

Zephaniah Chapter 3 – John Karmelich

1. Ever wanted to see a one-chapter summary of what God's done for us, what He expects of us and what's our eternal future? While Zephaniah Chapter 3 does that for Israel as a nation, there's a lot a Christian can learn and apply from this chapter on the topic of what God expects of us.
 - a) To explain further, let me discuss where we left off: Zephaniah was explaining what will happen to Israel and in particular, the world around Israel. It was a bad news message that destruction is coming and everyone in the "neighborhood" (all the nations in Israel's world) is going to feel it. That includes small and large nations around Israel as well as the Assyrian Empire, which as I love to say, was the "big boys on the block" at that time.
 - b) The natural thing as Israelite might think when hearing all of this, "OK God, I understand why you want to wipe out our neighbors. They know of Your existence simply by the fact they're in the neighborhood and You want to show the world that You are God. But why destroy us after You've taken all the time and trouble to get us here in the first place? Yes we know we're not perfect, but still we're You're chosen people, why harm us? You made an unconditional promise that we'd be in this land forever. How do You (God) reckon all of this? How can You let us suffer and "win" at the same time?" That's what Zephaniah is going to tell us all in this one chapter.
 - c) OK John, this is all ancient history. We get the idea that Israel has been destroyed several times in history and they're "still standing". We get the idea they're the only nation in the history of civilization to be conquered, scattered and reunited again (twice). How does all of that effect our lives as Christians? (Thought you'd never ask.)
 - d) That question leads me perfectly to my lesson title: "How do we reconcile our suffering as Christians with our rewards"? We know we're not perfect, but we were still separated to make a difference for God. Why do He allow us to go through all this pain if it is His will for us to be His disciples? In other words, how do You (God) reconcile the fact we are not perfect, with the fact that You want to us to spend an eternity with You?
 - e) Confused? Great. That's why I write. In this chapter, God lays out through Zephaniah reasons why Israel has to be punished for their failure to be a witness for Him. Zephaniah then gets all "millennial" on us explaining what's God's ultimate rewards for Israel just for being the Chosen People. Yes, this affects us Christians as well, which is why it's here!
 - f) What I want us as Christians to notice isn't the specific sins the Israelites were guilty of. It is about understanding what God expects of as believers. The point is God calls us to be His witnesses to the world. He never promises us that if we agree to be His witness, we'll get whatever we ask for on the spot. God never promises to make life easy for us if again we agree to be His witnesses. What He promises is peace, guidance through His word and through prayer as to what He expects of us. Sometimes He even communicates to us what is His will, but as most of us have learned, we can't demand He speaks to us. He will make it obvious when He has something to say to us. We don't have to strain to hear it nor can we make Him to speak. I'm just saying God speaking to us is always a possibility.
2. Meanwhile, back to Zephaniah. He finishes this short three-chapter "sermon" by telling us what's going to happen to Israel both bad in the short term and good in the long term. What God wants us to get out of it isn't an Israel history lesson, but an understanding of how He works in our life, what is the punishment for failing to live as God desire and what are our ultimate rewards when we do choose to use our lives to make a difference for Him. Yes, I'll give more details about both Israel's history and our future as we go through the text of this chapter. What I'd like all of us to get out of this lesson is essentially, "Why God's so tough on us, what He does promise us when it comes to this life and the next one and why it's worth it to use our lives as a witness for Him". If you get that, you get Zephaniah's purpose for writing this book. Therefore, I'm encourage you to study the details with me as we learn a few things about what God expects of us.

3. Before I break down and start Verse 1, let me lay out a little background on what's happening in the land of Israel at this time. It'll help to understand the setting for the first half of this chapter.
 - a) As I state almost every lesson, Israel split into two kingdoms a few hundred years before Zephaniah lived. The North Kingdom was taken into captivity by the Assyrian Empire. When Zephaniah wrote, the Assyrians were no longer a threat. The still standing South Kingdom enjoyed some independence. The last two South kings were both "bad news". The Israelites living in the South must have been thinking, "We've pretty much turned to idolatry along with other sins we'll read about in this chapter. We have ignored God for a good while now, but nothing's changed in the South and God can't kick us out of here because His temple is here. That's why Zephaniah's message is essentially God is going to do something and Zephaniah's fellow Israelites living in that area will get the punishment they deserve for failing to be a witness for God.
 - b) After explaining why Israel as a nation is "doomed", Zephaniah finishes the chapter to tell us how God will keep His unconditional promises to Israel as a nation in despite of all the sins they're collectively guilty of. That's how the book ends.
 - c) Before I get into all the details, there are a handful of neat little facts we'll learn about the millennium for those of you who like to know about the eternal future. To me, what's far more important is understanding why God allows us to suffer, what He will and won't do for us as believers and why all of this is worth it. What I also want to spend a little time in this lesson doing is explaining a little more of the "how" and not just the "why" of how He works in our lives and how we're to respond to what He does do for us.
 - d) The rest is the details. Speaking of which, time to get started on them.
