

Zephaniah

1. Introduction

1. Background

Zephaniah probably ministered between 622 and 612 BC during the reign of king Josiah (reigned 640-609 BC). Josiah began his reform movement in 622 BC in response to the discovery of the Book of the Covenant when the Temple was cleared in preparation for renovation.

The reigns of Josiah's grandfather and father (Manasseh and Amon respectively) had been rife with Baal worship and judicial murder. Manasseh had repented towards the end of his reign, but Amon had continued the corruption of his father, and the fact that Amon was assassinated after a reign of only 1 year indicates how perilous the days were.

The Book of the Covenant (Deuteronomy) was written c. 1400 BC – but the application was contemporary 800 years later! There are many parallels between Zephaniah and Deuteronomy, especially Deuteronomy 28 (the covenant curses) and Deuteronomy 32 (the song of testimony). The covenant curses were now about to come upon Judah – the ministry of Zephaniah was an application of the Book of the Law!

The ministry of Zephaniah arose at just the right time to provide Josiah with the support he needed to pursue his reformation.

“With language steeped in the covenantal formulations of the book of Deuteronomy, Zephaniah presents a picture of covenantal judgment without rival anywhere in Scripture for its stark depiction of the terrors of the coming consummation. At the same time, his penetration into the love of God reaches dimensions that stagger the imagination. Even in the context of coming devastation because of sin, the redeeming love of God for his people shall prevail” (O.P. Robertson, *New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, p. 10).

2. Theme: The Day of the LORD, a Reprise

Zephaniah is not the first of the Minor Prophets to announce the Day of the LORD, but Joel is the only other Minor Prophet to elaborate on the theme to the same extent. Indeed, assuming that Joel was the first pre-exilic Minor Prophet to preach the Day of the LORD, then Zephaniah is the last – Joel introduced the theme; and many years later Zephaniah repeated it, just as the judgement of the Day was about to crash down on the kingdom of Judah. Zephaniah announces: “The day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast.”

So the theme of Zephaniah is a *reprise* of the Day of the LORD.

Zephaniah sets the Day of the LORD firmly in the context of covenant. The concept of covenant is richly present in Zephaniah, even though the word “covenant” is absent. The whole framework for understanding his development of the idea of the Day of the LORD relates to his rehearsal of the features of successive covenants:

- The Noachian covenant – the sweeping clear of creation described in Zeph. 1:1-3 is reminiscent of Gen. 6:20.
- The Abrahamic covenant – the preparation of sacrifice with consecrated guests (Zeph. 1:7) echoes the covenantal consecration which begins with Genesis 15 and runs through the Old Testament.
- The Mosaic covenant – the arrival of the Day of the LORD is depicted in theophanic language derived from Sinai (Zeph. 1:15).

3. Structure and Content of Zephaniah

Superscription (1:1)

Part 1 (1:2-18) ***Cosmic Covenantal Judgement on the Great Day of the LORD***

- A. 1:2-3 Creation reversed
- B. 1:4-7 Covenant people cut off
- C. 1:8-14a Consumption of all concerned
- D. 1:14b-18 The terrors of theophany

Part 2 (2:1-15) ***The Call to Repentance before the Great Day of the LORD***

- A. 2:1-3 Seek now: perhaps you will be hidden on the Day of the LORD
- B. 2:4-15 Seek now: consider the devastation of the nations

Part 3 (3:1-20) ***Reconstitution of God's People on the Great Day of the LORD***

- A. 3:1-8 God will finally judge the rebellious
- B. 3:9-13 God will ultimately purify the remnant
- C. 3:14-20 God will then rejoice with his people

4. Relevance

The relevance of Zephaniah is appreciated only when we look at the Day of the LORD from the perspective of the New Testament, which declares that the Day is yet to come. So the apostle Peter uses language similar to that of Zephaniah when he says, "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed" (2 Pet. 3:10). And then he makes his application: "Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness..." (2 Pet. 3:11f). Zephaniah does something similar: he punctuates his message with three exhortations:

- to seek refuge in God (2:3);
- to wait for God (3:8);
- to rejoice in God (3:14).

