

Introduction to Zephaniah Chapter 3

The Woe Against the Rebellious City, the Pure Lips of the Nations, and the LORD Rejoicing Over His People with Singing

Zephaniah chapter 3 is the most dramatic chapter in the book and one of the most dramatic in the entire Minor Prophets for the range of its movement: from the most devastating indictment of the covenant city in the book (verses 1–7), through the announcement of the divine determination to gather the nations for the fire of the divine jealousy (verse 8), to the most breathtaking reversal available in the Minor Prophets — the purified lips of the nations, the humble remnant of Israel, the removal of the divine judgment, and the LORD Himself rejoicing over His people with singing (verses 9–20). No book in the Minor Prophets covers a greater theological distance in its closing chapter than Zephaniah: from the woe against the oppressive, defiled, violent city whose leaders are roaring lions and evening wolves to the LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.

The woe section of verses 1–7 is the return to the covenant community after the compass-rose judgment of chapter 2. The nations have been condemned; now the most important target of the entire book's prophetic word receives its most concentrated indictment. The rebellious, defiled, oppressing city is Jerusalem — the city that has heard the divine word, received the divine correction, and refused both. The specific condemnation of the officials, the prophets, and the priests in verses 3–4 is the most detailed available description of the comprehensive leadership failure that has produced the city's condition. And the most devastating element of the condemnation is verse 5: the LORD within her is righteous; he does no injustice; every morning he brings his justice to light; it does not fail. The contrast between the divine faithfulness and the human leadership's failure is the most searching available statement of the inexcusability of the city's condition.

The eschatological reversal of verses 9–20 is the most theologically expansive section of the book and one of the most beautiful in the entire Old Testament. The purified lips given to the peoples so that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord — the direct reversal of the Babel judgment of Genesis 11 — is the most universally significant promise in the chapter. The humble remnant of Israel who shall do no injustice and speak no lies and have no deceit in their mouths — the negative definition of the covenant faithfulness as the absence of the specific failures that the woe section named — shall pasture and lie down, and none shall make them afraid. And the LORD is in your midst, a mighty warrior who saves; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing is the most intimate and the most joyful available description of the divine relationship with the restored covenant community in the prophetic tradition.

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father,

We come to Zephaniah chapter 3 having traveled through the comprehensive judgment of chapter 1 and the urgent summons and compass-rose judgment of chapter 2, and we come now to the chapter that holds both the most devastating indictment of the covenant city and the most breathtaking reversal in the Minor Prophets. We come needing both. We need the woe against the rebellious, defiled, oppressing city to break through the comfortable self-assessment of the covenant community that imagines its own leadership to be faithful. And we need the LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save — the singing God, the quieting love, the exultant rejoicing — to be the eschatological anchor that holds the community through the judgment toward the restoration that the judgment is clearing the way for.

Lord, let the the LORD within her is righteous; he does no injustice; every morning he brings his justice to light; it does not fail be the most searching element of the indictment for us: the contrast between Your faithfulness and the faithlessness of the community that has had Your righteous presence in its midst and has produced the roaring lions and the evening wolves of the leadership failure. Let the contrast produce the shame and the earnest seeking that the chapter calls for. And let the I will give to the peoples purified lips, that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD be the eschatological vision that shapes the missionary life of the community that has been restored by the judgment and the singing.

And let the he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing be received in all its tenderness and all its theological weight. This is the God who has been announcing the day of wrath and distress and anguish and ruin and devastation. And this is also — on the other side of the judgment that the wrath announces — the same God, rejoicing, quieting, singing. Let the singing God be the final word that shapes everything that precedes it.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Zephaniah 3:1–7

Woe to the Rebellious, Defiled, Oppressing City: The Leadership Failure, the Divine Faithfulness, and the Inexcusable Refusal

- (1) Woe to her that is filthy and polluted,
to the oppressing city!*
- (2) She obeyed not the voice;
she received not correction;
she trusted not in the LORD;
she drew not near to God.*

*(3) Her princes within her are roaring lions;
her judges are evening wolves;
they gnaw not the bones till the morrow.*

*(4) Her prophets are light and treacherous persons:
her priests have polluted the sanctuary,
they have done violence to the law.*

*(5) The just LORD is in the midst thereof;
he will not do iniquity:
every morning doth he bring his judgment to light,
he faileth not;
but the unjust knoweth no shame.*

*(6) I have cut off the nations:
their towers are desolate;
I made their streets waste,
that none passeth by:
their cities are destroyed,
so that there is no man,
that there is none inhabitant.*

*(7) I said, Surely thou wilt fear me,
thou wilt receive instruction;
so their dwelling should not be cut off,
howsoever I punished them:
but they rose early, and corrupted all their doings.*

The Context

The woe that opens verse 1 returns to the form of the formal covenant curse last heard at the beginning of chapter 2:1, but now it is directed at the covenant city itself rather than at the nation without shame. The woe against the rebellious, defiled, and oppressing city is the most direct available application of the day-of-the-LORD judgment to the covenant community: the city that has been the recipient of the divine word, the divine presence, the divine correction, and the divine faithfulness is the city that most deserves the most concentrated form of the prophetic indictment. Jerusalem is not named — but the she of the oracle, the city that received the word and did not obey, received the correction and did not accept it, is unmistakably Jerusalem.

