

Zephaniah Explained & Applied 36

Ger de Koning



The Book of Zephaniah

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Joy

Ger de Koning

Dutch version:

Micha – Nahum – Habakuk – Zefanja – Toegelicht en toegepast 33 t/m 36

© 2019 Uitgeverij Daniël, Zwolle, NL, ISBN 978-90-79718-71-9 (hardcover)

Web shop: www.uitgeverijdaniel.nl

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Contents

Abbreviations of the Names of the Books of the Bible	9
Old Testament	9
New Testament	10
Explanation of General Format	11
The Book of Zephaniah	12
Introduction	12
Zephaniah 1	14
Zep 1:1 Zephaniah	14
Zep 1:2-3 Announcement of a General Judgment	14
Zep 1:4-6 The Judgment of Judah and Jerusalem	15
Zep 1:7 Be Silent	16
Zep 1:8-9 The Punishment of the LORD	17
Zep 1:10 A Cry, a Wail, a Loud Crash	18
Zep 1:11 The People of Merchants Will Be Killed	18
Zep 1:12 The LORD Searches Jerusalem With Lamps	18
Zep 1:13 God Shows That He Is There	20
Zep 1:14-16 The Great Day of the LORD	20
Zep 1:17 The Reason for Judgment	21
Zep 1:18 The Fire of God's Jealousy	21
Zephaniah 2	23
Zep 2:1-2 Examine Yourself, Before ...	23
Zep 2:3 Seek the LORD and What Marks Him	23
Zep 2:4-5 The Judgment on the Philistines	24
Zep 2:6-7 Judah Gets What the Philistines Possess	25
Zep 2:8-10 The Judgment on Moab and Ammon	26
Zep 2:11 Judgment on the Idols	27
Zep 2:12 The Judgment on the Ethiopians	27
Zep 2:13-15 The Judgment on Assyria and Nineveh	28
Zephaniah 3	30
Zep 3:1 Woe Over Jerusalem	30

Contents

Zep 3:2 Four Indictments	30
Zep 3:3-4 Four Corrupt Leaders	31
Zep 3:5 The Righteous LORD	31
Zep 3:6-7 God Points Out His Actions to His People	32
Zep 3:8 Wait for Me	33
Zep 3:9 Call on the LORD and Serve Him	33
Zep 3:10 My Offerings	34
Zep 3:11 Haughtiness Is Removed	34
Zep 3:12-13 The Remnant of Israel	35
Zep 3:14-15 Joy for Israel	35
Zep 3:16-17 The LORD Your God Is in Your Midst	36
Zep 3:18 God's People Gathered	37
Zep 3:19-20 God's People Turned Into Praise and Renown	37
Other Publications	39

Abbreviations of the Names of the Books of the Bible

Old Testament

Gen – Genesis

Exo – Exodus

Lev – Leviticus

Num – Numbers

Deu – Deuteronomy

Jos – Joshua

Jdg – Judges

Rth – Ruth

1Sam – First Samuel

2Sam – Second Samuel

1Kgs – First Kings

2Kgs – Second Kings

1Chr – First Chronicles

2Chr – Second Chronicles

Ezra – Ezra

Neh – Nehemiah

Est – Esther

Job – Job

Psa – Psalms

Pro – Proverbs

Ecc – Ecclesiastes

Song – Song of Songs

Isa – Isaiah

Jer – Jeremiah

Lam – Lamentations

Eze – Ezekiel

Dan – Daniel

Hos – Hosea

Joel – Joel

Amos – Amos

Oba – Obadiah

Jona – Jonah

Mic – Micah
Nah – Nahum
Hab – Habakkuk
Zep – Zephaniah
Hag – Haggai
Zec – Zechariah
Mal – Malachi

New Testament

Mt – Gospel of Matthew
Mk – Gospel of Mark
Lk – Gospel of Luke
Jn – Gospel of John
Acts – Acts of the Apostles
Rom – Letter to the Romans
1Cor – First Letter to the Corinthians
2Cor – Second Letter to the Corinthians
Gal – Letter to the Galatians
Eph – Letter to the Ephesians
Phil – Letter to the Philippians
Col – Letter to the Colossians
1Thes – First Letter to the Thessalonians
2Thes – Second Letter to the Thessalonians
1Tim – First Letter to Timothy
2Tim – Second Letter to Timothy
Tit – Letter to Titus
Phlm – Letter to Philemon
Heb – Letter to the Hebrews
Jam – Letter of James
1Pet – First Letter of Peter
2Pet – Second Letter of Peter
1Jn – First Letter of John
2Jn – Second Letter of John
3Jn – Third Letter of John
Jude – Letter of Jude
Rev – Revelation

Explanation of General Format

PERSONAL PRONOUNS are capitalized when pertaining to Deity.

BRACKETS [] are used in this commentary in the Bible text to indicate words which are not found in the original Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek but implied by it.

SHARP BRACKETS < > are used in this commentary in the Bible text to indicate words possibly not in the original writings.

When **ASTERISKS** * are used in New Testament quotations, it is to mark verbs that are historical presents in the Greek which have been translated with an English past tense in order to conform to modern usage. The translators recognized that in some contexts the present tense seems more unexpected and unjustified to the English reader than a past tense would have been. But Greek authors frequently used the present tense for the sake of heightened vividness, thereby transporting their readers in imagination to the actual scene at the time of occurrence. However, the translators felt that it would be wise to change these historical presents to English past tenses.

