *Images* 99).

Obedying the voice of the Lord is a formula seen 17 times in Deuteronomy—9 times in the covenant sanctions of Deuteronomy 28 and 30. These chapters reveal the covenant

promises of blessing for the hearing of God's voice and cursing for the repudiation of God's voice.

The "voice" of God in covenant stipulations and sanctions is a theme then picked up by Zephaniah, laboring in the context of the Deuteronomic code. As Judah would not be obedient to the "voice" of God's covenant stipulations (3:2), she would suffer the onslaught of the "voice" of God's covenant sanctions. The "sound [*qol*] of the day of the Lord" would fall upon them (1:14). It is the sound of wrath, trouble, distress, destruction, desolation, darkness and gloom (1:15), and "a day of trumpet and battle cry" (1:16). The scene of the theophanic presence of God at the giving of his covenant on Sinai—the blowing of trumpets, darkness, dark clouds, and consuming fire (Ex. 20:18) (Kline, *Images* 120), becomes the scene of God's judgment against the covenant breakers.

The second indictment against Judah was that she had "not received correction" (3:2a), a word which can mean instruction as well as discipline (VanGemeren, *NIDOTTE* 2: 480). This of course means not just receiving it, for Judah had certainly received the law, but responding to it—the equivalent in modern times might be those who "hear" but do not "listen." Judah had neither listened to instruction, nor to the Lord's chastening.

The third indictment against Judah was that she had "not trusted in the Lord." The element of trust was central to the covenant, and it called upon God's people to place their confidence in Yahweh (Barker and Bailey 476). The lack of trust is demonstrated in the garden when Eve begins to doubt the veracity of God's words (Gen. 3:4). Trusting in the

Lord in Old Testament was seen through obedience and faithful worship. The reward was possession of the land. Several passages from the Psalms clearly outlined the importance of trust in obedience, faithful worship, and the promise of an inheritance (cf. Ps. 4:5; 31:6; 37:3; 125:1). Part of this, then, is trusting in both the wisdom of the covenant stipulations, and the correction that follows disobedience to them (Pro. 3:5).

As Eve had been tempted to “be like God” in the garden, usurping his place and authority, so too the Judahites had put themselves in the place of God, trusting in their own power and wealth for security (Barker and Bailey 476).

The fourth indictment against Judah was that she had “not drawn near to God.” The people drew near by way of priests (Lev 9:7; I Sam. 14:36), but the priests had become corrupted, and thus the people did not draw near. The opportunity to come near to the Lord was one of the highest covenant blessings. It was one that Adam had enjoyed in the fellowship of the Lord in the garden temple—a privilege lost by his fall. In fact, the Deuteronomic code reveals that the concept of going near to God meant to hear what he has to say (5:27). But, like Adam, the Judahites instead did not wish to hear the voice of the Lord, nor draw near to him.

2) The Itemization – vs. 3, 4

a) Violence – Princes – vs. 3a

(3) *Her princes in her midst are roaring lions;*

The motif of the lion is very common in Scripture, and often occurs in figures of speech and poetry as symbols of judgment (cf. Num. 23:24; I Kings 20:36), violence (cf. I Sam. 17:34), royalty (cf. Prov. 19:12), redemptive work (cf. Jud. 14; Dan. 6), and the consummation (cf. Isaiah 65:25). In Gen. 49 Jacob gives the blessing to his children, declaring, “Judah is a lion’s whelp;” [...] “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, Nor a lawgiver from between his feet, Until Shiloh comes” (vs. 9, 10).

The king of Judah was to be a picture of the lion of the tribe of Judah, Jesus Christ. Here the princes fail, becoming roaring lions—pictures of the enemy (cf. I Pet. 5:8). They were pictures not of mercy, but of mercilessness. The royalty of Judah demonstrates that they are utterly unworthy in their capacity. They preyed upon the people and maneuvered their position to exalt their pride. This leads the reader to consider, “who may be worthy?”

Rev. 5:1-10 provides the answer in the scroll that must be opened, and the question again asked, “Who is worthy?” No one is worthy to open or even look at it, until one of the elders says, “Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals” (Rev. 5:5). Thus even in this charge against the princes of Judah redemption is anticipated, for the work of the lamb/king who is worthy creates an entire kingdom of kings and priests who will inherit the archetypal Kingdom of God. It is through this Lamb’s work that he has “made us kings and priests to our God; And we shall reign on the earth” (Rev. 5:10).

b) Greed – Judges – vs. 3b

*Her judges are evening wolves That leave not a bone till morning.*

Judges were responsible for equity, but instead were experienced in thievery. The covenant provided that judges were to hear and decide cases between people and judge righteously even in matters of life and death (Deut 1:16). They were instead judging to increase their own power and influence. They had become wolves among the sheep whom they were to protect. A wolf is a picture of violence in Scripture (cf. Gen. 49:27). The “evening wolves” were “notoriously fierce (Hab. 1:8) (Motyer 942). They would come out at night to seek their prey, so insatiable in their appetite, lust, and greed, that they would not even leave a bone of their prey by morning. The judges had become adept at consuming all they could of the people and produce of Judah, picking the people clean by their greed (Baker and Bailey 478).

