

## **THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH**

### **Lesson 3, Chapters 1 and 2**

We ended our study of Zephaniah last time at chapter 1 verse 11. Verse 8 began a section of chapter 1 that listed the kinds of sin that God was going to punish, and a broad list of the categories of people that would experience it. It began with sins of the leadership and elite that were precipitating the Lord's reaction to bring about what that verse calls "the day of Yehoveh's sacrifice". I have much to say about this... accompanied with caution, warning, and hoping to dispel simplistic if not false teachings about the topic that have been all the rage of the Evangelical Church since just a little past the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

The "day of Yehoveh's sacrifice" is a rather strange phrase that needs a bit of explanation. While it is generally equivalent to The Day of Yehoveh or Judgment Day, there is a nuance to it. First, the sacrifice this speaks of is not a typical altar sacrifice... it is not a burnt offering. Rather, it is figurative and it means something that pays the price for something else. So, for instance, when the Hebrews were in Egypt and God decimated the Egyptians in order to rescue His people, Egypt was the "sacrifice" to redeem Israel. So, this phrase in verse 8 is making Israel as the sacrifice for God to achieve something that He wants. And what He wants is the final step of Redemption history.

This sacrificing of Israel is also meant in a rather strange way. What is going to happen is that Israel will be the well-deserving bait used by God to draw all the nations of the world (all gentile by nature) to the Holy Land in order for God to crush them with His wrath. At the same time, it will be devastating for Israel as the nations harm them nearly to extinction, because the majority of the people of Israel will be killed and maimed. What is occurring from a broader scope is that God is using His fiery judgment on the nations to destroy those same nations, but He's also using that same judgment on Israel to purify them. This reflects a God principle that is crucial to our biblical and prophetic understanding. It is that God uses water and fire in dual purposes, so they serve both as symbols and as the actual instruments to accomplish those dual purposes. Water and fire can both utterly destroy or they both can purify. A universal flood of water destroyed human life on earth except for 8

people. At the same time, it purified in the sense that a remnant of 8 “purified” people survived to re-start the human race. What is coming for the world will be fire to destroy much of the human race (since God promised not to use water, again, to do that), but the result will also include a purification of the remnant of the survivors. So, all and all this “day of Yehoveh’s sacrifice” is a pretty unique event and is for a specific divine purpose. Yet, it is also following the same divine principle as used for the rationale of Noah’s Flood.

What emerges from this is a coming worldwide destruction of pagans, and unfaithful Believers of God and Yeshua... generally what we could label as the destruction of the wicked and the unrighteous. At the same time, those among the nations who survive will understand and acknowledge Yehoveh’s sovereignty and bow down before Him in submission. Some of them will obey and worship Him because of a change of heart, others as for no other reason than self-preservation. As for Israel, the unfaithful and unrighteous of Israel that generally will be wiped out in the war with the gentile nations, will give way to a remnant of the faithful and righteous who worship Yehoveh and His Son Yeshua in sincerity. There will arise a new world order unlike anything that has ever existed. This is when the Kingdom of God comes into its fullest being, on this same earth we all live on today, but with all the nations of the world (meaning governments and leadership) submitting to the King of God’s Kingdom, Yeshua, who will rule over the entire purified world from His throne in Jerusalem.

Another biblical principle is highlighted in God’s wrathful judgment to purge the world of evil. That judgment will begin with His own people. So, this judgment on the entire world... Israel included... begins in Jerusalem.

**CJB 1 Peter 4:17-18** ***17 For the time has come for the judgment to begin. It begins with the household of God; and if it starts with us, what will the outcome be for those who are disobeying God's Good News?- 18 "If the righteous is barely delivered, where will the ungodly and sinful end up?***

Let’s re-read the final few verses of Zephaniah chapter 1.

