

A PATRISTIC COMMENTARY

*THE BOOK
OF*

ZEPHANIAH

FR. TADROS Y. MALATY

Translated by

DR. GEORGE BOTROS

English Text revised by
Nagui Abd-El-Sayed
Dr. Nora El-Agamy

COPTIC ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN CENTER

Orange - California

A CALL TO THE HOLY LIFE

God in His love for mankind, is preoccupied with every man, as well as with humanity as a whole; wishing to set out of it, an icon of His holy love; qualified for the fellowship in the eternal glories, and for the enjoyment of the incessant heavenly joy.

This icon would not be realized in us, unless we enjoy the holy life, whose way is repentance; namely, the return to the Holy One.

This is the goal of the whole Holy Book; the goal of the divine salvation; and the goal of this book; where God is transfigured as being the jealous holy God; who only chastens to sanctify; in order that man would not mix between his fellowship with God, and his fellowship with evil; which is unacceptable by the Holy One.

God rejoices over the collective repentance. The way He stretches His hands to embrace the whole world as one holy bride; He desires, likewise, to see the believer open his heart to accommodate all his fellow brethren, and the whole humanity, to enjoy the new life in the Lord.

God's pleasure is, for all nations to be transformed into a pure lip that praises together in one spirit, rejoicing over her Savior God in a perpetual joy, in true freedom.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH

ZEPHANIAH

A Hebrew name meaning '**Jehovah covers, hides, or protects**', was probably on his mind, when he wrote: "*Seek humility, It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the Lord's anger*" (Zephaniah 2: 3); namely 'In the day of the fear of God'.

He started his prophetic work at the beginning of the reign of 'Josiah the son of Amon' king of Judah. He himself has been of the tribe of Judah. He was a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah, at the beginning of his ministry; and with whom he conformed in his goal and way of writing. He had an important role in the reform movement that was carried out by king Josiah.

Of Zephaniah's life, we only know the information that came in this book. Because he referred himself to king Hezekiah, it is assumed that he was a descendant of that good king. He was born in an unknown location in Judah.

The circumstances around this book:

King Hezekiah had three sons who successively succeeded him (2 Kings 20-21); two of whom were evil and idolaters; during whose reign, idolatry, abominations of every kind, corruption, and social oppression, prevailed on all levels in Israel, where the rich horribly abused the poor. After them came the good king Josiah, who ascended the throne when he was 16 years of age, and began a movement of reform that made him one of the most beloved of the kings of Judah.

During that reform period the people were divided into more than one category:

The greatest majority, although going along with the movement of reform; yet they cared for the outer appearances more than the reform of their souls, their inner life, and their behavior. Those were described by the prophet Jeremiah in the early chapters of his book, as having been only preoccupied with the mere presence of the temple in their midst, with no care for the actual dwelling of the Lord among His people.

A very few remnant, faithful in reforming their life, in holding fast to the word of God, and in seeking His glory. This remnant was the object of ridicule of the majority.

Date of writing this book:

It is obvious that prophet Zephaniah started his ministry before the fall of Nineveh and the appearance of the state of Babylon. Because the reform movement of king Josiah has not yet begun, in which Zephaniah played an important role, Some scholars believe that his prophetic ministry, 50 years after that of prophet Nahum, most probably began around the year 640 to 625 BC; and that he wrote this book at the end of that period.

The key of this book:

"The Lord your God is in your midst, The mighty One will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness; He will renew you in His love; He will rejoice over you with singing" (Zephaniah 3: 17)

Its features:

1- Its goal is to incite to '**repentance as a way to salvation**'; to rebuke the leaders and the people on all levels, and to proclaim the approach of affliction; namely the fall of Judah into captivity by the Babylonians (the Chaldeans). But most probably he died before the devastation of Jerusalem, which he prophesied.

2- The book begins with a proclamation of afflictions, and ends with praise; the same way followed by the majority of prophets, who began their books by warning confirming the coming chastisements of God; Then ended them by opening the door of hope, especially through the proclamation of the coming of the Messiah. This book represents a magnificently sweet musical symphony of divine love, starting in sadness, by proclaiming God's serious love; then ending it with rejoices. It is one of the sweetest joyful praises in the Old Testament.

3- This book bears an ecumenical tendency: If the kingdom of Judah would fall under a swift chastisement, following a long suffering by God, that extended along the generations; The Gentiles, would likewise fall under judgment, because of their evil toward God and against His people. But the book ends with the proclamation that the new Jerusalem that will embrace all the peoples, to become an ecumenical people of God. This book is a call to all humanity to wake up to enjoy a fellowship with God, and an exalted new life.

4- It is obvious that the book introduces many talks; some of which, at the end of his life, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the prophet collected in this book.

5- Like many other prophetic books, At its end, it carries, in a joyful evangelic language, and in an easy, simple, direct, and a very understandable way, a good tiding to the Gentiles, that they will eventually realize and enjoy the divine truth.

6- Having been of the royal seed, he was aware of the sins and iniquities that came over the royal court, of; and was in a position that gave him the right to speak openly to them about their transgressions.

7- The word “day” came seven times in this book. If preceded by a certain number, it would mostly either mean 24 hours or a whole year. Whereas, if not, it would mean a particular event; like for instance, the day of a certain ruler, would mean the celebration of his whole life. Saying “the day of the Lord”, means (the work of the Lord); either ‘His coming for chastisement’; ‘His day of judgment’; or ‘His day of salvation’.

The divisions of this book:

1- The great day of the Lord Chapter 1

2- The judgment of the nations Chapter 2

3- The rejoicing Jerusalem Chapter 3

These three chapters represent the foundation of the fellowship with the Holy One; namely “Faith; hope; and love”. In the first chapter, in faith, we gain the forgiveness of sins; believing in God the loving and the just. In His strong compassion, He is firm for the sake of our edification and of our fellowship with Him. In the second chapter, He proclaims the opening of the door of hope before all the nations and peoples; bringing us over from chastisement, for the sake of sanctifying us, to His spacious heart, that anticipates the salvation of the world. And finally in the third chapter, divine love transforms our hearts into the rejoicing Jerusalem, a holy heaven, the object of pleasure to God. He sets the Kingdom of Heaven in us; rejoicing over us bearing His name, and enjoying His joyful divine work.

Chapter 1: The great day of the Lord (Chastisement):

This is considered by some scholars as the traditional book to proclaim God’s judgment of the nations in the Old Testament.

God in His fiery jealousy (18), would not stand to see man attached to evil “*I will utterly consume all things from the face of the land*” (2). He would not stand even the irrational creation, which He created for the sake of man.

He will consume all things from the face of the land. In case you become heaven, He would not consume anything in you, but would dwell inside you, together with His angels. Whereas if you become land, you would lose yourself (the man); your body (the beast), your mind (the birds), and your talents (the fish) (3).

God confirms that the day of chastisement is very near (7,14).

God does not stand the mixing between His priests and those of the Baal.

The Holy One wishes for the holiness of His people; He refuses even the unholy foreign apparel (7, 8).

Zephaniah prophesies about the captivation of Judah by the Chaldeans (15).

Chapter 2: The judgment of the nations; Or the repentance as the way to salvation:

The second chapter came shining with more splendor; moving from chastisement to hope in the mercies of God through the collective repentance “*Seek the Lord, all you meek of the earth*” (2: 3).

God rejoices over the collective repentance: “*Gather yourself together, yes, gather together, O undesirable nation*” (2: 1). Yet, every member should present his repentance as a personal relationship that touches his own depths with God.

This collective repentance embraces the shepherds together with their flocks. All are in need of repentance; and every one of them supports the other.

The believer also needs a comprehensive repentance, touching both his inner soul, and his body, in order to be completely holy.

Positively repentance is a transformation toward God; We seek the Lord, in His righteousness, and His humility, to dwell in us, and to grant us His features.

The main obstacle on the way of repentance, is slothfulness, and the lack of feeling of the need for God; when the soul of man turns into “*a place for beasts to lie down*” (15).; namely, in it, every beastly and lusty thought, would encounter.

The rejoicing Jerusalem; Or the return of the Gentiles to the Lord; Chapter 3:

Chapter 3 presents the most magnificent portrait of hope in the whole world: to Israel, together with the whole humanity; when all enjoy the mercies of God and His amazing salvation.

While rebuking His people, God presents repentance as the way for their salvation; opening the door of hope to the whole humanity through the Savior Messiah: “*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*” (9, 10).

What does it mean “*to serve Him with one accord*”, but for all together to bear the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, (as though on one shoulder).

What is the offering presented by the peoples (10), but the one sacrifice of our Lord Christ?!

His prophecy ends with joy: “*Sing O daughter of Zion... The Lord God is in your midst; the mighty One will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness*” (14, 17).

As the church bears the name of her Groom, and as her life becomes a praise of joy, He says: “*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” (20).

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH

(Introduction)

RESTORE ME TO YOU: TO BECOME A PRAISE FOR YOU

+ I behold Your arms stretched for me, a sinner!
I return to You, to carry me in Your bosom.
To sanctify me by Your grace, O the only holy One
I will return to You in my secret place.
I will repent, confessing my sins and the sins of my brethren.
I will encounter You secretly as an amazing Groom.
I will encounter You together with my brethren, O Lover of all humanity.

+ I believe that You are the Forgiver of sins.
Who does not reject any soul that comes to You.
But will cleanse her with Your blood, will purify and sanctify her.
And will cut off every evil in her.
As You refuse any fellowship with evil and corruption.

+ The doors of hope in You are open;
Who can close them before my face?
To enter with faith, filled with hope, joy, and rejoice.

+ With Your love, Set in me Your heavenly Jerusalem
Dwell, O mighty Groom, in my depths.
Transform my life into an incessant wedding.
Present me with the pledge, as a heavenly grant;
So as to rejoice together with my brethren;
To praise together with them with one language;
By You, all of us will become a unique symphony of love.

CHAPTER 1

THE GREAT DAY OF THE LORD

The majority of Jews assumed that God would never allow for the captivation of Judah, as it happened to Israel; because Judah embraces Jerusalem, the city of God, and His temple, the house of God. By this they, in a way, have mixed between the worship of God and idolatry. Even with the reform movement of Josiah, the majority was satisfied with the outer formal reform, without the spiritual reform of the heart. That is why the prophecy of Zephaniah came to confirm the coming of the great day of the Lord, in which He will chasten Judah; and Jerusalem will fall under captivity, and be devastated.

An Introduction 1

The desolation of Judah 2 - 6

The day of the Lord is at hand 7 – 13

The great day of the Lord 14 – 18

AN INTRODUCTION:

“The word of the Lord which came to Zephaniah the son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah” (Zephaniah 1: 1)

The introduction of the book came to confirm that what Zephaniah states, are not his own words, but are the words of the Lord, proclaimed to him from heaven.

It presents to us the family tree of Zephaniah, back to four generations that end in king Hezekiah, also mentioned in 2 Kings 18: 1.

Josiah started his reform movement during the twelfth year of his reign; So, if the prophet Zephaniah started his prophecy with the beginning of the reign of Josiah, There would be no doubt that he had an important role in that reform movement.

We should not marvel at the prophet’s insistence on mentioning ‘Amon’, the idolater, from whose seed Josiah came, he who took it on himself to carry out religious and spiritual reform.. On one aspect, he intends to confirm the danger of evil. Despite all the effort done by Josiah, Yet the people were as though suffering from a personal ailment; as corruption has prevailed among them because of Amon. On another aspect, he intended to open the door of hope before us. If the father was hopelessly corrupt, Yet, his young son challenged the corruption of his father, and set forth to work with a spirit of power. And as proclaimed by the Lord Himself, on the tongue of the prophet Ezekiel, concerning the responsibility of every man for his own behavior, disregarding the worthiness of his father: *“Behold, all the souls are Mine; The soul of the father, as well as the soul of the son is Mine, The soul who sins shall die”* (Ezekiel 18: 4); And: *“If however, he begets a son, who sees all the sins which his father has done, And considers but not do likewise, ... He shall not die for the iniquity of his father, He shall surely live”* (Ezekiel 18: 14, 17).

+The soul that does not dwell in God, is the source of its evils, to sin; And this soul will die.

(St. Ambrose)

THE DESOLATION OF JUDAH:

“ I shall utterly consume all things from the face of the land”, says the Lord” (Zephaniah 1: 2)

God has created the earth for man to enjoy, as His ambassador and the agent of heaven; for the earth to be an icon of heaven. But, with the corruption of man, God would consume this earth from existence. Sin has corrupted man, as well as the land on which he lives. The heavenly Word of God, then came down to our earth to set out of our hearts a second heaven, worthy by His grace, for His living in it. If we persist on staying as earth and dust, we would not be worthy of existence; But of hearing the divine voice, saying: *“I will utterly consume all things from the face of the earth”* (1).

Whereas if we become heaven, to live together with the apostle Paul in the heavenly places, we shall not be consumed, but will eternally enjoy the divine bosom.

With man's persistence on staying earthly, he would drink from the golden cup of the bitterness of sin, get drunk, and lose his balance, and even his whole life. That is why, it is fitting for us to ask God to consume everything earthly in our hearts.

+ *"Babylon is a golden cup in the hand of the Lord; from which the whole earth will drink"*
... If you wish to know how

the whole earth will become drunk by drinking from the cup of Babylon; Just look at the sinners who fill the whole earth. You may probably say that the righteous did not drink from the cup of the sinners; So how does the Holy Book say that the whole earth gets drunk from the cup of Babylon? Don't assume that the Book is not telling the truth when it says so; As the righteous are not earth (dust); So it is only the whole earth ; namely, only the sinners who will get drunk. The righteous; although they exist on earth, Yet their dwelling place is actually in heaven (Philippians 3: 20). It is not fitting, therefore, to say to the righteous: "You are dust (earth), and to dust you will return"; But the Lord will certainly say to him, who *"bears the image of the heavenly man"* (1 Corinthians 15: 49): *"You are heaven, and to heaven you shall return"*. Therefore, it is only those who are still earth, who will get drunk from the cup of Babylon.

Origen

"I will consume man and beast; I will consume the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, and the stumbling blocks along with wicked. I will cut off man from the face of the earth", says the Lord (Zephaniah 1: 2)

Man and beast, will be consumed, either by captivation or by perdition; And the air, as well as the water will be so polluted, for the birds of the air and the fish of the sea to be consumed.

The Lord portrays the utter desolation that will befall on humanity that denies its Creator; saying that both man and beast will be consumed. If man refers to the rational soul of man; and the beast to his carnal flesh; Sin would destroy man's whole life; and would let him lose his rational nature, as well as his physical body; when he assumes that his happiness is in bodily lusts.