Once again the picture of the ravenous abuse of the judges points to the coming of the Judge of the last day. The New Testament paints the picture of the wolves who attack the sheep of Christ’s pasture (Luke 10:3), but tells also of the one who is the good shepherd, who gives his life for the sheep (John 10:11). The great Judge of Israel would not devour his own sheep, but judge righteousness and equity (Ps. 9:8; cf. Acts 17:31), fulfilling that which the Old Testament judges did not and could not.

c) Treachery – Prophets – vs. 4a

(4) *Her prophets are insolent, treacherous people;*

The word translated “insolent” is used only twice in Old Testament, and is a picture of a reckless or arrogant person, without the restraint that someone in a sacred vocation should exercise (VanGemeren, *NIDOTTE* 3: 609) (cf. Judg. 9:4). Commanded to lead the people in the way of the Lord, the prophets instead “led My people astray by their falsehoods and reckless boasting; yet I did not send them or command them, nor do they furnish this people the slightest benefit” (Jer. 23:32).

As the most basic level, the function of a prophet in the Old Testament was to call the people back to covenant faithfulness. The prophet acted as a covenant prosecutor, reminding the people of their sin, and offering indictments against them for their wrongdoing, while at the same time promising future blessings to the faithful (McLean 13). They were to apply the laws of Yahweh and prosecute its violators (Pratt).

The prophets were to continue to bring the law of God before a forgetful people. Their task was to reawaken memory of the largely forgotten Sinaitic Covenant (Bright, *History* 247). Thus their utterances were in the tradition of the covenant made with the people of Israel on Mount Sinai—calling them back to obedience to his law. As vassals under the great king, they were to be obedient to the stipulations set forth by that king, and in their keeping of those covenant stipulations receive either blessing or cursing (Deut. 27, 28). It is the violation of these covenant stipulations that leads to the pronouncement of the violent sanctions pronounced in Zephaniah—a prophet who amply demonstrates the prophetic role of

covenant enforcer.<sup>6</sup>

This “selling out” of Judah’s prophets made them “treacherous”—untrustworthy deceivers and charlatans. In Ex. 21:8, the root of the word—*bogedoth*—is used to describe a master’s dealing with a female slave whom he has intended to take as a wife. If the master found her unsatisfactory, he was to allow her to be redeemed; not sold off to foreigners. The prophets of Israel, however, were selling out the nation.

Here again, however, the office of Christ as prophet is anticipated. Rather than selling out his remnant, Christ would give his life to provide for their redemption, fulfilling the promise of the covenant (Gen. 3:15). For the intention of the law given through Moses could be realized not in the failure of the prophets to prosecute faithfully the covenant, but through true grace and truth realized in Jesus Christ (John 1:17).

d) Defilement – Priests – vs. 4b

*Her priests have polluted the sanctuary, They have done violence to the law.*

Priests, who were to be set apart for the Lord’s service, had become “polluted.” The world of the Israelite was divided into two categories—the clean or the unclean; holy or unholy. Of the 134 times that the word “polluted”—*halel*— is used in the Old Testament, 16 are found in the holiness code of Lev. 17-26. Israel was to be consecrated to God and her distinctive gifts and features set apart to him. The land (Amos 7:17), the camp of Israel (Lev.

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<sup>6</sup> See McLean, John. “The Prophets As Covenant Enforcers: Illustrated in Zephaniah.” *Michigan Theological Journal* 5 (Spring/Fall 1994): 5-25. McLean demonstrates how, in specific passages (many of which will be noted in the exegesis below), Zephaniah enforces the covenants God had established with his people.

13:46), the city of Jerusalem (Isa. 52:2), and the place of worship (I Kings 9:3), particularly the Holy of Holies (Num. 1:51), were all to be set apart unto God. So too the priests, representing the people to God, were to be holy, and their lives distinctively devoted to holy service (Lev. 21:1-23) (Von Rad 272). To be polluted, then, meant to take that which was to be consecrated and make it common. It was the failure to distinguish between the holy and the profane (VanGemeren, *NIDOTTE* 2: 149).

In no place was this distinction between holy and profane more pronounced than the temple. The sanctuary of God was to be kept clean, the holy nation was to offer sacrifices in a holy space, and none who were unclean could enter. Yet those who were chosen to be holy had become polluted: profaning God's name, people, and house.

Zephaniah, in very clear language, indicts the people of Judah for their utter failure to keep the terms of the covenant. They had abandoned the law of God, had refused to listen to God's chastening, and had demanded faithlessness from their leaders—and their leaders were only too happy to oblige.

c. Disclosure of Judgment— vs. 5-8

1) The Character of God – vs. 5

*(5) The LORD is righteous in her midst, He will do no unrighteousness. Every morning He brings His justice to light; He never fails, But the unjust knows no shame.*

The judgments of God are true and righteous, without fault in any form (Ps. 19:9), because they are based upon God's character. Thus before pronouncing the judgment of God

upon the sinner, Zephaniah reminds the reader of the character of God. In two sets of positive and negative statements the reader learns of God's character (righteous), his conduct ("do no unrighteousness"), his court ("bring justice to light"), and his consistency (he "never fails").

The Lord's covenant faithfulness is flawless, as he will always act according to character. Indeed, the law stated that the great King's work "is perfect, For all His ways are just; A God of faithfulness and without injustice, Righteous and upright is He" (Deut 32:4). This righteousness is not merely part of his character, but "every morning He brings his justice to light."

Zephaniah then briefly contrasts God's character with the unjust.