## RE-READ ZEPHANIAH 1:11 – 18

Verse 12 begins with: “When that day comes, I will search Jerusalem with lamps...” It would not be wrong to mentally picture the mythical Diogenes from the ancient Greek times that went around with a lamp in his hand, searching for one honest person. It should come as no surprise that we see precisely the same thought expressed in Jeremiah, who was a contemporary of Zephaniah... and it is too unlikely to think that those 2 weren’t aware of one another at the least and much more likely that they were in communication. Jeremiah says this:

**CJB Jeremiah 5:1** ***"Roam the streets of Yerushalayim look around, observe and ask in its open spaces: if you can find anyone (if there is anyone!) who acts with justice and seeks the truth, I will pardon her.***

So, while Jeremiah puts God’s search for someone (in Jerusalem) who seeks justice and truth (a positive thing), Zephaniah puts it in the negative flip side with God searching for those in Jerusalem who are sinners and determined to remain that way. Either way, the result is the same: the unfaithful and the unrighteous are identified and punished. Yet do not be misled. Because we are speaking of **national** judgments (not individual judgment), then the righteous will suffer collateral damage along with the wicked. Even so, the bulk of the unfaithful shall die just as the bulk of the faithful will survive. But *not all* of either group. Exactly how does God sort this out? I don’t know and we aren’t told. Clearly, however, it is He who does the sorting, and this is the point of picturing God with the lamp searching Jerusalem. This is not a job He has delegated to another.

The idea of using a lamp to search also includes the idea of searching and finding even those who hide in the dark hoping to avoid His gaze. But no one will be able to elude God’s search.

The next words of verse 12 are presented by the CJB in a dynamic way, and not literal. Here is a better and more literal rendering.

<sup>KJV</sup> **Zephaniah 1:12b** *...and punish the men that are settled on their lees: that say in their heart, The LORD will not do good, neither will he do evil.*

What does it mean for one to be “settled on their lees”? Literally, the lees are the sediments left over from wine and hard liquor production. They are always strained out before bottling or being served... except for those who prefer the strongest alcoholic content. So, to drink the lees was to drink the strongest liquor. Other Bible versions say: “stagnant in their spirit”, or “say in their hearts”, or even “hardened on their preserved things”. The Hebrew word that is frustrating Bible translators is **qapha**, which technically and most literally means to thicken, condense, or congeal. So, this is a tough phrase to bring over to English in order to attempt to decipher its meaning. The best way to look at this is as an expression of having to endure hard punishments. This is an idiom, so the sum of its words does not describe its actual use. My speculation is that it derives from the frequently used symbolic idea of “drinking from the cup of God’s wrath”, or “drinking from the cup of” something else that is harmful or negative. What would be at the bottom of a cup of wine or liquor? The sediments, the **qapha**... the strongest most powerful part of what is in the cup. Thus, in the context of verse 12, these are people who are committed to the most vile parts of their own wickedness. They have no fear of Yehoveh, they think He can’t or wouldn’t do anything to them, and that in most ways He is irrelevant in their lives. Thus, they can run their lives with impunity. Do not think of atheists; rather, in the context of Judah and Jerusalem, these are people that claim to be God worshippers who follow God’s Torah (thinking themselves as righteous), but in fact they have decided to believe in the doctrinal or traditional heresies of men as their source of truth, or they have decided that as Israelites they can behave in whatever way they feel like because (as God’s people), they have special liberty to do so. Yehoveh would never harm them no matter how disobedient they might be. Sound familiar? This is nearly perfectly parallel with the standard Christian belief that if one believes in Jesus, nothing that they do or think matters. They are forever held immune from their wickedness because a loving God would never punish or harm them. As a result, an intent to obey God’s laws and commands plays no role in their lifestyles or decisions. And, when judgment comes, they will be startled when God says to them:

**CJB Matthew 7:23** *"I never knew you! Get away from Me you workers of Lawlessness".*

To finish this thought, the last words of verse 12 are: *"...The LORD will not do good, neither will he do evil."*

First, the word "Lord" is not there in the Hebrew original... the word is Yehoveh. Second, in ancient speech, to do evil or to experience evil often as not meant to do harm or to experience catastrophe. So, it doesn't mean evil as in the opposite of good or righteous. This would best read: "...Yehoveh will not do me good, neither will He bring me catastrophe". This is expressing utter indifference; a belief that God has neither influence over your life nor over the world. You can simply set Him on the shelf, should you choose, while at the same time claiming He is your God. And, by the way, this is a core belief of Marxism, as well as of the most extreme Liberal of some Church denominations.

