

THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH
Lesson 4, Chapter 2

In Zephaniah chapter 1, we saw God's decision to rain down wrath upon His own people (specifically on Judah since Ephraim/Israel had been conquered and exiled nearly 100 years earlier); and at the same time, Zephaniah speaks of that wrath also being wrought upon the entire planet. So, chapter 1 introduces us to the concept and threat of a universal divine judgment on the whole world... none exempted... including Israel. What else can this be picturing but the End Times apocalypse?

Chapter 2 is of a different character. It highlights a divine and merciful principle of God that before He unleashes His just anger upon Israel or the nations, He urges them to repent in order to avoid the horrible consequences of their rebellious behavior. This is because destruction is not at the core of Yehoveh's nature. Yet, He will destroy when justice calls for it, and the Bible gives us several examples of when that has happened. Never let it be forgotten, however, that it is in the Covenant of Moses where God establishes the terms and conditions for that covenant's operation. Obedience to those terms and conditions brings covenant blessings. Disobediences to it brings covenant curses. And, for each term and condition prescribed, specific blessings and specific curses are assigned. So, the wrath that God intends on visiting upon Israel and the nations is not decided on some humanly unknowable basis, nor is it at the last second; it complies fully with what the Covenant of Moses says it shall be. That is, it can all be known well ahead of time and has been available for over 3000 years. Therefore, God warns that if thus and so has been violated, and if it's been going on a long time, unless there is true repentance, then the associated curses will happen. There is always plenty of time given for the needed changes to be made; The Father is most patient and long-suffering. Yet, at a point that patience runs out, and the inevitable happens.

Because the preceding is true, chapter 2 presents a God that has waited a long time for positive change but now is fed-up. And the warning He is giving through Zephaniah will be the final one (even though a couple of later prophets will repeat it). The message is: respond now... or pay the price very

soon. There is also an important element to God threatening the nations (meaning gentiles) that needs to be made clear. When God is announcing what He is going to do to the nations, and even warns them to repent, He is not speaking those words directly to some gentile leaders or gentile prophets of those nations (the one exception could be regarding Balaam speaking to the King of Moab). Much like here in Zephaniah, God speaks it to Hebrew prophets to Israel. More specifically in our current case, to Judah. It is the job of the people of Judah to make the gentile nations aware of Yehoveh's displeasure... even anger... with them, and what awaits them if they don't change. It's not unlike when Jonah was commanded to take God's message of impending destruction of Assyria to Nineveh. It was the Hebrew prophet's job to go to gentile Nineveh and speak directly to them, in order to give them that oracle.

The other thing we see in chapter 2 is that in one sense, the destruction of the nations is an aftereffect of what happens to Judah. At the least, we can say it is organically connected. Although we read chapter 2 to end our previous lesson, we'll read it again to refresh our memories.

READ ZEPHANIAH CHAPTER 2 all

The opening verse is:

CJB Zephaniah 2:1 ***Gather together, gather yourselves, nation devoid of shame***;

Unfortunately, the final words of this verse as interpreted by the CJB are not the best. Better are the words of the KJV and a couple of other versions.

KJV Zephaniah 2:1 ***Gather yourselves together, yea, gather together, O nation not desired***;

"Nation not **desired**" is more literal than "nation devoid of **shame**". To get the fullest understanding of the depth of meaning to the final words of this verse, we need first to understand the few words that come before it. When we see the Hebrew, we notice that the word for nation (**goy**) is in the singular, and not the plural as one might think. So, while it would seem by its tone that God

is aiming this order at the nations, in fact the grammar shows us that God is speaking about 1 nation; not several or many. That nation is Judah; so, this is not speaking about the gentile nations. Yehoveh adds the insulting term "**goy**" when addressing Judah, because **goy** as it was used since very early in Genesis inherently includes the notion of "gentile" in its meaning. God in His anger and disgust is sarcastically calling them "Gentile Judah" because that's what they behave like! Therefore, they have become a "nation not desired" to Him. Ouch.

I must acknowledge that some good scholars insist that even if the word "nation" is given in the singular, this is actually talking about the border nations surrounding Israel like Philistia, Moab, and Ammon. Or that the word nation is used as a collective term and could mean all nations. That is a stretch to me, as I can find no other use in the Bible in which the word "nation" (singular) is used collectively, and those nations are in no way singled out in this prophecy. The singled-out nation is Judah.