The fourfold failure of verse 2 is the most comprehensive available description of the covenant community's relationship to the divine word and presence: she did not obey the voice (the word received but not followed); she accepted no correction (the discipline offered but rejected); she did not trust in the LORD (the faith that should have been the foundation of the covenant life but has been replaced by the practical deism of chapter 1:12); she did not draw near to her God (the seeking that chapter 2:3 commanded but which the city has consistently refused). The four fail-

ures together constitute the complete breakdown of the covenant relationship from every available angle: the word, the discipline, the faith, and the seeking.

The leadership indictment of verses 3–4 is the most specific in the book. The princes are roaring lions; the judges are evening wolves who leave nothing for the morning — the image of the predatory leadership that has consumed the community so thoroughly that nothing remains for the next day. The prophets are reckless, faithless men — the Hebrew uses the word for the frothy, unreliable wind, the light and unstable person who cannot be trusted. The priests have profaned the sanctuary and done violence to the law — the specific violations of the two most sacred institutional responsibilities of the priestly office: the maintenance of the sanctuary's holiness and the interpretation and application of the Torah.

Verse 5 is the most theologically searching element of the woe section and the most devastating indictment of the city's leadership. The just LORD is in her midst; he will do no injustice; every morning he brings his justice to light; it does not fail. This is the divine faithfulness declared in the most emphatic available terms — every morning, without fail, the divine justice appears. And then the most damning contrast: but the unjust one knows no shame. The contrast between the divine faithfulness — consistent, daily, unfailing — and the human leadership's shameless injustice is the most concentrated available statement of the inexcusability of the city's condition. The community has had the faithful God in its midst every morning and has produced the roaring lions and the evening wolves and the reckless prophets and the law-violating priests. The contrast makes the covenant violation the more inexcusable.

Verse 6 — I have cut off nations; their battlements are in ruins; I have laid waste their streets so that no one walks in them; their cities have been made desolate, without a man, without an inhabitant — is the divine appeal to the evidence of the compass-rose judgment of chapter 2: look at what I have done to the nations. The desolated Philistine coast, the Sodom-and-Gomorra Moab and Ammon, the destroyed Nineveh — these are the object lessons that the covenant community should have received as the warning of what the divine judgment does to those who reject the divine word. And verse 7 is the most heartbreaking element of the woe section: I said, surely you will fear me; you will accept correction; then your dwelling will not be cut off. But they were eager to make all their deeds corrupt. The divine hope for the response that would have averted the judgment has been disappointed by the eagerness of the city to corrupt its own deeds.

Plain American English

What sorrow awaits the rebellious, polluted Jerusalem, the city of violence and crime! No one can tell it anything; it refuses all correction. It does not trust in the LORD or draw near to its God. Its leaders are like roaring lions hunting for their victims. Its judges are like ravenous wolves at evening time, who by dawn have left no trace of their prey. Its prophets are arrogant liars seeking their own gain. Its priests defile the Temple by disobeying God's instructions. But the LORD is still there in the city, and he does no wrong. Day by day he hands down justice, and he does not fail. But the wicked know no shame. I have wiped out many nations, devastating their

fortress walls and towers. Their streets are now deserted; their cities lie in silent ruin. There are no survivors — none at all. I thought, “Surely they will have reverence for me now! Surely they will listen to my warnings. Then I won’t need to strike again, destroying their homes.” But no, they got up early to continue their evil deeds.

Key Observations

“She obeyed not the voice; she received not correction; she trusted not in the LORD; she drew not near to God”: This signifies **The Fourfold Failure Is the Most Comprehensive Available Description of the Complete Breakdown of the Covenant Relationship — Every Available Dimension of the Covenant Life Has Been Refused.**

The four failures of verse 2 cover the entire available range of the covenant relationship: the word not obeyed, the correction not accepted, the trust not given, the drawing near not pursued. Each dimension of the covenant life that the LORD has been extending to the city has been refused in its particular way. The word has come and not been obeyed; the correction has been offered and not accepted; the faith has been available and not exercised; the nearness has been invited and not approached. Together the four failures constitute the most comprehensive available description of the covenant breakdown: not one dimension of the covenant relationship has been honored. The city has not merely failed in some areas while succeeding in others; it has failed in every available dimension simultaneously.

“The just LORD is in the midst thereof; he will not do iniquity: every morning doth he bring his judgment to light, he faileth not; but the unjust knoweth no shame”: This signifies **The Contrast Between the Divine Faithfulness and the Human Shamelessness Is the Most Devastating Statement of the Inexcusability — the Covenant Community Has Had the Faithful God in Its Midst Every Morning and Has Produced Only Shameless Injustice.**

The every morning he brings his justice to light; it does not fail is the most emphatic available statement of the divine consistency: the justice of the LORD appears every morning, without exception, without delay, without failure. And the but the unjust one knows no shame is the most damning contrast: against the backdrop of the daily, unfailing, consistent divine justice, the human leadership of the city has produced the shameless injustice of the roaring lions and the evening wolves and the reckless prophets and the law-violating priests. The inexcusability is total: the city has had the just God in its midst every morning and has produced the most comprehensive available leadership failure. The contrast is the prophetic tradition’s most concentrated statement of the principle that privilege intensifies accountability: the community that has had the most consistent available expression of the divine justice in its midst bears the heaviest accountability for its own injustice.