**CJB Zephaniah 1:13** *For this, their wealth will be plundered; and their houses will be destroyed. Yes, they will build houses but not live in them; they will plant vineyards but not drink the wine."*

When we look at this verse as a whole, the central object is building houses and planting vineyards. In this ancient agrarian society, this essentially meant to establish a community. Establishment of household and community is so important that in Deuteronomy being newly married is one of the very few ways for a young man to avoid serving in the army.

**CJB Deuteronomy 20:5-6** <sup>5</sup> *"Then the officials will speak to the soldiers. They are to say, 'Is there a man here who has built a new house, but hasn't dedicated it yet? He should go back home now; otherwise he may die fighting, and another man will dedicate it. 6 "'Is there a man here who has planted a vineyard, but hasn't yet made use of its fruit? He should go back home; otherwise he may die fighting, and another man will use it.*

So, because this is, after all, a national judgment, then this is speaking about the end of communities. These indifferent people who take their relationship with God so casually will be shocked when everything that mattered to them, and everything that they labored so diligently to acquire, or thought would protect them (like their wealth or societal position), doesn't save or exempt them from God's wrath. I ran across some words of those 19<sup>th</sup> century Bible scholars Kiel and Delitzsch about this situation that sums it all up so very well. I ask you to hear this because of the enormous danger we all face if we fail to heed what we have just been reading from Zephaniah. They say:

**They (these indifferent Israelites) did not deny the existence of God, but in their character and conduct they denied the working of the Living God in the world, placing Jehovah on the level of the dead idols, who did neither harm nor good... whereby they really denied the being of God.**

I ask you to pay special attention to this, because this is the trap of being what I call a "Cultural Christian". That is, when we live in a society that mostly accepts that there is a God (of some sort or definition), and where our societal laws are generally ordered on what the Bible teaches as basic rights and wrongs, then as a member of that kind of society this is a Cultural Christian. This can include those who attend Church perhaps as much as twice a year for Easter and Christmas... or those who have expressed belief in Christ, but they separate that belief from all other aspects of their daily lives. That is, they live and behave one way for 6 days and 23 hours, and another for 1 hour on Sundays. They exhibit no desire to know more about God nor to compare how the Bible says they are to live, against how they actually *do* live. Verses 12 and 13 together are very powerful, frank, and convicting.

Verses 14 – 18 now begin to speak more directly to the Day of Judgment.

***CJB Zephaniah 1:14 The great Day of Yehoveh is near, near and coming very quickly; Hear the sound of the Day of Yehoveh ! When it's here, even a warrior will cry bitterly.***

So very much to talk about here, and this and the previous verse together could easily be expanded into a book. I'll do what I can to condense it, but its meaning and impact simply must be heard and faced up to. To say that the Day of Yehoveh is near means it won't be delayed. It is not so much an expression of "when". After all, the terms near and far, soon or later, are relative and not definitive. Yet, this statement of it being "near" (that is, God's judgment not being delayed) is quickly amended to say it is coming very quickly! That *does* mean "when". Even so, "coming quickly" is also a relative term that from God's standpoint, depending on the context, could be anything from days to centuries. In this verse, the idea of its imminence is further amplified by the last half of the verse, so, this is not speaking of some distant future or... better... because of the very nature of prophecy, it includes the idea of both a very soon and a future fulfillment. When one studies prophecies in general, and then holds them up against actual recorded history, that much becomes exceedingly clear.

Relative to where we in the 21<sup>st</sup> century stand in history; there have already been a few "Day of Yehoveh" events in the past involving Israel. Most specifically the conquering and exiles they have experienced as a result of a Day of Judgment upon them. The Assyrian invasion and exile of the northern kingdom in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. was one incident. The Babylonian invasion and exile of the southern kingdom (Judah) in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century was another. The last one was the Roman invasion and exile of the entire reconstructed Holy Land in the early 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. For us, there is only one more Day of Yehoveh to come; the one that is spoken about concerning the End Times and Armageddon. How "near" that is to us cannot be reduced to a calendar date. But the signs our times indicate that we are much less than a century before it happens. Probably less than half a century. We need to be aware of this and be prepared. Zephaniah's prophecy fell on deaf ears for Judah and the results were catastrophic. And, even if all were affected by it, some would have fared better had they prepared for the deprivations that would surely come with it.