4. Chapter 3, Verse 1: Woe to the city of oppressors, rebellious and defiled!
 - a) If I just read Verse 1, the first thing you might ask is what city is Zephaniah talking about? It is not mentioned by name, but obviously he's talking about Jerusalem if you read it in the context of the surrounding verses.
 - b) Let me explain it this way: The last section of the text talked about the ultimate fate of the nations surrounding Israel. Zephaniah named insignificant nations (in terms of power) as well as big powers in the area. The effective message was "God's bigger than all of them, and since He created everything, He's going to punish all of them, because the world's full of evidence that He exists and He expects acknowledgment of His existence based on all we do know or can know about Him.
 - c) However, God holds those who do know about Him to a higher standard. It makes sense if you think about it. If God promises blessings both in this life and in eternity for those of us who trust Him with our lives, it'd make sense He holds us accountable for what we've learned about Him through His word. As I've said for years, the bad news of knowing the bible is God holds us accountable for what we do know.
 - d) Believe it or not, that leads us right back to Chapter 3, Verse 1. The "city" in view here has to be Jerusalem as God effectively says, "That's where I'm going to rule the world forever, so those in that city are held to a higher standard as they've received far more information about My existence than say all the countries discussed in the last half of Chapter 2".
 - e) As I said in my introduction, the other logical thing religious Jewish people can wonder is "I can understand why God wants to punish the heathen, but why punish us, as we're the "Chosen People". Yes, we're not perfect but we're still the Chosen, so why do we have to suffer in this lifetime?" What we get in Verses 1 through 4 are some specific charges given against them as if God's saying, "You want reasons why I'm going to let all of you go into captivity? No problem. Let me lay them out for you". The issue isn't so much the specific sins listed as much as it is ignoring God. The specific sins are "natural outcomes" in life as we ignore Him. I remember a fairly famous pastor in my area once saying, we don't steal horses because we're a horse thief. We're horse thieves and stealing horses is what we do. The point being is we are sinners, and here's the evidence that we're sinners.

- f) OK enough talking in general. Let's get to specifics. Verse 1 states this unnamed city is full of "oppressors, rebellious and defiled". Grant it, that's not very specific enough. We'll get into more specifics in the next three verses. Verse 1 is just listing the charges that God is accusing them of committing. Let me describe the charges:
- i) The idea of "oppressors" is about abusing one's power authority to put down other people for no good reason. There's nothing basically wrong with leadership. It's a problem when we abuse that role by taking advantage of our leadership.
 - ii) The idea of "rebellious" in this context has to do with rebellion against God. When it comes to leadership, God is the final authority on how it is He expects us to live as a witness for Him. Rebellion is about refusing to live as He desires. Again we'll get into more specifics in the next few verses.
 - iii) Finally the text says "defiled". It's effectively saying, one's sins are obvious to God based on how we're living. The issue isn't being perfect. It's about us refusing to change our lifestyle based on how the bible teaches us how we should live. To use the example I gave earlier, if we're abusing our authority as a leader in some way, it is an example of being defiled by sin as God's aware of what we're doing and I'd suspect those under those leaders are also painfully aware of what they're doing in their roles as leaders.
 - iv) OK enough guilty for Verse 1, let's try Verse 2.
5. Verse 2: She obeys no one, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the LORD, she does not draw near to her God.
- a) When I read this verse, what I think of is what I call the "tag line" of the book of Judges. It is "Everybody did whatever they felt like". What I mean is the book of Judges covers a 400 year period where the Israelites pretty much ignored God and again everyone did what it was they felt like doing without His influence over their lives".
 - b) When Zephaniah wrote, it's been about 500 years since the time of the judges. He's saying to them, "You in Jerusalem who should know better as you know Israel's history and you are acting just like your ancestors who refused to be corrected and draw near to God".
 - c) I always think of the Babylonian captivity as God's "only option left". What I mean by that is God will do whatever it takes to draw us into a close relationship with Him. When we ignore Him in spite of how He calls us to live, He goes to more drastic measures in order to draw us closer to Him. Verse 2 is a reminder of that fact. It's telling the Israelites you're ignoring how I expect you to live, and all of you leave Me no choice but to send you into captivity if that's what it takes to draw all of you back to Me.
 - i) Does that mean God will destroy our country if we collectively ignore Him? While I don't put anything past God, there are other ways He can work as well. As I like to point out, ministries have died and lives destroyed by Christians turning to sin and losing the status that God gave them by their bad choices.
 - ii) Let me also address the devout Christian who think, "I go to church every Sunday and I do "x" projects for church or my community." First, I'm not condemning that act. The issue isn't our actions, it's our attitude that affects those actions. If we do things to try to impress God or impress our neighbors, we're blowing it as well. If we do good things out of gratitude for the life God's given us, then we're living as He desires. If we humble ourselves before Him and we're willing to be corrected by Him, then we are living as God desires.