"He consumes the birds of the air and the fish of the sea". If man assumes that he can fly, as though to heaven; or can go down with the fish into the depths of the sea; He would never be able to hide from the eyes of God; nor to escape His divine chastisement. And as the Psalmist says: *"Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there, If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there..."* (Psalm 139: 7, 8). So it is fitting for him to flee, not from God, but to God!

+ Where can the slave of sin flee? He is carrying his mistress; namely sin, wherever he goes.

The wicked conscience cannot flee from itself; There is nowhere to go!

Yes, man cannot withdraw from himself; as the sin he commits is well inside him. He may commit sin in order to get some bodily pleasure; Yet pleasure will eventually go away, but sin will remain. What brings him pleasure will pass over, leaving a thorn behind. What a wicked servitude!

Let us then, all flee to Christ; and rebel against sin to God, being our Savior.

+ Man searches for a place to flee from the wrath of God! Where can he find such a place?!
... Where is the place where God is not?! ... Who can deceive God?! ... Who can hide from His eyes?!

+ Let us flee in hope and longing, by the double wings of love (Love of God and that of the neighbor). We shall never find comfort, except in the depths of that sea of love ... Let us flee to God in hope; ... Let us in hope filled with faith, contemplate on the end of the sea.

(St. Augustine)

"I will stretch out my hand against Judah, and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. I will cut off every trace of Baal from this place. The names of the idolatrous priests (the 'Camarim' according to

another version) – those who worship the host of heaven on the roofs; those who worship and swear oaths by the Lord, but who also swear by Milcom" (Zephaniah 1: 4)

If some people assume that God will never allow for the desolation of Judah, because of the presence of Jerusalem and the temple, The holy God proclaims that He is not preoccupied with Jerusalem or the temple, as a building, but with the holiness He desires for all men. If they lose their holy life, He intends to consume the whole earth, with everything on it; which He created for the sake of man.

Stretching His hand to chasten Judah in general; God will chasten Jerusalem in particular – as the city of God that embraces His holy temple; because it allowed mixing the worship of God with idolatry. He proclaims that He will cut off the name of Baal and his worship from the face of the earth, together with the idolatrous priests (2 Kings 23: 5), who led the people astray; He will cut them, together with their idols; those who worship the host of heaven, and those who swear by Milcom.

The **Baal**, is the Phoenician god, into whose worship Israel fell since the days of the judges (Judges 2: 13). King Manasseh made and set a wooden image for Baal in the temple itself (2 Kings 21: 3, 5, 7).

‘The **Camarin**’: A Hebrew name derived from a word meaning (black); because the priests used to wear black attire, and to put black signs on their foreheads. Some believe that the priests of Milcom were called (the black men) because their faces were smeared by the black smoke that came out of the altar on which they used to burn human sacrifices, including those of their children. The word ‘Camarim’ also meant ‘zealous’, because of their zeal for spreading idolatry.

“Those who worship the host of heaven on rooftops; those who worship and swear oaths by the Lord, but who also swear by Milcom” (Zephaniah 1: 5)

God refuses mixing between what is for Him and what is for the devil; and fellowship between light and darkness. When a part of the heart is delivered to the devil, he will take it all over; and if another part of it is left for God, He will firmly refuse it and forsakes it. God in His love, would never force Himself on man’s heart, unless it is completely delivered to Him to set in it His Kingdom.

Some used to mix between the worship of the living God and that of the idols; and to add to their oath by the living God, the name of one of the pagan gods. The worship of the sun, the moon, or one of the stars, was very common as the oldest of idol-worships.

“Those who have turned back from following the Lord, And have not sought the Lord, nor inquired of Him” (Zephaniah 1: 6)

The people were divided into two groups: one who responded to Josiah’s call for repentance; albeit for a certain time, Then turned back from following the Lord to practice idolatry – those who have put their hands on the plow, then looked backwards – And a second group who did not respond to the king’s call; and were not preoccupied with the Lord altogether.

The book here concentrates on three main sins:

Idol-worship (4-5)

Faltering between two opinions: Sometimes swearing by the name of the living God, and other times by Milcom (5).

Giving their back to God (6)

THE DAY OF THE LORD IS AT HAND:

“Be silent in the presence of the Lord God, For the day of the Lord is at hand, For the Lord has prepared a sacrifice, He has invited His guests” (Zephaniah 1: 7)

In response to the mocking words of many who commented on the prophet’s threats about the devastation of Jerusalem, saying that generations after generations have passed, and nothing happened of what the prophets said; and that their threats will never materialize!; Zephaniah says: *“The day of the Lord is at hand”* (7).

The present days are ‘the days of men’, in which they do whatever they chose to do; Whereas the last day, when God proclaims His eternal kingdom, and gathers the true believers to Himself, is the ‘**day of the Lord**’, the ‘day of chastisement’ in which He brings everyone into account. This day is at hand; and will come at the Lord’s discretion. The ‘Sabbath’, the weekly day

of worship, is also considered the 'day of the Lord', to become the secret of blessing for the whole week.

God allowed the Babylonians to defeat Judah, and to kill and slay many Jews; whom they considered as sacrifices offered, mercilessly and joyfully, to their gods.

The word of the Lord came to portray that, saying: *"For this is the day of the Lord God of hosts, a day of vengeance, That He may avenge Himself on His adversaries, The sword shall devour; It shall be satiated, and made drunk with their blood; For the Lord God of hosts has a sacrifice in the north country by the River Euphrates"* (Jeremiah 46: 10). And: *"And as for you, son of man, thus says the Lord God: 'Speak to every sort of bird, and to every beast of the field: Assemble yourselves and come; Gather together from all sides to My sacrificial meal, which I am sacrificing for you, A great sacrificial meal on the mountains of Israel, that you may eat flesh and drink blood. You shall eat the flesh of the mighty, drink the blood of the princes of the earth"* (Ezekiel 39: 17, 18).

"And it shall be, In the day of the Lord's sacrifice, that I will punish the princes and the king's children, and all such as are clothed with foreign apparel" (Zephaniah 1: 8)

Chastening the people, the Lord starts with the sinful princes, the king's children, the rulers and leaders of Judah; whom He allowed to be slain by Nebuchadnezzar; Those who were expected to be role models to the common masses, but became instead an offense to them. This prophecy was realized when the sons of king Zedekiah were killed before his eyes (Jeremiah 39: 6)

Saying: *"All such as are clothed with foreign apparel"*; refers to the princes and members of the royal court, who used to show off by putting on very expensive foreign apparel, probably during idol-worshipping; by which they were considered as partaking of those practices. Others believe that those foreign apparels, were of the transsexual types, when men wear women clothes and vice versa; which was banned by the law (Deuteronomy 22: 5).

"In the same day I will punish all those who leap over the threshold; Who fill their masters houses with violence and deceit" (Zephaniah 1: 9)

"Those who leap over the threshold"; is an expression that probably refers to man taking by violence and deceit, what belongs to his neighbor; or to those who, like hunting dogs, seek the favor of members of the royal court, by taking what belong to others on their behalf.

Some believe that it also refers to the Philistines who took away the ark of God and brought it over to the temple of Dagon in Ashdod, where they set it by Dagon; And when they found Dagon fallen on its face to the earth before the ark of the Lord, with its head and both the palms of its hands broken off on the threshold; the priests of Dagon, and those who came into its temple, used to leap over the threshold, so as not to tread on it with their feet (1 Samuel 5: 1-5). Whereas St. Jerome believes that it refers to those who used to ascend the steps of the Lord's temple with pride and haughtiness.

"'And there shall be on that day', says the Lord, 'The sound of a mournful cry from the Fish Gate, A wailing from the second Quarter, And a loud crashing from the hills'" (Zephaniah 1: 10)

The Fish Gate: Referred to in the book of Nehemiah (3; 3); opposite 'Joppa'; and probably the same gate through which the news came of the approach of the Chaldean army, crashing from the hills. It was so called because it was close to the fish market; and through it, the fishermen from lake Teberieh and the River Jordan used to come.

As the sound of a mournful cry came from the Fish Gate, there was a reaction in the second Quarter; namely, the lower part of the city, where people wailed on hearing those cries that echoed from one gate to another of the city wall.

"Wail, you inhabitants of Macktesh, For all the merchant people are cut down; All those who handle money are cut off" (Zephaniah 1: 11)

Maktech was a lower and deep mortar-shaped section of the city, inhabited by the rich merchants and business people; But they were ruined, and completely cut off; No more silver bearer or a merchant came in to do business; All became grounded like grains in a mortar. That situation,

in the book of Ezekiel, was also likened to a pot in which good pieces of meat: the thigh, the shoulder, and the choice bones, were put to boil and summer (Ezekiel 24: 3-5).

Some believe that he does not refer here to a specific location in Jerusalem, but to the city as a whole; where the people are struck and crushed to death, like grains in a mortar.

Maktech or Mortar, is a name that applies to the hollow-shaped valley of Siloam, between Zion and Mount Olivet, on the far eastern side of Mount Moriah, probably close to the fish market, inhabited by merchants

“And it shall come to pass at that time that I shall search Jerusalem with lamps, and punish the men who settled in complacency, who say in their heart, ‘The Lord will not do good, nor will he do evil’” (Zephaniah 1: 12)

Seeing the righteous in affliction, while the wicked enjoys success and prosperity, many may wonder, saying: ‘Where is the divine justice?! Where is the reward for the righteous, and the punishment for the wicked?! Where is God’s care for mankind?!’

Here God is portrayed holding a lamp, searching the dark and hidden corners of Jerusalem, so that no evil man would escape from the divine chastisement. He is not searching Jerusalem for the lost coin (Luke 15: 8-10); having already presented many chances to the sinners to return to Him. Here He uses the lamp to separate the wicked who persist on disregarding the threats of God to chasten them.

God, not only punishes those drunkards with the wine of the world’s love; but even those who drink the precipitate that remains at the bottom of the wine bottles; those who fall into practical atheism; through, not denying the existence of God, but denying His care for the world and mankind; as though man is of no real value in His sight.

In this chapter, God is portrayed as though in the midst of Judah, the worshipper of idols, to judge and chasten it; Whereas in the final chapter of the book, He proclaims His dwelling among mankind as a whole, to let them rejoice over Him, as He does over them; being the object of His pleasure.

+ The Lord Jesus, wishing to be among the Jews, came to the temple in Jerusalem in daylight, and stayed there looking around at all things. But as the hour was already late, with darkness (ignorance) falling on the temple, He evaluated everything around Him as though with a lamp (12), and found no place of comfort for His head; *“He went out to Bethany with the twelve”* (Mark 11: 11).

When the Savior, as well as the apostles searched the temple and found nothing, they left it!
(St. Jerome)

+ Those with little faith and knowledge, often wonder why the reward for the saints is not given them during their short life in this world, and not in the coming one!

But as far as we are concerned, we have put our hope in Christ, and not in this world; lest we become as the apostle say *“the most pitiable of all men”* (1 Corinthians 15; 19).

God will not keep temptations away from the righteous; and will not reward them; nor will punish the wicked in this

world. If we say otherwise, we would be punished along with those, about whom the prophet Zephaniah says: *“those who say in their heart, ‘The Lord will not do good, nor He will do evil’”* (12). Or we would be counted among those who blaspheme the lord, saying: *“‘Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, And He delights in them’; Or saying: ‘Where is the God of justice?’”* (Malachi 2: 17). Or saying: *“It is vain to serve God; What profit is it that we have kept His ordinance, and that we have walked as mourners before the Lord of hosts? So now we count the arrogant blessed, For those who do wickedness are raised up; Yes, those who tempt God go free”* (Malachi 3: 14, 15).

(Father Theodore)

“Therefore their goods shall become booty, and their houses a desolation; They shall build houses, but not inhabit them; They shall plant vineyards, but not drink their wine” (Zephaniah 1: 13)

If God in His longsuffering, does not hasten to punish the evildoers, anticipating their repentance through His compassion, Yet, if they do not return to Him, they will drink from the cup they have filled.

The enemy will take everything away from them: their wealth, the houses they built, and the vineyards they planted; realizing the prophecy that came in the book of Deuteronomy (28; 30, 39) about him who does not listen to the voice of God: *“You shall betroth a wife, but another man shall lie with her; You shall build a house, but you shall not dwell in it; You shall plant vineyards and tend them, but you shall neither drink of the wine nor gather the grapes; for the worms shall eat them”*

Quoting this statement, as well as others in the Holy Book, St Jerome demonstrates that nothing in this world will ever satisfy the depths of man, saying: [We should not seek the lusts of wealth and possessions; for, according to the wise Solomon: *“He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver”* (Ecclesiastes 5: 10); and *“The people will curse him who withholds grain; but blessing will be on the head of him who sells it”* (Proverb 11: 26). In Isaiah it came: *“Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field, till there is no place where they may dwell alone in the midst of the land”* (Isaiah 5: 8). And in Zephaniah: *“They will build houses, but they will not inhabit them; They shall plant vineyards, but not drink their wine. The great day of the Lord is near”* (Zephaniah 1: 13, 14). And in the gospel according to St. Luke: *“For what advantage is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost”* (Luke 9: 25).

+ Concerning that day, prophet Amos says: *“Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! For what good is the day of the Lord to you? It will be darkness and not light”* (Amos 5; 18). And prophet Zephaniah says: *“The noise of the day of the Lord is bitter; The day is a day of wrath”* (Zephaniah 1: 14, 15). That is why the repentant zealously asks in his prayer, not to be judged on that day for his deeds. What would be of more benefit for him, he who has little hope for becoming worthy because of his iniquities, than to pray for the fatherly love of God, while he is still in this world, where there is still a chance for repentance?

(Cassiodorus)

+ There is a kind of light that can be sensed, that which came, according to Moses, on the fourth day of creation; Yet it is not the true light; as it is only giving light to things on this earth. The Savior, on the other hand, is the spiritual light of the world, shining on the rational and the thoughtful, for their minds to see fitting visions. I mean that light of the rational souls in the sensed world, of which we are told by the Savior, who created it.... It is the sun of the great day of the Lord.

Origen

THE GREAT DAY OF THE LORD:

“The great day of the Lord is near; It is near and hastening fast.. The sound of the day of the Lord is bitter. There, the mighty men shall cry out” (Zephaniah 1: 14)

Here the prophet presents a warning to Judah and Jerusalem, about the destruction that will occur on the hands of the Babylonians. Yet it is not the day of the Babylonians, but it is *“The great day of the Lord”*. As this destruction is actually allowed by the Lord to chasten them.