Walter Kaiser, Jr. has done a wonderful job of summing up what the Day of Yehoveh amounts to that is just ahead of us, including the character of it. This is something you can write down and put in the front of your Bibles to refer to.

- 1)** It is that time when God will come to judge the entire world with righteousness.
- 2)** On that day the Lord will become King over the whole earth, and His Name will be the only one.
- 3)** That day is always pending; it is near, because it has both a near and a distant aspect combined in one perspective.
- 4)** It is the time of God's wrath against the wicked
- 5)** It is a day of cosmic gloom and darkness
- 6)** It is a day of unprecedented battle when the Lord Himself enters as the ultimate warrior

I'll add that it is a day of clouds and thick darkness; a Day of Trouble; a Day of vengeance.

Yes, in its final moments, when God's enemies are thoroughly vanquished and the earth is a complete wreck, there will come great blessing. The biggest blessing will be Yeshua's return and Him sitting on the throne in Jerusalem, from which He will rule the world in justice and truth. But the road to get *through* the Day of Judgment to its conclusion (which is far more than a single 24-hour period) will be indescribably horrific. Yet, I have heard congregation after congregation cheer and shout and sing with joy about it. About the only reason I can think why they would react that way is because of the naïve and false teachings from Pastors that Believers will never have to experience it or even witness it. The Bible teaches the precise opposite (Old and New Testaments). Ignorance can be deadly. When it comes to God and the Bible, ignorance can give you false hopes such that when those hopes aren't realized, you can lose faith in God... when in fact you are merely believing bad doctrine. You and I should be... and God expects us to be... sober and ready to face what is ahead by means of His forewarning. Our hope cannot be in how we might survive what is coming in this life; but rather in what joy and glory our Messiah has opened the gate to, for our next and eternal life, so that we don't have to fear our own death.

To show you how differently Pastors and Church leaders understood what is obvious simply by reading the words in the Bible, as compared to today, I

want to recite to you a poetic hymn that was created in about 1200 A.D. It is titled Dies Irae.

*Day of wrath! O day of mourning.  
See fulfilled the Prophets' warning.  
Heaven and earth in ashes burning.*

*O what fear man's bosom rendeth  
When from Heaven the Judge descendeth  
On whose sentence all dependeth.*

*Wondrous sound the trumpet flingeth;  
Through earth's sepulchers it ringeth;  
All before the throne it bringeth.*

*Death is struck, and nature quaking,  
All creation is awaking,  
To its Judge an answer making.*

This eventually became part of the requiem masses of the Roman Church, but its sober unpopularity against the modern doctrines of Believers not being around to have to experience any of this, saw it abandoned and removed in 1969. Remember this poem. This well reflects how the Day of Yehoveh will really come about, the terrible nature of it, that this is how God has chosen to redeem and purify the world, and even the Church of old acknowledged this as proper reflection of what the Scriptures taught. This was so for many centuries until only a relatively few years ago when the race to make God seem more docile and appealing to potential Church members, that it led to the creation of false and more pleasing doctrines about it.

As we read this and other prophetic verses about the Day of Judgment, very often the term "great" is included. I hope it goes without saying, that "great" is not meant in a happy or positive way. It means great as in momentous in effect. Great as of the highest degree and scope. This verse also speaks of the sounds of that Day. I have never been in war, but my father was. What little he spoke of it, it invariably included what it sounded like. How noisy it was.

The deafening blasts of bombs, thousands of bullets being fired, or more specifically in his case, of depth charges that split open his submarine and then as the salty waters rushed in unrestrained, the sudden gurgling and muffled screams of more than 50 drowning men that he had eaten with, lived with, but who couldn't escape it. I'm sorry to be so graphic, but this is what this verse is talking about. No doubt in the more ancient times (such when Zephaniah wrote this) the sounds would be the blowing of trumpets, the clanging and scraping of chariot wheels, the war cries of the attackers, and the sound of metal on metal as the warriors from both sides fought in close hand-to-hand combat.