“I said, Surely thou wilt fear me, thou wilt receive instruction... but they rose early, and corrupted all their doings”: This signifies **The Disappointed Divine Hope Is the Most Heart-breaking Element of the Woe Section — the LORD’s Expectation That the Lesson of the Nations’ Judgment Would Produce the Response That Would Have Averted the Same Judgment Has Been Answered by the Eagerness to Corrupt.**

The I said, surely you will fear me; you will accept correction is the most intimate and the most heartbreaking element of the woe section: the divine hope that the object lesson of the nations’

judgment would produce the fear and the correction in the covenant city that would have averted the same judgment for the city itself. The LORD who cut off the nations and desolated their streets expected the covenant community to see the desolated nations and understand: this is what happens to those who refuse the divine word. The hope was disappointed. They were eager to make all their deeds corrupt — the eagerness being the most damning element of the disappointment: not the passive drift into further faithlessness but the active, eager corruption of the deeds that the divine hope had expected to be corrected.

What This Means for Us Today

1. Apply the Fourfold Failure as the Diagnostic of the Covenant Community's Present Relationship to the Divine Word, the Divine Discipline, the Divine Trust, and the Divine Near-

ness: The she obeyed not the voice, received not correction, trusted not in the LORD, drew not near to God is the most comprehensive available diagnostic for the contemporary community of faith that has been receiving the divine word, the divine discipline, and the invitation to seek and to trust and to draw near. The diagnostic question is not whether the community has formally maintained these covenant practices but whether the practices have been genuinely operative: has the voice been obeyed or acknowledged without obedience? Has the correction been accepted or managed without transformation? Has the trust been genuine or performed? Has the drawing near been earnest or ritualized?

2. Receive the Every Morning He Brings His Justice to Light; It Does Not Fail as the Most Searching Available Corrective for the Leadership of the Covenant Community — the Divine Consistency That Makes the Human Inconsistency the More Inexcusable:

The every morning, without fail, without exception is the divine standard against which the leadership of the covenant community is being measured. The pastors, the teachers, the elders, the administrators, the prophetic voices of the community who have the consistent divine justice in their midst every morning and produce the roaring lions and the evening wolves of the leadership failure have committed the same inexcusable failure that verse 5 names. The divine faithfulness does not make the human failure easier to excuse; it makes it the more inexcusable by establishing the contrast.

3. Let the Disappointed Divine Hope of Verse 7 Be the Most Moving Available Motivation for the Earnest Covenant Faithfulness That Would Honor the Hope Rather Than Disappoint It:

The I said, surely you will fear me is the divine hope that can be honored or disappointed. The community of faith that reads verse 7 and understands that the LORD has a hope for the covenant community's response to the object lessons of the nations' judgment — that the LORD expects the community to see and to learn and to be corrected — has the most moving available motivation for the earnest response: not merely the fear of the judgment but the desire to honor the divine hope that the judgment is designed to produce.

How This Relates to Today

The princes as roaring lions and the judges as evening wolves and the prophets as reckless, faithless men and the priests who profane the sanctuary and do violence to the law is the most comprehensive available description of the leadership failure that the prophetic tradition consistently

identifies as the most proximate cause of the covenant community's collapse. The contemporary equivalents are not difficult to identify: the religious leaders who have consumed the community for their own benefit, the prophets who have told the community what it wants to hear rather than what the divine word requires, the institutional leaders who have profaned the sacred and done violence to the truth. The woe of verses 1–4 is addressed to the leadership of the covenant community in every generation with the same force with which it was addressed to Jerusalem in Zephaniah's.

The but the unjust knoweth no shame is also one of the most diagnostically useful observations in the chapter for the contemporary community's self-assessment. The community whose leadership has lost the capacity for the shame that the covenant violation should produce has reached the most complete available form of the formation failure: not the weakness of will that chooses wrong while knowing right, but the loss of the knowing itself — the loss of the capacity to recognize the wrong as wrong and to feel the shame that the recognition should produce. The shameless injustice of the leadership that knows no shame is the Amos 3:10 they do not know how to do right applied to the Jerusalem of Zephaniah's day.

Key Lesson: **The woe section is the most concentrated prophetic indictment of the covenant community in the book: the fourfold failure of the word, the correction, the trust, and the drawing near; the fourfold leadership failure of the princes, the judges, the prophets, and the priests; the devastating contrast between the every-morning unfailing divine justice and the shameless human injustice; and the heartbreaking disappointed divine hope that expected the object lesson of the nations' judgment to produce the correction that would have averted the same judgment for the covenant city.**

Zephaniah 3:8

Therefore Wait for Me: The Divine Determination and the Fire of the Jealousy That Consumes the Earth

*(8) Therefore wait ye upon me, saith the LORD,
until the day that I rise up to the prey:
for my determination is to gather the nations,
that I may assemble the kingdoms,
to pour upon them mine indignation,
even all my fierce anger:
for all the earth shall be devoured
with the fire of my jealousy.*

The Context

Verse 8 is the theological hinge of the entire chapter — and, in many ways, of the entire book. Standing between the comprehensive woe of verses 1–7 and the breathtaking restoration of

verses 9–20, it is the single verse that holds the judgment and the restoration in their proper theological relationship. The therefore wait for me is the most direct available expression of the divine command in the transitional moment: the community that has heard the woe and received the indictment is now commanded to wait — to hold in expectation for the day when the LORD rises up as a witness, when He gathers the nations, when He pours out His indignation, when the fire of the divine jealousy devours the whole earth.