## 2) The Corruption of Works – vs. 6, 7

*(6) I have cut off nations, Their fortresses are devastated; I have made their streets desolate, With none passing by. Their cities are destroyed; There is no one, no inhabitant. (7) I said, 'Surely you will fear Me, You will receive instruction'—So that her dwelling would not be cut off, Despite everything for which I punished her. But they rose early and corrupted all their deeds.*

The word for "fortresses"—*pinnah*—is the same word in used in 1:16 to describe the day of the Lord as "a day of trumpet and alarm against the high towers." It is often translated "corner" as in "four corners" or "corner gate," which is a word signifying strength and security (Barker and Bailey 483). But just as Judah had corrupted the covenant, and the surrounding nations had failed to gather to Judah's God, so to would their works be corrupted in this statement of a universal judgment of humanity. Rather than strength, they would reap

devastation and desolation. It is a picture of horror; one that Jeremiah paints by saying “the heart of the king and the heart of the princes will fail; and the priests will be appalled and the prophets will be astounded” (4:9). The destruction of the city of man will not just be a cosmic wrecking ball, but a terror inducing fiery judgment that will melt the elements (II Pet. 3:10, 12).

The streets of once great empires will lie “desolate”—a word picture of being laid to waste, and a word often used to describe a drought condition (cf. Jer. 51:36). The scene is that of a place deserted with a threefold emphasis (“none passing by”; “no-one, no inhabitant”), a once fruitful city now cracked and dried. The wages of their sin are being paid—death. They rise early—not to engage in the profitable labor of tending what God has given, but to discern new works of evil and unrighteousness.

This purging of judgment would lead to the restoration of the fear of the Lord. “Surely you will fear me—you will receive instruction” (3:7). First among the commandments of the Lord was that his people were to fear him (Deut 10:12, 13). In fact, fearing the Lord was synonymous with obedience to the Lord and keeping his covenant stipulations (Barket and Bailey 483). Fearing God is the right application of biblical commands. It is taking the commandments of the Lord and living them out in every life situation—filtering one’s interactions with all of created order in light of the commandments of the Lord. By purging away sin, this fear of God would be restored.

### 3) The Climax of Judgment – vs. 8

(8) *"Therefore wait for Me," says the LORD, "Until the day I rise up for plunder; My determination is to gather the nations To My assembly of kingdoms, To pour on them My indignation, All my fierce anger; All the earth shall be devoured With the fire of My jealousy.*

Zephaniah now speaks of a gathering for judgment—a judgment seen as a blessing for the righteous—an event they are to await in confident expectation. Zephaniah here changes from the third person masculine plural to the second person, which he previously used in 2:1-3 (Barker and Bailey 484), in speaking to the meek of the earth who would heed his warning. Thus the imperative to “wait” seems to be for the benefit of the remnant—who should look forward to the removal of the pagan nations that they might serve God uninhibited (Barker and Bailey 485). Even in their captivity, they are to wait in anticipation for “the Day I rise up for plunder.” The word for rise *-qum-* seems here to be used in a legal context, as in the judge rising to deliver his sentence to the guilty. In fact, several times where this word “rise” is used and God is the subject, it is followed by action verbs that have legal connotations (VanGemeren, *NIDOTTE* 3: 903), speaking of God standing in judgment against the wicked in vindication of the righteous (cf. Ps. 1:5; 74:22; 76:8).

In standing he makes his “determination”—his judgment—*mishpāt*. This word is seen most frequently in the book of Deuteronomy. A judicial word, it speaks of the process which governs the settling of disputes. There is a wide gap between the demands of God’s law and the works of the sinner—a gap that cannot be filled by humanity, which will stand before God in a universal judgment for their iniquity.

To render this judgment, God will gather the nations. The word used for gather—*asaph*—is used 127 times in Old Testament, but only three times where this form of the verb (qal) has God as the subject (VanGemeren, *NIDOTTE* 3: 863). The other two times are found in Ezekiel 22:19, 20, where the prophet states: “I am going to gather you into the midst of Jerusalem. As they gather silver and bronze and iron and lead and tin into the furnace to blow fire on it in order to melt it, so I will gather you in My anger.”

In the delivery of this judgment, Zephaniah in 3:8 says that God “will gather the nations to my assembly of kingdoms.” The word “assembly” is not possessive, however. It seems better translated “My decision is to gather nations, To assemble kingdoms” (NASB). Here in Zephaniah, the picture of judgment is expanded from Israel to “the nations” and “kingdoms” of the earth—a picture of judgment upon all unbelievers.

Once again even in this pronouncement of judgment, there is a significant element of comfort. The Judahites could be comforted by the fact that their oppressors would be judged and she would be delivered. So too, the gathering of the nations in rebellion against God is not something about which the church should cower in fear, for the gathering of the nations against God is God’s own working. The gathering of the armies of Gog and Magog (cf. Ezek. 28; Rev. 20) for the final battle, is a counterfeit gathering of impotent powers (Kline, *God* 200). As people of God gather in worship, so the kingdoms of this world will gather to defeat God, but will instead be judged (cf. Ezek. 38:4). In the final Day, God will release

Satan from his millennial prison and use him as an instrument to gather the unrighteous for their judgment (Kline, *God* 200).

In Zephaniah 3 this prophecy begins to unfold in a threefold fulfillment. In 586 B.C. Jerusalem is leveled by the Babylonians, in 70 A.D. Jerusalem is leveled by the Romans, and so also this prophecy points to the final judgment of the nations (Robertson, *Zephaniah* 325) (Rev. 20:8, 9).

While Zephaniah did not fully comprehend *how* this judgment would come about, the New Testament reveals that it is through the work of Jesus Christ, for “He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed” (Acts 17:31). Indeed, Christ’s victorious work has already begun—in his death and resurrection he disarmed the power and principalities and triumphed over them. God, by raising Christ Jesus subjected all things to him (Eph. 1:19) in a victory over the gathering of his enemies (Longman 304).