This entire verse begins quite negatively, as expressed in the opening word that is **qoshesh**. This word is directly related to the word for gathering up stubble or straw that is **qash**, and so the term is not usually used to refer to assembling or gathering *people* together. To get the best modern English sense of what it is getting at, we need to understand this dynamically as "Gather yourselves together like stubble and wood". To be gathered together in such a way means, of course, to assemble for the purpose of being destroyed by fire.

CJB Zephaniah 2:2 *before the decree takes effect, and the day comes when one passes like chaff; before Yehoveh's fierce anger comes on you, before the day of Yehoveh's anger comes on you.*

The early part of this verse is difficult, but there is no real disagreement that verse 2 essentially finishes the thought begun in verse 1. In my estimation, this is another of the many places where those who added chapter and verse numbers around 1000 A.D. got it wrong. Verses 1 and 2 as we have it today, need to be seen as one, long, run-on thought if not one long run-on verse. It should not have been divided. The opening phrase "before the decree takes

effect” is a good-enough translation, but the syntax and grammar are such that it could carry the meaning “before the decree is **birthed**”. The decree is referring to God ordering His threatened wrath to begin. So, the warning is that before God sends the signal for the wrath to be unleashed, Judah needs to look into the mirror of God’s accusations against them and change their ways. That is, there is still some time left... but very little. Buried in this is an ancient Hebrew understanding of the way prophecy works. In that understanding, in a very real sense, the beginning of God’s wrath has already been decided in Heaven and thus resides there known only to God and to His Divine Council of **elohim**. But the dynamic of it actually happening on earth only starts when God speaks it through inspiration to a prophet in order for it to be pronounced to people. Once the prophet speaks it, it triggers the transfer of it from Heaven to earth. It’s like gestation that finally leads to a birth. Or the uncorking of the bottle that contains the mythical genie. Of course, the time between a prophet announcing the oracle and the moment it actually occurs can vary from a few years to centuries. At some point in between, however, a point of no-return is passed, and it no longer matters if the intended victims of the wrath come to their senses and finally change their ways; God’s decree will not be further delayed or rescinded. So, Yehoveh is saying that since the dynamic is indeed in process of being transferred from Heaven to earth, upon Zephaniah speaking it to the Judeans prophetically, Judah needs to move quickly if they hope to avert it. Yet, because humans behave as we do, more often than not we ignore the warnings, trying to kick the can down the road so to speak.

Notice the next phrase that is: “and the day comes when one passes like chaff”. The use of the metaphor “chaff” validates interpreting the opening of the previous verse (verse 1) as referring to the gathering of people in the manner and purpose of the way stubble and wood are to be gathered for burning up. That is, we have two metaphorical expressions that are rather common in the Bible that amounts to an action of something being destroyed or made to no longer exist because it has become worthless. So, in this passage, the first metaphor is for something to be burnt up by fire, and the second is to be blown away with wind. Stubble and wood are for burning, while chaff is for being blown away during the winnowing process. Neither of these things, therefore, is deemed by God as good for anything but that.

Next, when this verse says, “before the day of Yehoveh’s anger comes on you”, the phrase “the day of Yehoveh’s anger” is just another of several paraphrased expressions we’ll find in the Bible that is equivalent to The Day of the Lord, The Day of Judgment, Judgment Day, etc. It has no other meaning. It seems to me that because this expression comes right after “before Yehoveh’s fierce anger comes on you”, which sounds nearly identical in meaning, then this is but Zephaniah’s attempt to create a poetic couplet. Otherwise, instead of this sounding redundant for the sake of creating a poetic structure, this could have simply been said in straight prose: “Before Yehoveh’s fierce anger comes on you on Judgment Day” ...which is the point of this verse.

So, the entire gist of the first 2 verses of chapter 2 is that the people of Judah (God’s people) are going to be gathered together by God to be destroyed on Judgment Day. But if they will gather themselves together before the point of no return is reached... gathering for the purpose of repenting before God gathers them together to be destroyed... then *perhaps* God will save them. This makes use of a wordplay of the God-principle that the same means that He can use to destroy (usually fire and water), He can also use to purify and save. Which of these 2 possibilities happens ultimately depends on the spiritual condition and faithfulness (or lack of) of the persons involved, as God judges them.