The wait for me is one of the most theologically important commands in the book because it establishes the posture of the covenant community in the period between the woe and the restoration. The community that has received the indictment is not commanded to despair or to flee; it is commanded to wait. The waiting is the eschatological posture of the community that has understood that the divine action is coming, that the judgment is real and comprehensive, and that the restoration that follows the judgment is the divine purpose toward which the judgment is directed. The waiting is the active, expectant, hope-filled posture of the community that knows the destination and is enduring the present penultimate stage in anticipation of it.

The for all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of my jealousy is the echo of chapter 1:18 — the whole land shall be devoured by the fire of his jealousy — now expanded to its cosmic scope: not merely the land of Judah but the whole earth. The comprehensive judgment announced in chapter 1 and applied to the nations in the compass-rose oracles of chapter 2 reaches its cosmic scope in the single verse that stands at the theological center of chapter 3. The fire of the divine jealousy that chapter 1 announced as the instrument of the judgment has been building to this moment: the gathering of all nations, the pouring out of the indignation, the devouring of the whole earth. And then — verse 9 — the restoration.

Plain American English

“So be patient,” says the LORD. “Be patient until the day when I stand up to accuse the evil nations. For it is my decision to gather the kingdoms of the earth and pour out my fiercest anger and fury on them. The whole earth will be consumed by the fire of my jealousy.”

Key Observations

“Therefore wait ye upon me, saith the LORD, until the day that I rise up to the prey”: This signifies The Wait for Me Is the Most Important Command in the Transitional Verse — the Eschatological Posture of the Community That Has Received the Indictment and Is Now Called to Hold in Active, Hope-Filled Expectation for the Divine Action.

The therefore wait for me is the command that establishes the covenant community’s posture in the penultimate stage between the judgment and the restoration. The waiting is not the passive resignation of those who have given up on the divine action; it is the active, expectant, hope-filled waiting of those who know that the divine action is coming and who are holding in anticipation of it. The Hebrew *qawah* — to wait, to hope, to look eagerly for — is the word used in Isaiah 40:31 for those who wait for the LORD and renew their strength. The community that

waits for the LORD in the Zephaniah sense is the community that has understood the theological sequence: the comprehensive judgment is real, the fire of the jealousy will devour the whole earth, and on the other side of that devouring is the restoration that verses 9–20 will declare. Wait for it.

“For all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of my jealousy”: This signifies **The Cosmic Expansion of the Chapter 1:18 Judgment to the Whole Earth Is the Theological Climax of the Book’s Judgment Announcement — the Fire of the Divine Jealousy That Began in the Land Has Reached Its Fullest Possible Scope.**

The expansion from the whole land of chapter 1:18 to the whole earth of chapter 3:8 is the most important theological development in the verse. The fire of the divine jealousy that was announced as the instrument of the judgment on Judah in chapter 1 is now declared to be the instrument of the comprehensive cosmic judgment. The compass-rose oracles of chapter 2 have traced the extension of the judgment from Philistia to Moab and Ammon to Cush to Assyria; the whole earth of verse 8 is the completion of the extension. The divine jealousy burns against the covenant violation in the covenant community (chapter 1) and against the pride and the contempt of the nations (chapter 2), and the fire that burns against both reaches to the whole earth before the restoration of verses 9–20 begins.

What This Means for Us Today

1. Practice the Wait for Me as the Most Important Available Form of the Eschatological Posture of the Community That Has Received the Judgment and Is Anticipating the Restoration: The therefore wait for me is the command for the community that has been between the woe and the restoration — that has received the indictment and understood the judgment but has not yet seen the restoration. The waiting is not the passive resignation of the defeated; it is the active, hope-filled, expectant waiting of those who know the destination. The community of faith that practices the eschatological waiting of verse 8 is the community that has understood both the reality of the judgment and the certainty of the restoration, and that is holding in the penultimate stage with the confident expectation of the divine action that is coming.

How This Relates to Today

The therefore wait for me is one of the most counter-cultural commands in the prophetic tradition for the contemporary community of faith that has been formed by a culture of immediate gratification, instant response, and the intolerance of the unresolved. The waiting that Zephaniah commands is the waiting that holds the unresolved tension of the present penultimate stage — the stage between the comprehensive judgment and the breathtaking restoration — with the active, hope-filled expectation that the divine action is coming. The community that cannot wait — that rushes to the resolution before the resolution has arrived — has not yet learned the eschatological patience that the prophetic tradition consistently models and commands.

Key Lesson: **The single transitional verse is the theological hinge of the chapter and the book: the therefore wait for me that establishes the eschatological posture of the community between the woe and the restoration, and the for all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of my jeal-*

ousy that expands the chapter 1 judgment to its fullest cosmic scope before the most breathtaking reversal in the Minor Prophets begins in verse 9.*

Zephaniah 3:9–13

Pure Lips for the Nations and a Humble Remnant: The Reversal of Babel and the Pasturing People Who Know No Fear

*(9) For then will I turn to the people a pure language,
that they may all call upon the name of the LORD,
to serve him with one consent.
(10) From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia
my suppliants, even the daughter of my dispersed,
shall bring mine offering.
(11) In that day shalt thou not be ashamed
for all thy doings,
wherein thou hast transgressed against me:
for then I will take away out of the midst of thee
them that rejoice in thy pride,
and thou shalt no more be haughty
because of my holy mountain.
(12) I will also leave in the midst of thee
an afflicted and poor people,
and they shall trust in the name of the LORD.
(13) The remnant of Israel shall not do iniquity,
nor speak lies;
neither shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth:
for they shall feed and lie down,
and none shall make them afraid.*

The Context

The for then of verse 9 is the most important transitional word in the chapter: the comprehensive judgment of verse 8 — the gathering of the nations and the devouring fire of the divine jealousy — is the precondition for the for then of the restoration. The judgment does not lead to a blank slate; it leads directly to the most expansive available reversal. And the first element of the reversal is the most universally significant: I will give to the peoples a pure lip, that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord.