This is a sobering prophecy, but it does not end here. The importance of these indictments against Judah is seen in the typological nature of the old covenant. It was a type pointing toward the new covenant. The works principle that operated in the law of Moses (“do this and live”) was the “governing principle in the typological sphere of the national election and the possession of the first level kingdom in Canaan” (Kline, *God* 97). This is why when Judah disregarded God’s covenant stipulations they lost their inheritance. The

works principle was at work. Not pertaining to individual eternal salvation—not salvation by works—but the physical inheritance. If you obey, you will get the land of promise.

The people, however, did not obey, a fact which helps reveal that the purpose of law was not to gain salvation—for no-one could ever keep it (cf. Romans 4:1-8). Its purpose, in part, was to show the need for the one who comes who does obey, fulfills the demands of the covenant of works, fulfills the Mosaic code, and initiates his kingdom making a new covenant with his people. The message of Zephaniah is one of judgment, fire, and destruction—but only for those not found united with the great Judge. For the true people of God, it is a prophecy of joy and conquest. And to this the prophet turns his attention in the last section of the book.

#### D. Joy and Conquest – 3:9-20

##### 1. True Security – 3:9-13

###### a. A Purified Language – vs. 9, 10

*(9) For then I will restore to the peoples a pure language, That they all may call on the name of the LORD, To serve Him with one accord. (10) From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia My worshipers, The daughter of My dispersed ones, Shall bring My offering.*

As the judgment and desolation would be universal, so also would the restoration. Extending to “the peoples” would be the restoration of a “pure language.” Out of the mouth will no longer proceed both blessing and cursing (James 3:10), but only that which gives

glory to God—fulfilling the right use of human language, and acknowledging him as their covenant sovereign.

Certainly in the restoration of 536 B.C. there was a gathering of God’s people, but the small remnant, lack of enthusiasm, and particular scope certainly indicated that a greater fulfillment was awaiting. Part of that fulfillment is seen in the Church of Christ as it is called to gather in worship, echoing the prayer, “O Lord, open my lips, And my mouth shall show forth Your praise” (Ps. 51:15). In Acts. 2:21, Peter, in the first sermon of the New Testament church declared “whoever calls on the name of the LORD Shall be saved.” Significantly, Peter’s message comes in the context of the Pentecostal gathering of those who were “afar off” (Acts 2:39), in which God supersedes the confusion of languages by his Spirit enabling the apostles to speak in a full range of tongues that all might understand.

The inauguration of the New Testament Church is the beginning of the gathering of many languages into one. The Church is truly a multicultural, universal society of God’s people—made up of both Jew and Gentile—and all are one in Christ. These worshipers are part of those who had been dispersed” “the daughter of my dispersed ones.” The covenant sanctions in Deuteronomy (4:27:28:64; 30:3) had warned that Israel would be scattered if they were disobedient (Robertson, *Zephaniah* 329). But now the true Israel of God, called from among the “daughter” of the dispersed and the Gentile nations, are called to speak one language of praise before him.

How far will this reach? Back in 2:12—it was seen that the *Cushim* would be slain by the sword—an allusion to the southernmost kingdom known to the prophet (Cox 292). This reference underscored the comprehensive nature of God’s judgment upon all nations. But in 3:10 Zephaniah declares that as far as the judgment extends, the salvation extends further. Not merely to *Cush*, but *beyond* the rivers of *Cush* God’s worshipers bring an offering. The Nile was over 4200 miles long—as far as the ancient near eastern mind could conceive. And yet past the southernmost branches of the Nile comes an offering of worship.

This purity is found not only with the lips, but with lives of those gathered that they may “serve him with one accord.” The profession of God’s sovereignty will not only be with the mouth, but with the worshipful service devoted to him. The expression “to serve him with one accord” literally means “work with one shoulder.” It is equivalent to the expression “working shoulder to shoulder” (Baker 117)—working together in a united effort. The church is the place of a common communion, fellowship, and work of worship—and a communion that extends not to one political body, but all over the world.

b. A Posture of Humility – vs. 11, 12

*(11) In that day you shall not be shamed for any of your deeds In which you transgress against Me; For then I will take away from your midst Those who rejoice in your pride, And you shall no longer be haughty In My holy mountain. (12) I will leave in your midst A meek and humble people, And they shall trust in the name of the LORD.*

Judah, which reveled in her pride and arrogance, will be cleansed of those elements. This cleansing would be the result of the removal of those who “rejoice in your pride.” This

phrase is found in Isa. 13:3, where the Medes had become arrogant because of their military might (Barker and Bailey 490). This, too, was Judah's sin. The pride of Judah would be ruined (Jer. 13:9), and she would be cleansed of those who had ruined her countenance with arrogance.

The lack of humility is the result of sin. The perfection of humility is because of the cleansing of it. Sin will now be eradicated, with the result that "you will not be shamed for your deeds." Without sin, there will be the restoration of perfect harmony and communion with God. As Adam and Eve without sin were "not ashamed" (Gen. 2:25), so when sin is eradicated, humanity will again be in that blessed state of sinlessness. They will now be able to respond properly to God's covenant—not out of arrogance, but out of humility.

c. A Place of Security – vs. 13

*(13) The remnant of Israel shall do no unrighteousness And speak no lies, Nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth; For they shall feed their flocks and lie down, And no one shall make them afraid.*

In vs. 13 we see the results of God's preservation of a people. There is no unrighteousness, no lie, and no deceitful tongue. These characteristics are indicative of a genuine heart change (Jer. 9:8; Matt. 12:34). The promise of Ezekiel 36:26 is come to fruition: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh."