6. Speaking of being corrected, let's look at Verse 2 again. The condemnation against those living in Jerusalem is that they refuse to be corrected. Everybody did whatever they wanted to do without any regard to what God teaches us about how to live in His word. To use an obvious example, if we're stealing from others in order to get rich, we're doing whatever we feel like without any care of what God considers right or wrong. It's when we refuse to humble ourselves before God that's when we become a "horse thief" and naturally do what horse thieves do, as I stated earlier.

7. Verse 3: Her officials are roaring lions, her rulers are evening wolves, who leave nothing for the morning. ⁴Her prophets are arrogant; they are treacherous men. Her priests profane the sanctuary and do violence to the law.
- a) Speaking of condemning the leaders, that's what we get in Verses 3 and 4. Zephaniah is listing all the types of leaders that existed in Jerusalem when Zephaniah wrote. Officials and rulers refer to those in government who had some sort of leadership role. To refer to them as "roaring lions and evening (hungry) wolves" is essentially accusing them of abuse of their leadership role.
 - b) The specific sin accusation has to do with stealing through power. It can include making unfair demands on people. It can include taking people to court and making them give up what they own in order to steal from them. It includes tax abuse as in charging people more than what's required of them. It may include protection fees to business owners. In summary, it's about power abuse in order to gain wealth. As the old saying goes, "There's nothing new under the sun". Again, part of the issue is God's people are held to a higher standard than nonbelievers. If you are an elected official and are guilty of something like this, that in effect makes us guilty before God because He holds us to a higher standard than non-believers, especially when we hold some position of power.
 - c) The final group is priests. It's the idea of someone who teaches the law but doesn't expect to be held to the same standard. Realize the difference between a hypocrite and a sinner is a sinner sins, but realizes they are guilty of that sin. A hypocrite is one who believes that others should live by a certain standard, but they themselves are above it as they're better people. That's what Jesus accused the Pharisees of. It wasn't a lack of effort to obey God's His laws. It's thinking those laws are for everyone else, as we're "above it" because we're living better lives than you are.
 - d) A modern example might be those who live in luxury and build high walls around where they live and hire gunman to protect them. If such people complain about walls built in a poor neighborhood or want gun control elsewhere, that's being a hypocrite.
 - e) The essential charge is abuse of power. Even if we think we're getting away with it, there is a God who will make those leaders suffer because they should know better but they are abusing their authority as leaders.
 - f) This comes back to the idea that once we stop caring what God thinks about our lives, we do things to abuse the authority we've got as we no longer fear His wrath upon our lives. It is worse by the fact they're living in Jerusalem, the city where God will rule the world from as well as the "center" where belief in God is based. We have no idea who we're messing with when we abuse our power especially in a Christian setting.
 - g) One of the 10 Commandments is to not take God's name in vein. Many people think that refers to not swearing by invoking His name. What many fail to realize is it includes the idea of abusing His authority by committing crime as one of His leaders. All in all, these verses are bad news and a reminder to us, that He expects us to live as a good witness for Him and we can suffer in this life when we fail to be that witness.
 - h) Let me pause for a moment to ask the important question of "Now what". Suppose we do try to obey the bible and live as God commands. Now what? I'm a big believer that I am free to do whatever I want when it comes to nonbiblical decisions. Like all people. I try to do what's logical and make the best decisions possible. Usually the "next step" in life is to do what's logical, after praying for His guidance through life. Remember that God never guarantees us long life or prosperity. What He cares about is our relationship with Him and our witness for Him to the world around us. If we do our best to live as He demands, and do our best to live as the bible teaches us to live, we're free to do what we want over and above those set of rules. Finally, remember that obedience is not about trying to earn His love, but about being grateful for what He's done for us.
 - i) With all that guilt out of my system, I'm ready for Verse 5.

8. Verse 5: The LORD within her is righteous; he does no wrong. Morning by morning he dispenses his justice, and every new day he does not fail, yet the unrighteous know no shame.
- a) Sometimes when I think I've just jumped off the deep end theologically speaking, the next verse tells me "I was right on track". What I'm saying is Verse 5 reminds us that God's still there, He's still in charge and the world is still moving according to His plans.
 - b) Verse 5 starts with a reminder that God's perfect and by definition and can do no wrong. That leads to the classic question of, "If God is so good, why does He allow so many bad things to exist in this world?" Part of the answer is He allows free will, and that's a messy thing to put it mildly. Part of the answer is He wants to see what we'll do about the evil of this world. Part of the answer is by watching evil fail, it proves He's still in charge as those who fight on His behalf overcome the evil of this world.
 - c) I can just hear everyone saying, "But I know of this person who gets away with "this" as if nothing will ever happen to Him. I'm not preaching "karma". I'm saying a God exists who is aware of all things and only if there's a next life, can this world be thought of as fair. As I've been saying for years, the main reason I can sleep well at night is because I'm assured of the fact a God exists who will judge the world fairly. The evidence of the bible writings telling of history before it occurs gives the evidence of His existence. The history of Israel is proof of His existence. The evidence of all aspects of Jesus two comings being written before it ever occurred is evidence that the bible is God's word. All I'm saying is God's not to be messed with and He's always working on His timing despite the fact we can't see Him working.