The pure lip given to the peoples is the direct reversal of the Babel judgment of Genesis 11. In Genesis 11, the LORD confused the language of the whole earth so that the nations were scat-

tered in their proud building project; in Zephaniah 3:9, the LORD gives purified lips to the peoples so that all nations may call upon the divine name with one accord. The Babel judgment was the scattering of the nations through the confusion of language; the Zephaniah restoration is the gathering of the nations through the purification of the speech. The canonical trajectory from Babel through the Pentecost of Acts 2 — where the Spirit's outpouring is accompanied by the miraculous understanding of the diverse languages — runs directly through Zephaniah 3:9: the reversal of Babel is the eschatological gift of the pure lip that enables the universal worship.

The from beyond the rivers of Ethiopia — from the most geographically remote possible source, the same Cushites whose single-verse oracle in chapter 2:12 established the comprehensive reach of the divine judgment — my worshippers, the daughter of my dispersed people, shall bring my offering. The same Cush that was subject to the divine sword is now the source of the worshippers who bring the divine offering. The judgment of the nations (chapter 2) and the restoration of the nations (chapter 3:9–10) are the two movements of the same divine purpose: the judgment clears the way for the restoration, and the restoration includes the nations that the judgment addressed.

The removal of the proudly exultant from the midst of the city in verse 11 — the purging of the proud who rejoice in their arrogance on the divine mountain — is the negative dimension of the restoration for the covenant community. The community that is restored is not the proud community of the woe section but the humbled community from which the pride has been removed. And the what is left behind is the afflicted and humble people who shall take refuge in the name of the LORD of verse 12: the anawim — the humble, the poor, the lowly of the earth who were the audience of the seek the LORD invitation of chapter 2:3 — are the remnant that the judgment preserves and the restoration fills.

The remnant of Israel shall do no injustice and speak no lies, and no deceitful tongue shall be found in their mouths of verse 13 is the definition of the restored community by the negative: what they will not do. The specific failures named — injustice, lies, deceitful speech — are the specific failures of the leadership that the woe section indicted: the roaring lions who consume the community (injustice), the reckless prophets who are faithless men (lies), the priests who do violence to the law (deceit). The restored community is defined by the absence of the specific failures of the unreformed community. And they shall pasture and lie down, and none shall make them afraid is the most peaceful available image of the restored life: the pastoral quietness of the flock that is safe, fed, and undisturbed by any threat.

Plain American English

“Then I will purify the lips of all people so that everyone will be able to worship the LORD together. My scattered people who live beyond the rivers of Ethiopia will come to present their offerings. On that day you will no longer need to be ashamed, for you will no longer be rebels against me. I will remove all proud and arrogant people from among you. There will be no more haughtiness on my holy mountain. Those who are left will be the lowly and humble, for it is they

who trust in the name of the LORD. The remnant of Israel will do no wrong; they will never tell lies or deceive one another. They will eat and sleep in safety, and no one will make them afraid.”

Key Observations

“For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the LORD, to serve him with one consent”: This signifies **The Pure Lip Given to All the Peoples Is the Most Universally Significant Element of the Restoration — the Direct Reversal of the Babel Judgment That Establishes the Eschatological Unity of Worship Across All Nations.**

The I will give to the peoples pure lips is the single most universally significant promise in the book and one of the most significant in the Minor Prophets. The canonical context is the Babel judgment of Genesis 11: the confusion of language that scattered the nations in their proud building project is now reversed in the giving of the pure lip that enables the nations to call upon the divine name with one accord. The eschatological trajectory from Babel through Zephaniah 3:9 to Acts 2 — the Pentecost outpouring that enables the understanding of diverse languages in the proclamation of the mighty works of God — is the most direct available canonical line in the New Testament’s fulfillment of the Old Testament restoration promise. The pure lip that Zephaniah announces is the lip that is purified by the Spirit for the purpose of the universal worship.

“I will also leave in the midst of thee an afflicted and poor people, and they shall trust in the name of the LORD”: This signifies **The Humble Remnant Who Trust in the Divine Name Is the Positive Definition of the Restored Community — the Anawim of Chapter 2:3 Who Were Invited to Seek the LORD Are Now the Community That the Restoration Produces.**

The afflicted and poor people who trust in the name of the LORD is the most direct available connection between the seek ye the LORD, all you humble of the earth of chapter 2:3 and the restored community of chapter 3:12. The anawim — the humble, the poor, the afflicted — who were the audience of the seeking invitation are the community that the restoration produces. The proud, the arrogant, the haughty who rejoice on the holy mountain have been removed; what remains is the humble people who trust in the divine name. The restoration does not produce the proud community that has been purged of its worst excesses; it produces the fundamentally different community whose defining characteristic is the trust in the divine name rather than the self-sufficient pride that the woe section condemned.