Zephaniah 1:1-18

2. *Covenantal Judgement on the Day of the LORD*

Zephaniah 1 is characterised by a concentrated emphasis on the Day of the LORD: it is mentioned 14 times in the chapter. The Day involves a theophany which Zephaniah 1 presents in a sequence of three terrifying images, each associated with a covenant: the Noachian covenant (vv. 2-3); the Abrahamic covenant (vv. 7-8); and the Mosaic covenant (vv. 15-16). The Day of the LORD is the day on which he establishes and enforces his covenant lordship over men.

1. **Creation reversed (vv. 2-3)**

Zephaniah's prophecy opens with a thunder clap – very strong language in a very strong form. God is about to sweep away everything. How like the judgement in the days of Noah. But God had promised Noah: "While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease" (Gen. 8:22). The implication of Zephaniah's announcement is that the End has now come! Hence the sweeping away is in the reverse order of creation – with the focus on wicked mankind.

The "rubble" is literally the "stumbling blocks". Jesus alludes to this in Matt. 13:41, "The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin [literally, *all things that cause stumbling*] and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace." "By this apparent allusion to Zephaniah, Jesus transfers the coming cosmic judgment described by the prophet from the devastation associated with judgment on old covenant Israel to the devastations associated with his final return. Jesus thereby indicates that the ultimate application of the prophetic threat of Zephaniah is still outstanding. The cosmic judgment that will reverse the creation is yet to come" (Robertson, pp. 259-60).

2. **Covenant people cut off (vv. 4-7)**

The object of the threatened judgement is particularised – the covenant people of God: "*Judah and...all the inhabitants of Jerusalem*" Stunning – they thought they were exempt! But God moves against them as he moved against Egypt ("I will stretch out my hand" = act with all the force at my disposal, c.f. Ex. 3:20). He will "cut off" specific people, i.e. remove them from the covenant community (vv. 4-6):

- the remnant of the Baal and the name of the idolatrous priests;
- those who worship the host of the heavens *in the privacy of their own homes*; according to Deut 17:4-7 this sort of private abuse was to be reported and purged out of the land.
- those who engage in syncretism, i.e. swearing by both the LORD and another "king" ("Milcom" may be the name of a god, but it also means "their king");
- those who fail to follow the LORD; the direction of their lives is not God-oriented; there is no strength of devotion in their religion.

Notice that the focus is on the sins committed by the people directly against God in their worship practices.

So “Be silent!” (v. 7). “Stop your vain protestations! Your insincerity only intensifies the basis for condemnation.” “Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God” (Rom. 3:19).

Now Zephaniah announces for the first time the Day of the LORD (vv. 7-10). It will be a day of punishment, a cry, a wail, a loud crash – a dreadful day!

3. Consumption of all concerned (vv. 8-14a)

The Day of the LORD permeates this section – it is near and coming with great haste (v. 14)! The objects of the judgement are further specified – not just the cosmos, not just Judah and Jerusalem, but now specific Judeans and districts of Jerusalem.

Noise is heard – wailing from people who have lost all hope in life, and the crashing of the idols being destroyed on the high places.

Surrounded by hills, Jerusalem is compared to a mortar – it will become a place of grinding. Culture, trade, craftsmanship, beauty and luxury will come to an end.

God will make a thorough search through Jerusalem – as careful as the woman who had lost the coin – but his search is for judgement, not for recovery. Complacency is hidden in the hearts of men, but it will not go undetected.

The covenant curses are enforced (v. 13, c.f. Deut. 28:30,39). Although verse 13 only mentions a sample of the curses, these stand for the whole – if these things happen, then the people can expect all the others as well.