With the removal of sin, there is the removal of fear. Considering the context of the imminent captivity to Babylon, it is a remarkable thing to ask the people of Judah to think

about lying down and being unafraid. Certainly this did not reach its apex in the Babylonian restoration (cf. Neh. 4). It does, however, begin to see its fulfillment in the work of Jesus Christ, who shepherds his flock in safety and security (John 10:14, 15). The picture of feeding is that of abundance of blessing. The picture of lying down is a picture of security. All these are found because Christ, the chief shepherd, has given his life for the sheep. In Christ sins are purged, and the chief shepherd has become a guarantor of the covenant promises of our eternal inheritance (Heb. 7:22).

Back in Lev. 26, Moses had written that if the children of Israel were obedient to God's covenant stipulations, they would receive an abundance of blessing—blessings echoed in Zephaniah 3:13. “You shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell in your land safely. I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none will make *you* afraid; I will rid the land of evil beasts, and the sword will not go through your land” (Lev. 26:5b, 6).

## 2. The Triumph of the Savior – 3:14-20

### a. From Sorrow to Singing – vs. 14-17

The last verses of the book of Zephaniah are so vastly different from the rest, that many scholars believe they were added to the book. Certainly such exuberant utterances must be post-exilic, they would claim (see Smith 144), for the people of God could be expected to have no such hope with captivity looming. But the attentive reader has been expecting the message of these verses. They speak of the redemption the prophet has not

only interspersed throughout the book, but has been leading up to all along. The very essence of authentic faith is trusting God in spite of the dire circumstances pressing in around them, and it is this authentic faith that Zephaniah is seeking to instill.

In fact, all of what is revealed of God's people—their trials, victories, failures, captivity, and restoration, is given as hope for the Church of Christ (cf. Romans 15:4). This is why it is perfectly compatible that the prophet who says “I will utterly consume everything from the face of the land” (1:2) can at the conclusion say “Sing, Shout, Be glad, Rejoice!” (3:14).

#### 1) The Command to Sing – vs. 14

*(14) Sing, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!*

The command to sing is the natural working out of the biblical truth of redemption. It is a command which not only relates to Judah in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., but relates to the Church of Christ today. The command to “sing” was connected to the vibrant worship of the community of the elect. It is reminiscent of the song of Moses—a victory hymn delivered at the judgment of God upon the enemies of his people (Kline, *God* 129). It is seen again in the revelation of the covenant to David (II Sam. 7), and will be seen as “the hymn sung by the victors over the beast as they stand by the sea of glass” (Rev. 15:3) (Kline, *God* 129).

As it is used here, the word “sing”—*ranan*—is a shout of victory. For the people of Judah it is the result of God beating back the enemy (VanGemeren, *NIDOTTE* 3: 1129). For

the Church, it is the result of the word of God victoriously working in the hearts of believers (Col. 3:16), which results in singing.

This singing is coupled with the command to “shout.” “Shout” is a causative active (hiphil), heightening the intensity of the response of God’s people from singing to shouting—a word which conveys the blast of the commencement of battle (Robertson, *Zephaniah* 336). It is a word used six times in Joshua 6 as the children of Israel marched around Jericho. They concluded their march by giving a rousing shout for God had delivered the city of Canaan to them. Singing and shouting are often coupled together in the exultant worship of God’s victorious people (cf. Ps. 32:2, 3). A natural compliment to singing and shouting, is then rejoicing. “Be Glad and rejoice with all your heart.” There is clearly an emotional element (Barker and Bailey 494) of relief, joy, thanksgiving and pleasure in what God has done.

The song of God’s people is a “new song” (Isa. 42:10). It is the song of deliverance and victory over the enemy by the divine warrior. In Rev. 5:9ff, the song disclosed in Isa. 42 is seen to be a song of praise to the Lamb because of his worthiness to open the seals—a symbol of the waging of a holy war (Longman 303). The singing of the Church is eschatological. It is the victory hymn of Jesus Christ.

## 2) The Cause for Singing – vs. 14-17

### a) God Stays with his People – vs. 15, 17a

*(15) The LORD has taken away your judgments, He has cast out your enemy. The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; You shall see disaster no more. [...] (17a) The LORD your God in your midst*

In the Israel of the Old Testament, there was no permanence of God's presence. The temple would be destroyed, and the people taken away from the land. The mark of covenant fulfillment was the coming of Jesus Christ as "God with us" in fulfillment of the covenant promise that "you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God" (Ezek. 36:28).

The dwelling of God with his people is fulfilled in the life and work of Jesus Christ. Christ took away the judgments of his people by bearing their sin in his body (II Cor. 5:21). He has cast out the enemy, defeating Satan. The Church carries this work forth in the preaching of the gospel, plundering the house of Satan (Mark 3:27; Luke 10:16-18), as God continues to stay with his people through Jesus Christ who is "with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

b) God Strengthens his people – vs. 16, 17b

*(16) In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear; Zion, let not your hands be weak. [...] (17b) The Mighty One, will save;*

There is a future orientation to the worship, work, and attitude of the people of God. They live as "unto that day." In the midst of their impending captivity, Judah looks to the mighty one who will save. For those in Zephaniah's day, this "day" was the future restoration from captivity. But beyond, Zephaniah is referring to the final day. The day of judgment in which sin will be purged, and the weak made strong.

For the New Testament believer, this is lived out in the life of the Church, for it is a prophecy fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ: "Fear not, daughter of Zion; Behold, your

King is coming, Sitting on a donkey's colt" (John 12:15). Sin and Satan have been defeated in Christ.