“The remnant of Israel shall not do iniquity, nor speak lies; neither shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth: for they shall feed and lie down, and none shall make them afraid”: This signifies **The Restored Community Defined by the Absence of the Specific Failures of the Unreformed Community Is the Most Precise Available Statement of the Transformation That the Judgment Has Accomplished — the Pastoral Peace of the Flock That Trusts.**

The shall not do iniquity, shall not speak lies, no deceitful tongue in their mouths is the restored community defined by the absence of the specific failures of the leadership that the woe section indicted. The injustice of the roaring lions is absent; the lies of the reckless prophets are absent; the deceit of the priests who do violence to the law is absent. The community that remains after

the judgment has removed the proud and purified the remnant is defined not by the brilliant achievements it has produced but by the specific failures it no longer commits. And the they shall feed and lie down and none shall make them afraid is the pastoral peace of the Psalm 23 flock — the image of the community that is safe, provided for, and undisturbed by any threat because the Shepherd is present.

What This Means for Us Today

1. Receive the Pure Lip Given to All the Peoples as the Eschatological Vision of the Universal Worship That the Missionary Enterprise of the Church Is Working Toward — and as the Pentecost Promise Already Being Fulfilled: The I will give to the peoples pure lips so that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD with one accord is the Old Testament seed of the Acts 2 Pentecost and the Revelation 7:9 great multitude from every nation and tribe and people and language standing before the throne. The missionary enterprise of the new covenant community is the outworking of the Zephaniah 3:9 promise: the purified lips are being given to the peoples through the Spirit's outpouring, and the all of them may call upon the name of the LORD is the eschatological goal toward which the mission is moving. Receive the Zephaniah promise as the missionary vision that shapes the community's engagement with the nations.

2. Receive the Humble Remnant Who Trust in the Divine Name as the Most Honest Available Self-Description of the Covenant Community in the Present Age — Not the Proud Triumphalist Community but the Afflicted and Poor Who Trust: The afflicted and poor people who trust in the name of the LORD is the most honest available self-description of the new covenant community in the present age. Not the triumphalist community that has achieved the social and cultural dominance of the nations; not the proud community that rejoices in its status on the holy mountain; but the afflicted and poor who trust in the divine name. The beatitude community of Matthew 5 — the poor in spirit, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness — is the Zephaniah 3:12 community: the humble remnant whose defining characteristic is the trust in the divine name.

How This Relates to Today

The canonical trajectory of the pure lip promise — from the Babel scattering of Genesis 11 through the Zephaniah 3:9 restoration through the Acts 2 Pentecost through the Revelation 7:9 great multitude — is the most comprehensive available canonical statement of the missionary vision that the prophetic tradition consistently builds toward. The contemporary church that understands itself as the community living between the Pentecost fulfillment and the Revelation consummation of the Zephaniah promise is the community that has received the pure lips for the purpose of the universal worship that is already being gathered and will be fully gathered when the last nation hears the name of the LORD called upon in its own tongue.

Key Lesson: **The restoration section establishes the three dimensions of the eschatological renewal: the universal pure lip given to all the peoples that reverses Babel and enables the universal calling upon the divine name; the removal of the proud and the preservation of the humble remnant who trust in the divine name; and the definition of the restored community by the ab-*

*sence of the specific failures of the unreformed community — the pastoral peace of the flock that feeds and lies down and is afraid of nothing because the Shepherd is present.**

Zephaniah 3:14–20

The LORD Your God Is in Your Midst: The Singing God, the Quieting Love, and the People Gathered Home

*(14) Sing, O daughter of Zion;
shout, O Israel;
be glad and rejoice with all the heart,
O daughter of Jerusalem.*

*(15) The LORD hath taken away thy judgments,
he hath cast out thine enemy:
the king of Israel, even the LORD, is in the midst of thee:
thou shalt not see evil any more.*

*(16) In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem,
Fear thou not:
and to Zion, Let not thine hands be slack.*

*(17) The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty;
he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy;
he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing.*

*(18) I will gather them that are sorrowful for the solemn assembly,
who are of thee, to whom the reproach of it was a burden.*

*(19) Behold, at that time I will undo all that afflict thee:
and I will save her that halteth,
and gather her that was driven out;
and I will get them praise and fame
in every land where they have been put to shame.*

*(20) At that time will I bring you again,
even in the time that I gather you:
for I will make you a name and a praise
among all people of the earth,
when I turn back your captivity
before your eyes, saith the LORD.*

The Context

The sing, O daughter of Zion of verse 14 is the most dramatic turn in the book and one of the most dramatic in the prophetic tradition. The book that has been building the most comprehen-

sive available statement of the divine judgment — the I will utterly sweep away everything, the be silent before the Lord GOD, the day of wrath and distress and anguish, the woe against the rebellious city, the wait for the fire of my jealousy — turns in verse 14 to the most exuberant invitation to joy available in the Minor Prophets: shout aloud, O Israel; rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem. The turn is not the abandonment of the judgment; it is the declaration that the judgment has accomplished its purpose and the restoration has arrived.

The theological ground of the singing is specified in verse 15: the LORD has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. The removal of the judgment is the precondition of the singing: the community that has been under the judgment cannot genuinely sing the song of the restoration while the judgment remains. The LORD took away the judgments and the cast out your enemies together establish the two conditions of the restoration: the removal of the divine condemnation and the removal of the human threat. Both conditions have been met; therefore the singing is appropriate.

Verse 17 is the most remarkable verse in the book and one of the most remarkable in the entire Old Testament for its description of the divine response to the restored community: the LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. The God who has been the God of the sweeping judgment, the fire of the jealousy, the gathered nations — this God is now the God who rejoices over the restored community with the most intimate and the most exuberant love available in the human emotional range: the gladness, the quieting love, the loud singing. The LORD who sings over His people is the most tender and the most humanly recognizable image of the divine love in the prophetic tradition.