**CJB Zephaniah 1:15** *That Day is a Day of fury, a Day of trouble and distress, a Day of waste and desolation, a Day of darkness and gloom, a Day of clouds and thick fog,*

Yehoveh and His prophet candy-coat nothing. They report nothing about Judgment Day to look forward to. Not for His people... not for anyone. To attempt to explain the enormity of it all, the Hebrew term **yom ebhrah** is used. It means **overflowing** wrath. Here the CJB translates it as Day of fury. The Latin Vulgate translation of this verse begins with **dies irae dies illa**. It is from these opening words that the poem I read a couple of minutes ago got its name. The next words, "a Day of trouble and distress" gives us 2 more descriptions. Trouble, or as in other versions, adversity, is in Hebrew **tsarah**. The equivalent word in Greek is **thlipsis**, which in English is nearly invariably translated in the New Testament as tribulation. Distress is in Hebrew **metsuqah**, which indeed means distress but is probably better explained in modern-day English as stress or anxiety. So, to make this more resonate with what most Christians have heard about the End Times, with a big emphasis on the word tribulation (as though it were a named event), this ought to read: "a day of tribulation and anxiety", because this phrase is speaking exactly about that same thing. The remainder of this verse is plain and easy to understand, so, there is no need to further dissect it. It depicts all the dreadful and ghastly things that come about in war. Yet, God doesn't think it's enough to fully describe what happens.

**CJB Zephaniah 1:16** *a Day of the shofar and battle-cry against the fortified cities and against the high towers [on the city walls].*

Shofars...rams horns... were used the same way bugles were used in much later wars. They were a way for leaders to signal their troops. The basic signal was to assemble and attack. So, here this is not God's people defending themselves; this is the enemy doing the attacking. It will be against walled cities, and its embattlements (or defensive towers) that were standardly built atop the walls. In other words, even if one tries to huddle within the safest place one could find (inside a strong fortress), the war will find you.

**CJB Zephaniah 1:17** *"I will bring such distress on people that they will grope their way like the blind, because they have sinned against Yehoveh. Their blood will be poured out like dust and their bowels like dung.*

The "distress" God will bring on people is in Hebrew ***tsarar***. Notice that in relation to the word ***tsarah*** from the previous verse where it meant tribulation. Virtually all Bible versions will translate ***tsarar*** as distress... and that is a fine choice. However, when we look at that word according to its technical and most literal meaning, it is to be bound up or involuntarily restricted. That is, this is a word used in the context of a siege upon a walled city where the people inside are trapped there. There is no escaping the terrible tribulations. This brings about such anxiety and hopelessness that the people (specific to what is just ahead for Judah) will grope around like blind men. This is speaking of a covenant curse God will enact, taken straight out of the Torah.

**CJB Deuteronomy 28:29** *You will grope about at noon like a blind person groping in the dark, unable to find your way. "You will be continually oppressed and robbed, and there will be no one to save you.*

In fact, all the terrible things we are reading about, and will eventually suffer, are specific covenant-based curses (punishments) each assigned to specific

violations of the Torah. All the way back to Moses, God said exactly what would happen when or if His people broke faith with Him and became rebels.

These destructive activities of God's wrath are directed at both Judah and at the entire world (because from Zechariah's perspective in time, this falls on Judah, but on our perspective of time, this will fall universally on the entire earth). So, we need to think about universality and not local or regional as we consider the meaning of what we are reading. Therefore, when the opening words of verse 17 speak of "distress upon people", we need to think larger in scope. The Hebrew as it is translated as the CJB does is not the best. Most other translations make it "distress upon men". The word is **adam**, and it means human being or mankind. So, this means everyone on planet Earth is going to behave like, and suffer, what comes next. So, "they have sinned" means all mankind has sinned and not just the people of Israel. And, the blood that will be poured out, will be the blood of all humanity and not just that of Israel.

Therefore, verse 18 (to end chapter 1) carries this same scope as referring to all mankind.

**CJB Zephaniah 1:18** *Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them. On the day of Yehoveh's fury, the whole land will be destroyed in the fire of his jealousy. For he will make an end, a horrible end, of all those living in the land."*

The world's elite, wealthiest, and most influential will not be able to buy their way out of what is coming. Ezekiel (who came soon after Zephaniah) said the same thing, no doubt paraphrasing his predecessor.

**CJB Ezekiel 7:19** *They will throw their silver into the streets; their gold will be like something unclean. On the day of Yehoveh's wrath their silver and gold won't be able to rescue them. These things won't satisfy their hunger, these things won't fill their stomachs, because these are what caused them to sin.*

But, since Ezekiel came AFTER Babylon conquered Judah, then he can only be referring to later times when God's wrath would befall Israel yet again. First to Rome, then later still to all the nations.

When we read that the "whole land will be destroyed", the Hebrew for land is **eretz**. Depending on the context (and to a degree, to the time in history the prophetic fulfillment happens), this can either mean the land of Israel, or it can be the whole earth. So, as concerns Zephaniah's time perspective, the land (**eretz**) is referring to Judah when the Babylonians invade, and then later (still regarding the Holy Land) when the Romans attack and invade. It changes to **eretz** meaning the entire world later in the future in what from our perspective is the End Times.

Chapter 1 ends as it begins. After the opening superscription, the first words of this prophecy were:

**CJB Zephaniah 1:2** ***"I will completely sweep away everything off the face of the land," says Yehoveh.***

How this sweeping event will occur, and what it will look, is what chapter 1 has been about. Chapter 2, however, is an exhortation to seek God. Not because this will help us avoid what is coming, but rather to know how to prepare, and to realize that the good end-results of God's wrath will be universal peace, and for the righteous dead, an eternal life with Him. Open your Bibles to Zephaniah chapter 2.

#### **READ ZEPHANIAH CHAPTER 2 all**

Although this chapter doesn't open with it, perhaps it should have begun with the word "therefore". That is, all that Zephaniah up to now has explained ought to lead us to react in a certain way that is the basis of chapter 2. That way is repentance. We all, universally, need to seek God, strive for righteousness and humility, and to obey His every word.

However, over the past three quarters of a century, the Church has made a sudden lurch in its doctrines to tell its people that we CAN escape all this

horror. Thus, was created the doctrine of the Rapture that says those who claim Jesus are not going to suffer; rather, we would be whisked away before all the calamities of the End Times begin in earnest. The truth is, that this “escape” that is open to Believers has more to do with an eternal future than avoiding physical death and/or deprivations. When those of us still living when the Day of Yehoveh arrives (and I think many of you listening *will* be alive) , and we understand what Zephaniah and other prophets are telling us, then we do have an opportunity to prepare better, to understand what is happening and not buy into what will be a media frenzy of fake news, and of every earthly government speaking falsely about these events. They will not know what comes next, but we who believe God’s word and know it, will. Thus, many of us will fare better, although not all.

As history shows us, and as the Bible tells us about the End Times, it will be punctuated with the many who claim allegiance to God and His Son falling away. Why would they do that? Unlike the nonsensical Church doctrine that says their salvation was never real and they were Pretenders from the start; it is that they will have believed the Church’s assurance that they would not suffer harm. So, when they do, they will think God has failed them... and turn away.

So, the call of chapter 2 to repentance necessarily includes learning God’s ways, believing them for what the Bible actually says, and shunning manmade doctrines... whether coming from institutional Christianity or Judaism.

Before we begin, next time, to study the words of Zephaniah chapter 2, be aware that the Hebrew word for repentance **sub** is not used. Nonetheless that is the sum of what is being spoken about. The words, instead, focus more on submission to God and humility before Him. It is my opinion that this is absolutely how the process works. There can be no actual or effective repentance until one first decides to submit themselves to God, admits their faults, their sin, and that as a human being we are **not** the masters of our lives nor are we the superior power and intellect in existence. Until we do that, then the seeds of truth and the fruit of repentance will land only on rocky soil, and they will quickly wither and die.