ALL CAPS in the New Testament quotations are used in the text to indicate Old Testament quotations or obvious references to Old Testament texts.

The Book of Zephaniah

Introduction

Zephaniah speaks about the day of the LORD. Currently, we still live in the day of man, the period in which man can (seemingly) arrange everything as he sees fit. The time is near when the Lord Jesus takes control. When He returns, He will first judge all iniquity. When that has happened, the way is free to bless. That blessing will go to His people and to the nations that have converted to God. God will rejoice over them and will be quiet in His love (Zep 3:17). Zephaniah's style of writing is characterized by rapid alternation of threats and promises.

The core of Zephaniah's message is the "day of the LORD". He uses that expression more often than any other prophet. That day is "near" (Zep 1:7,14); it is "a day of

wrath ...

... trouble and distress,

... destruction and desolation,

... darkness and gloom,

... clouds and thick darkness,

... trumpet and battle cry" (Zep 1:15-16a).

The day of the LORD is a day of doom for the wicked. The prophet declares that this so because they have "sinned against the LORD" (Zep 1:17). He also speaks of a promise of being "hidden", that is, there is protection for those who seek the LORD (Zep 2:3).

Division of the book

I. Introduction (Zephaniah 1:1)

II. Day of Judgment (Zephaniah 1:2-3:8)

A. Against Judah (Zephaniah 1:2-2:3)

1. General warning (Zephaniah 1:2-3)

- 2. Judgment for Judah (Zephaniah 1:4-13)
- 3. Description of that day (Zephaniah 1:14-2:3)
- B. Against the nations (Zephaniah 2:4-15)
 - 1. Philistines (Zephaniah 2:4-7)
 - 2. Moab and Ammon (Zephaniah 2:8-11)
 - 3. Cush (Zephaniah 2:12)
 - 4. Assyria (Zephaniah 2:13-15)
- C. Against Jerusalem (Zephaniah 3:1-8)
- III. Day of Joy (Zephaniah 3:9-20)
 - A. Return of a scattered people (Zephaniah 3:9-10)
 - B. Restoration of a sinful people (Zephaniah 3:11-13)
 - C. Joy of a saved people (Zephaniah 3:14-20)

Zephaniah 1

Zep 1:1 | Zephaniah

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

Apart from what we have in this verse, nothing of the prophet is known with certainty. Zephaniah means ‘Yahweh hides’. His ancestry is given up to four generations back, to his great-great-grandfather Hezekiah. This is remarkable. We don’t find anything like this with any other writing prophet.

In most other prophets, only the father is mentioned. Only Zachariah also mentions the grandfather. This extensive mention of his ancestry indicates that he was a man of stature and perhaps the great-grandson of the God-fearing King Hezekiah and in that case, - of royal blood.

He prophesied about half a century after Nahum, during the reign of King Josiah over Judah – ca. 640-609 BC. The ten tribes were taken away by the Assyrians about eighty years ago. Under Josiah a great reformation took place in Judah. Unfortunately, it had no effect on the mindset of the heart of the people. The people have not converted to the LORD. Zephaniah does not mention the reform of Josiah, but speaks to a people who live in rebellion against the LORD.

Zep 1:2-3 | Announcement of a General Judgment

*2 “I will completely remove all [things]
From the face of the earth,” declares the LORD.*

*3 “I will remove man and beast;
I will remove the birds of the sky*

And the fish of the sea,

And the ruins along with the wicked;

And I will cut off man from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD.

A devastation is announced over “all [things]” (verse 2). That the LORD will remove everything completely “from the face of the earth”, reminds us of what He said and did at the deluge (Gen 6:7). It implies a general judgment, sometimes referring more specifically to the judgment of a certain area.

Zephaniah describes who is removed by the judgment (verse 3). He does this in pairs, which we can deduce from the twice added word “remove”. Man and beast – created on the sixth day of creation – and birds and fish – created on the fifth day of creation – are removed. The animals are under the curse because of the sin of man (Rom 8:20). The same fate undergo “the ruins” (or: “stumbling blocks”) that are the idols, and “the wicked,” that are the idolaters. They too are removed.

The deluge is a prelude to the global judgment in the end time. The Lord Jesus says that in that time it will be like in the time of Noah (Lk 17:24-27). People thought in Noah’s days that it would all stay as it always was. That is what people think today. But suddenly the cycle of daily events is broken by the coming of the day of the LORD.

Zep 1:4-6 | The Judgment of Judah and Jerusalem

*4 “So I will stretch out My hand against Judah
And against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem.
And I will cut off the remnant of Baal from this place,
[And] the names of the idolatrous priests along with the priests.
5 “And those who bow down on the housetops to the host of heaven,
And those who bow down [and] swear to the LORD and [yet] swear by Mil-
com,
6 And those who have turned back from following the LORD,
And those who have not sought the LORD or inquired of Him.”*

After the announcement of general judgment the prophet narrows the scope of his message and announces the special judgment on Judah and Jerusalem (verse 4). God extends His hand in judgment against them (cf. Isa 5:25; 9:12,17,21). They have been the recipients of God’s special revelation; now they will become the recipients of His special judgment. God will carry out that judgment in the short term by the Babylonians.

During his reign, Josiah removed much of the Baal's service (2Chr 34:4), but not everything. God cannot tolerate any of it with His people. What is left of it calls for His judgment and extermination. Baal means 'lord'. The "idolatrous priests" are not only exterminated as persons, but even their names are erased. God even exterminates the memory of them. The "priests" here are those of the LORD, but they are priests who do not care about the honor of the LORD.