The gathering of those who mourn for the assembly of verse 18 — those who have been grieving the loss of the sacred gatherings during the exile — and the saving of the lame and the gathering of the outcast and the turning of the shame into praise and renown of verse 19 are the specific forms of the restoration applied to the specific forms of the loss that the exile has produced. The lame who have been unable to keep up with the community, the outcast who have been driven away from the community, the shamed who have been put to shame in every land — these are the specific people whom the restoration gathers, saves, and transforms. The restoration is not the restoration of the proud community that the judgment condemned; it is the specific restoration of the specific people who suffered the specific losses that the exile produced.

The at that time I will bring you home; at the time when I gather you together — I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the LORD of verse 20 is the book's final word. The restoration is not merely the ending of the exile but the transformation of the shame into the praise and the renown that the exile denied: in every land where they have been put to shame, they will be given praise and fame. The before your eyes is the most specific available statement of the visibility of the restoration: the same community that saw the exile happen will see the restoration happen. The LORD who declared the judgment will declare the restoration, and both will be seen.

Plain American English

Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! For the LORD will remove his hand of judgment and will disperse your enemy. The LORD himself, the King of Israel, will live among you! At last your troubles will be over, and you will never again fear disaster. On that day the announcement to Jerusalem will be: "Courage! Don't be afraid. For the LORD your God is living among you. He is a mighty savior. He will take delight in you with gladness. With his love, he will calm all your fears. He will rejoice over you with joyful songs." I will gather you who mourn for the appointed feasts, for you carry the shame of exile far from home. And I will deal severely with all who have oppressed you. I will save the weak and helpless ones; I will bring together those who were chased away. I will give glory and fame to my former exiles, wherever they have been mocked and shamed. On that coming day, I will gather you together and bring you home again. I will give you a good name, a name of distinction, among all the nations of the earth, as I restore your fortunes before your very eyes. I, the LORD, have spoken!

Key Observations

“Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all the heart, O daughter of Jerusalem”: This signifies **The Most Dramatic Turn in the Book Is the Invitation to the Most Exuberant Joy Available in the Minor Prophets — the Community That Has Been Under the Judgment Is Now Under the Restoration, and the Appropriate Response Is the Singing That the Removal of the Judgment Makes Possible.**

The sing, shout aloud, rejoice and exult with all your heart is the most exuberant invitation to joy in the Minor Prophets, and its dramatic force is proportional to the dramatic severity of what has preceded it. The book that opened with I will utterly sweep away everything and the day of wrath and the be silent before the Lord GOD and the woe against the rebellious city closes with the most exuberant invitation to joy available in the prophetic tradition. The dramatic distance between the opening and the closing is the measure of the comprehensive transformation that the judgment has accomplished: from the community under the judgment to the community under the restoration, from the silence of the creature before the sovereign to the singing of the beloved in the presence of the One who sings over them.

“The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing”: This signifies **The Singing God Is the Most Intimate and the Most Theologically Surprising Image in the Book — the God of the Sweeping Judgment and the Devouring Fire Rejoicing Over the Restored Community with Gladness, Quietening Them with Love, Singing Over Them with Exultation.**

The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing is the most remarkable verse in the book and one of the most remarkable in the entire prophetic tradition. The God who has been the God of the comprehensive cosmic judgment — who sweeps away everything, who prepares the sacrifice, who gathers the nations for the fire of the jealousy — is the God who rejoices with gladness over the restored community, who quiets the community with

His love, who sings over the community with the loud singing of the exultant heart. The two images of the divine character — the God of the judgment and the God of the singing — are not in tension; they are the two expressions of the same divine love: the love that is holy enough to judge the covenant violation and tender enough to sing over the restored community.

“I will save her that halteth, and gather her that was driven out; and I will get them praise and fame in every land where they have been put to shame”: This signifies **The Specific Restoration of the Specific People Who Suffered the Specific Losses Is the Most Precise Available Expression of the Divine Care for the Individual Members of the Community Whom the Exile Has Broken and Scattered.**

The saving of the lame and the gathering of the outcast and the turning of the shame into praise in every land where the shame was suffered is the most personally specific element of the restoration. The restoration is not the restoration of the community in the abstract but the specific restoration of the specific individuals who suffered the specific losses: the one who halts, who could not keep up with the community in the exile; the one who was driven out, expelled from the community; the one who has been put to shame in every land where the exile took them. The divine care for the specific broken people — the lame, the outcast, the shamed — is the most intimate available expression of the covenant love that the singing God has for the restored community.

“I will make you a name and a praise among all people of the earth, when I turn back your captivity before your eyes, saith the LORD”: This signifies **The Before Your Eyes Is the Most Personal Available Statement of the Visibility of the Restoration — the Same Community That Saw the Exile Will See the Restoration, and the Shame That Was Public Will Become the Praise That Is Public.**

The when I restore your fortunes before your eyes is the most specific available statement of the personal visibility of the restoration. The exile was a public event — the community that had been put to shame in every land where they were taken knows what it means for the shame to be visible to everyone around them. And the restoration that turns the shame into praise will be equally public: before your eyes, in every land where the shame was suffered, the LORD will give them praise and fame. The same community that saw the exile happen will see the restoration happen. The restoration is not the private consolation of the survivor; it is the public vindication of the community that was publicly shamed.