4. The terrors of theophany (vv. 14b-18)

The Day of the LORD is mentioned 10 times in these 5 verses. The theophany is described in terms drawn from the presence of God at Sinai. But whereas there the majesty of God descended for the purpose of covenant inauguration, now the terror of God comes for the purpose of covenant enforcement.

In vv. 15-16 the Day is mentioned 7 times in 5 couplets. The dominant theme is the Day of overflowing wrath. Zephaniah pairs words that sound similar (with the second generally stronger than the former) to emphasise the terror of the Day:

*A day of wrath is that day,
a day of distress and anguish,
a day of ruin and devastation,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness,
a day of trumpet blast and battle cry.*

It was customary for an invaded nation to try and buy off its conqueror – but the LORD cannot be bought of with silver or gold (v. 18). Why? Because God is jealous for his own honour (v. 18b, c.f. Ex. 34:14) and a consuming fire. At Sinai fire and smoke like smoke from a kiln wreathed the mountain – and he declared that he would not clear the guilty (Ex. 20:4-5).

Zephaniah closes this section of his message by returning to the cosmic dimension of the Day of the LORD: “*all the earth shall be consumed; for a full and sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.*” He will elaborate on the implications of this for the nations of the earth in chapter 2.

5. Applications

The Book of Deuteronomy had contemporary applications for the reign of king Josiah, 800 years after it was written – likewise, Zephaniah’s preaching of the Book of Deuteronomy remains contemporary 2,600 years after his ministry.

In one sense the Day of the LORD has already come. It came when Christ hung on the Cross. In another it is yet to come – in Zephaniah’s terminology it is “near” – the New Testament teaches that the Day of the LORD will be consummated on the day of Christ’s second coming (see, for example, 2 Peter 3).

(a) *The Day of the LORD came at Calvary*

“When Christ deliberately parallels the tearing of his own flesh as covenantal sacrifice with the substitutionary death of the Passover lamb, he is interpreting his own death in the familiar terms of covenantal malediction (cf. Matt. 26:26-29; Luke 22:14-22). The fury of God’s wrath, that wrath that is epitomized in the outpouring of covenantal curses on the Day of Yahweh, falls on him. Eating his flesh and drinking his blood by faith introduces the participant into the sacrificial feast of Yahweh, offered only to consecrated guests” (Robertson, p. 272).

(b) *The Day of the LORD will come at the Parousia*

The “day of wrath” is yet to come (Rom. 2:5). This is “the great Day of his wrath” (Rev. 6:16-17) and it is as certain as was the devastation of Jerusalem. But whereas the devastation of Jerusalem was partial (the city was rebuilt, and destroyed again by the Romans, and rebuilt), the devastation of the coming Day will be final, and all who are not found in Christ will be consumed from the face of the earth (Matt. 3:7; 1 Thess. 1:10; Rev. 11:18; 14:10; 16:9; 19:15).

(c) *Preparing for the Day of the LORD*

Chapter 1 presents the Day of the LORD as inescapable. So in chapter 2 Zephaniah calls us to seek refuge in the LORD himself (2:1-3). There is a niche in time “before...before...before” the coming of the Day (2:2). Into this niche in time we care to “seek...seek...seek” the LORD with humility and repentance (2:3).

Zephaniah 2:1-15

3. *The Call to Repentance before the Arrival of the Day of the LORD*

1. **Seek now, for perhaps you may be hid in that day (vv. 1-3)**

The tone of the prophecy changes from declaration to admonition. This section contains 5 admonitions (“gather together...gather...seek...seek...seek...”) which underscore the urgency of the message: “*perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the LORD.*”

(a) *Gather together in preparation for the burning* (v. 1)

The verbs in verse 1 are built on the word “stubble” ⇒ they mean “gather stubble” and “gather yourselves like stubble/gather stubble for yourselves”. The implication is that “Judah is worth no more than stubble – so gather yourselves in preparation for the fire of judgement” (c.f. Mal. 4:1). The historical context is the weakening of the Assyrian empire which may have encouraged Judah to feel resurgent self-confidence. How misplaced! They must either humble themselves in the dust or be humbled by the judgement of God.