In verses 5-6 some idolaters and what they do are described. They too will be judged. "Who bow down on the housetops to the host of heaven", are the worshippers of celestial bodies. These are people we know today as esoteric and new age people, people who seek 'light' in themselves and in creation and not in God. On the housetops they can better look at the sky. Moses vehemently warned against it (Deu 4:19).

The flat roofs are perfectly fit for erecting an altar (Jer 8:2; 19:13; 32:29). Manasseh and his successors have practiced it widely, making every house an idolatrous house (2Kgs 21:3,5; 23:5-6; Jer 7:17-18; 44:17-19,25).

Others have a compromise religion that includes worship of God and at the same time worship of the Milcom. This is unacceptable to God and in fact impossible (cf. Lk 16:13; Acts 3:6). Milcom also means 'king'. This looks ahead to the Antichrist, the false king in Israel in the end time that they will worship as a god.

The next group to be judged will be those of the apostates. These are the ones who first shared in the reform of Josiah, but later returned to idolatry. There are also the indifferent ones, "who have not sought the LORD or inquired of Him". Every form of iniquity is noticed and listed. Nothing is hidden from God's eye.

Zep 1:7 | Be Silent

*7 Be silent before the Lord GOD!
For the day of the LORD is near,
For the LORD has prepared a sacrifice,
He has consecrated His guests.*

Before the prophet continues to announce the judgment on all the aforementioned iniquities, he first calls for silence before God (Hab 2:20). The

reason for this is that “the day of the LORD”, the day of judgment, the day of reckoning, “is near” (cf. Joel 1:15; Oba 1:15). Man must be silent, for God has the last word.

The “sacrifice” prepared for the LORD is ... Judah. The “guests” who have been “consecrated” by Him are the Babylonians (Isa 13:3; 34:6; Jer 46:10; Eze 39:17; cf. Rev 19:17-18). How bitter it must be that God consecrates the pagan Babylonians to be His ‘priests’ to slaughter His people as sacrificial animals. If the sinner does not repent and offer himself to God as a living sacrifice (Rom 12:1), he will become the victim of his own sins.

Zep 1:8-9 | The Punishment of the LORD

8 “Then it will come about on the day of the LORD’s sacrifice

That I will punish the princes, the king’s sons

And all who clothe themselves with foreign garments.

9 “And I will punish on that day all who leap on the [temple] threshold,

Who fill the house of their lord with violence and deceit.

“The day of the LORD’s sacrifice” is the day of judgment He brings on the apostates and unbelievers (verse 8). They have rejected the Sacrifice, His Son, and will now themselves be sacrificed to the judgment. The first to be slaughtered are “the princes” who have adopted the customs of the nations. They are the most responsible. They should have been leaders for good instead of evil. “The king’s sons” are probably those of Zedekiah (2Kgs 25:7; Jer 39:6).

The “foreign garments” may refer to the garments of the Babylonians, in which the Judeans liked to walk (Eze 23:14-15). Their fondness for it betrays the bad mind of their hearts. The LORD wants to see in their garments that they are a people set apart for Him (Num 15:38; Deu 22:11-12).

In the application, “foreign garments” refer to all kinds of outward appearances that God’s people adopt from the world and through which an inner alienation from God and His Word is shown. Our language and our way of life, including the way we dress, betray the orientation of our hearts. Garments can have a lot to do with paganism. Garments are often immoral. Whoever wears such garments preaches apostasy from God through their body language.

“Leap on the threshold” seems to refer to the zeal with which slaves of rich lords leap over the threshold of their homes, i.e. leave their homes, to rob the property of others to make their lords even richer. In doing so, they use violence and deceit, so that the houses of the rich are filled with goods they have obtained through violence and deceit.

Zep 1:10 | A Cry, a Wail, a Loud Crash

*10 “On that day,” declares the LORD,
“There will be the sound of a cry from the Fish Gate,
A wail from the Second Quarter,
And a loud crash from the hills.*

By “that day” is meant the day of the LORD, the time when there will be crying and wailing from all parts of the city. The Fish Gate (Neh 3:3; 12:39; 2Chr 33:14) is located in the north of the city. Through this gate the enemy, coming from the north, enters Jerusalem. This gate owes its name to the nearby fish market where the fish caught in Lake Tiberias are brought. This gate is now called the Damascus Gate.

“The Second Quarter” is the district where the prophetess Huldah lives (2Kgs 22:14). With all the cries from the above mentioned places comes the sound of a loud crash from the hills. Everything is caused by the advancing armies of Babel.

Zep 1:11 | The People of Merchants Will Be Killed

*11 “Wail, O inhabitants of the Mortar,
For all the people of Canaan will be silenced;
All who weigh out silver will be cut off.*

“The Mortar” is a part of Jerusalem where merchants trade (Canaan means merchant). The word “mortar” is used to grind corn. This will happen to the dishonest merchants: they will be silenced because they will be cut off, i.e. they will be killed.

Zep 1:12 | The LORD Searches Jerusalem With Lamps

*12 “It will come about at that time
That I will search Jerusalem with lamps,*

*And I will punish the men
Who are stagnant in spirit,
Who say in their hearts,
'The LORD will not do good or evil!'*

No one will be able to escape the judgment that God brings on Judah and Jerusalem. The LORD Himself will see to it that no one escapes His judgment. As with the light of lamps, He will search the most remote places and bring all iniquity to light. His judgment will strike those who live in indifference and indolence. No sin escapes God's attention. He will bring it to light. He does not do this for Himself, but for His people, so that they may know this and judge sin in themselves.