The prophet confirms that, because the day of chastisement is near and hastening fast; there is no time for slothfulness or postponing. Here, while prophesying the day, when Judah will fall into captivity, as the great day of the Lord; he is also prophesying the great Day of Judgment, when all mankind will stand before the Lord.

They are very concise and repetitive cries ; because the danger is very eminent; the time is very short; and there is no place for argument. It is like someone seeing his family in a house on fire; crying out and calling everyone to hasten to escape through the nearest exit, or to jump from the nearest window. And as it is said by prophet Amos: *“The Lord roars from Zion, and utters His voice from Jerusalem; The pastures of the shepherds mourn, and the top of the Carmel withers”* (Amos 1: 2).

That day started by the death of the good king Josiah, who was killed by the Pharaoh Necho in the battle of Megiddo; And was consummated by the desolation of Jerusalem on the hand of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.

While the gold and silver of the world will not save us in the great day of the Lord; The wealth of the believer is the divine commandment; Whoever keeps it, will be kept by it from the divine wrath. The commandment is a treasure we acquire through the work of the divine grace; by carrying the righteousness of Christ.

“The day is a day of wrath, A day of trouble and distress; A day of devastation and desolation; A day of darkness and gloominess; A day of clouds and thick darkness” (Zephaniah 1: 15)

The great day of the lord is a joyful wedding day for the believers who were prepared for it through the exalted riches of God’s grace; And a day of wrath, trouble, distress, devastation, desolation, darkness, and gloominess, for those who were not ready for it, by having the living faith, working with love.

The human languages are not helping the prophet to portray the extent of desolation that would come over Judah. It is an extremely horrible portray of the divine wrath, when everyone finds himself as though in an utter darkness, with no insight to find a way for salvation, nor to offer a useful counsel. It is a day of dense clouds and thick darkness, which no one can oppose or confront.

“A day of trumpet and alarm against the fortified cities and against the high towers” (Zephaniah 1: 16)

What stronghold or fortified city can ever confront the wrath of God; When those who assume to be secure in them, come to hear the sound of war trumpets and the cries of the mighty warriors, When their strength and spirit collapse.

“I will bring distress upon men, And they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the Lord. Their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like refuse” (Zephaniah 1: 17)

The evildoers in the great day of the Lord, who walk in evil, oppose the truth, and not listen to the voice and the commandment of the Lord, will be like blind men, unable to enjoy the splendor of the glory of God; Always in doubt and in danger, they will vainly seek a way of escape They will see God as a mighty Judge; and not as a heavenly Groom who grants His people the fellowship of glory with Him.

All they can see and perceive is the sword striking them, their blood pouring, and their bodies falling beneath the feet of the enemy; There is one to heal a wound, or to haul a corpse from the dust.

“Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the Lord’s wrath; But the whole land shall be devoured by the fire of His jealousy, For He will make speedy riddance of all those who dwell in the land” (Zephaniah 1: 18)

Having kindled the fire of divine jealousy by their rebellion, abominations and opposition against God, desolation will come over all the earth. There will be no place for anyone to hide or to escape. Here silver or gold that they have unjustly acquired, will not be able to protect them; as according to the words of Solomon: *“Riches do not profit in the day of wrath; But righteousness delivers from death”* (Proverbs 11: 4).

+ I wonder how those who foolishly carry such heavy loads of jewelry, do not worry about death!... The rich man filling his storehouses says to himself: *“You have many goods laid up for many years, take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry’*. But to hear God’s voice saying to him: *“You fool, This night, your soul will be required of you; Then whose will those things be which you have provided?”* (Luke 12: 19, 20). It is fitting for the women who minister to Christ, to adorn themselves, not with gold, but with the Word, through which, alone, the glitter of gold will shine.

(St. Clement of Alexandria)

+ Let us demonstrate the perfection of obedience, inspired in us through our anticipation of His coming. I wish we persistently strive and watch with our whole hearts up to the end. I wish we

keep the commandment of the Lord; that, on the great day of the Lord, the day of wrath and vengeance, we would not be punished together with the sinners and evildoers; but would be honored together with the righteous and those who fear the Lord.

(Cyprian, the martyr)

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH''

(Chapter 1)

LET YOUR GREAT DAY COME

- + I often wonder: when will the great day of the Lord come?
The wicked assumes that all the days are his, and acts accordingly!
Whereas the righteous moans, anticipating the coming of Your great day.

- + You promised that You are coming soon;
To chasten me by Your mercies; before You come on the clouds.
I can't flee from You; But flee to You.
You are my refuge in whom I resort, so that the wrath would not befall on me.
If I ascend to heaven, You are there;
And If I go down to the abyss, there, I will find You!
I flee to You, O heavenly Father;
Take away from me everything earthly by Your fiery Spirit;
To become for You a second heaven, toward which destruction cannot approach.

- + Let Your great day come now!
As I know that You will destroy every evil thing in me;
And will cover me with Your righteousness and holiness.

- + I anticipate the coming of Your ultimate great day.
I behold You as the splendid Groom, and not as the fearsome Judge.
I behold Your eyes as two doves; Whereas the evildoers see them as flaring fire.
The day of Your coming is a day of light and splendor.
And not a day of darkness and gloom;
Your coming is the perpetual desire of my heart;
And not a day of wrath, distress, devastation, and desolation;
Come on the clouds;
Carry me with You; To enter with You into the bosom of God the Father.

CHAPTER 2

THE JUDGMENT OF THE NATIONS

In the first chapter, the Lord confirms that He firmly chastens His people, because He does not accept any fellowship with evil. Yet, though He used Assyria, then Babylon to chasten His people “Israel and Judah”, yet if those nations gloat, or bear a spirit of hatred against them, He will also judge them.

Presenting a horrible description of the judgment of those nations, the prophet does not mean for mankind to fall into despair, but to be drawn to God, the source of their life, peace, and happiness. He calls on them to re-evaluate their life, goals, and intentions; and to get terrified, not from God, but from sin.

In His judgment of the nations, chastening them firmly for their gloating against his people, fallen under chastisement, God seems as though He is their enemy. Yet in the light of the book as a whole; when He proclaims His rejoice over the return of the nations to God, It will be clear that God is not their enemy, but an enemy against their attitude; That He is not avenging against them, but avenging against the evil that possessed them.

- 1- Calling on His people to seek righteousness1 – 3
- 2- Judgment of Palestine4 – 7
- 3- Judgment of Moab and Ammon8 – 11
- 4- Judgment of Cush12
- 5- Judgment of Assyria13 – 15

CALLING ON HIS PEOPLE TO SEEK RIGHTEOUSNESS:

Before starting to judge the nations gloating against His people, fallen under chastisement, God requests from His people to repent, and seek righteousness and humility, in order that He will cover them, and restore their glory. He would not judge those who gloat against His people, unless the later present a true repentance.

“Gather together, yes, gather, O shameless nation” (Zephaniah 2: 1)

He calls on this nation, that counted herself as the people of God, privileged above all the other nations and peoples, to re-evaluate her position. He calls them, ‘a shameless nation’; namely, one that have nothing to justify her before Him. He calls on her to gather together; As one of the serious fruits of sin, is the loss of a common goal; as it has been in the dark period of the judges: *“In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes”* (Judges 21: 25).

Sin makes man like chaff that has no place to settle down; and scatters the whole society like a storm. Whereas the work of true repentance, is to bring man down to his depths, to look, by the spirit of truth, into his heart, mind, feelings, intentions, and will; and to be attached to God, through connecting to his brethren by the spirit of unity; and not by mere physical gathering; for all to have one spirit and one thought.

This call for gathering together, is probably meant to let everyone re-evaluate his accounts; in order to present a collective repentance, to avoid the shame, and to spare themselves falling under the divine anger, by the spirit of prayer, humility, and wish to return to Him.

“Before the decree is issued; Before the day passes like chaff; Before the day of the Lord’s fierce anger comes upon you; Before the day of the lord’s anger comes upon you” (Zephaniah 2: 2)

If His people have fallen under chastisement; Yet, He warns them, that unless they return to Him, they will fall under the divine anger, in the day of the Lord’s anger.

Sin corrupts the life of men, turning them into chaff, and not wheat, that would be scattered, as though by a storm, by any attack of an enemy. Whereas repentance would otherwise turn this chaff into wheat, that the wind would not scatter, but getting rid of chaff then they gather together.

He calls on them to jealously hasten to repent; as the Day of Judgment; namely the day of chastisement, draws very near. When that day dwells, the wind of divine anger will come, and the wicked will find no chance to flee; They will turn into chaff before the wind; according to the words of the Psalmist: *“The ungodly are like the chaff which the wind drives away”* (Psalm 1: 4); And as

the Lord says about the ungodly people of Ephraim: *“They shall be like the morning cloud, and like the early dew that passes away, like chaff blown off from a threshing floor, and like smoke from a chimney”* (Hosea 13: 3).

The ungodly would therefore find no place for comfort; They would neither settle down on earth, nor reach heaven; They would be like chaff that the wind scatter to every direction.

St. Augustine compares between the meek and the ungodly; About the meek, it is said: *“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth”* (Matthew 5: 5); Whereas the ungodly are like chaff which the wind drives away (Psalm 1: 4). Pride would blow up the ungodly, to become perpetually driven away from the face of the earth.

❖ The ungodly are *“the chaff which the wind drives away”* (Psalm 1: 4). The Holy Book says that a wicked man is an unhappy man; He is not even like dust, that may seem valueless, yet it actually has a kind of existence in itself ...

So is the ungodly; As he denies God, he is led by vanity, to where the breath of Satan sends him.

(St. Jerome)

❖ *“Let them be like chaff before the wind, and let the angel of the Lord chase them”* (Psalm 35: 5) ... The wind is the temptation, and the chaff (the dust) are the ungodly. The dust would not stand before the wind.

(St. Augustine)

“Seek the Lord, all you meek of the earth, Who have upheld His justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility, It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the Lord’s anger” (Zephaniah 2: 3)

In His call, He does not intend for them to invoke the spirit of terror into each other, but to gather together to seek the Lord; that He pours His grace upon them, have mercy on them, and realize His promises to them; He calls on them to gather together with the spirit of humility, as someone sick, asks the heavenly Physician to stretch His hand to heal and cure him. That is why He calls them *“All you meek of the earth”*.

He calls on the ‘meek of the earth’ to seek the Lord Himself, and to ask Him to cover them with righteousness and humility, on the day of His wrath. There is no other way to avoid the divine wrath, except by resorting to the Lord, by hiding in Him, and by enjoying righteousness and humility that covers their weaknesses, and turn them into wheat instead of chaff before the blowing wind.

This call was also proclaimed by the Lord in the book of Isaiah: *“Come My people, enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you, Hide yourself as it were, for a little moment, until the indignation is past. For the Lord, the Lord comes out of His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity”* (Isaiah 26: 20-21); And in Amos: *“For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel: ‘Seek Me and live; ... Seek the Lord and live, Lest He break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and devour it, with no one to quench it in Bethel’”* (Amos 5: 4, 6).

Some believe that the talk here is addressed to the meek and the poor who fell under oppression, because of the corruption that came over the land; and the abuse by the rich and by those in authority. But because the poor, themselves, partook of the corruption and the abominations, the prophet calls on them to return to the Lord, and to seek His mercy through repentance in humility and walking in righteousness; As the oppression that befall them would not justify them on the day of the Lord’s wrath, unless they return to Him with all their hearts.

He probably also means by the meek here, the Jews, who, although they have crucified Christ and blasphemed Him; If they recognize and seek Him by the spirit of humility, He will again embrace and keep them from the wrath that came upon them because of their denial; according to the words of the prophet Isaiah: *“Seek the Lord while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near”* (Isaiah 55: 6).

St. Cyprian sees in the call: *“Seek the Lord”*, an invitation to us to forsake everything else, and to seek the Lord, His Kingdom, and righteousness; Then all these things shall be added to us; according to the promise of the Lord Christ Himself (Matthew 6: 31-33).

- ❖ As long as there is still time, look forward to the eternal true salvation; And as the end of the world draws near, turn your minds by the fear of God to Him. Don't rejoice over your vain authority on the righteous and the meek ... But "*Seek the Lord and live*" (Amos 5: 6). Recognize the Lord, even if it seems too late ... Believe in Him, who would never deceive you ... Believe in Him, who has told about these things beforehand ... Believe in Him, who will grant the eternal life to those who believe ... Believe in Him, who, by the fire of hell, will punish those who do not believe.

(Cyprian, the martyr)

Thus, we have no refuge from the Lord's wrath, except by fleeing to Him, and hiding in Him.

- ❖ Before seeking the Lord, we were weak and burdened; But now, having our hearts settled on Him, we are strong and have courage.

(St. Jerome)

2. JUDGMENT OF PALESTINE:

"For Gaza shall be forsaken, and Ashkelon desolate: They shall drive out Ashdod at noonday, And Ekron shall be uprooted" (Zephaniah 2: 4)

The Lord will chasten the main cities of Palestine: Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, and Ekron; that took pride in their strength and prosperity. Gaza shall be forsaken like a barren wilderness; and was almost utterly destroyed by Alexander the Great; Hence its Hebrew name, "Gazubah", which hints to (non-existence).. Ekron, in Hebrew, came as "Ekron teeaker". As for Ashdod that shall be driven out at noonday; the people of the east used to sleep, and even stop military action at noon because of the hot weather (2 Samuel 4: 5).

It is to be noticed that 'Gath', the fifth famous city in Palestine, was not mentioned here, as it was not mentioned in Amos (1: 6), Jeremiah 25: 20), Zechariah (9: 5-6); because at that time, it was under Jewish authority.

What is said here about those four main cities, refers to what would befall the unrepentant man; namely, to suffer isolation; to become forsaken, desolate, where he is not dwelt by the divine righteousness, horrified, through living as a fugitive, though nobody is after him, and uprooted, having the same end of the devil himself.

This is the divine warning to every man, who chooses for himself to be an opponent against the divine truth, and to give his back to God, the Grantor of life, fulfillment, peace, and happiness. He would moan, together with Zion, which, assuming in her bitterness, that the Lord has forsaken and forgotten her (Isaiah 49: 14); says: "*There I was left alone*" (Isaiah 49: 21); And would become as is said by prophet Jeremiah: "*Every city shall be forsaken, and not a man shall dwell in it*" (Jeremiah 4: 29); And as is said by prophet Isaiah: "*Then they will look to the earth, and see trouble and darkness, gloom of anguish, and they will be driven into darkness*" (Isaiah 9: 22); And as is said by the Psalmist: "*Let their habitation be desolate; Let no one dwell in their tents*" (Psalm 69: 25); "*Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment!*" (Psalm 73: 19). And as it came in the Maccabees: "*He did away with all the renegades and outlaws*" (1 Macc 14: 14).