But Judah remains shameless – there is no colour on her cheek (v. 1). Teetering on the brink of ruin she remains blithely unconcerned with her perilous position. She needs to be awakened by Zephaniah’s admonition.

(b) *A niche of time in which to make a choice before the burning* (v. 2)

So Zephaniah expresses urgency: “*before...before...before...*” Waiting for the Day to arrive is madness – you must get ready before the Day arrives. And the time is evidently very short – it is as likely to happen in a moment like chaff that is suddenly picked up by a gust of wind and carried away irretrievably.

The Day has been established by a decree that gives birth – as sure as birth follows conception, so surely shall the Day follow the decree. Jesus spoke about “birth pangs” of the Day (Matt. 24:8). In Zephaniah the pains come suddenly with the “burning anger of the LORD”.

(c) *Seek refuge from the burning* (v. 3)

Against this solemn backdrop Zephaniah exhorts the Judeans to “seek...seek...seek...” They must seek refuge in the LORD. Jesus said that we must “ask...seek...knock...” (Matt. 7:7). Seeking God is the heart of Old Testament religion – it expresses wholehearted desire for God (Ps. 27:4,8). God promised the exiles, “You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart” (Jer. 29:13; c.f. Deut. 4:29; 2 Chron. 7:14).

Those addressed are “all you humble of the land”. These may be the “people of the land” who had placed young Josiah on the throne (2 Kings 21:23-24). These officials needed encouragement to continue the reform programme inaugurated by Josiah. They carried a great responsibility for promoting God’s just commands, and his righteousness in the affairs of state.

Moreover, they were to “seek meekness”. Meekness is a divine quality: “You have given me the shield of your salvation, and your gentleness made me great” (2 Sam. 22:36); “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt. 11:29). So these men were to perform their duties in the court and nation not arrogantly, but with gentleness.

“Perhaps” – this falls short of absolute assurance – there is the “sting of ambiguity”. For the Day will certainly come, and it will burn, and it will overturn the cosmos – but in the light of the promises of Deut. 4:29 and 2 Chron. 7:14, the “perhaps” is not expressive of doubt but of hope – the difficulty is real enough, but faith is stimulated by the combination of promise and difficulty.

2. Seek now, for consider the devastation of nations (vv. 4-15)

Not only Judah, but the surrounding nations are under obligation to the LORD, and the Day will bring their ruin. The destruction predicted is viewed as historical events that pre-figure the Day and act as warnings to the covenant community.

Notice the surprising new elements introduced: a remnant of God's people which will possess the land and enjoy covenant blessings; the nations called to worship God post-devastation; the threatening sword of the LORD brandished over Cush as a warning to Jerusalem; the total destruction without remnant of Assyria.

(a) To the West: Philistia (vv. 4-7)

Total destruction is envisaged: “*deserted... a desolation... driven out at noon... uprooted*” (v. 4). Would Judah take note of the ruin of Philistia and remember the covenant curses (see Deut. 8:19-20; Deut. 28:63)?

But a new note is introduced in v. 7 – a “remnant of the house of Judah” which shall enjoy the covenant blessings: occupation of houses they had not built (Deut. 6:11). The verb “to visit” was used previously (1:8,9,12) to signify “visiting with punishment”; now it is used to mean “visiting with salvation” – God is mindful of and cares for his humble ones. Restoration of the fortunes of the captives is an idea rooted in Deuteronomy; see, for example Deut. 30:1-3.

(b) To the East: Moab and Ammon (vv. 8-11)

Moab and Ammon were blood relatives of Israel. They resided on the rim of the region in which Sodom and Gomorrah had been overthrown in the days of Lot their father. They had a history of animosity towards Israel (Balak, Num. 22-25; and Nahash, 1 Sam. 11; 2 Sam. 10). God's contention with them was over their taunts, insults and boasts against his people and their territory. They were too full of themselves to notice their own moral failure.

