

## 9. ZEPHANIAH

Written during King Josiah's reign 640-609 BC

Zephaniah was a descendant of King Hezekiah who in the eighth century BC warned Judah about God's coming judgment on the Day of the Lord, both from Babylon shortly and a final judgment in the latter days which would result in the Messiah, the king of Israel, being in their midst. The final great day of the Lord needs to be interpreted as the day the Messiah returns; it is not God judging the wicked *in absentia*.

### **The Day of the Lord's wrath**

*Zephaniah 1:2-4, 14-18*

The Lord said he will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth ... birds ... fish ... he will cut off mankind from the face of the earth. The Hebrew word for 'earth' is not the usual word for 'earth/land', but 'ground.' Here it appears to be comprehensive and describes the same event as Ezekiel 38:19-20: "Because of my zeal and burning anger, at that time (when Gog invades Israel) there will be a massive earthquake throughout the land of Israel. I'm going to shake the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, the wild beasts, all the creatures that crawl on the earth, and every single human being who lives on the surface of the earth. Mountains will collapse, as will their mountain passages, and every wall will fall to the ground."

In verses 4-13 Zephaniah focuses on Judah and Jerusalem, because they are just as guilty as the rest of mankind, and as with other prophecies about the Day of the Lord, Jerusalem is the center of activity and the place where the Lord descends.

Verses 14-18 go on to describe ‘the great Day of the Lord’, the Day of the Lord’s visitation in judgment as described in Revelation 6:12-17 and 16:17-21. God is angry with mankind because they have sinned against him. This is the day of God’s wrath and vengeance when the whole Earth will be consumed. He will make a sudden end to all the ungodly inhabitants of the Earth by means of earthquake and warfare. Zephaniah doesn’t name the aggressors, but Ezekiel calls them Gog and his hordes coming from the remotest parts of the north with many nations with him.

This is the great Day of the Lord spoken of by Joel and other prophets; the Day of the Lord at the end of the Great Tribulation when the Messiah returns to Earth. It is a day of trumpet blasts and battle cry, of bloodshed and slaughter, a day of darkness and wrath. It involves the whole Earth and there will be no respect for human life. The destruction will be massive, but it is not the annihilation of the world or mankind; see Zephaniah 3. This will be a terrible and terrifying end to civilization as we know it. Isaiah said that God will make people scarcer than pure gold (Isa 13:12) and Zechariah talks about the survivors of the nations who will go and worship the Messiah during the subsequent millennium (Zech 14:16).

## **Messiah will be in Israel’s midst**

*Zephaniah 3:14-20*

The survivors in Israel and Jerusalem are told to shout and sing aloud because their enemies have been cleared away. God’s judgments on Israel are now over and the King of Israel, the Lord (the Messiah), is now in their midst.

It is important to realize that the last great Day of the Lord is the day of the Messiah’s arrival, the day that Jews and Christians have hoped for for centuries and millennia. When he arrives, they won’t fear evil any longer. After saving them, he will delight in his people and quiet them with his love. The Lord, the God of Israel, will be in their midst! He is their king, reigning on the throne of David in Jerusalem. Don’t think of Jesus as being a king outside of politics. Don’t think of him

as ruling in people's hearts. That is not what the Kingdom of God is all about. He is in their midst. Don't think of the great Day of the Lord as a day when God indirectly brings judgment. When he is king, he will be theocratic, ruling the world with a rod of iron, forcefully, strictly, and justly. There will be no more war, and justice and morality will be enforced by courts of law. The Bible is clear about what behaviors are abominable to God. All forms of idolatry will be outlawed. The family unit will be encouraged. Incest, homosexuality, and bestiality are all forbidden in the strongest terms by the moral law of Moses which is an eternal guide for mankind.

At that time, the Messiah will deal with oppressors so that there will be peace and righteousness, justice and virtue, and purity. The regathered people of Israel and others who live in their land will be treated as the Messiah's people. They will be renowned and praised by all nations during the millennium. The resurrected church will live in a heavenly sphere of existence from where they will rule with Christ. They are not in focus here, the future of the church is detailed in the book of Revelation. Only the details of Israel's future, and that of Jerusalem, are in the books of the OT prophets as highlighted in this book.

The Messiah's presence among his people in Israel sounds like a physical presence, but what does that mean for a resurrected person like the Lord? In a vision, Ezekiel heard him speaking from inside the temple saying: "This is where my throne is, where I place the soles of my feet, and where I will live among the Israelis forever" (Ezek 43:7). In John's vision, an angel showed him around the New Jerusalem. The throne of God and the Lamb were in it. His servants (the resurrected church) will see his face and they will reign forever and ever (Rev 22:3-4). Christ is not reigning over the world at present. In him all things hold together and he sustains the universe, but the time for him to intervene in world politics has not yet arrived; that awaits his coming and his millennial reign. The church is not yet reigning either. Christians are in the world, but they don't have authority over it. We mourn because of the evil in the world, and we pray, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on Earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10).

Zephaniah emphasizes the fact that one day the Lord will be "in your midst," which could mean among them or within them. This follows

the conversion of Israel when the Lord pours out his Spirit on them (Ezek 39:29, Joel 2:2-29), so he will be within them, but the words are spoken to Zion, not Israel, and he says that he will dwell in Zion as “the King of Israel.” The Lord told Ezekiel that his servant David would be king over Israel. He also said that he would set his sanctuary in their midst forever and that his dwelling place would be *over them* (Ezek 37:27-28). The name of Jerusalem will be: “The Lord is There” (Ezek 48:35). All these verses imply a visible presence, but we are not given details of his appearances. There is no palace in Ezekiel’s detailed vision of the millennial temple and the presence of a temple suggests the Messiah’s spiritual presence. The New Jerusalem will be his home, together with the Church.

In a vision Zechariah hears the Lord say to Zion: “Sing and rejoice, daughter of Zion! Take note! I am coming to live in your midst” (Zech 2:10). John heard a voice from heaven saying: “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people” (Rev 21:3). Literally, he will ‘tabernacle’ with them. Compare John 1:14: “The Word became flesh and lived (tabernacled) among us.” This implies that at least on some occasions his presence among them will be visible.