



Zephaniah - Chapter Three

Summary of Chapter Three

On the Day of the Lord, God's righteous judgement will fall on the people of Jerusalem. If they are found to be against God and still living with unrepented sin then they will face his wrath.

God the judge is also God the gracious. He intends that the nations should turn to him as well as his own people. This will cause rejoicing, not least because God alone has accomplished salvation.

e. Zephaniah 3:1-7 - The Wickedness of Jerusalem

God's people cannot think that they will emerge unscathed on the Day of the Lord. If they sin (vv.1-4) and are shameless (v.5), they are also held accountable, especially if they lack repentance (vv.6-7).

¹ Ah, soiled, defiled,
oppressing city!

Zephaniah 3:1

The city is now described as soiled, defiled and oppressing. It has become ritually polluted through sins of idolatry and covenant breaking: <<*For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, your tongue mutters wickedness*>> (Isaiah 59:3), and: <<*By offering polluted food on my altar. And you say, 'How have we polluted it?' By thinking that the Lord's table may be despised*>> (Malachi 1:7). Rather than showing care, the city has become brutal and overbearing: <<*Like a lion he has left his covert; for their land has become a waste because of the cruel sword, and because of his fierce anger*>> (Jeremiah 25:38).

- ² It has listened to no voice;
it has accepted no correction.
It has not trusted in the Lord;
it has not drawn near to its God.

Zephaniah 3:2

God called to his people, but they did not listen. If there is any voice for the sheep to obey, it is the voice of the shepherd: *<<When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers>>* (John 10:4-5), but it has listened to no voice.

Correction certainly came, but the people did not receive it as correction from the Lord. Instead it was a bad time, tough circumstances, whatever, but it has accepted no correction. God still disciplines his people today and it is in their best interest to accept his correction: *<<But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world>>* (1 Corinthians 11:32), *<<And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children – ‘My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, or lose heart when you are punished by him; for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and chastises every child whom he accepts.’ Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline?>>* (Hebrews 12:5-7).

God never gave his people any reason to stop trusting in him; he never proved himself unfaithful or untrustworthy. Now God’s people will openly deny and contradict God’s Word and promises, showing that it has not trusted in the Lord.

The worst offence is saved for last. God longs for relationship with his people, but they rejected his desire and went their own way, so it has not drawn near to its God: *<<Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded>>* (James 4:8).

- ³ The officials within it
are roaring lions;
its judges are evening wolves
that leave nothing until the morning.

Zephaniah 3:3

Among those who should lead the city aright, but have in fact turned against her, are its officials, the civil authorities: *<<David assembled at Jerusalem all the*

officials of Israel, the officials of the tribes, the officers of the divisions that served the king, the commanders of the thousands, the commanders of the hundreds, the stewards of all the property and cattle of the king and his sons, together with the palace officials, the mighty warriors, and all the warriors>> (1 Chronicles 28:1), <<And on the day of the Lord's sacrifice I will punish the officials and the king's sons and all who dress themselves in foreign attire>> (Zephaniah 1:8); and the judges, those in charge of settling legal disputes: <<Let them sit as judges for the people at all times; let them bring every important case to you, but decide every minor case themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you>> (Exodus 18:22). Instead of showing benevolence, these leaders were acting as roaring lions, ferocious beasts possessing great power, about to seize prey: <<Does a lion roar in the forest, when it has no prey? Does a young lion cry out from its den, if it has caught nothing?>> (Amos 3:4), and as evening or desert wolves, known for their ravenous appetite: <<Benjamin is a ravenous wolf, in the morning devouring the prey, and at evening dividing the spoil>> (Genesis 49:27). Leaders, rather than guarding their flock, devour it clearly against God's will: <<Thus says the Lord God, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them>> (Ezekiel 34:10).

The apostle uses the analogy of a roaring lion to warn God's people of Satan's trickery: <<Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour>> (1 Peter 5:8).

- ⁴ Its prophets are reckless,
faithless persons;
its priests have profaned what is sacred,
they have done violence to the law.

Zephaniah 3:4

Religious officials are also condemned, including the prophets. Rather than being speakers of God's sure Word, they speak their own reckless and even faithless words: <<Instead, as a faithless wife leaves her husband, so you have been faithless to me, O house of Israel, says the Lord>> (Jeremiah 3:20). In: <<Unstable as water, you shall no longer excel because you went up on to your father's bed; then you defiled it – you went up on to my couch!>> (Genesis 49:4), 'unstable' is the same Hebrew word translated here as reckless.