 - d) Let me quickly talk about seeing God versus not seeing Him work: Obviously, God's not a genie in the bible who's here to grant our wishes. The reason God doesn't make Himself visible is it violates our free will. If we told someone we saw God they'd think we're nuts. The best way to describe "seeing God" is literally in hindsight. I've learned that God never does for us what we can do for ourselves. If we're working on a project that we believe He is guiding us to do, God often works behind the scenes when we let go of worrying about the results. I'll also add that I'm convinced He does more miracles with newer Christians. As we build our faith the "cute coincidences" decrease as He wants us to learn to walk by faith. In summary, God's in charge and we're not. We can't force His hand. I don't think He minds us asking for anything, but the "get" is all about His will.
 - e) Now that I got my seeing and not seeing how God works in our lives out of my system, I noticed that's the topic of Verse 6, so let's go there.
9. Verse 6:"I have cut off nations; their strongholds are demolished. I have left their streets deserted, with no one passing through. Their cities are destroyed; no one will be left--no one at all.
- a) Here's a tough question: If a major disaster happens like a big city being destroyed, was it God's will to occur? Every now and then I'll lecture on God's "permissive will" versus His "desired will". It's like a child pestering a parent over and over again to give them a thing. It may not be the parent's desire to give them "that", but often it's permitted. I believe God is the same with us. It's like "I really want to give you "this", but if you only want to settle for "that", I'll allow it.
 - i) Historically if a city or nation fell, and the bible said that was God's will to occur, I simply accept the prophet's as speaking for God, mainly because of all the accurate predictions they've made about the future.
 - ii) Let's pick a city on the other side of the world. If an army conquered a city say in South American, is that God's will? If God knows all things, He knew it was going to occur. It could be His will or it could simply being sin or evil occurring in the world. I'm getting into all of this as Verse 6 describes places being destroyed that was His will for the world.
 - b) Think of it this way: It was God's will for the Israelites to live in that land. That means He allowed the Israelites to conquer the nations in that land and around that area.

- c) OK, I got the general out of the way, now let's focus on the specifics. Unfortunately, this is talking about Jerusalem's destruction. God's saying through Zephaniah that He's going to destroy Jerusalem just as God allowed other cities to be destroyed.
 - i) A quick word on the "how". God destroying a city, does not mean a big hammer's coming down from the sky smashing everything. God uses armies to do that job. Yes, it can also include earthquakes or other disasters. I can't explain all tragedies. I just know that God exists, He knows all things and allows the world to continue ultimately to glorify Himself. Yes, the world is full of tragedies. That's why for us to "win" we must accept that God paid the complete price for all our sins. We don't have to try to earn His love. However, He still demands obedience as He wants us to use our lives to make a difference for Him. That's why we created to begin with.
 - ii) That's also why He's getting all "destructive" on us in Verse 6. It is as if He's telling us, I wish I didn't have to go to these extremes. However, all you (Israelites) aren't living as I demand, so I have to perform this punishment as nothing else works.
 - iii) The message to us Christians is effectively the same. We can't lose salvation as we trust in Jesus. However, we can lose rewards and lose opportunities to be used by God if we "blow it" like the Israelites. Yes, He can also destroy us as a society if we fail to live as He desires, but I don't want to push that. History alone is proof that if we fail to live as He desires, our life will be like, "Down goes Frazier" to use a famous reference in the world of boxing a few decades ago.
 - d) One final thing here. Notice the verse says no one will be left. Imagine living in some big city. A bible prophet says it will be so wiped out, no one will be left. Yes, that is the literal case here when the Babylonians got tired of Israel's rebellion against them and decided to wipe them out as a nation. On that pleasant note, Verse 7:
10. Verse 7: I said to the city, `Surely you will fear me and accept correction!' Then her dwelling would not be cut off, nor all my punishments come upon her. But they were still eager to act corruptly in all they did.
- a) Notice the word "city" near the beginning of this verse. Back in Verse 1, I established the fact that God's talking about Jerusalem when Zephaniah refers the "city". My point is he is still talking about that city here in Verse 7. Realize that when Zephaniah described all that destruction in the previous set of verse, he had Jerusalem in mind. The simple point is that God's not above using extreme measures to get us to focus upon Him, even if that means destroying what He established to accomplish that relationship!
 - b) Remember why God's allowing all this death and destruction in the first place. The people that God's called to be a witness for Him have turned to idols. They only want to get what they can out of this life, no matter who they have to hurt to do that. That is the crux of the condemnation of the early part of this chapter. By allowing the survivors to be taken into captivity, that's God's way of saying, "You want idols, I'm sending you to place that's full of idols so you can live how you want and ignore Me, as that's what you're desiring right now. My point is as horrible as all this destruction is, it's God's way to say that, "This is what I have to resort to, to draw all of you back to Me, by destroying what I have built up (a home for my people). Further, I need to send you to a land where no one cares about Me as essentially that's what all of you want."