Thus though the Judahites are faced with many encumbrances, they are told "do not fear." This is a dramatic reversal of Adam, who heard the sound of the Lord coming in judgment and was "afraid" (Gen. 3:10). Though the Lord is again coming in judgment, God's people are not to be afraid. This is a play on words. In 3:7 the people have a lack of fear, but it is the lack of the fear of God, which lead them to sin. This lack of fear is replaced with a fear of God which eliminates their fear of sin, self, and Satan. It is only the fear of God which can deliver his people from the fear of sin, for "by the fear of the Lord men depart from evil" (Prov. 16:6). This fear of God is also realized in the believer's union with Jesus Christ. Isaiah 11:3, speaking of Christ, declared that "His delight is in the fear of the LORD."

Godly fear, and the absence of ungodly fear, leads to service. In the face of captivity, there was no excuse for inaction. They were not to let "your hands be weak." The command to labor was given to Adam before the fall. The curse upon creation, however, made that labor futile and inefficient. Hands applied to thorns and thistles would wear out and soon tire. In "that day," however, the impediment of the curse will be removed. The Christian's service, now hampered by sin, will be perfect service to God. No longer grieving their glorious Savior, but freed from sin, they will serve him with full hearts. The frustration expressed by Paul in Romans 7:22-24 will be alleviated, because of the perfect work of

Christ. This is why Paul can look forward to that day of Christ in which his work will be with his full capacity in Jesus Christ—free from the burden of sin (Phil 3:12). For him, as it is to be for all believers, it is also the motivation for his present labor—as unto the Lord who has worked for us. “Let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not” (Gal. 6:9).

It is the prospect of the restoration of their worship—“The LORD your God is in your midst” (vs. 17a)—that is to strengthen their hands in Christian service.

c) God Sings over his people – vs. 17c

Zephaniah 3:17c contains three parallel lines which express the deepest joy and satisfaction of God in his people.

*(17c) He will rejoice over you with gladness,  
He will quiet you with His love  
He will rejoice over you with singing.*

O. Palmer Robertson calls this verse the John 3:16 of the Old Testament (*Zephaniah* 339). It is a remarkable expression of the love of God in a progressive parallel demonstrating love bursting forth in song (vs. 14). There is a progression from joy, to the silence of adoration, to a vocal exultation: “He will be elated!” (Motyer 958). It is a love contemplated deep within the very being of God (Robertson, *Zephaniah* 339), for “God is love” (I John 4:8). And that love bursts forth in God himself singing over his people. As God’s people sing to him, he sings back to them.

This verse expresses the unconditionality and the intensity of God’s commitment to his people. But at the same time, the word for “love” is not the typical word used of God’s love—that which describes his covenant faithfulness. It is the word used to describe the love Jacob had for Rachel, that of Jonathan’s tremendous friendship with David, and the way Jacob loved his son, Joseph. It describes a love of great intensity, purpose, and delight (Motyer 958).

Adam hid when confronted with his sin. This picture of God’s delighting in his children drives the Christian to him. Sin shames the believer, but it should not drive him from God, but drive him to God in repentance. God welcomes the repentant sinner, and even as he repents, he pours his blessing of love upon him (cf. Luke 15:20). This is a love seen all the way back at that first promise of redemption when God did not leave Adam hopeless in his sin, but provided a way of salvation for him—a way that sent his Son to the cross in an outpouring of his love.

This is an indescribable love known only through Jesus Christ. It is a love shown for his people “in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). It is the love of the cross. And yet while this love cannot be adequately defined, it can certainly be known (Eph. 3:17-19). This description of God being quieted by his love for us<sup>7</sup> points us to Jesus

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<sup>7</sup> The word *charach* for “quiet” is a hiphil imperfect 3<sup>rd</sup> person masculine. The Hiphil being a causative, one might expect that this verse means that “He will quiet you with his love” as translated in the NKJ. However, the translation “he will be quiet in his love” (NASB) seems to be preferred. Robertson (*Zephaniah* 340, 341) notes that while this line is difficult to interpret, the regular usage of the word and the poetic structure of the verses seems to point toward an idea that God is saying that “he will be quiet (over you) in his love.” It is his understanding that the word describes the inward condition of the subject (God), rather than depicting a

Christ—who refused to open his mouth to defend himself before Pilate. Jesus’ silence in his crucifixion was rooted in nothing other than the strength of God’s love for his people—enabling Christ to be a sheep dumb before shearers, opening not his mouth.

b. From Sorrow to Salvation – vs. 18-20

In these last three verses of Zephaniah, God himself now directly speaks (Robertson, *Zephaniah* 343):

*(18) "I will gather those who sorrow over the appointed assembly, Who are among you, To whom its reproach is a burden. (19) Behold, at that time I will deal with all who afflict you; I will save the lame, And gather those who were driven out; I will appoint them for praise and fame In every land where they were put to shame. (20) At that time I will bring you back, Even at the time I gather you; For I will give you fame and praise Among all the peoples of the earth, When I return your captives before your eyes," Says the LORD.*

The people of Judah had sinned, and the judgment of God was upon them. They would be scattered among the nations. As in the wilderness, they aimlessly wandered without a place for worship; without attending the appointed cultic festivals (cf. Lam. 1:4). The reproach of sin had become a “burden,” a word used to speak of the unjust taxes in grain that the poor had to pay to the rich (VanGemeren, *NIDOTTE* 2: 1114). The shame of the exile is heavier than they are able to bear.