- ❖ "*How they are brought to desolation, as in a moment*" (Psalm 73: 19); He marvels at them, realizing what will come over them in the end. They, like smoke, will eventually vanish as it rises up ... "*They are utterly consumed ... As a dream when one awake*" (Psalm 73: 20)... Like when someone dreams that he found a treasure, to find out that he has got nothing when he gets up; So are the evildoers, they will wake up to realize the misery they have prepared for themselves.

(St. Augustine)

Evil destroys man and deprives him of every vitality, to become as though forsaken in isolation, desolate, and uprooted; God allows that, to uproot the evil in him, and to plant him anew; Namely, to renew his life and his nature, and to set His righteousness in him, by His Holy Spirit; as is said by the Psalmist: "*You drove out the nations with Your hand, But them You planted*" (Psalm 44: 2).

“Woe to the inhabitants of the seacoast, the nation of the Chrethites! The word of the Lord is against you, O Canaan of the Philistines; I will destroy you; So there shall be no inhabitant” (Zephaniah 2: 5)

By ‘the seacoast’ He means all the region on the Mediterranean Sea coast, from Egypt to Jaffa and Gaza. The Hebrew word is “Ceroth”, that gives the impression of (dug cisterns).

“The seacoast shall be pastures, with shelters for shepherds and folds for flocks” (Zephaniah 2: 6)

The seacoast that used to be as a port for ships, would turn into uninhabited pastures with shelters for shepherds and folds for flocks.

Some believes that the Chrethites here refer to a congregation of Phoenician immigrants, also mentioned in 1 Samuel 30: 14, and Amos 9: 7. In the Septuagint and the Syrian versions, it came as ‘Crete’.

“The coast shall be for the remnant of the house of Judah; They shall feed their flocks there; In the houses of Ashkelon they shall lie down at evening. For the Lord their God will intervene for them, and return their captives” (Zephaniah 2: 7)

Here he prophesies that the house of Judah shall repossess Ashkelon; and that their remnants returning from captivity shall settle down securely in the houses of Ashkelon.

Alexander the Great destroyed Askelon; And the Maccabees realized the prophecies of the prophets against it. It utterly lost her authority, and her inhabitants were forced to be circumcised; namely to turn Jewish.

3. THE JUDGMENT OF MOAB AND AMMON:

“I have heard the reproach of Moab, and the revilings of the people of Ammon, with which they have reproached My people, and made arrogant threats against their borders” (Zephaniah 2: 8)

Moab and Ammon were connected together; Each of them was an unlawful son of the fallen ‘Lot’ (Genesis 19: 33-38). Both were not considered among the people of God; denied faith in the Lord Christ, and do not enjoy the new spiritual birth.

Moab and Ammon both fell under chastisement, because they reproached the Jewish people during their chastisement, blasphemed their God, assuming that the God of Israel does not hear their reproach, and is unable to oppose them. Although He says: *“I have heard the reproach of Moab, and the revilings of Ammon”*; Yet in His longsuffering, and in order to chasten His people. He seemed as though He does not hear,

“They made arrogant threats against their borders”, and actually attacked the borders of Judah (Jeremiah 48: 29; 49:1)

“Therefore, as I live’, Says the Lord of host, the God of Israel, ‘Surely Moab shall be like Sodom, and the people of Ammon like Gomorrah – overrun with weeds and saltpits; and a perpetual desolation; The residue of My people shall plunder them; And the remnant of My people shall possess them” (Zephaniah 2: 9)

Moab and Ammon shall have the same destiny of Sodom and Gomorrah; They will be reduced to nothing; Their land will be desolate with no inhabitant; will produce weeds instead of wheat; And their springs will produce salt water.

“This they shall have for their pride, because they have reproached and made arrogant threats against the people of the Lord of hosts” (Zephaniah 2: 10)

“The Lord will be awesome to them, For He will reduce to nothing all the gods of the earth; People shall worship Him, Each one from his place; Indeed all the shores (and islands) of the nations” (Zephaniah 2: 11)

God confirms that, although there is no animosity in His heart between Him and any people; Yet the arrogant, the haughty, and the blasphemer will fall under his own pride, blaspheme, and evil. As for God, He will destroy the idols, and will set out of every nation a people for Himself; Every nation, and every man, will worship Him, each from his place. There will be no need for them to go to Jerusalem, nor to worship in the temple of Solomon.

God was preparing His old people to accept the notion; that the whole earth would become for the Lord and His Christ.

“Sing to the Lord, you kingdoms of the earth; Oh, sing praises to the Lord” (Psalm 68: 32).

“Then the Lord will be known to Egypt, and the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day, and will make sacrifice and offering; Yes, they will make a vow to the Lord and perform it” (Isaiah 19: 21)

“For from the rising of the sun, even to its going down, My name shall be great among the Gentiles; In every place incense shall be offered to My name, and a pure offering” (Malachi 1: 11)

He is demeaning the pagan gods; showing them as wild beasts, extremely emaciated because of lack of food for an extended time; because no more sacrifices nor worship are offered to them in their temples.

❖ Let us now listen to a prophet prophesying that the time will come when the worship of God will not be limited to one place; that all mankind will get to know the Lord; and that people shall worship Him, each one from his place; *“Indeed all the shores (and islands) of the nations”* (Zephaniah 2: 11 LXX); Contrary to what prophet Moses has commanded the Jews to worship the Lord in only one place.

❖ You heard how several prophets prophesied: that mankind will no longer be limited to worship God in one place; That people will no longer have to come from everywhere on earth to offer Him sacrifice in only one city; That everyone will be allowed to stay and to minister to God in his own house or land. What would be a more appropriate time than today for those prophecies to be realized?

Let us now see how the gospels and the apostle Paul echo the words of prophet Zephaniah: The prophet says: *“of all nations”*; And the apostle says: *“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men”* (Titus 2: 11). Zephaniah says: *“reduce to nothing all gods of the earth”, and Paul says: “teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age”* (Titus 2: 12).

(St. John Chrysostom)

+As one prophet proclaimed that all the nations of the earth will come to worship God in a certain place *“The Gentiles shall come to You from the ends of the earth”* (Jeremiah 16: 19); It was proclaimed by another prophet, saying: *“The Lord will be awesome to them, For He will reduce to nothing all the gods of the earth; People will worship Him, each one from his place; Indeed all the shores (and islands) of the nations”* (Zephaniah 2: 11).. All peoples will come to the exalted and true God of the Christians, not physically, but by faith.

+ They will come to Him without leaving their place; As by faith, they will find Him right in their hearts.

+For a long time, the devils have kept silent in their temples concerning the things that are to come, although it was definitely known to them through the sayings of the prophets. But now, with the approach of events, the devils intended to proclaim them, lest they may look as though ignorant or defeated; Yet they stopped short of referring to certain issues that were already proclaimed since long time, like those said by prophet Zephaniah: *“The Lord will be awesome to them, For He will reduce to nothing all the gods of the earth; People will worship Him, each one from his place; Indeed all the shores (and islands) of the nations”* (Zephaniah 2: 11). Gods, worshipped in the temples of the Gentiles, because they probably did not expect these events to apply to them; they did not wish to cause any unwarranted disturbances among their soothsayers.

(St. Augustine)

+Let us now talk about the churches as ‘Islands’. The Holy Book says in one location: *“Sing to the Lord a new song, His praise from the end of the earth; Let the sea roar and all that fills it, the coastlands (the islands) and their inhabitants”* (Isaiah 42: 10). Prophet Isaiah says in the name of the Lord, that the same way islands appear in the middle of the sea, churches will be established in the middle of the world; and will be struck by a multitude of waves of persecution. Although mighty waves will be thrown on these islands every day, yet they will never be inundated with

water... Indeed they are in the middle of the sea; Yet their foundation is Christ, who will never be shaken!

(St. Jerome)

+Despite all that, they were not yet able to reset the temple nor to repair the location where they were allowed to practice their rites according to the law. The authority of Christ, that established the church has destroyed that place. The prophet, although he proclaimed that Christ will come, Yet His coming would only be after the captivity.

(St. John Chrysostom)

4. THE JUDGMENT OF CUSH:

"You Ethiopians also You shall be slain by My sword" (Zephaniah 2: 12)

Cush (Ethiopia) was submitted by Nebuchadnezzar (Jeremiah 46: 9-10; Ezekiel 30; 4). By *"My sword"*, the Lord means 'Nebuchadnezzar', whom He used as a tool to chasten the nations.

5. THE JUDGMENT OF ASSYRIA:

"And He will stretch out His hand against the north, Destroy Assyria, and make Nineveh a desolation; as dry as the wilderness" Zephaniah 2: 13)

"The herds shall lie down in her midst, every wild animal, the desert owl and the screech shall lodge on its capitals; the owl shall hoot at the windows; the raven croak on the threshold; For the cedar work will be laid bare" (Zephaniah 2: 14)

Assyria will turn from being a great empire, feared by all the nations of the world, into a vast wilderness where every kind of animal will lie down; both the domesticated like the sheep, and the wild ones. It will turn into an open pasture, with no walls to protect it; Its only law will be perdition and death. As for birds, there will be only the owls to hoot, with their mourning voice that brings sadness and distress.

With desolation and destruction, the windows of the palaces will be wide open, and birds will stand on them to wail and lament. By the action of nature, the roofs of the palaces made of cedar wood, as marvelous pieces of art, will be laid bare of their splendid beauty.

If Nineveh, the symbol of the evil heart, that persists on not returning to the Lord, has become a dwelling place for owls, that keep on wailing and hooting; The spiritual Jerusalem, the symbol of the holy heart, on the other hand, shall become a dwelling place for the rejoicing turtledoves: *"The voice of the turtledove is heard in our land"* (Song 2: 12). The portion of the wicked would be depression and despair; whereas that of the righteous would be joy and hope. The heart of the wicked would bear the pledge of hell; whereas that of the righteous would bear that of the joyful and heavenly, eternal kingdom.

Assyria that captivated Israel, was known for her fierce violence in dealing with the captives; Her kings used to find pleasure in cutting off their body members, especially those of the rich and noble, whom they mockingly paraded before the mob. Assyria that referred to the evil soul, filled with violence and abominations, has turned into a desolate wilderness, only dwelt by wild beasts and owls; Whereas the holy soul will become a joyful paradise planted with the trees of virtue, where the sweet voice of turtledoves is heard.

The following are some comments by St. Gregory, the Bishop of Nyssa, on what came in the Song of songs 2: 12:

❖ Having *"rebuked the wind, and said to the sea: 'Peace, be still!'*, the wind ceased and there was a great calm" (Mark 4: 39); Our life started to flourish like a garden adorned with flowers, that represent the virtue in our life that bears fruit in its seasons. That is why the Word of God says: *"The winter is past, The rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; The time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land"* (Song 2: 11, 12).

The Groom says: [Behold, the pastures are adorned with the flowers of virtue! Do you see that purity in the beauty of the Narcis? Do you see the roses of humility, and the violet that represent the sweet aroma of the Lord Christ? Why don't you make a crown for yourself of these flowers. It is the proper season, as testified by the voice of the turtledove; that is like *"that voice of one crying in the wilderness"* (Matthew 3: 3); John the Baptist is the turtledove; who precedes that wonderful

spring which provides such magnificent flowers for everyone who wish to gather. He is the one who tells us about: *“the Rod that shall come forth from the stem of Jesse”* (Isaiah 11: 1); and *“The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”* (John 1: 29). He is the one who demonstrates to us the repentance from sin, and the life according to virtue. According to the holy text: *“The voice of the turtledove is heard in our land”*; to tell us that those who have responded to the voice of John the Baptist, were those called by the gospel, ‘the tax-collectors and the sinners’; while the rest of the people gave no heed to his preaching.

(St. Gregory of Nyssa)

“This is the rejoicing city, that dwelt securely, that said in her heart, ‘I am it, and there is none beside me’. How has she become a desolation, a place for beasts to lie down! Everyone who passes by her shall hiss and shake his fist” (Zephaniah 2: 15)

Nineveh that has been a rejoicing city, that everyone longed to see; with a circumference of 100 miles, with walls 100 feet high, on which three chariots could run side by side; and on which there were 1500 watching towers; has become a desolation, even almost impossible to locate!

In haughtiness, Nineveh, like Babylon later on, as well as other haughty cities, assumed that it is the mistress of the whole world. The Lord God in the book of Isaiah says: *“Therefore hear this now, you who are given to pleasures; who dwell securely; who say in your heart, ‘I am, and there is no one else beside me; I shall not sit as a widow, nor shall I know the loss of children’; But these two things shall come to you in a moment, in one day: the loss of children, and widowhood. They shall come upon you in fullness, because of the multitude of your sorceries”* (Isaiah 47: 8-9).

The city of Nineveh represents the soul, which is proud of herself, and satisfied with herself, and not with God; which enjoys her time in the world, thinking that she is in peace and security, and no one can ever come in her way.

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH (CHAPTER 2)

DESTROY MY WICKEDNESS, AND SET YOUR RIGHTEOUSNESS IN ME

+Let my soul join all the souls of Your people;

Let us gather together by Your Holy Spirit;

Let Him expose before my eyes, my daring and arrogance;

Let Him consume every evil inside me and in my behavior,

Let Him grant me Your righteousness, to cover up my depths.

+Sin made me like chaff before the wind;

I cannot stand before Your wrath;

Who would be justified before You, O Holy One?

Your fiery Spirit will renew my nature.

Will turn me from chaff into holy wheat!

+To You, I shall flee. O my Savior;

You will take away my misery, and grant me Your mercy;

Instead of my haughtiness, You will grant me Your meekness and humility.

You are my stronghold; In You, I shall hide, to cover up my weakness.

+Take away from inside me every trace of idolatry.

Destroy every silver image, that I foolishly have set for myself.

Occupy my whole heart and being.

Because without You, my soul would feel forsaken, deserted, and desolate.

Without You, every life in me would be uprooted.

Enter into my depths, to set Your heavenly Kingdom.

Then, I shall no longer be a barren pasture of sheep.

In me, the voice of a turtledove, will be heard, singing and praising Your name.

No owl, or any other screeching bird, will find a place in me.