 - c) As you can see, this is God's tough but necessary "carrot and the stick" approach to having a relationship with us as well as describing the penalty for turning from Him.
 - d) The good news, is this is the end of the condemnation section. I can just hear the Israelites hearing this and saying, "Well, we may be bad, but what about all those other nations that don't care about you? What's going to happen to them? God answers that question in the next verse. Like I said in my introduction, Zephaniah is a great summary, of "What about us (bad news), what about them, (really bad news) and the ultimate destiny of our nation in the future (the really good news). There I just summarized the book in three thoughts.

11. Verse 8: "Therefore wait for me," declares the LORD, "for the day I will stand up to testify. I have decided to assemble the nations, to gather the kingdoms and to pour out my wrath on them-- all my fierce anger. The whole world will be consumed by the fire of my jealous anger.
- a) Speaking of waiting on the good news, it starts here in Verse 8. This is where Zephaniah gets all "millennial" on us, as in describing the ultimate future for both His chosen people as well as nonbelievers. It's good news for those who trust in God and bad news for those who're refusing to do so with their lives.
 - b) One of the strange things that the book of Revelation describes is the whole world going to war against Israel. It's hard to picture a large army from Europe, Asia and Africa, all to fight against a small country the size of New Jersey. The nuclear missiles of Russia alone is far more than enough to wipe out Israel. If Iran gets nuclear bombs, they won't hesitate to use it even if it means damaging their own country. My question is why is the world so threatened by the existence of tiny Israel, in comparison to their own size and might? It's because of what Israel represents: God's existence and His rule over the world. A desire to wipe Israel out once and for all, is the desire to end the remainder of God's existence.
 - i) Anyway, with all that stated, a future day will come where God's going to put His "foot down" and say in effect, "Enough of all of this. Let's have it out once and for all. Come on, all you nonbelievers, let's duke it out and see who wins!" Yes, that's a colorful way of describing a big battle, but that's what's described in Revelation as well as Ezekiel 38-39 in the bible. I always see that battle as an overwhelmingly huge army going to attack Israel and God literally stepping in to end that war!
 - ii) One of the reasons I am convinced Israel is back in that land, is for this event to go on as described in those places in the bible. I'm not saying this will occur in the next few days, but I do see all the pieces in place, for it to occur.
 - iii) Now that I've stated all of that, I'd invite you re-read Verse 8 and see that's exactly what God's describing through Zephaniah here in this verse. Again, Zephaniah is a great summary of God's ultimate plans for Israel, the church and the world all in a short little book. So where is the church in all of this? My personal view is we'll watch it from the "balcony" of heaven when this great battle occurs. I do hold the "pre-tribulation" rapture view, which simply means the church will be in heaven, before this great battle begins. For those Christians who believe the church will be around when all this happens, the view is the church won't be strong enough to be an influence to stop that great battle.
 - c) Speaking of good news, it's time for my favorite verse in the chapter. I'll explain:
12. Verse 9: "Then will I purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him shoulder to shoulder.
- a) This is one of those verses that have puzzled scholars for millenniums. Here's a few ideas of what scholars think "I will purify the lips..." means:
 - i) Some say it's a reversal of the "Tower of Babel". If you recall that story in Genesis, it is when the human race was young. As opposed to obeying God's command to multiply and fill the earth, people were "hanging together". Somehow, God made it so people started scattering over the world and different languages developed. Anyway, some scholars think this verse is a reversal of that process where people all over the world will just speak one language again and honor God as God when He returns to rule over the world. Yes, it's a "millennial" end time prediction.
 - ii) Another theory is when Zephaniah says there will be a "pure speech" it's refers to the elimination of any bad language, as in no more cursing or swearing.
 - b) As you can gather, I have my doubts about both those theories, so here's what I and many believe it means: In the history of civilization, no dead language has ever come back to be used in common language, except Hebrew. When Israel became an independent country again after not being one for 2,000 years, Hebrew was the official language.

- i) Even at the time of Jesus, Hebrew was not the commonly spoken language in that land. It was Aramaic. Hebrew was studied by bible scholars in order to learn the original language. My point is it wasn't used in every day speech. Ever since that time, it's only been studied by those who want to learn the bible better.
 - ii) When Israel officially became a country again, Hebrew was declared to be what is to be spoken there. People who move there have to learn Hebrew as all the street signs are in Hebrew and that's what people speak.
 - iii) Now think about Verse 9 again. Zephaniah is predicting a future day where God's people will stand shoulder to shoulder praising Him together. If they are going to do that, it'd be logical they're all speaking the same language. Don't forget that the target audience that Zephaniah wrote to, were Jewish people. Therefore, if Jesus is going to return to Israel to be worshipped as God, a common language is needed in order to make this happen. All I'm saying is along with many bible scholars, I think that Hebrew being revived again, is predicted here by Zephaniah.