Over and against Moab and Ammon, God identified himself as “the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel”. With this impressive title God pronounces judgement on Moab and Ammon – they shall become like Sodom and Gomorrah, overtaken in the overthrow from which their ancestor Lot escaped. They shall be plundered and possessed by the remnant of “my people...my nation”.

A religious problem lies at the root of their pride (v. 10), and they will be humbled by a theophany, the LORD will be awesome against them (v. 11). God will devastate the land to such an extent that it will produce nothing for sacrifices, and the gods of the lands will grow lean.

But here is a new idea: “To him shall bow down, each in its place, all the lands of the nations” (v. 11) – after God has devastated them, the nations of the earth shall acknowledge the supremacy of the LORD, each shall worship him in their own land/place, i.e. not in Jerusalem, cf. John 4:21-23. This blessing will extend to the islands of the nations, i.e. to the ends of the earth.

(c) To the South: Cush (v. 12)

“The Lord’s own personal sword, wielded by his own hand, strikes the deathblow foe the Cushites” (Robertson, p. 309). This sword is mentioned in Deut. 32:40-42; It appears in the hand of the commander of the army of the LORD (Josh. 5:13); it is the battle cry of Gideon (Judg. 7:20); it is in the mouth of Christ (Rev. 1:16); it is the iron sceptre by which the messianic King subdues the nations (Ps. 2:9).

Jerusalem should remember that the sword once threatened her in the days of David (2 Sam 24:16-17).

(d) To the North: Assyria (vv. 13-15)

“The North...Assyria...Nineveh” – notice how the object is narrowed down just as chapter 1 narrowed its focus on Jerusalem.

Assyria’s sin is described in v. 15 as pleasure, security and self-sufficiency – callous self-indulgence and indifference to the poor – how contemporary! Nineveh’s claim, “I am and there is no other”, was an arrogant abrogation of the prerogatives of God. So she will become a object of scorn – hissing and shaking of the hand. The civilized city becomes the epitome of the wild and uninhabited; she is inhabited by unclean animals; her thresholds are blocked with rubble; her luxuriant cedar work is exposed to the abrading work of wind and sand.

“He will make Nineveh a desolation, a dry waste like the desert” – actually, Xenophon passed the site of Nineveh in 401 BC and found not a trace of it in the desert sands.

(e) And the point is...?

By looking to the four points of the compass, Zephaniah has only opened his subject. He is yet to look at the centre – Jerusalem. That he does in chapter 3. And his point is that just as the nations suffer just judgement because of sin, so would Judah.

Do not rejoice over the downfall of evil nations or individuals – rather, see in the calamities foreshadowings of the Day of the LORD, and tremble and repent. When people told Jesus about a group of Galileans who had been slaughtered by Pontius Pilate, he replied, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:2-3).

Zephaniah 3:1-20

4. God Brings Grace with the Arrival of the Day of the LORD

The city is Jerusalem. Chapter 2 pronounced judgements on the leading cities of surrounding nations (Philistia, Moab and Ammon, Cush and Assyria) – now judgement is pronounced on Jerusalem. But once judgement has been pronounced, grace is promised.

1. Judgement against the rebellious (vv. 1-8)

(a) Against the city (vv. 1-2)

This is “unfinished business”, left over from chapter 2. The opening “Woe!” sets the tone of the section. The emphasis is on rebellious, polluted and oppressing:

- Rebellious is Jerusalem’s leading characteristic – the city is in a relationship with God; only thus can it be rebellious.
- Polluted suggests disqualification from a sacred task. But this is not ceremonial pollution; it is moral pollution – so much innocent blood had been shed in Jerusalem in the days of Manasseh.
- Oppression was explicitly forbidden (Ex. 22:21; Deut. 23:16).