What This Means for Us Today

1. Receive the LORD Your God Is in Your Midst, a Mighty One Who Will Save as the Most Comprehensive Available Statement of the Emmanuel Promise That the Restored Community Lives Under — the Divine Presence That Is Both Mighty Enough to Save and Tender Enough to Sing: The LORD your God is in your midst is the Emmanuel promise in its most complete available form: the God who is mighty to save is the same God who rejoices with gladness, who quiets with love, who sings with exultation. The new covenant community lives under this promise in its fullest expression: the Emmanuel of Matthew 1:23 is the incarnation of the LORD in the midst of the community, and the Spirit of Acts 2 is the ongoing presence of the

mighty, saving, singing God in the midst of the people. Receive the Zephaniah 3:17 promise as the description of the God who is present in the community right now.

2. Let the He Will Quiet You by His Love Be the Most Important Available Word for the Community That Has Been Unsettled by the Judgment and Needs the Quieting of the Love That Has Not Changed:

The he will quiet you by his love is the most intimate available expression of the divine response to the community that has been through the judgment and is now in the restoration. The quieting is not the silencing of the lament; it is the settling of the restless, unsettled spirit that the judgment has disturbed. The love of the God who has both judged and restored is the love that can quiet the community's restlessness in the restoration: the same love that required the judgment is the love that quiets the community after the judgment. Let the love that quieted do its quieting work in the community that has been through the comprehensive judgment of the present age.

3. Receive the He Will Exult Over You with Loud Singing as the Most Astonishing Available Description of the Divine Delight in the Restored Community — and Let the Divine Singing Shape the Community's Own Singing:

The LORD exulting over the restored community with loud singing is the most astonishing available image of the divine delight. The God who has been the God of the wrath and the judgment and the devouring fire sings over the restored community with the exultation of the one whose delight has found its object. Let the divine singing shape the community's own singing: the community that knows it is being sung over by the LORD can sing with the confidence that its singing is the echo of the divine song. The daughter of Zion is invited to sing because the LORD is singing over her.

How This Relates to Today

The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing is one of the most frequently quoted and most deeply loved verses in the entire prophetic tradition, and its contemporary application is as direct as its ancient one. The new covenant community that has received the Emmanuel of Matthew 1 and the Spirit of Acts 2 is the community over whom the LORD is singing right now. The restoration that Zephaniah announces is the restoration that has been inaugurated in the resurrection of Jesus and is being consummated in the gathering of the nations through the missionary enterprise of the church. The singing God of Zephaniah 3:17 is the same God who, in the parable of Luke 15, runs to meet the returning prodigal and calls for the celebration: there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

The saving of the lame and the gathering of the outcast and the turning of the shame into praise in every land where the shame was suffered is also the model for the new covenant community's ministry to the specific broken people whom the exile of the present age has produced. The community that saves the lame, that gathers the outcast, that transforms the shame into praise in the specific lands where the specific people have been shamed, is the community that is participating in the Zephaniah 3:19 ministry of the God who does the same. The ministry to the broken and the scattered is not the optional extra of the covenant community's life; it is the specific form that the participation in the divine restoration takes.

Key Lesson: **The closing section of the chapter and the book is the most theologically breathtaking in Zephaniah: the dramatic turn from the woe to the sing, shout, rejoice with all your heart; the LORD in the midst of the community who is mighty to save and tender to sing; the quieting love and the exultant loud singing of the God who has both judged and restored; the specific restoration of the lame and the outcast and the shamed; and the before your eyes gathering and home-bringing that turns the public shame into the public praise among all the peoples of the earth.**

Closing Prayer and Theological Synthesis of the Book of Zephaniah

Heavenly Father,

We close Zephaniah chapter 3 — and with it the entire book — having traveled from I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth to he will exult over you with loud singing. We have received the most comprehensive available statement of the day-of-the-LORD theology in the Old Testament and the most breathtaking available reversal in the Minor Prophets in the same three chapters. We have heard the be silent before the Lord GOD and the day of wrath, distress, and anguish and the be silent's transformation into the sing, O daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel; rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem. We have heard the roaring lions and the evening wolves and the reckless prophets and the law-violating priests of the woe section and the humble, poor, trusting remnant of the restoration section. And we have heard the most remarkable sentence in the Minor Prophets: the LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.

Lord, let the full arc of the book be received as the single sustained theological argument it is: the holy God who cannot accommodate the covenant violation — who sweeps away, who gathers the nations for the fire of the jealousy, who woes the rebellious city and its roaring-lion princes — is the same God who gives pure lips to all the peoples, who preserves the humble remnant that trusts in the divine name, who sings over the restored community with the exultation of the lover who has found the beloved. The God of the judgment and the God of the singing are not two Gods; they are the one God whose holiness requires the judgment and whose love produces the singing.

Let the I will give to the peoples pure lips, that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord be the eschatological vision that shapes the missionary life of the new covenant community. We have received the pure lips of the Pentecost outpouring. We are the people who call upon the name of the LORD. We are the people among whom the LORD is in our midst, singing. Let the singing produce the singing. Let the divine exultation over the restored community produce the daughter-of-Zion exultation that the book closes with. Sing, O daughter of Zion. The LORD your God is in your midst. He is singing over you.

*In Jesus' name — in the name of the Emmanuel who is the LORD in the midst of the community,
who is the mighty warrior who saves, who is the quieting love and the exultant song — Amen.*

Soli Deo Gloria
Glory to God Alone