When we think of a lamp and light, we can apply that to the light of conscience, where the mind of man is like a lamp of the Lord, through which He speaks to man about his sins. There is also the light of an event through which the Lord speaks and can call us to order. He can therefore suddenly and unexpectedly shed light on certain things in our lives that are not good. We have a third light in the Word of God. God's Word spreads light on our lives and points out what is wrong.

The search with lamps is reminiscent of the search by the Israelite of his house in view of the Passover to see if there remains any sour leaven, so that it can be removed (Exo 13:7). It is still customary for the father to go through the house with a light on the eve of the Passover. Spiritually, the lamp is still used to search for the lost sinner (Lk 15:8-10).

The people whom the LORD will punish will be compared with wine that is not removed from the lees or dregs. The sediment is the dregs. If the wine is not poured from the barrel into another barrel, while the dregs are left in the old barrel, the wine spoils. So it is about people who continue to live on in their wickedness (Jer 48:11).

They also have a heart in which they say they have to deal with the LORD. They do not deny His existence, but say that He does not live. In any case He does not show Himself. They attach this foolish conclusion to their equally foolish view that He does no good and does no evil, He does not bless and He does not judge. They see nothing of His presence, so He does nothing. He does not prove Himself, so the question is whether He is there.

It is the modern agnostics who say that it is possible that God is there, but that it is also possible that He is not there. One cannot know. Such people are fools and blind.

Zep 1:13 | God Shows That He Is There

*13 "Moreover, their wealth will become plunder
And their houses desolate;
Yes, they will build houses but not inhabit [them],
And plant vineyards but not drink their wine."*

Because of their complacency and indolence, God will bring the curse of the law upon them. This means that they will not be able to enjoy their prosperity, their homes and the fruit of their vineyards (Lev 26:32-33; Deu 28:30,39; Amos 5:11; Mic 6:15). In this way God will show that He is there and directs the world. He fulfills His promises to His people, also in judgment.

Zep 1:14-16 | The Great Day of the LORD

*14 Near is the great day of the LORD,
Near and coming very quickly;
Listen, the day of the LORD!
In it the warrior cries out bitterly.
15 A day of wrath is that day,
A day of trouble and distress,
A day of destruction and desolation,
A day of darkness and gloom,
A day of clouds and thick darkness,
16 A day of trumpet and battle cry
Against the fortified cities
And the high corner towers.*

It is "the great day of the LORD" (verse 14). That day is great because of his terrible judgments and their consequences (Joel 2:11). He is first presented as near and as a day that is fast approaching. He is much closer than the people realize and he rushes to his full revelation. If they listen carefully,

to which they are emphatically called, “listen”, they will already be able to hear the sound of it. They will also hear the bitter cries of the warrior.

How awful that day is, is indicated in several ways in this description (verses 15-16). Words are used that indicate the horrors of that day.

1. It is a day of “wrath” of the LORD over sins (verse 15). He is angry and deeply displeased with the behavior of His people.
2. When He brings His wrath upon them, it causes “trouble and distress” in those over whom He brings His wrath.
3. The consequences are “destruction and desolation”.
4. The atmosphere in which God’s wrath manifests itself is one “of darkness and gloom” and “of clouds and thick darkness”.

The LORD reveals Himself as a warrior blowing the trumpet and shouting a war cry against every stronghold built by men to protect themselves (verse 16). “Fortified cities” and “high corner towers” will be to no avail. There is no protection against the unfolding wrath of the LORD, as the following verse shows.

Zep 1:17 | The Reason for Judgment

*17 I will bring distress on men
So that they will walk like the blind,
Because they have sinned against the LORD;
And their blood will be poured out like dust
And their flesh like dung.*

Because the LORD Himself oppresses people, they will not be able to find a way out of this desperate misery. As a result, the people of Judah will walk like the blind (Deu 28:29). That is the result of having “sinned against the LORD”. People who turn their backs on God and are not willing to repent are also seen and treated with contempt by God. Their worthlessness is expressed by comparing their blood with “dust” and their flesh, i.e. their body, with “dung”.

Zep 1:18 | The Fire of God’s Jealousy

18 Neither their silver nor their gold

*Will be able to deliver them
On the day of the LORD's wrath;
And all the earth will be devoured
In the fire of His jealousy,
For He will make a complete end,
Indeed a terrifying one,
Of all the inhabitants of the earth.*

To underline the hopelessness of their situation, the prophet points out that there is no way out either. All their wealth does not benefit at that moment. Their silver and their gold offer no protection against the judgment of God (cf. 1Pet 1:18-19). The land and all its inhabitants will be consumed by the fire of God's jealousy. With the description of this general judgment the chapter ends as it began (verses 2-3).

Zephaniah 2

Zep 2:1-2 | Examine Yourself, Before ...

*1 Gather yourselves together, yes, gather,
O nation without shame,
2 Before the decree takes effect —
The day passes like the chaff —
Before the burning anger of the LORD comes upon you,
Before the day of the LORD's anger comes upon you.*

After a judgment that is so radical and definitive, everything seems over and out. But God does not announce a definitive judgment without keeping and offering a way out. That is why there is a penetrating appeal to the people to come to repentance (verse 1). The fact that it is said twice that they have to gather indicates how emphatic the call is. The meaning is to sift yourself through and through, and to sift on. A diligent sifting and search into oneself must be the beginning of all true repentance and pardon.