But it is in the midst of this contemplation of sin’s burden that the reader is summoned with a call to worship: “I will gather those who sorrow over the appointed

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quietness which is conveyed to the object. In addition, the first and last lines of the stanza contain the ‘*alayik*’ (“over you,”) suggesting its implied presence in the middle line of the stanza.

assembly.” God will gather them to the restoration and purification of worship. God’s elect will rejoice in their worship, finally able to do all that they were created to do.

Yes, Judah would be taken into exile because of their sin, but God would also deal with those who oppressed his people. They would face God’s judgment (cf. 2:3ff). And while the mighty were judged God would “save the lame, And gather those who were driven out” (taken into exile). This portion of vs. 19 is set in a chiasmic structure emphasizing the return after the exile (Robertson, *Zephaniah* 345). The Deuteronomic code discovered under Josiah had revealed both the prophecy of exile and return (Deut. 30:1, 4), and God now declares and confirms the declaration of that sanction (Robertson, *Zephaniah* 345). God would not leave his people in exile, but would come to their rescue. He would “save the lame”—the most helpless members of society, who could not save themselves.

Isaiah, too, had foreseen that salvation would be provided for those incapable of saving themselves. “I will bring the blind by a way they did not know; I will lead them in paths they have not known. I will make darkness light before them, And crooked places straight” (Isa. 42:15). Ultimately, this will be carried out in the coming of the King. Christ would bear their grief and carry their sorrows (Isa 53:4), a picture seen at Gethsemane, where Jesus cries, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (Matt 26:38). Jesus was exiled, grieved, despised and rejected by men, “A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isa. 53:4). Jesus Christ would bear the punishment of his people.

CHAPTER 5:  
CONCLUSION

Zephaniah's prophecy found near term fulfillment in the return from the 70 years of exile, but surely it did not there find complete fulfillment. The little community of a few tens of thousands who returned found little fame and praise throughout the earth. But there was a restoration after the purging of the exile, and this purging and restoration is a picture of the work of Jesus Christ.

Judah was profaned by her sin and exile, but this would result in a change. Once she had been a picture of shame in the lands into which she was driven, but she would now be a picture of praise and fame. This would fulfill the covenant promise of Deuteronomy 26:18, 19, that God "will set you high above all nations which He has made, in praise, in name, and in honor, and that you may be a holy people to the LORD your God."

The fame expressed here is not a worldly recognition, but a picture of God giving his people a permanent identity. He is again calling them out (gathering) and naming them. It is the restoration of the garden paradise entrusted to Adam—but more—for it will be a permanent and incorruptible inheritance. Adam lost the land given to him, and was cast out. Israel had lost her land and would soon be taken captive. But God would restore them again—not merely to the Canaanite rich land, or the Edenic paradise, but to the archetypical heavenly kingdom.

This is fulfilled in the new covenant—a fulfillment of the gracious promise made to Abraham in Gen. 12 that “I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great.” How great? It will be the name of Jesus Christ (cf. Phil 2:9 with Acts 2:38; 11:26).

With the coming of Christ, the Old Testament expectation matures into the new covenant reality of the Messiah. As anticipated by the Old Testament, his way is prepared by another messenger—distinct from the line of prophets that had brought the message in the monarchical and exilic periods, but now a single voice that would prepare the coming of the great King (Mal 3:1; Isa. 40:3)(Robertson, *Christ* 402). This expectation was fulfilled in the ministry of John the Baptist, as Jesus declares “For this is he of whom it is written: ‘Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You’” (Matt. 11:10). So Paul writes that these things took place in “fullness of time”—when the way had been prepared by the messenger (MacKay 315).

And who comes, but Christ! “Immanuel”—“God with us” (Matt. 1:23). God himself, made flesh. And when Christ comes, it is God who has come, as he is fully God. Christ takes upon himself the title of “Lord,” demonstrating that the expectation of the coming of the Lord is fulfilled in the coming of Christ (Vos, *Pauline* 74). In Matt. 12:8 Christ declares himself to be the anticipated “the Son of Man” (and the imagery of Daniel entailed in that) and that Son of Man “is Lord...” Thus Peter in Acts 10:36, declares that Christ is “Lord of all.” Paul declares that “every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of

God the Father” (Phil 2:11). The coming of “Yahweh” is none other than the coming of Christ himself.

There is a sense in which it can then be said that the “day of the Lord,” while speaking of a particular judgment and redemption, also speaks of the entire period between Christ’s first and second coming—when he came he put down all rule, authority and power—binding Satan, setting captives free, and giving light to the blind. In his incarnation he began that rule and reign which will be fully consummated in his coming.

And this coming of the Messiah, has in itself a dual “coming.”

First, Christ, as the covenantal sacrifice, provides his own death in judgment as a substitution for the judgment of death for violators of the covenant of works (cf. Matt. 26:26-29; Luke 22:14-22) (Robertson, *Zephaniah* 272). The full fury of the wrath of God visited upon him the covenant sanctions of cursing for disobedience (Robertson, *Zephaniah* 272), which Christ bore in fulfillment of prophecy to provide salvation to his people (Isa. 53).

Second, the coming of the Holy Spirit, sent from the Father and the Son (John 14:26; 15:26), provides another level of fulfillment, as his outpouring, accompanied by supernatural signs, marks the arrival of the last days (Robertson, *Zephaniah* 272). The apostles preached the kingdom of Christ as the fulfillment of the hopes of the Jewish people, with Peter declaring that the event was the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy of the day of the Lord (Goldsworthy 223). The event of Pentecost thus became the days leading up to the

consummate fulfillment of Zephaniah's prophecy in what is usually referred to as Christ's "second coming."