Priests have two roles, and have failed in both. First, they are to help purify sinners through presenting their offerings before God as commanded in Leviticus Chapters 1-7, but instead they make them profane, unsuitable to be in God's holy presence: <<*You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean*>> (Leviticus 10:10), and: <<*All who eat it shall be subject to punishment, because they have profaned what is holy to the Lord; and any such person shall be cut off from the people*>> (Leviticus 19:8). Second, they are to teach life under the law: <<*and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the Lord has spoken to them through Moses*>> (Leviticus 10:11), and: <<*They teach Jacob your ordinances, and Israel your law; they place incense before you, and whole burnt-offerings on your altar*>> (Deuteronomy 33:10), but instead they turn to violence: <<*Its priests have done violence to my teaching and have profaned my holy things; they have made no distinction between the holy and the common, neither have they taught the difference between the unclean and the clean, and they have disregarded my sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them*>> (Ezekiel 22:26), leading others to do the same.

⁵ The Lord within it is righteous;
he does no wrong.
Every morning he renders his judgement,
each dawn without fail;
but the unjust knows no shame.

⁶ I have cut off nations;
their battlements are in ruins;
I have laid waste their streets
so that no one walks in them;
their cities have been made desolate,
without people, without inhabitants.

Zephaniah 3:5-6

The Lord within it is righteous. Unlike the human leaders, God perpetually shows that he is righteous in not breaking the law: <<*If a man is righteous and does what is lawful and right – if he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbour's wife or approach a woman during her menstrual period, does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, does not take advance or*>>

*accrued interest, withholds his hand from iniquity, executes true justice between contending parties, follows my statutes, and is careful to observe my ordinances, acting faithfully – such a one is righteous; he shall surely live, says the Lord God>> (Ezekiel 18:5-9) and renders his judgement in seeing that all receive fair treatment, as confirmed by: <<*You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in their lawsuits*>> (Exodus 23:6).*

7 I said, ‘Surely the city will fear me,
it will accept correction;
it will not lose sight
of all that I have brought upon it.’
But they were the more eager
to make all their deeds corrupt.

Zephaniah 3:7

Surely the city will fear me. God calls the city to fear, not in panic but in respectful awe at his power: <<*Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses*>> (Exodus 14:31), and: <<*The Lord will be terrible against them; he will shrivel all the gods of the earth, and to him shall bow down, each in its place, all the coasts and islands of the nations*>> (Zephaniah 2:11). This is further defined as willingness to accept correction; (contrast this with v.2 as well as with: <<*In vain I have struck down your children; they accepted no correction. Your own sword devoured your prophets like a ravening lion*>> (Jeremiah 2:30), and: <<*O Lord, do your eyes not look for truth? You have struck them, but they felt no anguish; you have consumed them, but they refused to take correction. They have made their faces harder than rock; they have refused to turn back*>> (Jeremiah 5:3), learning from God’s reproof in renewed obedience and showing the fear of God in action: <<*Whoever heeds instruction is on the path to life, but one who rejects a rebuke goes astray*>> (Proverbs 10:17). If they were to do this, they would not experience God’s judgement.

But they were the more eager to make all their deeds corrupt. God brought his justice to the nations around Judah, and it should have warned Judah what would happen if they rejected God. Instead of learning from the surrounding nations, they dedicated themselves to ungodliness all the more.

f. Zephaniah 3:8-13 - Punishment and Conversion of the Nations

God the judge also purifies and calls the distant ones to himself. Not ignoring their sin, God speaks of the removal of impurity from Jerusalem so that his people might be restored.

⁸ Therefore wait for me, says the Lord,
for the day when I arise as a witness.
For my decision is to gather nations,
to assemble kingdoms,
to pour out upon them my indignation,
all the heat of my anger;
for in the fire of my passion
all the earth shall be consumed.

Zephaniah 3:8

For my decision is to gather nations. The Jewish nation had always thought of itself as special, and quite rightly as God had chosen them. However, they failed to grasp that his purpose was always to use them as a light to guide the nations to him. To make this point clear he lets them know it is his final decision.

Pour out upon them my indignation. In light of the repeated and chronic sin of the nations and of God's own people, God will bring judgement and then restoration.

The summary statement concludes with a return to worldwide judgement: all the earth shall be consumed. The people are called to wait for God, not for possible blessing: <<*Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him*>> (Isaiah 30:18), but rather for his coming judgement. However, this time it will not be against Judah itself, since he will gather all nations of the earth for their judgement (vv.18-20).

⁹ At that time I will change the speech of the peoples
to a pure speech,
that all of them may call on the name of the Lord
and serve him with one accord.

Zephaniah 3:9

At that time, God will alter the speech of the peoples gathered to be punished: <<And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!' Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out'>> (Isaiah 6:5-7). The nations had polluted speech, worshipping pagan gods, but now they will have pure speech: <<Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully>> (Psalm 24:4), cleansed to call on the name of the Lord in worship: <<To Seth also a son was born, and he named him Enosh. At that time people began to invoke the name of the Lord>> (Genesis 4:26). Some have suggested that this may also allude to the reversal of the Babel syndrome in Genesis 11:1-9.