The call is made to a nation that the prophet calls a “nation without shame”. It indicates the indifference or even the hardening of their hearts. They are numb to what God wants.

That the call is urgent is shown in verse 2. There is no time to lose... time is short. The day to come to repentance is a wonderful day, but it is very fast over, just as quickly as chaff disappears that is carried away by the wind. Chaff is also a picture of the wicked people disappearing through the anger of the LORD (cf. Mt 3:12). The call must be answered immediately. Delay is fatal.

Zep 2:3 | Seek the LORD and What Marks Him

*3 Seek the LORD,
All you humble of the earth
Who have carried out His ordinances;
Seek righteousness, seek humility.*

*Perhaps you will be hidden
In the day of the LORD's anger.*

Repentance must appear from works which here, consist of seeking the LORD and doing what He says. They must seek “the LORD” and also “righteousness” and “humility”. This call seems to be addressed to the remnant, which includes “all the humble of the earth [or: land]” (Psa 76:9; Isa 11:4; Amos 8:4). They have been converted. Although they are humble, they are urged to seek humility, that is to say, they are called to increase in it.

Humility is the hallmark of the Lord Jesus (Mt 11:29). A remnant is recognized as having His features. They are not concerned with themselves and their faithfulness, but with Him to Whom they have taken refuge. The LORD then hides them and protects them from judgment. He is the ark that offers salvation against the waters of the deluge. This corresponds to the meaning of the name of the prophet. After all, Zephaniah means ‘Yahweh hides’.

Zep 2:4-5 | The Judgment on the Philistines

*4 For Gaza will be abandoned
And Ashkelon a desolation;
Ashdod will be driven out at noon
And Ekron will 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;
And I will destroy you
So that there will be no inhabitant.*

When the LORD judges His people for their sins, it does not mean that he ignores or condones the sins of the surrounding heathen peoples. The cities of the Philistines in the west are the first to be judged. Philistines are a picture of depraved Christianity. They print their name on the land: Palestine. In them we see the religious posturing that tries to control and rule everything of God according to human standards.

The four main cities are mentioned: Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod and Ekron. Gath is missing (cf. Amos 1:6-8). As a reason for not mentioning Gath, it has been suggested that this city did not recover from the destruction that King Uzziah brought upon it (2Chr 26:6). Also in some other lists of the Philistine cities Gath does not occur (Jer 25:20; Zec 9:5-6).

Ashdod will be driven out “at noon”, which is the hottest part of the day. This means that that city will have an extra heavy judgment, because the inhabitants will have to flee at a time when in the east people usually rest because of the great heat. It also means that it will happen when one least expects to be attacked (2Sam 4:5; Jer 6:4). Attacks are usually expected at night, not during the day, and certainly not during the hottest part of the day.

The Philistines are called “Cherethites” (verse 5) because of their relationship with Crete (Jer 47:4; Amos 9:7; Eze 25:16). They are a people who unlawfully took God’s land. Also in our days there are religious, spiritual powers that want to drive the people of God, the church, out of their inheritance. God will defeat those powers and put His people in possession of their inheritance. To defend and enjoy the inheritance now, He has given us His armor (Eph 6:12-18).

Zep 2:6-7 | Judah Gets What the Philistines Possess

*6 So the seacoast will be pastures,
[With] caves for shepherds and folds for flocks.
7 And the coast will be
For the remnant of the house of Judah,
They will pasture on it.
In the houses of Ashkelon they will lie down at evening;
For the LORD their God will care for them
And restore their fortune.*

When the land has been stripped of the Philistines, the land that they have unlawfully claimed for themselves will be inhabited by the remnant of the house of Judah. They are entitled to it. It belongs to what God originally promised Abraham. “The remnant” is “all Israel” that “will be saved”

(Rom 11:26). It is the new Israel that receives all the blessings that God has promised His people.

Zep 2:8-10 | The Judgment on Moab and Ammon

*8 "I have heard the taunting of Moab
And the revilings of the sons of Ammon,
With which they have taunted My people
And become arrogant against their territory.
9 "Therefore, as I live," declares the LORD of hosts,
The God of Israel,
"Surely Moab will be like Sodom
And the sons of Ammon like Gomorrah—
A place possessed by nettles and salt pits,
And a perpetual desolation.
The remnant of My people will plunder them
And the remainder of My nation will inherit them."
10 This they will have in return for their pride, because they have taunted and
become arrogant against the people of the LORD of hosts.*

Moab and Ammon are connected by Zephaniah, as many other prophets do (verse 8). They are characterized by great arrogance towards Israel. This has become greater as the decay in Israel and Judah has increased. They taunt the people of God and try to enrich themselves and take advantage of the discipline that God brings upon His people.

In Christianity we recognize them in people who say they are Christians, but are not born again. They claim they are alive, but they are dead (Rev 3:1b). They are confessors who confess to belong to the family of God while they are children conceived in lewdness. They are the proud Christian confessors who, with contempt, look down on anyone who wants to be guided only by God's Word and emphasize the new birth as the only possibility to get eternal life. Their pride is condemned by Isaiah and Jeremiah in their prophecies (Isa 16:6; 25:11; Jer 48:29-30).

The comparison of Moab and Ammon with Sodom and Gomorrah (verse 9) should come as no surprise when we think of their origins (Gen 19:30-38). They originated from an incestuous relationship between Lot and his

daughters, after he was got drunk by them. This happened after he and his daughters fled from Sodom. Although they may have left Sodom, Sodom did not leave them and is characteristic of their descendants.

Their offspring, the Moabites and the Ammonites, behaved as wickedly as Sodom and Gomorrah. Therefore, the judgment on them will be the same as that of Sodom and Gomorrah. They will become “a place possessed by nettles and salt pits”, symbolizing desolation, infertility, and perpetual disaster (Deu 29:23; cf. Gen 19:26; Num 18:19; Jdg 9:45; Psa 107:34; Eze 47:11).

Because Moab and Ammon have acted in pride against God’s people, they will be judged by God. No people who harm God’s people, whether through domination or taunting, have a sense of how much God is grieved by this and how He will punish them for it. He will use His people to carry out that punishment. Israel will inherit the territory of Moab and Ammon, located east of the country.

Zep 2:11 | Judgment on the Idols

11 The LORD will be terrifying to them, for He will starve [literally: make lean] all the gods of the earth; and all the coastlands of the nations will bow down to Him, everyone from his [own] place.

By judging the heathen nations, God also judges the gods these nations worship. Idols have no reason to exist without nations that worship and serve them (1Cor 8:4-6). Then each nation will worship the one true God, each in the place where that nation lives, making that worship general, universal (Mal 1:11). Now it is not general yet, although it happens wherever there are worshippers (Jn 4:21-24). It will only be universal when the Lord Jesus will reign as Messiah, during the realm of peace.

Zep 2:12 | The Judgment on the Ethiopians

12 “You also, O Ethiopians, will be slain by My sword.”

After judging the peoples west and east of Israel, Zephaniah draws attention to Ethiopia, south of Israel. By “My sword” is meant Nebuchadnezzar, who is used as a sword in the hand of the LORD for His people (Jer 46:9; Eze 30:24-25). Ethiopia represents man in the blackness of his sinful nature, for whom it is impossible to change anything themselves (Jer

13:23). God will execute His judgment on this, just as He did that for all who believe by judging His Son on the cross for them.

Zep 2:13-15 | The Judgment on Assyria and Nineveh

*13 And He will stretch out His hand against the north
And destroy Assyria,
And He will make Nineveh a desolation,
Parched like the wilderness.*

*14 Flocks will lie down in her midst,
All beasts which range in herds;
Both the pelican and the hedgehog
Will lodge in the tops of her pillars;
Birds will sing in the window,
Desolation [will be] on the threshold;
For He has laid bare the cedar work.*

*15 This is the exultant city
Which dwells securely,
Who says in her heart,
"I am, and there is no one besides me."
How she has become a desolation,
A resting place for beasts!
Everyone who passes by her will hiss
[And] wave his hand [in contempt].*

Finally, there is the judgment on Assyria (verse 13), located north of Israel. The judgment on Nineveh is described in detail in the book of Nahum. Nineveh falls in 612 BC after a siege by the Medes and the Babylonians. In Assyria and Nineveh we see the pride, which needs nothing and nobody and is completely indifferent towards God. The fact that Nineveh will become "parched like the wilderness" shows how drastic the judgment will be because Nineveh has an enormous irrigation system that provides itself with an abundance of water.

Nineveh, a large city with a large number of inhabitants, will offer a desolate and desolate sight (verse 14). Instead of marching armies and a prosperous population, according to the prophet's prophecy all kinds of animals will find a home in a devastated area where they feel at home.

Nineveh boasts of his own satisfaction – “I am, and there is no one besides me” –, as if she is dependent on nothing and nobody (verse 15). Babylon does the same (Isa 47:8; cf. Rev 3:17). God is the only One Who has the right to say what Nineveh is arrogantly boasting about here: “There is no other God besides Me, ...There is none except Me. ... For I am God, and there is no other” (Isa 45:21-22). Nineveh is greatly humiliated because of this presumption and is a dwelling place of wild beasts only. Anyone who sees it will clearly demonstrate that it is her own fault. No one will feel sorry for her, but instead mock her.

Zephaniah 3

Zep 3:1 | Woe Over Jerusalem

*1 Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled,
The tyrannical city!*

After having expressed his woe over various nations, the prophet returns to his message for Jerusalem. Because of her high privileges and vocation, much devotion to God could be expected in the way of faith and obedience to Him. Now she is accused of rebellion: she is “the rebellious”, of defilement: she is “defiled”, and of oppression: she is “tyrannical”.

1. She rebels, because she does not want to submit to the will of God;
2. She is defiled because she sins persistently through idolatry;
3. She is tyrannical, because she tramples the rights of the poor, widows and orphans.

The polluted, defiled people wash themselves with water and perform other ceremonies that make them look clean. In reality, their whole life is polluted.

Zep 3:2 | Four Indictments

*2 She heeded no voice,
She accepted no instruction.
She did not trust in the LORD,
She did not draw near to her God.*

Four indictments are brought against Jerusalem:

1. She does not listen to God’s voice through His law;
2. She does not allow herself to be corrected (cf. verse 7);
3. She trusts in herself, in her idols and allies and not in God;
4. She stays away from God because she does not want to be in His presence.

Zep 3:3-4 | Four Corrupt Leaders

*3 Her princes within her are roaring lions,
 Her judges are wolves at evening;
 They leave nothing for the morning.
 4 Her prophets are reckless, treacherous men;
 Her priests have profaned the sanctuary.
 They have done violence to the law.*

As the people are, so are the four classes of leaders, representing the total leadership of the entire people: princes, judges, prophets and priests.

1. “Her princes” – with the exception of Josiah – are “roaring lions”, always looking for new prey. With their roaring they frighten their subjects instead of giving them a feeling of security and safety.
2. “Her judges” are “evening wolves”: they tear the people apart instead of taking care of them and healing them. The wolf is in contrast with the shepherd; he robs and scatters (Jn 10:13) in his insatiable hunger and indomitable urge to tear.
3. “Her prophets” – the only time they are mentioned in this book – are guilty of “reckless” talk and behavior with which “treachery” goes hand in hand. There is no seriousness or steadfastness in doctrine and life. They are treacherous because they are unfaithful to the LORD Whom they say they represent. They encourage the people in their apostasy from the LORD.
4. “Her priests” behave unholy. They “profane the sanctuary”, which means God’s sanctuary. They do not worry about the law. Instead of teaching the law to the people, they do “violence to the law”, which means they distort it (Eze 22:26).

Zep 3:5 | The Righteous LORD

*5 The LORD is righteous within her;
 He will do no injustice.
 Every morning He brings His justice to light;
 He does not fail.
 But the unjust knows no shame.*

Contrary to the unfaithful princes “within her” (verse 3) Zephaniah states “the LORD is righteous within her”. His holy and righteous presence makes the corruption of the leaders so much worse and requires judgment about it.

Contrary to the tearing wolves at evening, He brings His justice to light every morning. This justice will actually be practiced in the realm of peace, both in Israel and among the nations (Psa 101:8).

Despite all warnings and God’s law enforcement, the unjust does not intend to change his course of action. Unashamedly, he continues to commit injustice. He can’t get rid of his bad, shameless behavior by anything.

Zep 3:6-7 | God Points Out His Actions to His People

*6 “I have cut off nations;
Their corner towers are in ruins.
I have made their streets desolate,
With no one passing by;
Their cities are laid waste,
Without a man, without an inhabitant.
7 “I said, ‘Surely you will revere Me,
Accept instruction.’
So her dwelling will not be cut off
[According to] all that I have appointed concerning her.
But they were eager to corrupt all their deeds.*

God reminds His people of His dealings with other nations (verse 6). These are unspecified nations. It is about God’s general judgments on certain nations. Wars of people against people are ultimately God’s way of punishing peoples. Those nations think to do their own will, but in reality God uses them to execute His judgments. His people need to see that, we also need to see that in our time. God allows one people to exterminate the other, to destroy their “corner towers”, to make their “streets” desolate and impassable, to lay waste their “cities” and to completely depopulate them, without a single remaining inhabitant.

Jerusalem does not take to heart the example of God’s dealings with the peoples around her (verse 7). She does not allow herself to be corrected (cf.

verse 2) and brought to a fear of the LORD. God uses His Word to instruct (2Tim 3:16). Instruction means bringing the people back on the right path. It is a great grace of God that He wants to do this with His people. But God's people do not listen and do evil. They are even "eager" to do evil. This is also the case with the masses today.

Zep 3:8 | Wait for Me

*8 "Therefore wait for Me," declares the LORD,
 "For the day when I rise up as a witness.
 Indeed, My decision is to gather nations,
 To assemble kingdoms,
 To pour out on them My indignation,
 All My burning anger;
 For all the earth will be devoured
 By the fire of My zeal.*

The word "therefore" with which this verse begins, indicates that what follows is based on the foregoing. In the previous verses the sinfulness of the mass of God's people is painted. Connected to that follows the call to wait for the LORD. That call is addressed to the remnant.

The LORD says that He will rise up and return to the earth. He comes as a Man. The believing remnant may trust that He will bring judgment on the nations, which will mean salvation for His people. For this judgment He will gather the nations and then judge them (Zec 14:2; Joel 3:1-3,12-16).

Zep 3:9 | Call on the LORD and Serve Him

*9 "For then I will give to the peoples purified lips,
 That all of them may call on the name of the LORD,
 To serve Him shoulder to shoulder.*

After the execution of judgment the LORD shall process a change among the nations. Instead of the arrogant and proud language and their worship of their idols, they will speak things that are to His honor. The judgment on Babel in the confusion of speech will be undone. Here we see that the nations learn righteousness through the judgments (Isa 26:9b).

The purity of lips presupposes that the hearts are cleansed. The first thing clean lips do is pray and worship. Calling on His Name cannot be done other than in pure language. Calling on the Name of the LORD means that one turns to the LORD out of the feeling of need. The result or consequence of that calling is a “shoulder to shoulder” – literally ‘[with] one shoulder’ – serving or serving together God according to His pleasure.

Zep 3:10 | My Offerings

*10 “From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia
My worshipers, My dispersed ones,
Will bring My offerings.*

The change that has taken place with the nations inwardly will have external consequences. Ethiopia represents all countries far away. From everywhere, from all parts of the earth, the LORD will restore His people. Those who were first haters of God’s people will bring the dispersed ones of God’s people as offerings to the LORD (Isa 18:1; cf. Zep 1:7-8). This will be the result of the fervent prayer of the dispersed.

Zep 3:11 | Haughtiness Is Removed

*11 “In that day you will feel no shame
Because of all your deeds
By which you have rebelled against Me;
For then I will remove from your midst
Your proud, exulting ones,
And you will never again be haughty
On My holy mountain.*

“In that day” refers to the future, in this case to the future restoration of God’s people. When they are back in the land, they will not have to be ashamed, because everything that would work that has been removed by the LORD. He has done so either in the exercise of judgment on the arrogant, or because the Lord Jesus has borne the judgment over them. Every arrogant act of His own is reconciled. Pride and overconfidence are removed.

If Christ rules, the flesh will no longer be able to uplift itself. He rules on His holy mountain. Where He is and reigns, everything must be in accordance with His holiness. What is unholy cannot assert itself.

Zep 3:12-13 | The Remnant of Israel

12 *"But I will leave among you
A humble and lowly people,
And they will take refuge in the name of the LORD.*
13 *"The remnant of Israel will do no wrong
And tell no lies,
Nor will a deceitful tongue
Be found in their mouths;
For they will feed and lie down
With no one to make them tremble."*

A "humble and lowly people" is the remnant with which God continues (verse 12). Therein is nothing of man and everything of God that He Himself has worked in His sovereignty. God desires to see His attributes represented by His people. They cannot do this in their own power. Yet the people will show them because "they will take refuge in the name of the LORD".

These attributes are described in verse 13. The remnant is free from doing injustice and speaking deception. When God has worked everything to His pleasure, there is only food in abundance for the people, they will "feed", they will "lie down" in rest and safety for there is "no one to make them tremble" (cf. Mic 4:4).

Zep 3:14-15 | Joy for Israel

14 *Shout for joy, O daughter of Zion!
Shout [in triumph], O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all [your] heart,
O daughter of Jerusalem!*
15 *The LORD has taken away [His] judgments against you,
He has cleared away your enemies.
The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;*

| *You will fear disaster no more.*

In view of the future happy day, Zion is called to be cheerful, to sing, and to rejoice (verse 14). “The time has arrived for singing” (Song 2:12). All the heart is focused on the LORD and His deeds in favor of them and can therefore be full of joy.

In verse 15 the reason for the joy of verse 14 is given. The judgments are over; every opponent has been conquered and removed and cleared away. It is not possible for the enemy to rise again and attack again. The guarantee for this is that “the King of Israel, the LORD”, that is the Lord Jesus, is in their midst. Where He is and rules, evil has no chance of ever asserting itself again (cf. Nah 1:9).

Zep 3:16-17 | The LORD Your God Is in Your Midst

16 In that day it will be said to Jerusalem:

“Do not be afraid, O Zion;

Do not let your hands fall limp.

17 “The LORD your God is in your midst,

A victorious warrior.

He will exult over you with joy,

He will be quiet in His love,

He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy.

In these verses the encouragement and comfort for a frightened and plagued remnant continues. The LORD does everything He can to reassure them that it is truly and definitively over with all persecution and oppression. They do not have to be afraid anymore and not to lose courage (verse 16). Because He is in their midst, there is no reason for that either (verse 17). Fear takes away the power to serve. When fear is gone, there is strength to serve again. The LORD their God is in their midst as a victorious Warrior, literally: a Warrior Who saves (cf. Jer 14:9). He is the “strong God” (Isa 10:21).

In the application for us, we may say that the Lord Jesus – He is that strong God – is in the midst of the assembled church, even though there are only two or three gathered together (Mt 18:20). Though they are a weak and

small people, the assembled believers will rejoice that He is in their midst (Jn 20:19-20).

The climax of joy is that the marriage contract, broken by the unfaithfulness of the people, is restored (Isa 62:5; 65:19; Hos 2:19-20). God Himself will remain quiet in His love for His people Israel in unlimited joy and delight. What a certainty that is for Israel. He will be quiet in His love about all her past sins because they are gone forever. Quietness is not only the absence of talking, but it is also the enjoyment of the simple presence of the beloved. It is being quiet about the other. There is complete rest about each other. God looks so much in joy at His people that their presence gives Him complete satisfaction.

The silence is broken by His cheering, through which He expresses His joy over her. It is the delight of the Groom about His bride (cf. Isa 62:5b), as we hear in the song of the King of Israel when He says: "How beautiful and how delightful you are, [My] love, with [all] your charms!" (Song 7:6).

Zep 3:18 | God's People Gathered

*18 "I will gather those who grieve about the appointed feasts—
They came from you, [O Zion];
[The] reproach [of exile] is a burden on them.*

There was sadness because the feasts could not be celebrated in the foreign country where they were (Psa 137:1-4). That sadness will be over because they will be able to celebrate the feasts again. The LORD will gather them together and bring them together to those who are already in the land. The ten tribes in the scattering and the two tribes in the land belong together. They are one people.

Now the reproach of imprisonment in the foreign country still presses as a burden on them. That reproach will be taken away by the LORD by bringing them back to their own land.

Zep 3:19-20 | God's People Turned Into Praise and Renown

*19 "Behold, I am going to deal at that time
With all your oppressors,
I will save the lame*

*And gather the outcast,
And I will turn their shame into praise and renown
In all the earth.
20 "At that time I will bring you in,
Even at the time when I gather you together;
Indeed, I will give you renown and praise
Among all the peoples of the earth,
When I restore your fortunes before your eyes,"
Says the LORD.*

The LORD will repay the oppressors for the evil they have done to His people (verse 19; Isa 60:14). The LORD shall take action against them. God's people were an easy prey for the oppressors, for they were lame and outcast (cf. Mic 4:6-7). God's people had no strength in themselves because they were lame. They were also powerless because of the loss of cohesion, because they were outcast. The LORD will see to it that His people will be honored wherever they formerly were objects of mockery and exploitation.

In verse 20 the LORD repeats the promise of verse 19 in slightly different words. This gives the promise extra emphasis. Then the people will fulfill the purpose God has set for them (Deu 26:19).

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