The label "second coming," however, may be a bit of a misnomer. In the New Testament, Paul describes the coming of Christ using the words *parousia*, "revelation," and simply, "the day." Geerhardus Vos points out that the word *parousia* is absent the word "again," and does not connote a return, but an arrival (*Pauline* 75). The term denotes primarily presence, "with the idea that the presence is realized by way of a coming as a secondary connotation" (Kline, *Images* 121). The culmination of the old covenant promise of God's dwelling with his people is seen in this *parousia*, or presence of Christ. Indeed, "when Christ's *parousia* is spoken of as a revelation in glory, as it is repeatedly, what is in view is the specific idea that Jesus is the embodiment of the theophanic Glory of God revealed in the Old Testament" (Kline, *Images* 122).

In terminology couched in creation covenant language, I Thess. 4:16 describes the coming of Christ as taking place with the "voice of the archangel," (cf. Gen. 3:8), as God's voice is again heard with the shout of command, speaking in judgment (Kline, *Images* 122). "The cosmos-shaking voice of the Lord as he speaks from heaven at the eschatological judgment will answer to the terrifying, earth-shaking voice of God in his ancient descent in the theophanic cloud with sound of trumpet and voice of words on Sinai" (Kline, *Images* 122).

Paul's conception of the day of Christ's coming harmonizes with Zephaniah's picture of the day as one of great calamity and sudden justice. It is a day which arrives as a thief in the night, or as labor pains come upon a woman prepared to give birth (I Thess. 5:1-8) (Vos, *Pauline* 82).

Though the prophets did not fully comprehend, Christ understood that his ministry of judgment was that of the gathering at the consummation. In fulfillment of the expectations of the Messiah, Christ would gather the wheat into the granary and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire (cf. Matt. 3:11, 12) (Kline, *God* 201). This gathering will have a dual purpose—the gathering of the elect for eternal reward (cf. 3:20), and the gathering of the wicked for judgment. When Satan deceives the nations and gathers his armies to invade the kingdom of Christ, (II Thess. 2:3-11), then the “Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming” (II Thess. 3:8), taking vengeance upon the deceiver (Kline, *God* 206), and consuming his armies with fire falling from heaven (Rev. 20:9). Then at the great white throne judgment, all creatures will be judged, and he whose name is not found written in the book of the life will be cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:15) with the Devil and his angels to be tormented forever and ever (Rev. 20:10).

The day of the Lord revealed in Zephaniah is thus a foretaste of the consummation in Christ Jesus, in which all evil will be purged, and God's people will realize full and final salvation. It is a day anticipated in protology, as one reads of the voice of the Lord and his presence in the garden temple, and of the judgment of the Lord in the “frightening noise of

the approaching Glory theophany told them [Adam and Eve] that God was coming to enter into judgment with them” (Kline, *Images* 106).

The eschatological day of the Lord foretold by the Old Testament prophets reappears in the New Testament prophecies of the end of the world. It continues to be closely identified with the parousia-Presence of God and with divine judicial action, only now the day of Yahweh becomes the day of Jesus Christ and his parousia as Judge (Kline, *God* 191).

In Zephaniah the theme of contrasts is seen. There are numerous sets of opposites, reversals, and antitheses that point to the promise of de-creation, re-creation, and restoration. There is judgment for the wicked and justification for the chosen—and they are seen in stark contrast to one another.

Being gathered for judgment is alarming. But the gathering of the last day is a dual gathering—a gathering of the seed of the serpent, and a gathering of the seed of the righteous. Matthew (24:30, 31; 13:41) reveals that God will send out his angels with a blast of a trumpet to gather his elect from one end of heaven to the other, but at the same time he will gather the wicked out of his kingdom. The weeds will be gathered into bundles and burned. The righteous will be gathered into the barn—precious grain to glow like the sun in the kingdom of their Father (Kline, *God* 202).

Nothing is more terrifying than the opening words of Zephaniah to the wicked (Robertson *Christ* 266):

*Neither their silver nor their gold Shall be able to deliver them In the day of the LORD's wrath; But the whole land shall be devoured By the fire of His jealousy, For He will make speedy riddance Of all those who dwell in the land (1:18)*

But at the same time there are no words more comforting than the closing words:

*The Lord your God will rejoice over you with gladness, He will be quiet in his love, he will rejoice over you with singing (3:17).*

God's salvation is even greater, wider, and more magnificent than his destruction of sin. The salvation offered is greater than the judgment rendered. And the story of Zephaniah shows true believers that God's work of redemption is built into his creation pattern. It is seen at the creation—the destruction of it through sin, and restoration of it through a new heavens and new earth. It is seen in the first promise of redemption. It is seen in the Exodus event, as God recreates his people, gathering them from the land of their enemies and calling out a people for himself. It is seen as he gathers them to Sinai where as a covenant assembly they heard his words of covenant law—a law they could not keep, pointing them to Jesus Christ. It is seen in the scattering and confusion of language that God will restore. It is seen in the captivity to Babylon, and the restoration to the land.

But all of these were types pointing to the new covenant; to the coming of Immanuel—God with us; to the institution of the Church; to the consummation of all things in Christ Jesus. Zephaniah, though written over 2500 years ago, is about the Christian today. It is about the response of the one with a true and living faith to a God who loves his people with an everlasting love that will never fail. And it calls upon the believer to live in light of that

which will come, the power of which shines back upon us in the “now.” It calls the believer to go into all the world and be a witness to the nations (Matt. 24:14) of the power, majesty, love, and holiness of the Great King of the covenant. It calls upon the believer to live a life of holiness before the Lord—the life of a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17).

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