Israel had enjoyed unique privilege: unlike Philistia etc., they had heard the voice of God (Deut. 4:32-33). But in the desert they had refused to listen and so God refused them entry into his good land (Num. 14:22). Jerusalem knew this, and knew the curse (Deut 28:45) – but still she did not hearken. Her relationship with God was all wrong – she accepted no correction, and thus rejected the LORD’s paternal care (c.f. the rebellious son, Deut. 21:20); and she did not “draw near to God” because she had no desire for relationship with him.

(b) Against the leading men of the city (vv. 3-4)

Zephaniah specifies the charges against the various leaders (vv. 3-4). Israel’s officials and judges brutalised and preyed on those they governed. Her prophets abused the authority of their spoken word (Deut. 18:20), hiding their true motives. The priests were especially guilty. Their role was to maintain the sanctity of the LORD so that he could dwell among the people (Israel’s highest privilege); so their pollution of the holy was the greatest crime. Moreover, they brutalized the torah of which they were supposed to be skilled and faithful expositors, nurturing justice in the life of the nation.

(c) God’s explains his actions (vv. 5-8)

In contrast the LORD – who is still within Jerusalem! – is righteous and does justice, morning by morning, without fail. Does it look like it when the unjust practices of the leaders abound? But it is so, and it calls for faith and patience on the part of the saints (Rev. 13:10).

So why the devastations described in chapter 2? Vv. 6-7 tell us – it was so that God’s people would fear him and accept correction (c.f. v. 2); it was so that the

threatened judgement would be averted, and the nation not be “cut off”. For God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked and he takes steps to keep them from wandering from him. The law (containing the terrifying covenant curses of Deut. 28) was to be read publically at the feast of Booths every seven years (Deut. 31:9-13); particular offenders were to be put to death so that evil would be purged out of the community (Deut. 13:11; 14:23; 19:20; 21:21).

But “she accepts no correction” (v. 1) – instead the people “rise up early, they corrupt all their deeds”, i.e. they have been diligent in doing wrong. The word used for corruption is first used with reference to the pre-Flood corruption of the world.

Jerusalem has sinned – so why does God call an assembly of all nations to judgement? Because when God’s people are judged, it means the Day has arrived, 1 Pet. 4:17.

The address which opens v. 8 is unexpected: “wait patiently/in trust for me”. “Do not entertain any doubts. When you observe the persistent refusal to fear Yahweh even on the part of those who have Yahweh dwelling in their midst, trust in the fact that the Day is near. He never does wrong. He never shall fail. His justice cannot be questioned. Morning by morning it comes to light. On the rightly appointed Day, he shall come to testify even against those who bear his name” (Robertson, p. 326).

2. Grace for the remnant (vv. 9-13)

Notice the time marker: “at that time”, i.e. when God brings judgement on Jerusalem and all the nations of the earth, then grace also comes. Zephaniah introduces another new idea – beyond the fires of judgement there will be a purified remnant, humble and poor, who seek refuge in the LORD (vv. 11-13), joined by those converted from the nations (vv. 9-10), and together they will worship the LORD. This is a fresh start for humanity.

(a) Grace for the nations (vv. 9-10)

God will be the agent of a change which would otherwise be impossible – he will purify their “lip” of the nations so that they will be able to call upon his name for salvation. This was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. Hence they will serve him with “one shoulder”, i.e. united. This is the reversal of the curse of Babel.

(b) Grace for Israel (vv. 11-13)

Notice a second time marker: “In that day...” This refers to the Day. This Day will entail purging of sin from the remnant and destruction of the wicked. Jerusalem was rebuked because she “knew no shame” (3:5); but now, having been purged by the Day, she “will not be but to shame because of your deeds”.

Rebellion, the proud and haughtiness are removed – only the humble and poor remain, who seek refuge in the name of the LORD. The humble do no injustice; in this they reflect the character of God who does no injustice (3:5).

The final picture is pastoral – sheep lying down secure in their grazing. “None shall make them afraid”, compare Lev. 26:5; Deut. 28:26; Mic. 4:4.

