

Abiding Fruit

Informing the Mind & Inflaming the Heart

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On That Day, At That Time, In Your Midst Zephaniah 3:9 - 12

These three expressions recur a number of times in this short prophecy from Zephaniah (as per the ESV translation). Packed within three chapters is a veritable explosion of judgment from God. This coming judgment shall be upon Judah and then upon her enemies (the nations), and then in a striking demonstration of mercy and compassion, God promises to restore the nations and Israel. This is always how God portrays His judgment. It is never without mercy somewhere nearby. This judgment is God's doing and this mercy is God's doing. As far as the nations are concerned, and as far as Judah is concerned, they deserve nothing but the judgment of God. They do not deserve mercy. These expressions reflect both the judgment and mercy of God. There will be both judgment and mercy connected with a particular day and time

These statements point to God doing something in the future concerning Judah and the nations. I think that the language used, points to an imminent danger for Judah and the nations, and also a danger located far into the future that is still to come. There is no question that for Judah the imminent danger was the Babylonians, who within at least 50 years of Zephaniah's prophecy, would have besieged Jerusalem and carried away captives. King Josiah's (640 – 609 BC) spiritual reforms had brought a measure of revival to the nation, but were still not enough to turn away the wrath of God. At the same time, the prophet Jeremiah was urging the nation to prepare for invasion from Babylon (compare Jer. 8:2; 19:13 with Zeph. 1:5; Jer. 5:2, 7 with Zeph. 1:5b & Jer. 8:8, 9 with Zeph. 3:4 for similarities).

The first phrase to consider is *"on that day."* What does this mean and refer to? What is this day that is described in such graphic terms in Zephaniah 1:14 – 16? It is a day that implies complete devastation by the hand of God (see Zeph. 1:2, 3, 17, 18). God will use the Babylonians to bring about His discipline and judgment upon Judah, and then He will judge the Babylonians at the hand of the Medes and the Persians at a later time. We see in Zeph. 1:2, 3 that God will bring about a universal judgment upon man. The language that is used here is universal ("sweep away everything from the face of the earth" – includes man, beasts, birds and fish of the sea and "mankind from the face of the earth.")

"On that Day" occurs four times in Zephaniah (1:9, 10; 3:11, 16). This phrase is not limited to Zephaniah either, but is used by the other prophets. Zechariah uses it at least 20 times. There is no question that the word for day ("yom") is the most important concept for time in the Old Testament. The usage of the phrase in Zephaniah has an eschatological reference. It is used of a future occurrence. The usage also is not necessarily limited to one day only (meaning 24 hours), but refers to a period of time called "the day" or "that day."

It's usage in Zephaniah is in this way. It is referring to a future eschatological event of profound significance and impact, not only for Judah but for the world. To limit this to Judah only is to completely ignore the language used (see for instance Zeph. 1:18 - "all the earth shall be consumed" and God will make a "full and sudden end of all the inhabitants of the earth.") On this day in the future, God will

bring about catastrophic activity that will impact all inhabitants. For Judah in the near future such language would suggest to them, a devastation so complete, that their very existence is threatened. Judah, of course, will largely ignore the threat of Babylon, will ignore the pleadings of the prophets of God, and subsequently will experience exile. The two verses (Zeph. 3:11, 16) use the phrase “*on that day*,” closely associated with the phrase “*in your midst*” and here the usage is a future reference, not to judgment but to restoration (3:12, 17). We will return to this later.

The second phrase “*at that time*” occurs four times (Zeph. 1:12; 3:9, 19, 20). It is only the first use of the phrase that indicates coming judgment (1:12). This judgment is connected with “*on that day*” (see 1:7 – 10). The time indicated is a reference to the events in Jerusalem during the “day of the Lord” (1:7) – events associated with punishment from God.

The remaining three uses are connected with the idea of restoration. This is largely located in Zephaniah 3 (see 3:9 – 20), but the first two chapters are about judgment (both Judah and the nations). In chapter one God promises judgment upon Judah. In chapter two God promises judgment upon the nations who are the enemies of Judah. The theme of local and universal judgment is prevalent as I have already indicated. We see here that God uses the nations to bring judgment upon Judah (Babylon, etc), but in chapter two God localizes the nations to the Philistines (2:4 – 7), the Moabites and Ammonites, descendants of Lot (2:8 – 11), the Cushites (2:12), the Assyrians (2:13 – 15). These are nations that have caused trouble to Israel. This whole series of judgments in Zephaniah forms an interesting pattern (*a, b, c, b¹, a¹*). This is seen as: *a* = judgment upon all the earth (1:2, 3); *b* = Judgment on Judah and Jerusalem (1:4 – 2:3); *c* = judgment on the nations (2:4 – 15); *b¹* = judgment on Jerusalem (3:1 – 7); *a¹* = judgment on all the earth.

The two themes of judgment and restoration flow through Scripture like an ever widening stream. Where God breaks forth in judgment, He also overflows in mercy. This is seen in Genesis 3:15, where ultimately Satan’s cause is defeated completely by our Lord Jesus Christ. The change from judgment to restoration is seen in Zephaniah 3:9. The verse begins with a particle emphasizing a causal relationship. This particle is expressed as either “*for*” or “*then*”. The associated phrase in verse 9 is “*at that time*”, and so by all accounts this period of time in the future that brings judgment also brings healing. The New Testament lays great stress upon the Jews and the Gentiles. For centuries, there lay between these races a partition that could not be breached (except by conversion to Israel or by excommunication from Israel). Paul explains that the Gentiles have already experienced and are experiencing the healing process brought about through the death of our Lord (Rom. 11:13 – 25; Eph. 2:11 – 22). Israel, on the other hand will experience a complete restoration (not every single Jew, but a remnant, as Romans 9:26 - 28; 11:5, 26 – 32 declares). It is the New Covenant (Jer. 31; Heb. 8; 10), that will ensure the restoration of the Gentiles and the Jews. This is worked out through the Church, the people of God. Both Gentiles and Jews enter the Kingdom of Christ through the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ. This was accomplished at the Cross, and God is gathering in the elect from every nation.

The phrase “*in your midst*” (3:12, 15, 17) speaks of the blessing of God personally upon His people. Notice the contrast in 3:11 with 3:12 – God will remove the arrogant and proud, and uphold the humble and lowly. These are the ones who shall find their refuge in God. Thus, the Gentiles shall rejoice in their God. Israel shall rejoice in her King (3:15) because He shall be in the midst of her having removed her enemies from His sight, and they shall never have to fear evil again. In verse 17, God promises that He is mighty to save, and that He shall reveal Himself to His people in love and rejoicing. It is Christ the Messiah who shall reign as our God, as our King, as our Savior. To the remnant who believes, Christ promises that He will gather them in (vs. 20), and among all the peoples of the earth, they shall be renowned and praised, because God will have restored their fortunes at last. O, what a Day that shall be!