Worship is not only through word but also through deed, since the nations will serve him. The term '*abad*, meaning work or serve, designates obedient work for God: <<You have said, 'It is vain to serve God. What do we profit by keeping his command or by going about as mourners before the Lord of hosts?'>> (Malachi 3:14). This service is universal, done by all, and unanimous, with one accord: <<The messenger who had gone to summon Micaiah said to him, 'Look, the words of the prophets with one accord are favourable to the king; let your word be like the word of one of them, and speak favourably'>> (1 Kings 22:13).

¹⁰ From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia
my suppliants, my scattered ones,
shall bring my offering.

Zephaniah 3:10

The Israelite exiles will be restored to their place from beyond the rivers of Ethiopia or Nubia - Hebrew Cush. These rivers are the Blue and White Nile. Beyond the river more often has an eastward orientation beyond the Euphrates, and it can refer to Assyria: <<On that day the Lord will shave with a razor hired beyond the River – with the king of Assyria – the head and the hair of the feet, and it will take off the beard as well>> (Isaiah 7:20), as can Cush: <<The descendants of Ham: Cush, Egypt, Put, and Canaan. The descendants of Cush: Seba, Havilah, Sabtah, Raamah, and Sabteca. The descendants of Raamah: Sheba and Dedan. Cush became the father of Nimrod; he was the first on earth to become a mighty warrior>> (Genesis 10:6-8); refer also to Zephaniah 2:12-13 and the comments made there. These true worshippers will now move toward Jerusalem, whether from east or west.

11 On that day you shall not be put to shame
because of all the deeds by which you have rebelled against me;
for then I will remove from your midst
your proudly exultant ones,
and you shall no longer be haughty
in my holy mountain.

Zephaniah 3:11

Jerusalem's shame is over: <<*For you shall be ashamed of the oaks in which you delighted; and you shall blush for the gardens that you have chosen*>> (Isaiah 1:29), and: <<*Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed; do not be discouraged, for you will not suffer disgrace; for you will forget the shame of your youth, and the disgrace of your widowhood you will remember no more*>> (Isaiah 54:4), even though it was deserved because of the people's godless deeds (vv.1-4 and v.7). They had rebelled, flagrantly and purposefully turning against what they knew was right: <<*Set the trumpet to your lips! One like a vulture is over the house of the Lord, because they have broken my covenant, and transgressed my law*>> (Hosea 8:1).

They were dominated by proudly exultant ones, complacent, wealthy people (Zephaniah 1:8-13) who, in being haughty: <<*The Lord said: Because the daughters of Zion are haughty and walk with outstretched necks, glancing wantonly with their eyes, mincing along as they go, tinkling with their feet*>> (Isaiah 3:16), thought they were self-sufficient, needing nothing from God. Ironically, this contempt was shown in God's earthly dwelling place, his holy mountain, Zion: <<*For as you have drunk on my holy mountain, all the nations around you shall drink; they shall drink and gulp down, and shall be as though they had never been*>> (Obadiah 16), the site of the temple.

12 For I will leave in the midst of you
a people humble and lowly.
They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord –

13 the remnant of Israel;
they shall do no wrong
and utter no lies,
nor shall a deceitful tongue
be found in their mouths.

Then they will pasture and lie down,
and no one shall make them afraid.

Zephaniah 3:12-13

God will especially provide a place for the humble and lowly (Zephaniah 2:3) who, unlike the arrogant (v.11), know that they are in need. They not only call on God's name (v.9) but also seek refuge in his name. The same term is used in: <<*When you cry out, let your collection of idols deliver you! The wind will carry them off, a breath will take them away. But whoever takes refuge in me shall possess the land and inherit my holy mountain*>> (Isaiah 57:13), and: <<*The Lord is good, a stronghold on a day of trouble; he protects those who take refuge in him*>> (Nahum 1:7).

Previous sins among God's people, injustice (v.5), lying: <<*They have prophesied falsehood and lying divination; they say, 'Says the Lord', when the Lord has not sent them, and yet they wait for the fulfilment of their word! Have you not seen a false vision or uttered a lying divination, when you have said, 'Says the Lord', even though I did not speak? Therefore thus says the Lord God: Because you have uttered falsehood and prophesied lies, I am against you, says the Lord God. My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and utter lying divinations; they shall not be in the council of my people, nor be enrolled in the register of the house of Israel, nor shall they enter the land of Israel; and you shall know that I am the Lord God*>> (Ezekiel 13:6-9), and a deceitful tongue giving words that are not from God: <<*And the Lord said to me: The prophets are prophesying lies in my name; I did not send them, nor did I command them or speak to them. They are prophesying to you a lying vision, worthless divination, and the deceit of their own minds*>> (Jeremiah 14:14), will be among them no longer.