 - iv) Does that mean when we get to heaven, we all have to take Hebrew classes? Don't know. What I suspect is we'll all speak in our native language, but just like when the "tongues" thing started, we each hear each other in our native language. Either that, or Hebrew is what comes out of our mouths. That is pure speculation on my part. I just know this verse predicts a "pure language" for people to worship God in some future day, and I suspect the Hebrew language is part of that prediction.
- c) Speaking of getting all "millennial" on us, that's what Zephaniah will do for the last part of the book. Remember the essential theme of the book is "How and why do we as God's people suffer for disobedience, how do non-believers suffer and what's the final ending for those who do trust in God? That's Zephaniah in three questions. Since we're about to wrap this book up, it's time for him to discuss the future where believers live worshipping God when He rules the world from Israel. It has to begin with Israelites living there and I suspect having a common language, which is the whole "Hebrew language" argument.
13. Verse 10: From beyond the rivers of Cush my worshipers, my scattered people, will bring me offerings.
- a) Keep in mind, 2,500 years ago, there were no jet airplanes. The farthest parts of the world to an Israelite back then, might be a place like "Ethiopia" to the south of Egypt. Zephaniah is making a reference to the upper part of the Nile river here (Cush was the ancient name of what we call Ethiopia today and is the source location for the Nile River).
 - b) The verse is both "general" and "specific". When Israel became a country again, Israelites from all over the world came there to live. That's the "general". There were a lot of Jewish people in living in Ethiopia when it was formed. The record for most number of people on one airplane flight was when a bunch of Ethiopian Jewish people flew from there to Israel. In fact the plane landed with two more people as there were two births on the flight. This was in 1991 when 1,086 people got on a Boeing 747. I know it's a bit of trivia, but I'd say it is an example of this prophesy being literally fulfilled within the last few decades. Again, the number of people who landed were 1,088 as there were two births on the flight.
 - c) Is it possible this refers to something else? Of course. I just found it interesting the record for the most people on one flight was a Jewish rescue mission to Israel as all those people moved to Israel to start a new life in the Jewish home land. This verse can also refer to a future time in the "millennium" where people come to Israel to worship God. Ok enough of all of that, unto Verse 11:
14. Verse 11: On that day you will not be put to shame for all the wrongs you have done to me, because I will remove from this city those who rejoice in their pride. Never again will you be haughty on my holy hill.
- a) Remember we spent half this book discussing all the suffering Israel's going to deal with for disobeying Him? Zephaniah's saying a day will come where all that's "past tense".

- b) Let's pretend for a moment that Jesus returns tomorrow. Can you imagine all the guilt the Israelites would feel if they realized how bad they blew it in terms of seeing Jesus as being the Messiah? Let alone guilt for not living as God desired. Even when this happens, all of us Christians would be thinking, I know I failed to live as He desired as well.
 - i) With all that said, notice the lack of shame for wrong doings done to God here. So how can a perfect God just "forgive" us in that day? Let's assume as the bible says a future day will come where Jesus comes to reign on the earth? What about all of the Israelites living there then? Does God just forgive them? Tough question. The way I see it is when all the Revelation bad stuff happens and they realize that they have blown it collectively, they'll beg forgiveness and turn to Him. Will some not repent? Sure, and I don't want to be in their shoes on that day.
 - ii) As for non-Jewish people, all that "Revelation time" will be full of world upheaval. Many will turn to God during that time and many will not. Thus the judgment.
 - iii) All I'm saying is complete forgiveness for one's sins comes through one's trust that Jesus is who we Christians claim Him to be and trust He's forgiven every sin we've ever committed or ever will commit. That applies when all that "millennial" stuff begins. Speaking of getting all "millennial" on us, onto the next verse.
15. Verse 12: But I will leave within you the meek and humble, who trust in the name of the LORD.
- a) Keep in mind the whole three-chapter book for a moment: Zephaniah spent a lot of time telling how Israel will be completely destroyed. Then he spent some time describing how the nations around Israel will suffer. Finally here in Chapter 3 we get told that "in spite of all of that", those who humble themselves before God (then and now) will be saved. That had to be a comforting message through the "horror show" of the first two chapters.
 - b) Let me quickly discuss "humility". It doesn't mean we have to sell all we own or leave our family. It means we accept that He is God and we are not. It means we trust that He is in charge and we're not. We can make all the plans we want but God has the right to change them if He desires. The way I view life as a Christian is "Here's the rules (bible) says we're to live by, then we're free to do whatever we want over and above that, as long as we are making the effort to seek Him and use our lives for His glory."
 - c) When I think of "meek" I think of having power, but not using it. For example, boys have a lot more strength than girls the same age as a general rule. Boys have to learn to control that strength and channel it properly. Meekness for a Christian would include the idea of not having a "holier than though" attitude toward nonbelievers. It means always being a good witness to others and realize God's in charge of all things
 - d) OK then, on that positive note, Verse 13.
16. Verse 13: The remnant of Israel will do no wrong; they will speak no lies, nor will deceit be found in their mouths. They will eat and lie down and no one will make them afraid."