No mourning noise, but joy and rejoice.

+Transfigure in me, with the splendor of Your glory.
To drive away from me every pride and haughtiness.
Let me judge no one; but myself.
Let me not gloat for those under chastisement.
As I am worthy of every punishment, even of death.

+By coming into my depths, You will open up my insight.
I behold You, the Savior of the whole world.
I behold all nations and peoples, rejecting every idol,
And gathered around You in a victorious procession.
The defiled nations became for You a holy bride.
The adversary nations, became the subject of Your pleasure.
Your heavens rejoice over humanity, sanctified in You.

CHAPTER 2

THE JUDGMENT OF THE NATIONS

In the first chapter, the Lord confirms that He firmly chastens His people, because He does not accept any fellowship with evil. Yet, though He used Assyria, then Babylon to chasten His people “Israel and Judah”, yet if those nations gloat, or bear a spirit of hatred against them, He will also judge them.

Presenting a horrible description of the judgment of those nations, the prophet does not mean for mankind to fall into despair, but to be drawn to God, the source of their life, peace, and happiness. He calls on them to re-evaluate their life, goals, and intentions; and to get terrified, not from God, but from sin.

In His judgment of the nations, chastening them firmly for their gloating against his people, fallen under chastisement, God seems as though He is their enemy. Yet in the light of the book as a whole; when He proclaims His rejoice over the return of the nations to God, It will be clear that God is not their enemy, but an enemy against their attitude; That He is not avenging against them, but avenging against the evil that possessed them.

- 1- Calling on His people to seek righteousness1 – 3
- 2- Judgment of Palestine4 – 7
- 3- Judgment of Moab and Ammon8 – 11
- 4- Judgment of Cush12
- 5- Judgment of Assyria13 – 15

CALLING ON HIS PEOPLE TO SEEK RIGHTEOUSNESS:

Before starting to judge the nations gloating against His people, fallen under chastisement, God requests from His people to repent, and seek righteousness and humility, in order that He will cover them, and restore their glory. He would not judge those who gloat against His people, unless the later present a true repentance.

“Gather together, yes, gather, O shameless nation” (Zephaniah 2: 1)

He calls on this nation, that counted herself as the people of God, privileged above all the other nations and peoples, to re-evaluate her position. He calls them, ‘a shameless nation’; namely, one that have nothing to justify her before Him. He calls on her to gather together; As one of the serious fruits of sin, is the loss of a common goal; as it has been in the dark period of the judges: *“In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes”* (Judges 21: 25).

Sin makes man like chaff that has no place to settle down; and scatters the whole society like a storm. Whereas the work of true repentance, is to bring man down to his depths, to look, by the spirit of truth, into his heart, mind, feelings, intentions, and will; and to be attached to God, through connecting to his brethren by the spirit of unity; and not by mere physical gathering; for all to have one spirit and one thought.

This call for gathering together, is probably meant to let everyone re-evaluate his accounts; in order to present a collective repentance, to avoid the shame, and to spare themselves falling under the divine anger, by the spirit of prayer, humility, and wish to return to Him.

“Before the decree is issued; Before the day passes like chaff; Before the day of the Lord’s fierce anger comes upon you; Before the day of the lord’s anger comes upon you” (Zephaniah 2: 2)

If His people have fallen under chastisement; Yet, He warns them, that unless they return to Him, they will fall under the divine anger, in the day of the Lord’s anger.

Sin corrupts the life of men, turning them into chaff, and not wheat, that would be scattered, as though by a storm, by any attack of an enemy. Whereas repentance would otherwise turn this chaff into wheat, that the wind would not scatter, but getting rid of chaff then they gather together.

He calls on them to jealously hasten to repent; as the Day of Judgment; namely the day of chastisement, draws very near. When that day dwells, the wind of divine anger will come, and the wicked will find no chance to flee; They will turn into chaff before the wind; according to the words of the Psalmist: *“The ungodly are like the chaff which the wind drives away”* (Psalm 1: 4); And as the Lord says about the ungodly people of Ephraim: *“They shall be like the morning cloud, and like the early dew that passes away, like chaff blown off from a threshing floor, and like smoke from a chimney”* (Hosea 13: 3).

The ungodly would therefore find no place for comfort; They would neither settle down on earth, nor reach heaven; They would be like chaff that the wind scatter to every direction.

St. Augustine compares between the meek and the ungodly; About the meek, it is said: *“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth”* (Matthew 5: 5); Whereas the ungodly are like chaff which the wind drives away (Psalm 1: 4). Pride would blow up the ungodly, to become perpetually driven away from the face of the earth.

❖ The ungodly are *“the chaff which the wind drives away”* (Psalm 1: 4). The Holy Book says that a wicked man is an unhappy man; He is not even like dust, that may seem valueless, yet it actually has a kind of existence in itself ...

So is the ungodly; As he denies God, he is led by vanity, to where the breath of Satan sends him.

(St. Jerome)

❖ *“Let them be like chaff before the wind, and let the angel of the Lord chase them”* (Psalm 35: 5) ... The wind is the temptation, and the chaff (the dust) are the ungodly. The dust would not stand before the wind.

(St. Augustine)

“Seek the Lord, all you meek of the earth, Who have upheld His justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility, It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the Lord’s anger” (Zephaniah 2: 3)

In His call, He does not intend for them to invoke the spirit of terror into each other, but to gather together to seek the Lord; that He pours His grace upon them, have mercy on them, and realize His promises to them; He calls on them to gather together with the spirit of humility, as someone sick, asks the heavenly Physician to stretch His hand to heal and cure him. That is why He calls them *“All you meek of the earth”*.

He calls on the ‘meek of the earth’ to seek the Lord Himself, and to ask Him to cover them with righteousness and humility, on the day of His wrath. There is no other way to avoid the divine wrath, except by resorting to the Lord, by hiding in Him, and by enjoying righteousness and humility that covers their weaknesses, and turn them into wheat instead of chaff before the blowing wind.

This call was also proclaimed by the Lord in the book of Isaiah: *“Come My people, enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you, Hide yourself as it were, for a little moment, until*

the indignation is past. For the Lord, the Lord comes out of His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity” (Isaiah 26: 20-21); And in Amos: “*For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel: ‘Seek Me and live; ... Seek the Lord and live, Lest He break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and devour it, with no one to quench it in Bethel’*” (Amos 5: 4, 6).

Some believe that the talk here is addressed to the meek and the poor who fell under oppression, because of the corruption that came over the land; and the abuse by the rich and by those in authority. But because the poor, themselves, partook of the corruption and the abominations, the prophet calls on them to return to the Lord, and to seek His mercy through repentance in humility and walking in righteousness; As the oppression that befall them would not justify them on the day of the Lord’s wrath, unless they return to Him with all their hearts.

He probably also means by the meek here, the Jews, who, although they have crucified Christ and blasphemed Him; If they recognize and seek Him by the spirit of humility, He will again embrace and keep them from the wrath that came upon them because of their denial; according to the words of the prophet Isaiah: “*Seek the Lord while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near*” (Isaiah 55: 6).

St. Cyprian sees in the call: “*Seek the Lord*”, an invitation to us to forsake everything else, and to seek the Lord, His Kingdom, and righteousness; Then all these things shall be added to us; according to the promise of the Lord Christ Himself (Matthew 6: 31-33).

❖ As long as there is still time, look forward to the eternal true salvation; And as the end of the world draws near, turn your minds by the fear of God to Him. Don’t rejoice over your vain authority on the righteous and the meek ... But ”*Seek the Lord and live*” (Amos 5: 6). Recognize the Lord, even if it seems too late ... Believe in Him, who would never deceive you ... Believe in Him, who has told about these things beforehand ... Believe in Him, who will grant the eternal life to those who believe ... Believe in Him, who, by the fire of hell, will punish those who do not believe.

(Cyprian, the martyr)

Thus, we have no refuge from the Lord’s wrath, except by fleeing to Him, and hiding in Him.

❖ Before seeking the Lord, we were weak and burdened; But now, having our hearts settled on Him, we are strong and have courage.

(St. Jerome)

2. JUDGMENT OF PALESTINE:

“For Gaza shall be forsaken, and Ashkelon desolate: They shall drive out Ashdod at noonday, And Ekron shall be uprooted” (Zephaniah 2: 4)

The Lord will chasten the main cities of Palestine: Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, and Ekron; that took pride in their strength and prosperity. Gaza shall be forsaken like a barren wilderness; and was almost utterly destroyed by Alexander the Great; Hence its Hebrew name, “Gazubah”, which hints to (non-existence).. Ekron, in Hebrew, came as “Ekron teaker”. As for Ashdod that shall be driven out at noonday; the people of the east used to sleep, and even stop military action at noon because of the hot weather (2 Samuel 4: 5).

It is to be noticed that ‘Gath’, the fifth famous city in Palestine, was not mentioned here, as it was not mentioned in Amos (1: 6), Jeremiah 25: 20), Zechariah (9: 5-6); because at that time, it was under Jewish authority.

What is said here about those four main cities, refers to what would befall the unrepentant man; namely, to suffer isolation; to become forsaken, desolate, where he is not dwelt by the divine righteousness, horrified, through living as a fugitive, though nobody is after him, and uprooted, having the same end of the devil himself.

This is the divine warning to every man, who chooses for himself to be an opponent against the divine truth, and to give his back to God, the Grantor of life, fulfillment, peace, and happiness. He would moan, together with Zion, which, assuming in her bitterness, that the Lord has forsaken and forgotten her (Isaiah 49: 14); says: “*There I was left alone*” (Isaiah 49: 21); And would become as is said by prophet Jeremiah: “*Every city shall be forsaken, and not a man shall dwell in it*”

(Jeremiah 4: 29); And as is said by prophet Isaiah: *“Then they will look to the earth, and see trouble and darkness, gloom of anguish, and they will be driven into darkness”* (Isaiah 9: 22); And as is said by the Psalmist: *“Let their habitation be desolate; Let no one dwell in their tents”* (Psalm 69: 25); *“Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment!”* (Psalm 73: 19). And as it came in the Maccabees: *“He did away with all the renegades and outlaws”* (1 Macc 14: 14).

❖ *“How they are brought to desolation, as in a moment”* (Psalm 73: 19); He marvels at them, realizing what will come over them in the end. They, like smoke, will eventually vanish as it rises up ... *“They are utterly consumed ... As a dream when one awake”* (Psalm 73: 20)... Like when someone dreams that he found a treasure, to find out that he has got nothing when he gets up; So are the evildoers, they will wake up to realize the misery they have prepared for themselves.

(St. Augustine)

Evil destroys man and deprives him of every vitality, to become as though forsaken in isolation, desolate, and uprooted; God allows that, to uproot the evil in him, and to plant him anew; Namely, to renew his life and his nature, and to set His righteousness in him, by His Holy Spirit; as is said by the Psalmist: *“You drove out the nations with Your hand, But them You planted”* (Psalm 44: 2).

“Woe to the inhabitants of the seacoast, the nation of the Chrethites! The word of the Lord is against you, O Canaan of the Philistines; I will destroy you; So there shall be no inhabitant” (Zephaniah 2: 5)

By ‘the seacoast’ He means all the region on the Mediterranean Sea coast, from Egypt to Jaffa and Gaza. The Hebrew word is “Ceroth”, that gives the impression of (dug cisterns).

“The seacoast shall be pastures, with shelters for shepherds and folds for flocks” (Zephaniah 2: 6)

The seacoast that used to be as a port for ships, would turn into uninhabited pastures with shelters for shepherds and folds for flocks.

Some believes that the Chrethites here refer to a congregation of Phoenician immigrants, also mentioned in 1 Samuel 30: 14, and Amos 9: 7. In the Septuagint and the Syrian versions, it came as ‘Crete’.

“The coast shall be for the remnant of the house of Judah; They shall feed their flocks there; In the houses of Ashkelon they shall lie down at evening. For the Lord their God will intervene for them, and return their captives” (Zephaniah 2: 7)

Here he prophesies that the house of Judah shall repossess Ashkelon; and that their remnants returning from captivity shall settle down securely in the houses of Ashkelon.

Alexander the Great destroyed Askelon; And the Maccabees realized the prophecies of the prophets against it. It utterly lost her authority, and her inhabitants were forced to be circumcised; namely to turn Jewish.

3. THE JUDGMENT OF MOAB AND AMMON:

“I have heard the reproach of Moab, and the revilings of the people of Ammon, with which they have reproached My people, and made arrogant threats against their borders” (Zephaniah 2: 8)

Moab and Ammon were connected together; Each of them was an unlawful son of the fallen ‘Lot’ (Genesis 19: 33-38). Both were not considered among the people of God; denied faith in the Lord Christ, and do not enjoy the new spiritual birth.

Moab and Ammon both fell under chastisement, because they reproached the Jewish people during their chastisement, blasphemed their God, assuming that the God of Israel does not hear their reproach, and is unable to oppose them. Although He says: *“I have heard the reproach of Moab, and the revilings of Ammon”*; Yet in His longsuffering, and in order to chasten His people. He seemed as though He does not hear,

“They made arrogant threats against their borders”, and actually attacked the borders of Judah (Jeremiah 48: 29; 49:1)

“Therefore, as I live’, Says the Lord of host, the God of Israel, ‘Surely Moab shall be like Sodom, and the people of Ammon like Gomorrah – overrun with weeds and saltpits; and a perpetual desolation; The residue of My people shall plunder them; And the remnant of My people shall possess them” (Zephaniah 2: 9)

Moab and Ammon shall have the same destiny of Sodom and Gomorrah; They will be reduced to nothing; Their land will be desolate with no inhabitant; will produce weeds instead of wheat; And their springs will produce salt water.

“This they shall have for their pride, because they have reproached and made arrogant threats against the people of the Lord of hosts” (Zephaniah 2: 10)

“The Lord will be awesome to them, For He will reduce to nothing all the gods of the earth; People shall worship Him, Each one from his place; Indeed all the shores (and islands) of the nations” (Zephaniah 2: 11)

God confirms that, although there is no animosity in His heart between Him and any people; Yet the arrogant, the haughty, and the blasphemer will fall under his own pride, blaspheme, and evil. As for God, He will destroy the idols, and will set out of every nation a people for Himself; Every nation, and every man, will worship Him, each from his place. There will be no need for them to go to Jerusalem, nor to worship in the temple of Solomon.

God was preparing His old people to accept the notion; that the whole earth would become for the Lord and His Christ.

“Sing to the Lord, you kingdoms of the earth; Oh, sing praises to the Lord” (Psalm 68: 32).