Verse 3 completes, or perhaps sums up, the thought that verses 1 – 3 were making.

^{CJB} Zephaniah 2:3 *Seek Yehoveh, all you humble in the land, you who exercise his justice; seek righteousness, seek humility- you might be hidden on the day of Yehoveh’s anger.*

Of the several different ways I have seen this verse translated, I think the CJB has done the best job of capturing the intended meaning and message. The first words... Seek Yehoveh... are meant to be in opposition to what is read back in chapter 1 verse 6, where it speaks of “those who have turned away from following Yehoveh”. So, whereas in chapter 1 the context is that those

wicked who oppose God have already had their fate decided on Judgment Day, so, there is no hope of being spared, in chapter 2, those who seek Yehoveh (meaning to seek to know and do His ways) are the humble and those who are righteous. They DO have hope of being hidden away (protected) on Judgment Day. What that “hidden away” portends, exactly, is not explained.

The most important emphasis of verse 3 is the idea of “performing” as opposed to passively hearing or claiming. In other words, DOING God’s Word, BEING obedient to God’s written ways, characterizes those who have hope on Judgment Day. This wonderfully expresses something James the Just... Yeshua’s brother... once said in a slightly different way.

CJB James 1:22-25 ²² Don't deceive yourselves by only hearing what the Word says, but do it! ²³ For whoever hears the Word but doesn't do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror, ²⁴ who looks at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. ²⁵ But if a person looks closely into the perfect Torah, which gives freedom, and continues, becoming not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work it requires, then he will be blessed in what he does.

Unfortunately, James’s words have been relegated to the dust bin in our Christian institutions where doing is completely secondary to believing. Or even so far as to their congregations that doing amounts to legalism, and legalism is sin. So, doing is to be avoided.

It is very common in English translations to find the word “judgment” used in place of “justice” (“you who exercise his judgment”). The word being translated is **mishpat**, and in the modern English sense of the word it means “justice”, not “judgment”. The word “judgment” has for a very long time had a primarily negative, punitive tone to it. So, being judged by God, to modern English speakers, means for God to have determined you have done something wrong and so, are worthy of discipline or punishment. Technically, the term “judged” simply means the official appointed judge (which could be God or a human) having examined the issue or case before him, has made a determination... either positive or negative. The term justice, however, simply

means to do right by following God's administrative laws and commands. So, justice is the far better word to use in verse 3.

I want to conclude verse 3 by saying this: where in the CJB it says if a humble person is righteous, he MIGHT be hidden, other versions say, "may be", or "perhaps", or some other such similar thing. That is, it is only the *possibility* that is opened; there are no guarantees or promises. While the humble and righteous in God are guaranteed a good eternal future, no one is guaranteed much of anything about our earthly lives. And, when a national judgment is occurring, some of the humble and righteous will fare better and survive than those who are not; but not all will. And, which of that group of humble and righteous survive, and which don't, is unknowable. Any doctrine that teaches otherwise creates a false hope.

^{CJB} Zephaniah 2:4 *For 'Azah will be abandoned, Ashkelon will be desolate, they will evacuate Ashdod at noon, and 'Ekron will be uprooted.*

These 4 cities mentioned are 4 of the 5 city/states of the Philistines. It is because of this verse that many Bible scholars think that verse 4 is what verse 1 was referring to when it spoke about the undesirable nation. I don't; I think verse 4 is turning away from speaking about Judah in verses 1 - 3 and is now speaking about the gentile nations. Philistia bordered on Judah's west as a constant bother. Today, most of what the Bible calls Philistia is called Gaza.

A familiar opening word to this verse is ***ki***, meaning "for". This word can be used as a conjunction that joins this verse with the previous one. Or it can be used in the sense of "indeed" ...that is, it is a most emphatic statement. Because I take this to mean "indeed", then it is the start of a new section that is dealing with the nations; or, even more precisely, I think it makes verse 4 operate as a kind of bridge between the subject of verses 1-3 (Judah), and what comes after verse 4 (the nations). That is, what happens in those first 3 verses have an influence on what happens from verse 5 onward.

The somewhat odd statement that Ashdod will be evacuated at noon, is because it is used as an expression and not literally as meaning a certain time

of day. To be evacuated at noon means that the judgment will come onto Ashdod suddenly. Jeremiah uses that same expression for the same purpose in his book, chapter 15:8. Nonetheless, this means that Philistia will cease to exist and it will happen quickly and unexpectedly. The cities of Philistia will become desolate by means of some disaster. We have every reason to apply that to modern-day Gaza. Now, in 2026, Gaza lies in ruins and whatever hope of restoration they might have after their war with Israel, is pure fantasy. No one seems willing to provide the funds to rebuild, and Gaza itself has no means. We'll see in the next few years if this is a prophetic fulfillment Zephaniah 2:4... it could be, but I doubt that.

CJB Zephaniah 2:5 *Woe to the inhabitants of the seacoast, the nation of the K'reti! The word of Yehoveh is against you, Kena'an, land of the P'lishtim: "I will destroy you; no one will be left."*

The remainder of this chapter, starting in verse 5, is prophecy aimed at the nations. The verse begins with the word **hoy**, which means woe. This seacoast nation of people called the "K'reti" or the Cherethites, is referring to people that had originally come from Crete, which in ancient times was called Caphtor. A nickname for these folks was the Sea Peoples. They were known to the Hebrews as the Philistines... that is, the Philistines were people from Caphtor that had settled along the Mediterranean seacoast of Canaan. They became one of Israel's most constant enemies.

The second nation, Canaan, is the 2nd target of this "woe" prophecy. This requires a bit of explanation. Canaan is the land promised to Israel in the Bible. Its territory is described in Genesis 10 as:

CJB Genesis 10:19 *The border of the Kena'ani was from Tzidon, as you go toward G'rar, to 'Azah; as you go toward S'dom, 'Amora, Admah and Tzvoyim, to Lasha.*

An additional description of what the territory of Canaan is, is found in Joshua.

CJB Joshua 13:1-4 *Now Y'hoshua was old; the years had taken their toll. ADONAI said to him, "You are old, and the years have taken their*

toll; but there is yet a great deal of land to be possessed. ² "This is the land that still remains: all the regions of the P'lishtim and all the G'shuri, ³ from the Shichor which fronts Egypt, to the border of 'Ekron (northward from there the land is considered as belonging to the Kena'ani)- that is, the territory of the rulers of the P'lishtim in 'Azah, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gat and 'Ekron; also the 'Avim ⁴ to the south; all the land of the Kena'ani;

So, even though these settlers from Crete established a nation called Philistia along the seashore, the land was considered, and remembered historically, as being part of Greater Canaan. Thus, from this standpoint, the land the Philistines occupied was intended by God to be land set-apart for Israel to occupy. But Israel never fully has. In verse 5, then, this prophecy is using rather archaic designations for the people and the land that the Philistines took over (a portion of Canaan) ...a land that was part of what God had promised to the Hebrews, in full. Even so, calling that coastal region Canaan was never used during the time of Israel's and Judah's kings.

And to these people of Philistia, God says He is against them. The Philistines were to suffer the same lot as the Canaanites since they claimed that land for themselves. The thing is this: we learn that God's laws, commands, requirements and regulations, were just as relevant to the gentile nations as they were to Israel. They, too, were to seek the Lord. Just because God gave the humans of the earth His Word through Moses and Israel, doesn't mean that only Israel was expected to comply. Unless the people of the nations repented and sought the God of Israel, they could expect to receive the terrible consequences of what Zephaniah's prophecy was calling out, just as Israel would.

Ladies and gentlemen: this is a teaching moment. What we see happening today in the Middle East, and what is going on with the Gazans to the west of Israel, and the Palestinians of the West Bank to their east, it is precisely arising out of those territorial inhabitants attempting to hold on to parts of Canaan that doesn't belong to them... whether they were born there or not. The modern-day names of these places are irrelevant. Since God gave **all** the territory of Canaan to the Israelites (based upon the borders of Canaan as

understood in ancient times), then understand that these people (non-Hebrews) are trying to hold on to land they had, and have, no right to (from God's perspective). Therefore, it is an oxymoron that Israel should be seen as occupiers. The real occupiers are the Gazan and West Bank Palestinian Arabs, regardless of any political rhetoric or labels people want to give to them.

A major portion of today's Church believes Israel is in the wrong, and those Palestinian Arabs are in the right. Most nations of Europe stand in solidarity with the Palestinian Arabs and against Israel. They all want Israel to give up Gaza and the West Bank to those whom the Church says are the rightful owners: the Palestinians Arabs. But God says otherwise. There is only one way to understand this: it puts Europe and that portion of the Church that stands against Israel's biblical rights to that land, in direct opposition to God. And it is going to end violently for them. What do you suppose is the consequences of that? Well, we're reading about. It is exactly the same as what God has done, is doing, and will do to the rebellious Israelites. It is what we find in the prophets, and especially in the 12 Minor Prophets... fiery wrath from Yehoveh for both the rebellious Israelites and the faithless gentiles.

So here is some advice: if you knowingly want to remain part of any group who are the-land-belongs-to-the-Palestinian Arabs group... then, as of now you have no excuse of ignorance of the real situation. I strongly recommend you change your mind and allegiance; get out and don't look back. As God says to end verse 6 when He speaks of those Philistines (or today those called Palestinians) that you stand with... "I will destroy you; no one will be left".

We'll read the next verse (6) along with 7 as it is one unified thought and ought not to have been broken in half.

CJB Zephaniah 2:6-7 ⁶ *The seacoast will be reduced to pastures, meadows for shepherds, pens for sheep; ⁷ and the coast will belong to the remnant of the house of Y'hudah. They will pasture their flocks there and in the evening lie down in the houses of Ashkelon. For Yehoveh their God will remember them and restore their fortunes.*

The area of Canaan that was once (and for a very long time) settled upon by the Philistines is going to be reduced to pastureland. Think for a moment what that means in the 21st century. An area that once had a significant population of people, with the usual hospitals, apartment buildings, streets, factories, stores and more quite rapidly finds itself depopulated and the structures of urban life gone. That means something catastrophic (to them) happened. In the modern-day world, whatever happens of this magnitude will dominate the 24-hour news cycle. The entire world will know about it, and sides will be taken either to acquiesce to it and be uninterested and elect to be uninvolved; or attempt to actively aid those who want to continue to live there. While I make no predictions about the disastrous results for the Palestinians living in Gaza, there's only a couple of ways for this to go. This country that lost 70% or more of their entire infrastructure, all of its manufacturing, virtually without habitable housing for its 2 million people who live there; people who have no means to produce food, to produce electricity, to supply clean water for themselves, live upon the rubble as the result of war that they started and couldn't have remotely imagined would end up for them as it did.

Either someone, or some nation or coalition, with a great deal of money and resources is going to step forward and rally an effort to rebuild Gaza, or sooner or later there is no choice but for the people to leave and try to start a new life elsewhere. As of now, lots of talk and little help except for sheer day to day survival has come. The people of Gaza are blocked from moving away, because they have nowhere to go. They have been so radicalized that, out of fear, no nation... including no Arab or Muslim nation... will take any of them in. It's by no means out of sympathy that I say this; it is only to point out the real situation and then compare it to the land of Zephaniah's prophecy because it's one and the same land. Whether it winds up this way or not, THIS is how populated lands can, within days or weeks, become nothing but wastelands that nature turns into pasture fit only for sheep or goats. One outcome is to do nothing more than allow the people to leave, and to let Gaza remain just as it is...piles of rubble and all. It will take but a handful of years for vegetation to begin to take over and provide food for smaller domesticated livestock like sheep or goats.

The point being that however Zephaniahs' prophecy concerning the former Philistia comes about, it is going to look something like I've just described to you, which is happening right before our eyes, and it is going to be enormously controversial and no doubt cause even more hatred against Israel to arise.

And, naturally, Israel (at some point) will move into the vacated land... at least what is left of Israel will. And the world will be so decimated that there will be no one to stand in their way. Again, this is just what Zephaniah's prophecy says in verse 6.

So as for Zephaniah's readers to stay within proper context, the end of verse 6 reminds all why it is that things will happen this way, and for who's benefit.

For Yehoveh their God will remember them and restore their fortunes.

Yehoveh has made numerous promises to Israel about their future and how much He sees them as His precious treasure. The restoration of Israel was always envisioned and will happen, even if it is Israel that has forgotten about it. Even so, it will only be a remnant of Israel that will see this final restoration come about, just as it will be only a remnant of gentiles who will watch it happen from afar. And all will be amazed.

CJB Zephaniah 2:8 "I have heard the insults of Mo'av and the taunts of the people of 'Amon, how they reviled my people and boasted of expanding their territory.

So, as verses 6 and 7 dealt directly with the Philistines to Israel's west, so now another bothersome enemy to their east is spoken about. Moab and Amon... today being primarily the nation of Jordan...are what the next couple of verses are about. While out and out war between Israel and the states of Moab and/or Amon were infrequent in ancient times, there were sporadic confrontations about territories and resources. Because of the era in which Zephaniah prophesied, very likely what was in the forefront of his mind was the events of about 640 B.C. (his era) when Kamashalta, King of Moab, was able to regain full control over most of the Transjordan region (to the east side

of the Jordan River), but later found himself subject Arab invasions that weakened him, and eventually Judah's King Josiah finished the job.

And, in the even more archaic times, we find passages in Genesis 19 and in Deuteronomy 23 that paint Ammon and Moab in a very negative light as concerns Israel. One of the greatest biblical stories is that of Balak, King of Moab, asking Balaam to curse Israel for him. Balak was not only fearful of Israel but also wanted to take their territory to add to his. The result was God's threat to exterminate them.

The reality that this same region is today Jordan... and the world has witnessed Jordan's numerous attacks on Israel since Israel's rebirth in 1948... then the negative tone that extends to the End Times about that place certainly continue to be proved true. Right now, Jordan is a very weak nation and so has little ability to do any real harm to Israel (something else, by the way, that was prophetic). Yet, the day is coming when their Arab neighbors will urge them to join yet another coalition to destroy Israel once and for all... and Jordan will accept the invitation. That decision will prove fatal to them. Amazingly, God actually used the pagan Balaam to make the pronouncement of Moab's final destruction.

CJB Numbers 24:15-19 ***¹⁵ So he made his pronouncement: "This is the speech of Bil'am, son of B'or; the speech of the man whose eyes have been opened; ¹⁶ the speech of him who hears God's words; who knows what 'Elyon knows, who sees what Shaddai sees, who has fallen, yet has open eyes: ¹⁷ "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not soon- a star will step forth from Ya'akov, a scepter will arise from Isra'el, to crush the corners of Mo'av (Jordan) and destroy all descendants of Shet. ¹⁸ His enemies will be his possessions- Edom and Se'ir, possessions. Isra'el will do valiantly, ¹⁹ From Ya'akov will come someone who will rule, and he will destroy what is left of the city."***

Fully, 3300 years has passed since that prophetic word was uttered. Ammon and Moab have been crushed more than once by Israel in ancient times and in modern times. But the day is just ahead of us when they will be crushed worse than ever. Over and over, prophet after prophet, we find that God's Word

never fails. And yet, the Christianity that most of us grew up under, where we first learned about our need for a Savior, often either challenges the veracity of some of those prophecies or claims that Jesus has canceled them. Or that promises of good benefit made to and for Israel, have been canceled for them and transferred to the gentile Church. That false doctrine turns people who make great and certain claims about their righteousness in Christ into rebels, if not (in some cases) enemies of God. Most having no idea of it because of what they have been taught by their leaders and teachers.

I want to close today's lesson with this thought: nations and their leaders that covet Israel's land are marked by God for destruction and death. Whether the Philistines of old or their modern counterparts, from the Muslim nations of the Ottoman Empire to the Churches under the Popes during the Crusades, or the Arabs and Palestinians of today... God repeatedly warns them that this intent to take Israel's land from them will end badly. And, those nations that might not be after Israel's land, but wish to support those nations that are, are going to find themselves in the same condition as the direct offenders. Pray that your nation is not one of these.