Then they will pasture and lie down, and no one shall make them afraid. This speaks of the peace and prosperity Israel will know in the millennial earth.

g. Zephaniah 3:14-20 - A Song of Joy

As in the psalms, people even in the throes of suffering are called to worship and give thanks for their anticipated salvation. Joy is increased through the increased promised blessings from God.

¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!

Zephaniah 3:14

The defiled city and nation (v.1) is raised up by being again called the beloved daughter Zion: <<*The Lord has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to daughter Zion, 'See, your salvation comes; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him'*>> (Isaiah 62:11). Zion is an alternative name for Jerusalem, the city of David: <<*Nevertheless, David took the stronghold of Zion, which is now the city of David*>> (2 Samuel 5:7), and home of the temple: <<*Sing praises to the Lord, who dwells in Zion. Declare his deeds among the peoples*>> (Psalm 9:11), and: <<*His abode has been established in Salem, his dwelling-place in Zion*>> (Psalm 76:2). It is God's primary dwelling among his people: <<*Incline your ear, O my God, and hear. Open your eyes and look at our desolation and the city that bears your name*>> (Daniel 9:8a).

Jerusalem's inhabitants are called Israel since, now that the northern Israelite tribes are in exile, Judah and its capital Jerusalem are the only remaining people who can bear this name as descendants of the first Israel, i.e. the patriarch Jacob; refer to Genesis 28:10-15 and 32:28.

¹⁵ The Lord has taken away the judgements against you,
he has turned away your enemies.
The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.

Zephaniah 3:15

Rejoicing is appropriate because of the presence of the real King of Israel, God, among his people. The human kings of Israel and Judah served only as representatives of Israel's true monarch, who here blesses with his presence those who repent and return to him. He is not powerless, as some had claimed: <<*At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, 'The Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm'*>> (Zephaniah 1:12).

The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.

This passage provides definite steps for consolation, as Christians understand that:

- The Lord is in their midst.
- The Lord is in their midst with power to save.
- God takes joy in them.
- God gives them rest in his love.
- God sings over them.

16 On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.

Zephaniah 3:16

When frightened or dismayed, literally one's hands grow weak: <<*Therefore all hands will be feeble, and every human heart will fail*>> (Isaiah 13:7), and: <<*We have heard news of them, our hands fall helpless; anguish has taken hold of us, pain as of a woman in labour*>> (Jeremiah 6:24). Since God is now present and in control, this will not happen.

17 The Lord, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing

18 as on a day of festival.
I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.

Zephaniah 3:17-18

The previously weakened nation is in the presence of the mighty warrior God himself: <<*For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe*>> (Deuteronomy 10:17), <<*Who is the King of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle*>> (Psalm 24:8), and: <<*A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God*>> (Isaiah 10:21), who, unlike human warriors and heroes, does not lose heart: <<*The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter, the warrior cries aloud there*>> (Zephaniah 1:14). Instead of fleeing in the face of danger, God can save his people from it: <<*Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore*>> (Exodus 14:30).

This verse remarkably adds that God himself will rejoice over you with gladness, indicating that when God's people seek him and follow him (vv.12-13), and rejoice in him and trust him (vv.14-16), then God personally delights in them. This is not

an aloof, emotionless contentment, but it bursts forth in joyful divine celebration: he will exult over you with loud singing.

Verse 18 is very obscure, with numerous translations suggested. This version suggests that those Judæan sinners who had been unable to join in the festival celebrations that were reserved for God's righteous people are now able to do so once again; refer to Numbers Chapters 28-29.

19 I will deal with all your oppressors
at that time.
And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.

Zephaniah 3:19

God will act on behalf of all his flock who suffered under exile, taking steps to save the lame like a shepherd: <<*On that day, says the Lord, I will assemble the lame and gather those who have been driven away, and those whom I have afflicted. The lame I will make the remnant, and those who were cast off, a strong nation; and the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion now and for evermore*>> (Micah 4:6-7). Also, the exiles, like outcast, scattered animals: <<*He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God*>> (John 11:51-52), will no longer suffer shame at their plight but will rejoice that it is over.

20 At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes, says the Lord.

Zephaniah 3:20

God's far-flung people will face restoration at the hand of their King. Instead of being justifiably shamed for their sin, they will be renowned and praised because of the gracious salvation of God: <<*Today the Lord has obtained your*

agreement: to be his treasured people, as he promised you, and to keep his commandments; for him to set you high above all nations that he has made, in praise and in fame and in honour; and for you to be a people holy to the Lord your God, as he promised>> (Deuteronomy 26:18-19).

When I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord. God is promising restoration within their lifetime as well as a future time of judgement and restoration. They would live to see it with their own eyes: <<**Look at the nations, and see! Be astonished! Be astounded! For a work is being done in your days that you would not believe if you were told>> (Habakkuk 1:5).**