“Then the Lord will be known to Egypt, and the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day, and will make sacrifice and offering; Yes, they will make a vow to the Lord and perform it” (Isaiah 19: 21)

“For from the rising of the sun, even to its going down, My name shall be great among the Gentiles; In every place incense shall be offered to My name, and a pure offering” (Malachi 1: 11)

He is demeaning the pagan gods; showing them as wild beasts, extremely emaciated because of lack of food for an extended time; because no more sacrifices nor worship are offered to them in their temples.

- ❖ Let us now listen to a prophet prophesying that the time will come when the worship of God will not be limited to one place; that all mankind will get to know the Lord; and that people shall worship Him, each one from his place; “Indeed all the shores (and islands) of the nations“ (Zephaniah 2: 11 LXX); Contrary to what prophet Moses has commanded the Jews to worship the Lord in only one place.
- ❖ You heard how several prophets prophesied: that mankind will no longer be limited to worship God in one place; That people will no longer have to come from everywhere on earth to offer Him sacrifice in only one city; That everyone will be allowed to stay and to minister to God in his own house or land. What would be a more appropriate time than today for those prophecies to be realized?

Let us now see how the gospels and the apostle Paul echo the words of prophet Zephaniah: The prophet says: “**of all nations**”; And the apostle says: “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared **to all men**” (Titus 2: 11). Zephaniah says: “reduce to nothing all gods of the earth”, and Paul says: “teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age” (Titus 2: 12).

(St. John Chrysostom)

+As one prophet proclaimed that all the nations of the earth will come to worship God in a certain place “The Gentiles shall come to You from the ends of the earth” (Jeremiah 16: 19); It was proclaimed by another prophet, saying: “The Lord will be awesome to them, For He will reduce to nothing all the gods of the earth; People will worship Him, each one from his place; Indeed all the shores (and islands) of the nations” (Zephaniah 2: 11).. All peoples will come to the exalted and true God of the Christians, not physically, but by faith.

+ They will come to Him without leaving their place; As by faith, they will find Him right in their hearts.

+For a long time, the devils have kept silent in their temples concerning the things that are to come, although it was definitely known to them through the sayings of the prophets. But now, with the approach of events, the devils intended to proclaim them, lest they may look as though ignorant or defeated; Yet they stopped short of referring to certain issues that were already proclaimed since long time, like those said by prophet Zephaniah: *“The Lord will be awesome to them, For He will reduce to nothing all the gods of the earth; People will worship Him, each one from his place; Indeed all the shores (and islands) of the nations”* (Zephaniah 2: 11). Gods, worshipped in the temples of the Gentiles, because they probably did not expect these events to apply to them; they did not wish to cause any unwarranted disturbances among their soothsayers.

(St. Augustine)

+Let us now talk about the churches as ‘Islands’. The Holy Book says in one location: *“Sing to the Lord a new song, His praise from the end of the earth; Let the sea roar and all that fills it, the coastlands (the islands) and their inhabitants”* (Isaiah 42: 10). Prophet Isaiah says in the name of the Lord, that the same way islands appear in the middle of the sea, churches will be established in the middle of the world; and will be struck by a multitude of waves of persecution. Although mighty waves will be thrown on these islands every day, yet they will never be inundated with water... Indeed they are in the middle of the sea; Yet their foundation is Christ, who will never be shaken!

(St. Jerome)

+Despite all that, they were not yet able to reset the temple nor to repair the location where they were allowed to practice their rites according to the law. The authority of Christ, that established the church has destroyed that place. The prophet, although he proclaimed that Christ will come, Yet His coming would only be after the captivity.

(St. John Chrysostom)

4. THE JUDGMENT OF CUSH:

“You Ethiopians also You shall be slain by My sword” (Zephaniah 2: 12)

Cush (Ethiopia) was submitted by Nebuchadnezzar (Jeremiah 46: 9-10; Ezekiel 30; 4). By *“My sword”*, the Lord means ‘Nebuchadnezzar’, whom He used as a tool to chasten the nations.

5. THE JUDGMENT OF ASSYRIA:

“And He will stretch out His hand against the north, Destroy Assyria, and make Nineveh a desolation; as dry as the wilderness” Zephaniah 2: 13)

“The herds shall lie down in her midst, every wild animal, the desert owl and the screech shall lodge on its capitals; the owl shall hoot at the windows; the raven croak on the threshold; For the cedar work will be laid bare” (Zephaniah 2: 14)

Assyria will turn from being a great empire, feared by all the nations of the world, into a vast wilderness where every kind of animal will lie down; both the domesticated like the sheep, and the wild ones. It will turn into an open pasture, with no walls to protect it; Its only law will be perdition and death. As for birds, there will be only the owls to hoot, with their mourning voice that brings sadness and distress.

With desolation and destruction, the windows of the palaces will be wide open, and birds will stand on them to wail and lament. By the action of nature, the roofs of the palaces made of cedar wood, as marvelous pieces of art, will be laid bare of their splendid beauty.

If Nineveh, the symbol of the evil heart, that persists on not returning to the Lord, has become a dwelling place for owls, that keep on wailing and hooting; The spiritual Jerusalem, the symbol of the holy heart, on the other hand, shall become a dwelling place for the rejoicing turtledoves: *“The voice of the turtledove is heard in our land”* (Song 2: 12). The portion of the wicked would be depression and despair; whereas that of the righteous would be joy and hope. The heart of the wicked would bear the pledge of hell; whereas that of the righteous would bear that of the joyful and heavenly, eternal kingdom.

Assyria that captivated Israel, was known for her fierce violence in dealing with the captives; Her kings used to find pleasure in cutting off their body members, especially those of the rich and noble, whom they mockingly paraded before the mob. Assyria that referred to the evil soul,

filled with violence and abominations, has turned into a desolate wilderness, only dwelt by wild beasts and owls; Whereas the holy soul will become a joyful paradise planted with the trees of virtue, where the sweet voice of turtledoves is heard.

The following are some comments by St. Gregory, the Bishop of Nyssa, on what came in the Song of songs 2: 12:

- ❖ Having *“rebuked the wind, and said to the sea: ‘Peace, be still!’*, the wind ceased and there was a great calm” (Mark 4: 39); Our life started to flourish like a garden adorned with flowers, that represent the virtue in our life that bears fruit in its seasons. That is why the Word of God says: *“The winter is past, The rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; The time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land”* (Song 2: 11, 12).

The Groom says: [Behold, the pastures are adorned with the flowers of virtue! Do you see that purity in the beauty of the Narcis? Do you see the roses of humility, and the violet that represent the sweet aroma of the Lord Christ? Why don't you make a crown for yourself of these flowers. It is the proper season, as testified by the voice of the turtledove; that is like *“that voice of one crying in the wilderness”* (Matthew 3: 3); John the Baptist is the turtledove; who precedes that wonderful spring which provides such magnificent flowers for everyone who wish to gather. He is the one who tells us about: *“the Rod that shall come forth from the stem of Jesse”* (Isaiah 11: 1); and *“The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”* (John 1: 29). He is the one who demonstrates to us the repentance from sin, and the life according to virtue. According to the holy text: *“The voice of the turtledove is heard in our land”*; to tell us that those who have responded to the voice of John the Baptist, were those called by the gospel, ‘the tax-collectors and the sinners’; while the rest of the people gave no heed to his preaching.

(St. Gregory of Nyssa)

“This is the rejoicing city, that dwelt securely, that said in her heart, ‘I am it, and there is none beside me’. How has she become a desolation, a place for beasts to lie down! Everyone who passes by her shall hiss and shake his fist” (Zephaniah 2: 15)

Nineveh that has been a rejoicing city, that everyone longed to see; with a circumference of 100 miles, with walls 100 feet high, on which three chariots could run side by side; and on which there were 1500 watching towers; has become a desolation, even almost impossible to locate!

In haughtiness, Nineveh, like Babylon later on, as well as other haughty cities, assumed that it is the mistress of the whole world. The Lord God in the book of Isaiah says: *“Therefore hear this now, you who are given to pleasures; who dwell securely; who say in your heart, ‘I am, and there is no one else beside me; I shall not sit as a widow, nor shall I know the loss of children’; But these two things shall come to you in a moment, in one day: the loss of children, and widowhood. They shall come upon you in fullness, because of the multitude of your sorceries”* (Isaiah 47: 8-9).

The city of Nineveh represents the soul, which is proud of herself, and satisfied with herself, and not with God; which enjoys her time in the world, thinking that she is in peace and security, and no one can ever come in her way.

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH

(CHAPTER 2)

DESTROY MY WICKEDNESS, AND SET YOUR RIGHTEOUSNESS IN ME

+Let my soul join all the souls of Your people;
Let us gather together by Your Holy Spirit;
Let Him expose before my eyes, my daring and arrogance;
Let Him consume every evil inside me and in my behavior,
Let Him grant me Your righteousness, to cover up my depths.

+Sin made me like chaff before the wind;
I cannot stand before Your wrath;
Who would be justified before You, O Holy One?
Your fiery Spirit will renew my nature.

Will turn me from chaff into holy wheat!

+To You, I shall flee. O my Savior;
You will take away my misery, and grant me Your mercy;
Instead of my haughtiness, You will grant me Your meekness and humility.
You are my stronghold; In You, I shall hide, to cover up my weakness.

+Take away from inside me every trace of idolatry.
Destroy every silver image, that I foolishly have set for myself.
Occupy my whole heart and being.
Because without You, my soul would feel forsaken, deserted, and desolate.
Without You, every life in me would be uprooted.
Enter into my depths, to set Your heavenly Kingdom.
Then, I shall no longer be a barren pasture of sheep.
In me, the voice of a turtledove, will be heard, singing and praising Your name.
No owl, or any other screeching bird, will find a place in me.
No mourning noise, but joy and rejoice.

+Transfigure in me, with the splendor of Your glory.
To drive away from me every pride and haughtiness.
Let me judge no one; but myself.
Let me not gloat for those under chastisement.
As I am worthy of every punishment, even of death.

+By coming into my depths, You will open up my insight.
I behold You, the Savior of the whole world.
I behold all nations and peoples, rejecting every idol,
And gathered around You in a victorious procession.
The defiled nations became for You a holy bride.
The adversary nations, became the subject of Your pleasure.
Your heavens rejoice over humanity, sanctified in You.

CHAPTER 3

THE REJOICING JERUSALEM

Because she persisted on her evil ways, did not heed the voice of the Lord, did not accept His chastisement, did not draw near to Her God, and her leaderships turned destructive, instead of working on account of the Kingdom of God, the Lord calls Jerusalem: “*the rebellious, the defiled, and oppressing city*”¹. Together with the rest of the nations, she will fall under the wrath of God, who will set another new rejoicing Jerusalem, that will gather the peoples together as a church that worship with pure lips, in whose midst the Lord will dwell.

1. The oppressing city¹ – 7
2. The fall of everyone under the divine indignation⁸
3. Setting the worshipping Jerusalem⁹ – 10
4. The humble Jerusalem¹¹ - 12
5. The true Jerusalem¹³
6. The rejoicing Jerusalem¹⁴
7. Jerusalem, the dwelling place of the Lord¹⁵ – 17

8. Jerusalem, enjoying salvation^{18 – 19}

9. Jerusalem, the glorious city²⁰

1. THE OPPRESSING CITY:

“Woe to her who is rebellious, and defiled, to the oppressing city!” (Zephaniah 3: 1)

Here, He refers to Jerusalem some very bad attributes; He calls her rebellious, defiled, and oppressive. From the outside, she is the city of God. It was fitting for her to be up to this great honor; Yet, through her rebellion, she became worse than any pagan city. She is the center of the worship of God, embracing His holy temple; Yet, because holiness had no place in her, she became worthy of the Hebrew name ‘Moreah’, meaning (defiled), instead of ‘Mariah’, the name of the hill on which she was built. Finally, she is oppressive, and does not testify to God’s mercies, and compassion on those who are in need. In other words, He chose her to be His city; yet, instead of obeying Him, she became rebellious. He set His holy temple in her; yet, instead of holiness, she became defiled. He provided her with His commandment of love and mercy toward the neighbor; Yet, she became oppressive, and did not listen to His divine commandment. Hence, the Lord advises the king of Judah and the people of Jerusalem, saying: *“Execute judgment and righteousness, and deliver the plundered out of the hand of the oppressor. Do no wrong and do no violence to the stranger, the fatherless or the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place”* (Jeremiah 22: 3).

Three serious attributes, that make the people, as well as the individual, lose fellowship with the Holy God, the Grantor of life, holiness, and love. These attributes are: *“rebellion”*, namely lack of obedience, *“defilement”*, namely, lack of holiness, and *“oppression”*, namely, lack of love. *“Rebellion”* is not obeying God, and not keeping His commandment; *“Defilement”* touches his inner life; And *“oppression”* touches his relationship with his brethren; However, each of these attributes reflects on these three ranges; as there is no separation between obedience to God, sanctifying man and the love of neighbor.

1- **Rebellion** or lack of obedience: St. Augustine in a commentary on the words of the Psalmist: *“Through Your precepts I get understanding; Therefore I hate every false way”* (Psalm 119: 104), sees a connection between these three attributes. He believes that, in obedience to God’s commandments, there is an enjoyment of the riches of the knowledge of wisdom; through which, man would be dismayed by every way of evil, would love righteousness, and would hate oppression.

+Through his obedience to God’s commandments, (the Psalmist) gains an understanding of the issues he longs to know... *“Through His precepts he gets understanding”* ... Those who keep the commandments get greater riches in the knowledge of wisdom ... *“He loves righteousness”*, and hates every oppression ... A higher wisdom is given to him who obeys God; and an understanding of His commandments.

(St. Augustine)

+Nothing would please the lord like obedience.

(St. Jerome)

2- Concerning **holiness** it is said:

+*“Your way, O God, is holy”* (Psalm 77: 13). If you are not holy, the way of God is not in you. What is the way of God? The Savior says: *“I am the way, the truth, and the life”* (John 14: 6). Hence the “Way” is the Son of God. If we wish to have Christ dwell in us, Let us be holy; As the way of God is holiness.

+A holy man does not fear the fire {*“A fire goes before him, and burns up his enemies round about”* (Psalm 97: 3). Let the sinner fear it! Fire sanctifies the saints, but burns up the sinners!. *“He makes His angels spirits, His ministers a flame of fire”* (Psalm 104: 4).

(St. Jerome)

3- Concerning **Oppression**, it is said:

+As *“Christ has no accord with Belial”*, and *“the righteousness has no fellowship with lawlessness”* (2 Corinthians 6: 14-15); It is not possible for one soul to love both goodness and evil.