- a) Again, remember that Zephaniah is getting all "millennial" on them. That just means he's preaching about the end times when the Messiah comes to rule the world from Jerusalem.
 - b) That leads to a tough question: Even when Jesus literally starts to reign as world king as a lot of the bible predicts, how will the Israelites do no wrong? Let's face it, human nature is human nature. I can see the last part of Verse 13 coming true where they won't need to be afraid of anything when Jesus rules. That's an easy "given". The hard part for me is how will people act perfectly? One thing I've always accepted as a Christian is that in our new body, the desire to sin will be taken away. We live in a world cursed by sin, and it's easy to do the wrong thing when it's part of our nature. I've always held the view that people are naturally bad and have to learn to do good. For example, we don't need to teach our children how to lie, they just do. All I'm saying is we have to overcome our desire to do what is sinful in order to be pleasing to God and live as He desires.
 - c) That leads me back to this "utopia" where apparently sin will no longer exist! I do suspect that means is this future world is one where sin is no longer an issue.

- d) I'm actually hesitant to say that. That's because Revelation 20:7-8 makes a reference to one final attempt by Satan to deceive the nations. My question is if Israelites in that day can't do anything wrong, how can there be a final deception of the nations? Good question. It may mean that Israelites in that day can no longer sin, but the nonbelievers who survive through all that Revelation horror show, who repopulate the world can be deceived. This is one of those questions I file under "ask God about it one day", and let it go. None of it affects our relationship with God or our job as a witness for Him, so I'll just move on.
17. Verse 14: Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem! ¹⁵ The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm.
- a) To state the obvious from reading these verses, this is "good times". We're all done with the "doom and gloom" of the early chapters and this is the "happily ever after" section of the text. Zephaniah is telling the Israelites, "Be glad, you're going to lose in the short run but you'll win big in the end. That of course is God's message for us Christians as well. I like the expression, "suffering is inevitable, having joy is a choice!" So before we move on, let's take a moment, praise God for the inevitable victory He'll give all us of who do trust in Him.
- b) That leads to Verse 15: The LORD (all capitals God's most holy name) has taken away our punishment. That's about God's grace. That's about God Himself bearing the penalty for our sins. Whenever a Christian asks me, "What about the sin I committed last Tuesday? I say "Jesus paid for that sin. You may still suffer the consequences in this life for it, but that is all the punishment you'll ever receive for that sin."
- c) Let me apply this verse another way: Zephaniah described well the Babylonian invasion. The Israelites have suffered as a nation ever since. Rome destroyed it around 70 AD. The Jewish people have suffered all through history, let alone the Holocaust. So how is it that Zephaniah can say, "you will never again fear any harm"? Part of the answer is to accept that the last part of this chapter is again millennial, referring to a future era when Jesus is going to rule the world from Israel. If you know anything about history, you'd know that no aspect of this verse has come true as of yet.
- d) Another question to ponder is, "How do we know Zephaniah didn't just write this section to give the Israelites comfort about a rough future? Maybe he saw the ravages of war and thought the Israelites will suffer through it. In other words, how do we know for sure the millennium is going to happen? Just because the bible says it will, how can we know for sure? The way I look at that is, "The bible's been 100% accurate with all it's predictions to date. If we can trust it to date, why do we doubt it about the eternal future? That's why I am convinced God spoke to Zephaniah as well as all the other prophets the bible names.
- e) Meanwhile, I'm spoiling all the "happiness" of the millennium talk. Let's get back at it.
18. Verse 16: On that day they will say to Jerusalem, "Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. ¹⁷ The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing."
- a) If you've ever read through the prophets, they spend a lot of time describing what life will be like in the millennium. Books like Isaiah give us lots of details how we will recognize it when it begins. Revelation gives us clues as well. Zephaniah is effectively a summary of the fact it will happen along with some key points about that time: He doesn't focus a lot on the issue of "how it will happen", but "how God will act when all this begins".
- b) Again, Zephaniah wrote this soon before the Israelites faced annihilation as a country. To write this section is to assure the Israelites it's not over until He says it's over and it won't be over until God literally rules over the world from Israel. Remember what God wants from us: A relationship with us. In order to have that we must be perfectly forgiven of all our sins. That's why we get verses like Verse 17 that says God takes great delight in us as He will calm us with His love and we'll rejoice in singing. Let me explain that better:

- i) I used to ponder why would a perfect God who does not need anything, desire to create us in the first place? What's in it for Him? The best way I can describe it is if we have a desire to paint, or play a musical instrument, we do it just because we enjoy it. It brings us happiness. If God is full of love, He desires things to express that love upon. That's why He paid the price for our sins so He can spend eternity expressing that love upon us and we, out of our own free choice, chose to express love back to Him in return.