3. Grace rejoices, re-gathers, restores (14-20)

(a) The people rejoice in God (vv. 14-15)

Zephaniah began with one of the most terrifying descriptions of the wrath of God; he closes his prophecy with one of the sweetest descriptions of the love of God. The chapter began “Woe!” but it closes “Sing aloud! Shout! Rejoice and exult!” “By piling up every available expression for joy, the prophet leaps across the vale of gloom into the realm of grace-beyond-devastation” (Robertson, p. 336).

(b) God rejoices in the people (vv. 16-17)

The reason for the blessings is that “the King of Israel, THE LORD, is in your midst” (v. 15). In 1:5 we were told of those who syncretised, turning to “Milcom” (“their king”) as well as the LORD. But the LORD alone is King of Israel. (It is frightening that all three of Josiah’s sons succeeded him as king – and the last of them, Zedekiah, would see the fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar.)

“He will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.” These lines “express the deepest inner joy and satisfaction of God himself in his love for his people. Delight, joy, rejoicing, and singing on God’s part underscore the mutuality of emotional experience felt by God and the redeemed...That Almighty God should derive delight from his own creation is significant in itself. But that the Holy One should experience ecstasy over the sinner is incomprehensible” (Robertson, pp. 339-340).

(c) God promises to re-gather and restore the people (v. 18-20)

Zephaniah looks forward some 20 years to the exile and the end of the festivals of the LORD. This loss to the religious life of the pious ones would cause them grief. But God promises to gather them again from their dispersal and to remove from them reproach – the reproach cast on them by their captors; the reproach of being “not my people”; the reproach of having no access to their sanctuary.

God shall deal with their oppressors. Oppression was associated especially with absence from the promised land, e.g. 2 Sam. 7:10. Hence this is an implicit promise of secure tenure of the land ⇒ a promise to establish the Kingdom of God on the earth.

“Praise and renown in all the earth” – this phrase is found only in Deut. 26:19 and Jer. 13:11. Compare with Eph. 3:10, “...so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.” The ultimate purpose of salvation is the praise of God’s glorious grace.

4. Application

Zephaniah commands, “Sing aloud...shout...rejoice and exult with all your heart!” (3:14). Paul says, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” (Phil. 4:4), and Peter writes, “Though you have not seen [Christ], you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible

and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Pet. 1:8-9).

How can we do this, especially when “now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials” (1 Pet. 1:6)?

(a) Love and joy go hand-in-hand

We can learn how to rejoice even in hard times by resting our minds on the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:31-39). It is not first and foremost about our love for God or our joy in him, but his love for us and his joy in us. The “you” in vv. 16-17 is Zion, Jerusalem – this is the corporate people of God, the Church. The love is “the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (Eph. 3:19).

Notice that the verb “to quiet” (in verse 17) does not normally have a direct object (i.e. to quiet something or someone) – rather it describes the inner condition of the subject of the verb (i.e. to be or become quiet). Thus a better translation is “God is quiet in his love over you” – he sinks in contemplations of love for his people!

(b) Hope and joy go hand-in-hand

We can learn how to rejoice even in hard times by placing our hope in the promise of the restoration of all things.

How is it that the restoration of fortunes – the renown and the praise that shall radiate out from Jerusalem among all the peoples of the earth (v. 20) – shall be “before the eyes” of those to whom Zephaniah ministered? This is possible only because of the resurrection (c.f. Moses at the burning bush and the self-revelation of God as God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, God of the living, not of the dead). The possession of the land was originally the promise of paradise – the promise of its repossession is the promise of paradise restored.

“So the book of Zephaniah ends where it begins. The prophet opened with a scene of cataclysmic overthrow. The whole order of the cosmos would be reversed in the judgement of the great Day of Yahweh. The prophet closes with another scene of cosmic scope. The earth shall be reconstituted in the glorious new order achieved by a return to the land on a proportion never before realized. The ultimate blessing of the covenant joins with the ultimate cursing to consummate the entirety of the historical process” (Robertson, p. 347).