You, who love the Lord, have to hate the devil! In every single work, there is love for one, and hate for the other!

+The haughty man in his pride, acquires the source of all other evils, he offers no regret, assuming that he

is the object of God's pleasure. Pride is against God; The proud or the haughty, assuming that he is righteous,

does not submit to God, nor repent his evil ways, but, in hypocrisy, he boasts his assumed good works.

(St. Jerome)

"She has not obeyed His voice; She has not accepted correction; She has not trusted in the Lord; She has not drawn near to her God" (Zephaniah 3: 2)

Here, He diagnoses the actual nature of the incurable ailment of Jerusalem; namely, rejecting reform, not trusting the heavenly Physician, and fleeing away from Him. Her ailment bears three serious symptoms:

Rejecting the voice of her heavenly Physician; and not wishing for reform.

Not trusting His ability to cure her and fulfill her needs.

Not drawing near Him; As though she demands from Him to depart from her, and not to dwell in her midst.

The prophet Moses says: *"For what great nation is there that has God near to it, as the Lord our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him?"* (Deuteronomy 4: 7) God desires to refer Himself to her, to be called 'her God'; Yet, she flees away from Him!

+Jerusalem has always been refusing to listen to the words of the prophets sent to her, and not accepting any way of teaching from its source. She might have looked, as though ready for change at certain times; Yet, she soon returned to her wicked ways. Now, Jerusalem, the city that embraces the temple of the Lord, is disregarding the prophet sent by God to her, and despising that magnificent experience! She has completely forgotten the Lord, and declared war against him.

(Theodore Mopsuestia)

It is just amazing, how the heavenly Physician has come down to us; Yet, we refuse to draw near Him. It is fitting for us to cry out together with the Psalmist, saying: *"To You, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, I trust in You"* (Psalm 25: 1).

+*"To You, O Lord, I lift up my soul"* By spiritual longing, I lift up my soul which bowed down to earth through carnal yearnings. *"O my God, I trust in You, Let me not be ashamed"* (Psalm 25: 2). O my Lord, by leaning upon myself, I have reached such physical weakness. Through deserting God, I ended up, shamefully afraid of the tiniest of insect! *"I trust in You; Let me not be ashamed"*

(St. Augustine)

+*"Blessed is the man whom you instruct, O Lord"* (Psalm 94: 12). Blessed is the man who receives God as his Instructor ... Whom You teach Your law ... in Your holy books ... They will grant him comfort at the time of affliction.

(St. Jerome)

Here, the prophet presents to us a magnificent concept of religion; namely, to be drawn near God, Who desires us to get attached to Him.

+*"The Lord reigns, He is clothed with majesty"* (Psalm 93: 1). The Lord is the King; He is clothed with majesty. The patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), the prophets, and the saints, are His garments; They are His 'sash', referred to in Jeremiah: *"For as the sash clings to the waist of a man, so I have caused the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah to cling to Me", says the Lord"*. But, as that sash or that glory, was cast away on the other bank of the River Euphrates, where it was hidden in a hole in the rock; It got ruined and corrupt (See Jeremiah 13: 4-12). ... Yet, the Lord would not remain naked, without sash or cover; Having lost His first people, He made for Himself a new sash of the Gentiles.

(St. Jerome)

“Her princes in her midst are roaring lions; Her judges are evening wolves, that leave not a bone till morning” (Zephaniah 3: 3)

Her rulers are terrible examples of evil and oppression; Those who were supposed to be the physicians to heal her wounds, turned into roaring lions in her midst,; disregarding both the Mosaic law and that of nature.

As for the judges, in order to please their oppressive rulers, they walk in the darkness of the night to devour the flesh and bones of the people, and leave no trace of their preys till morning.

“Her prophets are insolent, treacherous people; Her priests have profaned the sanctuary; They have done violence to the law” (Zephaniah 3: 4)

The prophets no longer present the will of God, and proclaim His commandment; But for the sake of temporal honors, pleasures, and material benefits, they deceive the people by smooth and false words; They are no longer the messengers of heaven and the ambassadors of God, but have become like the devil, insolent and treacherous, with no truth in them, and not trusted by the people. About them, God says on the tongue of prophet Jeremiah: *“Behold, I am against those who prophesy false dreams’, says the Lord, ‘And who tell them, and who lead My people astray by their lies and by their recklessness, when I did not send them or command them, so they did not profit this people at all, says the Lord”* (Jeremiah 23: 32).

As for the priests, instead of ministering in the temple to sanctify the people, they turned into a cause of defilement to the sanctuary and the temple; And instead of preaching the law and the divine commandment, to lead the people to God by repentance and obedience, they, themselves walked contrary to the law; They betrayed the divine covenant, corrupted the worship, and deformed the divine word according to their own intentions, to serve their interests, and those of the great and the rich.

“The Lord is righteous, He is 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” (Zephaniah 3; 5)

The Jews assumed that the secret of their holiness, prosperity, and conquest over the nations, is the presence of Jerusalem, the city of God, and the worship of the Lord in the temple of Solomon. Yes, the Lord is there, but He will never cover them with His mercy and compassion; But will realize His divine justice, and will chasten His people for their corruption, and for their reluctance to return to Him and to repent their iniquities.

He is as though telling them: ‘You boast the presence of God in your midst. Well let that be! He is just; Why then are you not just like Him? He is light; Why do you practice the works of darkness, and do evil in secret, assuming that God does not see you, does not hear your words, and does not know your thoughts?’

The presence of the holy God in your midst does not justify you, but, on the contrary, will judge your corruption. *“For the Lord your God walks in the midst of your camp, to deliver you and give your enemies over to you; Therefore your camp shall be holy, that He may see no unclean thing among you, and turn away from you”*(Deuteronomy 23: 14). *“... You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy”* (Leviticus 19: 2). *“They lean on the Lord, and say: ‘Is not the Lord among us? No harm can come upon us!’”* (Micah 3: 11).

“Every morning He brings His justice to light” (Zephaniah 3: 5). If, in His longsuffering, He did not yet chasten them; They should, with the light of every new morning, anticipate His justice; As He will eventually publicly chasten; and no one can justify himself, oppose, or get away from Him. He is capable of putting His judgment into effect.

The repentant souls say together with prophet Jeremiah: *“The Lord’s compassion fail not; They are new every morning”* (Lamentations 3: 22, 23); Whereas the adversaries, should, every morning, expect the divine chastisement. Although God warns the slothful sinners, that the day of chastisement is drawing near; yet, He does not wish for them to become sad and bitter; while He threatens, He opens the door before them to enjoy His mercies through repentance.

+*“On the wicked He will rain (traps)”* (Psalm 11: 6); to catch in them those who misused their freedom; to motivate them to take the straight way; saying to them, *“I am the Way”* (John 14: 6). That is why in Jeremiah (16: 16), the Lord says, that He will send many fishermen, and hunters

to cast their nets and set their traps to catch the lost fish, and the wandering beasts on every mountain and every hill, and to bring them over to enjoy salvation. This phrase and the following, present a promise of healing.

(St. Jerome)

“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” (Zephaniah 3: 6)

The people should have learned a lesson from God’s chastisement of the pagan nations around them. After His long-suffering at the designated time, they fell under His very firm judgment: Kingdoms disappeared; kings’ palaces were struck; great cities were destroyed, and turned into barren wilderness with no inhabitant.

On one hand, He probably means the seven nations of Canaan, mentioned in Leviticus 18: 28, and the surrounding nations; which the Lord allowed to be devastated, anticipating that Jerusalem and Judah would heed their example, and return to the Lord with repentance.

On another hand, St Jerome and many other fathers, believe that the nations cut off by the Lord, refer to the heretics who proclaim erroneous teachings; and would soon be cut off.

+*“O my God, make them like the whirling dust”* (Psalm 83: 13); to have no place to settle down. Or (In another version), ‘Make them like a rolling wheel’, going forward and backward; As the heretics, likewise, are never stable, but change their teachings and views all the time!

+Because the heretics are not searching for knowledge for the sake of salvation, but are searching for a new teaching just to overcome their opponents, Bring them down with their multitude of controversial views; And let them have only one refuge – You, O Lord!

(St. Jerome)

“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” (Zephaniah 3: 7)

God talks to us in our own language; He presents to His people an example of the surrounding nations, that He expected to fear Him, to accept His chastisement, and to return to Him; in order to save themselves the desolation He said to come over them. Although He threatened His people with desolation, yet He wishes for them not to fall into it. He warned them through His prophets, that He would cut off “her dwelling”, and to take it away from Jerusalem; Yet, He wishes not to put His threats into effect, if they return to Him.

Saying “*her dwelling*”, and not “*My dwelling*” God refers the temple to Jerusalem, or to the people, and not to Himself. This is the way He deals with the people: If they are holy, He counts them as ‘His people’; and calls their feasts, ‘His feasts’; their Sabbaths, ‘His Sabbaths’; and their temple, ‘His temple’; But in case they are not holy, He does not count the people, their feasts, their Sabbaths, nor their temple, as His own.

What brings Him grief, is that, when He expected them to heed the lesson of what happened to their neighbors, to repent and to return to Him; He finds them stubbornly rise early to spite Him by corrupting all their deeds, and to commit every sort of defilement and uncleanness.

It is amazing, how man, both on the level of the individual and that of the whole congregation, wishes that God be long-suffering with him, and avenging against his opponents. The Jewish people as well, wished God to be long-suffering with them, but to avenge their pagan opponents, while they commit the same evils they commit, and fall into their idolatry and abominations.

+*“Lord, how long will the wicked, how long will the wicked triumph?”* (Psalm 94: 3). With no longsuffering on their part, humanity does not want God to be long-suffering on others. We wish to be the object of God’s compassion, but we do not wish the same for our enemies.

(St. Jerome)

+Do not protest because the evildoers are not punished (now). lest you would be punished together with them. You are not happy that whoever steals from you, does not die but still lives ... If you want to reform the hand of another, and to keep it from stealing from you; Start by reforming your own hand and heart toward God; Lest, when you seek God’s revenge against others, while you

persist on your evil, and deny His long-suffering and mercies; You may treasure for yourselves the wrath on the day of His wrath!

(St. Augustine)

2. THE FALL OF EVERYONE UNDER INDIGNATION:

“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’” (Zephaniah 3: 8)

The Lord, even in the moments of His anger, is addressing the few holy remnants of His people, to tell them about His plan. He is requesting from them to look forward to the times of glory that are to come; After the day of chastisement and punishment comes upon all nations; His jealousy will consume the whole earth, to set His heavenly kingdom. Yet, in His jealousy, He does not seek the destruction of men, but the destruction of what is earthly in them, to become a holy temple for Himself, carrying holy heavenly features.

“I rise up for plunder”: Following that firm chastisement, the Lord will bear the spoils of conquest, when the nations return to believe in Him; to become His joyful spoils.

3. SETTING THE WORSHIPPING JERUSALEM:

“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” (Zephaniah 3: 9)

He is taking away from the nations everything earthly, to grant them instead what is heavenly, He is taking away from humanity, what has come upon it in Noah’s days, when He confused their language to keep them from building themselves a tower with its top in the heavens (Genesis 11). Now, He makes all nations offer a sacrifice of prayer and praise with a pure language. What is this pure language, but the language of the Spirit? In Jesus Christ, the Church all over the world, gather together to worship Him by a holy heavenly Spirit, by one mind and by one heart. This is what God proclaimed through His prophets concerning the church of the New Testament; of which we may mention for instance: *“in that day five cities in the land of Egypt will speak the language of Canaan and swear by the Lord of hosts”* (Isaiah 19: 18); And, *“the Lord shall be king over all the earth. In that day it shall be – The Lord is one, And His name one”* (Zechariah 14: 9).

For all to have one mind, they will bear together, with one accord, His easy and sweet yoke, as though, with one (shoulder), on which, they, with joy and the rejoice of heart, partake of carrying His one cross.

+Having lost their patience, the Jews could not bear to hear even the little children praising the Lord Christ.

They tried to mute the voice of those little ones, to whom the Lord referred in Isaiah (8: 18), saying: *“The children whom the Lord has given me”*. When the elders of the Jews kept silent, grinding their teeth in envy and hate, the children cried out glorifying Christ; And even the stones would also cry out; about which it is written in the gospel: *“God is able to raise up children from these stones”* (see Matthew 3: 9). These stones refer to us, the Gentiles, who were once stone-hearted, before we believed in Jesus Christ, enjoyed sonhood among the children of Abraham, and became the children of the mighty God, To Whom is the glory forever, Amen.

(St. Jerome)

+*“The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, The leopard shall lie down with the young goat, The calf and the young lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them”* (Isaiah 11: 6): The Jews may say, [Even if these impossible things actually happen, how would it benefit mankind?!] That text here, does not refer to wild beasts, as much as it does to wild peoples; namely, to an assortment of races and nations, about whom the prophet clearly proclaims, that they will all come together under one yoke, *“to worship the Lord, each one from his place”* (Zephaniah 3: 9; 2: 11); That they will no longer have to come to Jerusalem to worship the Lord, but each will stay home and offer his worship to God.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia, My worshippers, My dispersed ones, shall bring My offering” (Zephaniah 3: 10)

Here, He refers to a congregation of Jews dispersed in Ethiopia, who supplicate to God anticipating their return and reform. Those, accepting the belief in the Lord Christ, being the church of the New Testament, will present the spiritual offering to the Lord (Romans 12: 1), outside the land of Israel.

Origen believes that, anticipating the salvation of Israel through receiving faith, after *“the fullness of the Gentiles has come into faith”* (Romans 11: 25); the Gentiles, together with Israel, will gather together to worship God, as though under one yoke and with one accord (one shoulder) (Zephaniah 3: 9); Even as far as Ethiopia, all will present Him offerings (Zephaniah 3: 10); according to what came in the psalms: *“Ethiopia will quickly stretch out her hands to God”* (Psalm 68: 31).

St. Jerome often spoke of the holy people of God, as being the ‘garment of majesty’ that clothes the Lord. (see Psalm 97: 1). Having lost the first people, the Lord did not stay naked, but made for Himself another garment of the Gentiles.

+It is said: *“The Lord reigns; Let the earth rejoice; Let the multitude of isles be glad”* (Psalm 97: 1). It is not only one isle; namely, Judea, that will be glad, but a multitude of isles; namely, the whole world.

+His goal from ascending the cross was to lift us up from the earth. I believe that the cross of the Savior is the ladder that was seen by Jacob, on which the angels went up and down. On that ladder; namely, the cross, the Jews descend, and the Gentiles ascend.

(St. Jerome)

4. THE HUMBLE JERUSALEM:

“In that day you shall not be ashamed of any of your deeds in which you transgress against Me; 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” (Zephaniah 3: 11)

Proclaiming the great reform, through setting the new Jerusalem, and the appearance of the church of the New Testament; She shall no longer be ashamed of any of her deeds; as He takes away from her midst, the haughty who take pride, in a deadly formal literality, in the blessings that were once given to the people of Israel. The Lord takes away from Israel what they thought to be the secret of their greatness – the presence of Solomon’s temple and Jerusalem the city of God, etc. in their midst; And grants the few believers -- that little remnant, characterized by humility and not haughtiness -- the inner beauty; namely his Holy Spirit.

+What then? Have they all perished, and are they denied their reference to David and to the tribe of Judah?

No, Some of them believed, actually several thousands did, after the resurrection of the Lord. After they crucified Him, and watching the great miracles that were performed by the disciples in the name of the crucified, who seemed helpless in their hands; they realized that the Deity was then hidden in Him. And when they sought the counsel of the apostles, they told them: *“Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins”* (Acts 2: 38).

The Lord Christ resurrected to judge those who crucified Him; He transferred His presence from the Jews to the Gentiles; and seemed to act for the good of the remnant of Israel, about whom He was told: *“For Your servant David’s sake, Do not turn away the face of Your anointed”* (Psalm 132: 10). Let the hay be gathered together with the wheat, *“for the remnant to be saved”* (See Isaiah 10: 21). Out of those remnant, came the twelve apostles; the five hundred brethren to whom the Lord appeared after His resurrection (1 Corinthians 15: 6); the several thousands who were baptized on the day of the Pentecost (Acts 2: 41), and those who laid their possessions at the apostles’ feet (Acts 4: 35).

(St. Augustine)

“I will leave in your midst a meek and humble people, and they shall trust in the name of the Lord” (Zephaniah 3: 12)

St. Augustine believes this to be a prophecy about the few remnant of Israel who were saved through believing in the Lord Christ.

Having taken away their haughtiness, they started to practice humility and to trust in the name of the Lord, and in His work in them. Here He connects between the true humility and the living faith, filled with trust in the work of God.

+Miracles were realized in some of those who crucified Christ; who became believers, and received the blood of Christ. Those, on whose hands was the blood of the Savior, He cleansed them; Those who persecuted His dead body, have themselves become His body; namely, the church.

(St. Augustine)

5. THE TRUE JERUSALEM:

“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” (Zephaniah 3: 13)

This holy remnant who accept faith in the Lord Christ, shall have exalted features: humility with practical faith, holiness of behavior, doing no unrighteousness, uttering no lies, and deceit shall have no place in their hearts, nor in their mouths. They shall be true in their thoughts, deeds, and words.

6. THE REJOICING JERUSALEM

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

The fruits of humility with practical faith, the holiness of thought, deeds, and words, will be the true inner joy. The church shall have no work but to give the Lord perpetual thanksgiving, praise, shouting, and incessant rejoice. It is joy *“with all the heart”*, in which the source of joy will dwell, leaving no place for anyone else.

+*“Sing to the Lord a new song”* (Psalm 96: 1). Because the old man will be destroyed, and replaced by the new man, the earth will sing a new song, *“Sing to the Lord, all the earth”* (Psalm 96: 1). The earth that turned to the Lord with all her heart, will incessantly sing with the sweet praises of thanksgiving of youth.

+*“The heavens will praise Your wonders, O Lord”* (Psalm 89: 5) ... If to the sinner, it is said: *“You are dust, and to dust you will return”* (Genesis 19: 3); So why not say to the righteous and the saint: *“You are heaven, and to heaven you will return”*? The saints, like the apostles, will have *“their citizenship in heaven”* (Philippians 3: 20). *“The heavens will praise Your wonders, O Lord”*, prophesies the repentance preached by the apostles, and by which we accept the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. If we obey the counsel, and follow the example of those who have their citizenship there, we shall also be called *“heaven”*... Paradise is the home of the saints.

(St. Jerome)

+*“Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous”* (Psalm 33: 1); *“For the praise from the upright is beautiful”* (Psalm 33: 1);

Submitting to the Lord, they will never go astray; *“Praise the Lord with the harp”* (Psalm 33: 2); Praise the Lord, presenting to Him *“your bodies a living sacrifice”* (Romans 12: 1); *“Make melody to Him with an instrument of ten strings”* (Psalm 33: 2). Let your body members minister to the love of God and to the love of your neighbor ... *“Sing to Him a new song”* (Psalm 33: 3); Sing to Him the song of the grace of faith. *“Play skillfully with a shout of joy”* (Psalm 33: 3).

(St. Augustine)

7. JERUSALEM, THE DWELLING PLACE OF THE LORD:

“The Lord has taken away your judgments, He has cast out your enemy. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; You shall see disaster no more” (Zephaniah 3: 15)

The secret of joy of the church is that He has taken away and wiped out her charges, to be judged no more. The Holy One took her place, and received the verdict of death on her behalf; He took what is hers, and gave her what is His, being the holy and the righteous Son.

The enemy, the devil, who became the prince of this world, has no more place in the true church of Christ. The Lord has cast out her enemy, has publicly made him of no reputation, and has

reigned in her midst; making His righteousness and holiness her law; Evil cannot force its way through her.

+Live, O Jerusalem in complete joy, in perfect happiness, and in fulfillment. The Lord has cast away all your evil deeds, and saved you of your enemy's might; to whom you were once submitted. Now, being in your midst, and proclaiming His Kingdom by caring for you; no disturbance can ever approach you.

(Theodore, Bishop of Messisa)

+The deep meaning of this phrase is that it clearly commands Jerusalem to rejoice and to be happy with all her heart; having all her iniquities cast away by Christ. The spiritual Zion – the church, or the holy congregation – become righteous in Christ, and in Him alone. By, and through Him, they are saved from the harm of their unseen enemies; having as an Intercessor, the Incarnated who took our form; the King of all; namely the Word of God the Father. Thanks to Him, being saved from the hosts of darkness, we shall no longer see evil; He is the (Word), the Shield of good will, Peace, Stronghold, Grantor of non-corruption, the Intercessor of crowns, who overcomes the incorporeal Assyrians, and makes of no avail, the plots of the devils.

(St. Cyril of Alexandria)

+I know that certain scholars interpret this text, as the return from Babylon, and the renewal of Jerusalem. Although

I shall not argue against their interpretation; as the text also applies to what happened then. Yet you shall find a more logic and correct interpretation in the incarnation of our Savior, that healed the grieved hearts by the cleansing of the new birth, having renewed our human nature; proclaiming His love for us by delivering Himself for our sake; *“Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends”* (John 15: 13); and, *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”* (John 3: 16).

(Theodore, Bishop of Coresh)

+After making war against the devil for a certain time, we will be in need of a dwelling place where we find peace.

(St. Augustine)

“In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: ‘Do not fear, Zion, let not your hands be weak’” (Zephaniah 3: 16)

Dwelling in the midst of His people, and dwelling in the heart of the believer, He seeks the raising of the pure hands with no weakness nor fear. Casting away the devil with his works, fear will have no place in the church of Christ, who, daringly, will raise her hands to supplicate for the sake of her children, and for all humanity.

The secret of having no fear will be what the church enjoys of the freedom of the glory of the children of God; by which she can, daringly, speak with Him like a son or a daughter with their father.

+*“The Lord is the strength of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid?”* (Psalm 27: 1). The Lord will make all the attacks of

the enemy of no avail. *“When the wicked came against me, to eat up my flesh”* (Psalm 27: 2); ... I shall change to

the better; With their teeth, they will not devour me, but will devour my carnal lusts.

(St. Augustine)

“The Lord your God in your midst, The mighty One will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you in His love, He will rejoice over you with singing” (Zephaniah 3: 17)

By the return of the remnant to the Lord, The Lord will proudly refer Himself to her; She will be told: *“Your God”*; the same way it is said: *“God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob”*.

In the midst of His church, He is the mighty God, capable to save to perfection, to defend her, and to grant her the life of conquest. She will be the object of His rejoice, and His joy; He will (quietly) contemplate in her spiritual beauty, not in disregard, but will find His comfort in His great love for her.

We know that God is the source of our rejoice, joy, and happiness; But, how amazing to hear that God finds pleasure in us, and rejoices over us! According to Ben Sirach: “God finds pleasure in mankind”; And according to the Lord Christ Himself: “*There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents*” (Luke 15: 7).

+He will indeed save; Yet, He will do that according to the way He promised; And how is that? We have to seek salvation; We have to listen to Him; As He is not promising wooden boards!
(St. John Chrysostom)

8. JERUSALEM ENJOYING SALVATION:

“I will gather those who sorrow over the appointed assembly, who are among you, to whom its *reproach is a burden*” (Zephaniah 3: 18)

Grief reigning over the hearts of the captives, they refused to play on their harps. The Psalmist says: “*By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion. We hung our harps upon the willows in the midst of it. For there, those who carried us away captives required of us a song, And those who plundered us required of us mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion’. How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, Let my right hand forget her skill ...*” (Psalm 137). But, once the Lord reversed their captivation, brought them into the spiritual Jerusalem, and gave them the freedom of the glory of the children of God; their whole being became a spiritual harp on which the Holy Spirit of God plays the songs of salvation, of thanksgiving, and of praise. Her reproach is taken away, her grief is scattered, and she is bearing an inner glory, an exalted heavenly joy.

“*Behold, at that time, I will deal with all who afflict you; I will save the lame, and gather those who are driven out; I will appoint them for praise and fame in every land where they were put to shame*” (Zephaniah 3: 19)

Enjoying salvation from captivity and the reproach of the devil, the weakness of the holy remnant will not be an obstacle on the way of her true glory, As the Savior will deal with whoever has humiliated her, will break his might and power, and will take away his authority over her,

If the enemy has made her lame and helpless to move; the Savior will move on her behalf, and will spare her the feeling of weakness and helplessness.

And if the enemy has captivated her, brought her into exile, and scattered her away from her home, The Savior will gather her, and will bring her over, as though to her heavenly home.

And if the enemy has distorted her image, and poured on her shame and reproach, She will bear the name of her Savior in the whole earth; And will become, herself, a song, and a source of joy to many.

9. JERUSALEM THE GLORIOUS:

“*At the time I will bring you back, Even at the time I gather you; For I will give you fame and praise among all the people of the earth, when I return your captives before your eyes’, says the Lord*” (Zephaniah 3: 20)

He ends the book by proclaiming the Church of the New Testament as a glorious church that reflects the splendor of the glory of her heavenly Father. She, who used to be an object of ridicule and reproach, Her name now, will be all over the earth, the source of joy for all mankind. Everyone will marvel, how the captive has become free; and how the one who was in disgrace, has come to such an exalted glory?!

+The salvation of humanity would only be realized through the compassion of God; We would not acquire it as wage for our own righteousness; but rather as a divine grant and goodness. That is why the Lord says: “*For your sake I save and make alive*”; I will bring back to me, him who has gone after another; I will make him more prominent and more famed; I will set him free from his past reproach, captivity, and servitude; I will make a free nation for Myself, out of those who returned from Babylon at that time, and the whole people of the world later on. We, who were under the violent servitude of the devil; have become now free; Who have irrationally fallen under the worship of a multitude of gods, have become subjects of the living and true God, and, have become, according to the prophecy, more famed and prominent than the pagans and the Barbarians; And, according to the blessed apostle, we, who were far before, became near.

(Theodore, Bishop of Coresh)

Having enjoyed salvation, the believer will be the object of pleasure to God; And this, being reflected on everyone he encounters, he will become the secret of joy to many, who get in touch with the Lord Christ dwelling in him – the fountain of joy; and his mere name will become a praise on the mouths of people.

Wherever the true believer goes, he will turn the location as though into heaven, by the grace of God working in him. And what we say about the believer, we do say about the church as a whole. Her name will turn into a praise, blessed by many, as a source of joy and rejoice to them.

That was the experience of St. Mary, who carrying her Savior in her womb, she became a praise to the whole world; And as she said: “*Behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed*” (Luke 1: 48).

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH

(Chapter 3)

YOU BUILD, AND YOU DEMOLISH

+I shall entrust no hand to demolish me except Your divine hand that builds and demolishes.

To demolish my rebellion, defilements, and oppression; and to take away every disobedience in me.

To scatter every haughtiness which infiltrated into my depths; and to kill every voracious thought.

+In place of my dryness, You grant me the living spirit of worship;

So that, in me, the river of Your Holy Spirit will run, to transform my wilderness into a paradise.

Will grant me the fellowship of the divine nature.

I will find my pleasure in enjoying obedience, humility, and meekness.

I will bear Your abidance, enjoy Your humility, and will enjoy Your meekness.

Glory to You, O who works in the sinners, and grants righteousness to Your servants, in which to hide.

+Your amazing Spirit sets out of me, a rejoicing Jerusalem.

And turns my depths into Your holy temple, to become Your dwelling place.

To know nothing but the joy of heaven and the rejoice of the angels.

To enjoy Your salvation, and the pledge of eternal glory.

Glory to You, O Grantor of glory to Your beloved children.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH: A CALL TO THE HOLY LIFE.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH:

Zephaniah; The circumstances around this book; Date of its writing; Its key; Its features; Its divisions.

- An inspiration from the book of Zephaniah: (The Introduction): Restore me to You; to become a praise for You.

CHAPTER 1: THE GREAT DAY OF THE LORD.

An Introduction; The desolation of Judah; The day of the Lord is at hand; The great day of the Lord.

- In inspiration from the book of Zephaniah (Chapter 1): Let Your great day come.

CHAPTER 2: THE JUDGMENT OF THE NATIONS.

Calling on His people to seek righteousness; Judgment of Palestine; Judgment of Moab and Ammon; Judgment of Cush; Judgment of Assyria.

- An inspiration from the book of Zephaniah (Chapter 2): Destroy my weakness, and set Your righteousness in me.

CHAPTER 3: THE REJOICING JERUSALEM.

The oppressing city; The fall of everyone under the indignation; Setting the worshipping Jerusalem; The humble Jerusalem; The true Jerusalem; The rejoicing Jerusalem; The dwelling place of God; Jerusalem, enjoying salvation.

-An inspiration from the book of Zephaniah (Chapter 3): You build and You demolish.

TABLE OF CONTENTS.