 - ii) To explain it another way, I don't want to get saved so I can kick back on the couch all day in heaven watching television. I want to have joy eternally then just as I do want it today. It is when we are using our lives to help others, we get far more joy than anything and everything else this world has to offer. That's how we show our love back to Him. Not just by praying to Him and singing songs to Him, but when we use our lives for His glory by showing love to others, that is the greatest way to have joy in this life. The idea of love is about putting other's needs ahead of ours.
 - iii) My whole point here is God wants us to have a joyful life now and for eternity. Of course this life will be hard at times, but joy is a choice no matter what we have to deal with in our lives.
 - iv) OK I got on a roll, and we still have three verses left to cover.
19. Verse 18: "The sorrows for the appointed feasts I will remove from you; they are a burden and a reproach to you.
- a) OK, what's the "sorrow for the appointed feasts?" Why does Zephaniah want to bring us "down to earth" after all the joy of the last few verses? Stop and consider that a lot of the Jewish holidays are associated with "remembering past suffering and asking forgiveness of one's sins". My point is those holidays were not just big parties for no reason. To steal a classic joke, all Jewish holidays can be summarized as "They tried to kill us, we won, so let's eat". Anyway, Zephaniah's saying that when the Messiah comes to rule the world, it won't be a time to deal with the burden of having to recall past sins or people trying to kill you. It'll be one big party without all the "remember the suffering" parts.
 - b) Remember back in Verse 13 where it implied the Israelites will no longer do no wrong? It ties to this verse. If there is no wrong done by God's people at that time, that would mean no more sorrow is needed for a "need to repent".
 - c) Let me try this another way: I don't see us spending eternity on our knees telling God of all the sin's were truly sorry we committed. Once we're forgiven, that is it. We are much tougher on ourselves than God is on us. (Yes, there are consequences for our sins, I'm not denying that.) If God has completely forgiven us, why do we fail to forgive ourselves? We can't change our past, only learn from it. My point is whenever all this millennial time begins, it won't be a time for sorrow over the past. It's forgiven so we can enjoy that close eternal relationship with God without having to still feel sorry for what we've done in the past. I'm not saying we have a free license to sin. I'm saying if we are forgiven, accept it, move on, and make the effort to turn from sin.
 - d) OK then, Verse 19.
20. Verse 19: At that time I will deal with all who oppressed you; I will rescue the lame and gather those who have been scattered. I will give them praise and honor in every land where they were put to shame.
- a) Time for one more parting shot at "everyone else". If we'll have an everlasting time of joy, what about those who hurt us? What about those who suffer now due to being physically hurt at the hands of others? Zephaniah wants to reassure us that, such as issue won't be a problem. Just as all believers will be gathered close to God for eternity, so He'll eternally punish those who desired to hurt His people.
 - b) It's also saying, all my people who've had to suffer shame at the hands of nonbelievers, I'll make up for that. Eternity is a lot longer than whatever we deal with in this lifetime!

- c) If I had to describe Zephaniah's message in a few thoughts, it'd be that God's chosen will suffer in this lifetime, partially because we've failed to be His witness as He desires. We'll also suffer as there are dark forces who don't want us to be a witness for Him. However, a victory party is assured for those who trust in God. That's what the last half of Chapter Three is saying. Those who refuse to turn their lives over to God and worse, have harmed those who do, will suffer eternity. That's God's message to the world in a few thoughts.
 - d) It also ties well to Verse 19, which is why I mention this here.
21. Verse 20: At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home. I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes," says the LORD.
- a) You have to admit, after all the doom and gloom of the first half of this book, the last half of this chapter has been "Party time! All of us who are trusting in God's full payment of all our sins are going to win". The prize for living that way is eternity in a close relationship with God in a mutual (as in free choice) love relationship."
 - b) OK time to end on a weird note: I've always pondered how do a lot of people get close to God all at the same time? That's why I'm positive we're going to exist in more than three dimensions eternally. Just as Jesus could enter a locked room in His resurrected body, so we'll have more than three dimensions so we can be everywhere at the same time. It's the idea that location and space will be a non-factor. Do I understand how it works? No I am just accepting the fact that the eternal world we will live in, will still be suitable for human life in that eternal form but we'll exist in ways we can't fully explain in this lifetime.
 - c) Enough of that. The point is God promises He will gather all believers close to Him as He will restore "your fortunes" before your very eyes. OK, what if we're poor now? What is this fortune? I don't think it is material. I think it's about the honor of being able to draw close to God without any fear of any consequences. Am I positive that's what Zephaniah means by restoring of fortune? No. Maybe it refers to the fact God's people will eternally inherit that land with Him ruling over it. Either way, it's good news for those who trust in Jesus' full payment for our eternal salvation.
 - d) Speaking of good news, time to close in prayer.
22. Let's pray: Heavenly Father, first, we thank You that You've forgiven us of all our sins, even the one's we'll commit in the future. Help us to forgive ourselves and turn from those sins as living that way is not pleasing to You. Help us to use the most valuable thing You've given us, "our time" back to You as to somehow use it for Your glory. Make it obvious to us exactly what it is that You desire of us today. Help us to trust in You and Your power to use our lives for what is Your will today. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen