

The Kingdom the Prophets Saw

An Exposition of Zephaniah 3

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Some years back, Philip Yancey wrote a book which won several literary awards, entitled *The Jesus I Never Knew*. In it he presents both a refreshing and challenging view of Jesus through the eyes of the gospel writers, and the words of Christ himself, which is in many cases quite different than the "Jesus" so many of us "knew" as children, a.k.a. the "Sunday School Jesus." He followed up with a second book called *The Bible Jesus Read*, in which he reminds Christians that the Hebrew Scriptures are the "sourcebook" of their faith, as it is these very Scriptures to which Christ referred when He appealed to Scriptural authority to establish His identity. Indeed, if we are reading the Old Testament as merely about past history, and not seeing Christ there, we are missing the main point: "That all things must be fulfilled, which were written in *the law of Moses*, and in *the prophets*, and in *the psalms*, concerning *me*." (Luke 24:44)

If I were to suggest a third edition to Yancey's series, I might call it: *The Kingdom the Prophets Saw*. Having only recently come to the fulfilled understanding of the kingdom of God, I am impacted daily by the prophets I never knew, who saw a kingdom so beautiful and glorious, so many things about which I once considered irrelevant to our place and time. Understanding now that the kingdom they saw is the same kingdom in which I now and forever reside, and is in fact synonymous with my position *in Christ*, has inspired me to take another look at that kingdom through their eyes.

One of the dilemmas we sometimes face when reading the prophets is determining the historical context of events, specifically judgments to which they refer. Is a given passage speaking of the *final* judgment or some earlier one; *a* Day of the Lord, or *the* Day of the Lord? One thing which rightly increases our confidence that we are correctly applying a passage to the end of the Old Covenant age, is the oft-used phrase "in that day," or "at that time," followed by a clear reference to what we know to be a New Covenant promise. Such is the case with the passage we will examine here, Zephaniah 3.

The chapter begins with a warning of judgment against Jerusalem. We will look first at a few aspects of that judgment, highlighting some parallels with New Testament passages, and then move on to what follows and show its clear reference to the eternal kingdom of Jesus Christ.

Zephaniah 3:1 Woe to her who is rebellious and polluted, To the oppressing city! 2 She has not obeyed His voice, She has not received correction; She has not trusted in the Lord, She has not drawn near to her God. 3 Her princes in her midst are roaring lions; Her judges are evening wolves That leave not a bone till morning. 4 Her prophets are insolent, treacherous people; Her priests have polluted the sanctuary, They have done violence to the law. 5 The Lord is righteous in her midst, He will do no unrighteousness. Every morning He brings His justice to light; He never fails, But the unjust knows no shame. 6 "I have cut off nations, Their fortresses are devastated; I have made their streets desolate, With none passing by. Their cities are

destroyed; There is no one, no inhabitant. 7 I said, 'Surely you will fear Me, You will receive instruction'-- So that her dwelling would not be cut off, Despite everything for which I punished her. But they rose early and corrupted all their deeds.

"Her who is rebellious" refers to the city of Jerusalem, confirmed by the references to priests and prophets. Also, describing it as "the oppressing city" could logically be a reference to the Jewish persecution of the church in the first century, especially in light of other confirmations later in the chapter which posit it in that context.

"Her priests have polluted the sanctuary":

Matthew 21:13 And He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it a 'den of thieves.' "

"They have done violence to the law":

John 5: 45 Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; there is one who accuses you--Moses, in whom you trust. 46 For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me. 47 But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?"

Romans 1: 19 Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them.21 Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. 22 Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, 23 And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things..... 25 Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator.....And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge...

In the New Testament, the apostles comfort the believers by assuring them those who are persecuting them will soon be dealt with:

2 Thessalonians 1:6....it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, 7 and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, 8 in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, 10 when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe...

Here is a perfect parallel to the above passage, which enunciates the timing of its fulfillment:

Matthew 16: 27 For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works. 28 Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.

Continuing in our text:

Zephaniah 3:8 "Therefore wait for Me," says the Lord, "Until the day I rise up for plunder; My determination is to gather the nations To My assembly of kingdoms, To pour on them My indignation, All my fierce anger; All the earth shall be devoured With the fire of My jealousy.

As we often encounter in discussions with futurists, the "global" language here, especially when ripped from its context, may at first glance support their view of future planetary destruction. But when we examine the language in its context, we see that whatever "all the earth shall be devoured" means, it clearly occurs at the *same time* as the following. Notice the phrase, "for then":

Zephaniah 3:9 "For then I will restore to the peoples a pure language, That they all may call on the name of the Lord, To serve Him with one accord.

"Restore" suggests bringing back what was lost, and that was the undefiled conscience which allowed face to face communion with God in the garden. The restoration of communion and presence with God is that with which God's entire restorative, redemptive plan was concerned. Before the fall, Adam walked and talked with God in the garden, and it is that "pure language," spoken face to face in God's presence, and only possible with a perfect conscience, which the New Covenant has restored to us in Christ:

Jeremiah 31: 33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. 34 No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."

"To serve Him with one accord":

Ephesians 2:14 For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, 15 having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, 16 and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. 17 And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. 18 For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. 19 Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God...

Zephaniah 3:10 From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia My worshipers, The daughter of My dispersed ones, Shall bring My offering.

Here is another reference to dispersed ones being brought back, which emphatically links that event with the Messianic kingdom:

Isaiah 11: 10 And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an

ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest shall be glorious.
11 And it shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord shall set his hand again the second time to recover the remnant of his people, which shall be left, from Assyria, and from Egypt, and from Pathros, and from Cush, and from Elam, and from Shinar, and from Hamath, and from the islands of the sea. 12 And he shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.

And *now*, it's *time*. "In that day":

Zephaniah 3:11a In that day you shall not be shamed for any of your deeds In which you transgress against Me;

"In that day": In the day all the earth will be devoured (vs 8), in the day a pure language is restored to the peoples (vs 9), in the day the daughter of His dispersed ones will bring an offering (vs 10); in that day "you shall not be shamed for any of your deeds which you transgress against Me."

The day of vengeance is synonymous with the day of forgiveness, which is synonymous with the day of comfort:

Isaiah 61:1 The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; 2 To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn; 3 To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified.

In the day God would comfort and forgive His people, He would also deal with those He opposed:

Zephaniah 3:11b For then I will take away from your midst Those who rejoice in your pride, And you shall no longer be haughty In My holy mountain.

Those who are "haughty" refers to those who thought themselves righteous and worthy because of law keeping, or what they viewed as their birthright. And "in that day" the haughty, prideful ones would be removed.

John 6:63 It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.

Romans 9:8 That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed.

Galatians 3:13 For not even those who are circumcised keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has

been crucified to me, and I to the world.

In contrast to those who esteemed themselves worthy by their own effort, it is the meek and humble who trusted in God and would inherit the promises:

Zephaniah 3:12 I will leave in your midst A meek and humble people, And they shall trust in the name of the Lord.

Psalm 37:11 But the meek shall inherit the earth, And shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace.

Matthew 5:5 Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

The words "earth" and "land" are often used interchangeably in Scripture. Abraham looked for a heavenly country (the land of promise), knowing it was the everlasting inheritance God had sworn to him in an oath. It is this same land Jesus is referring to when He promises, "the meek shall inherit the earth." Here again Isaiah posits the righteous judgment of Christ to reward the meek of "the earth" with the Day His enemies would get their due:

Isaiah 11:4 But with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked.

And here, Isaiah refers to the "land" inheritance, and equates it with righteousness:

Isaiah 60:21 Also your people shall all be righteous; They shall inherit the land forever, The branch of My planting, The work of My hands, That I may be glorified.

Zephaniah continues in the same vein. To be righteous is to be unashamed (verse 11); to be in Christ is to be at rest in the land:

Zephaniah 3:13 The remnant of Israel shall do no unrighteousness And speak no lies, Nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth; For they shall feed their flocks and lie down, And no one shall make them afraid."

Psalm 4:8 I will both lie down in peace, and sleep; For You alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.

The remainder of the chapter is an exhilarating praise song, and the parallels with both OT and NT passages about Christ and His Kingdom are seemingly inexhaustible. There is an endless, intricate web of connectivity to be explored in Scripture. It truly is (and always will be) a never-ending, joy-filled journey.

Zephaniah 3:14 Sing, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!

Psalm 98: 1 Oh, sing to the Lord a new song! For He has done marvelous things; His right hand and His holy arm have gained Him the victory. 2 The Lord has made known His salvation; His righteousness He has revealed in the sight of the nations.

3 He has remembered His mercy and His faithfulness to the house of Israel; All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.

Here the prophet states the reason for rejoicing:

Zephaniah 3:15a The Lord has taken away your judgments, He has cast out your enemy.

To my futurist friends: compare verse 15 to the following passages, and ask, "Has this been fulfilled? Have our judgments (the condemnation of the law) been removed?" And if they have, what about verse 13? Is the remnant of Israel righteous and dwelling safely in the land? Consider again the context of "in that day."

Revelation 12:10 Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, "Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down.

Colossians 2:14...having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. 15 Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.

Ephesians 2:15...having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace.

To those who say we have not yet entered the land, and are not yet in heaven, or ask, "Is this it?": What greater victory could be won than that which took away our judgments? Our shame? The torment of a guilty conscience? Have you been forgiven? If so, you are dwelling in the land:

Isaiah 33:24 And the inhabitant will not say, "I am sick"; The people who dwell in it will be forgiven their iniquity.

Isaiah 60:21 Also your people shall all be righteous; They shall inherit the land forever, The branch of My planting, The work of My hands, That I may be glorified.

All who have inherited the land and dwell in it forever are righteous. In Christ, we have been made the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21). Therefore, we have inherited the land. To say we are not yet in the land would be to say we are not yet righteous.

To dwell safely and peacefully in the land is to dwell with God, and He with us. Notice also that God in the midst of His people is called the *King* of Israel:

Zephaniah 3:15b The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; You shall see disaster no more. 16 In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: "Do not fear; Zion, let not your hands be weak. 17 The Lord your God in your midst, The Mighty One, will save;

Revelation 21:3 And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God.

We have seen previously that God's people would rejoice with singing; having been made righteous, unashamed, and unafraid they would enter the land of rest, which is none other than the very presence of God, "in that day." Here we see Christ the King would rejoice over His people, and would "quiet [them] with His love." This phrase is also translated, "He will rest in His love," indicating Christ's intimate communion with His people, and the reciprocal nature of "rest." His rest is in His accomplished work, which brought His presence to His people; His presence is the "land" of promise, our eternal inheritance; to be at rest in that land, is to be at rest in *Him*.

Zephaniah 3:17b He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing."

Hebrews 2:11 For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren, 12 saying: "I will declare Your name to My brethren; In the midst of the assembly I will sing praise to You." 13 And again: "I will put My trust in Him." And again: "Here am I and the children whom God has given Me."

Psalm 22:22 I will declare Your name to My brethren; In the midst of the assembly I will praise You.

Zephaniah 3 concludes:

Zephaniah 3:18 "I will gather those who sorrow over the appointed assembly, Who are among you, To whom its reproach is a burden. 19 Behold, at that time I will deal with all who afflict you; I will save the lame, And gather those who were driven out; I will appoint them for praise and fame In every land where they were put to shame. 20 at that time I will bring you back, Even at the time I gather you; for I will give you fame and praise among all the peoples of the earth, When I return your captives before your eyes," Says the Lord.

Isaiah speaks also of a gathering, and posits it with forgiveness of sin:

Isaiah 44: 21 "Remember these, O Jacob, And Israel, for you are My servant; I have formed you, you are My servant; O Israel, you will not be forgotten by Me! 22 I have blotted out, like a thick cloud, your transgressions, And like a cloud, your sins. Return to Me, for I have redeemed you." 23 Sing, O heavens, for the Lord has done it! Shout, you lower parts of the earth; Break forth into singing, you mountains, O forest, and every tree in it! For the Lord has redeemed Jacob, And glorified Himself in Israel.

Notice in the above passage, what is defined as the "redemption of Jacob" and God being "glorified in Israel": "I have blotted out, like a thick cloud, your transgressions, and like a cloud your sins." Our salvation is God's glory.

Recalling from verse 15 of Zephaniah 3, that it is the *King of Israel* who would *save*, we must acknowledge the kingdom the prophets saw, the one and only kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, is fulfilled and established forever in us, His redeemed, His brethren, His tabernacle. Let this be our response:

Zephaniah 3:14 Sing, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!