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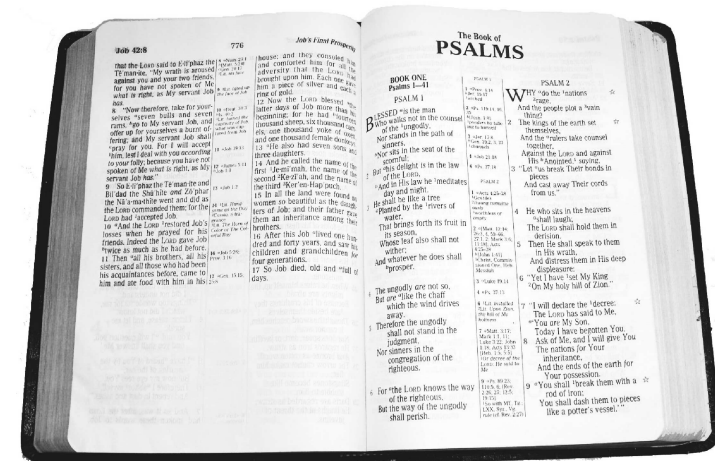
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PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God's holy Word simply explained and applied



December 2019

Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Ezra
Psalms 13 to 16

Recommended for further reading:

Habakkuk: From Fear to Faith by Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones
The Expectant Prophet by John D. Currid, published by Evangelical Press.

Ezra: A Time to Build by James Philip, published by Didasko Press.
Ezra and Nehemiah by G. Coleman Luck, published by Moody Press.

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Book	Date
Amos	March, April 2019
Obadiah	April 2019
Jonah	April 2019
Micah	April 2019
Nahum	August 2019
Habakkuk	December 2019
Zephaniah	December 2019
Haggai	January 2012, revised January 2020
Zechariah	February 2012, revised January 2020
Malachi	June 2012
Matthew	January to March, May, June 2019
Mark	August to October 2015
Luke	Sept, Oct, Nov 2013; February March 2014
John	April to June 2018
Acts	February to April 2016
Romans	October to December 2015
1 Corinthians	July, August 2016
2 Corinthians	November, December 2016
Galatians	February, March 2017
Ephesians	May, June 2017
Philippians	September 2017
Colossians	October 2017
1 Thessalonians	November, December 2017
2 Thessalonians	January, February 2018
1 Timothy	September 2018
2 Timothy	November 2018
Titus	November 2018
Philemon	August 2019
Hebrews	October, November 2019
James	July 2014, revised February 2020
1 & 2 Peter	October 2014
1, 2 & 3 John	December 2014
Jude	March 2015
Revelation	April and May 2015

Regular notes began publication in 1990. 'Through the Bible in a year' (selected readings from every book) was published in 1989 and 1996.

Bible Reading Notes Index 2011 to 2019

Book	Date
Genesis	November, December 2013; January 2014
Exodus	April to June 2014;
Leviticus	August to September 2012
Numbers	August, September 2014
Deuteronomy	January to March 2015
Joshua	January, February 2016
Judges	May, June 2016
Ruth	June 2016
1 Samuel	September, October 2016
2 Samuel	January, February 2017
1 Kings	March, April, May 2017
2 Kings	July, August 2017
1 Chronicles	July 2019
2 Chronicles	August, September 2019
Ezra	December 2019
Nehemiah	May 2012;
Esther	May, June 2012
Job	February, March 2018
Psalms 1–2	December 2018
Psalms 3 to 17	January, November, December 2019 , February 2020
Psalms 18 to 23	March, May, June 2013
Psalms 24 to 66	Jan, June, July, Sept, November & December 2014
Psalms 67 to 78	March and December 2015
Psalms 79 to 89	June, October, November 2016
Psalms 90-106	December 2016
Psalms 107–134	June, August, Sept, November, December 2017
Psalms 135 –150	June, September, November, December 2018
Proverbs	January, February 2013
Ecclesiastes	January 2018
Song of Solomon	April 2013
Isaiah	April, May; August, September 2013
Jeremiah	May to August 2015
Lamentations	October 2015
Ezekiel	July to September 2018
Daniel	October 2018
Hosea	December 2018
Joel	December 2018

HABAKKUK

Habakkuk was probably a contemporary of Jeremiah, the date of his prophecy possibly being between the death of King Josiah (609 BC) and the time when Judah became a vassal to Babylon in the reign of King Jehoiakim (606 BC). It was certainly before God used the Chaldeans (Babylonians) as his instruments of judgment to punish Judah (1:6). The prophecy is not directly addressed to a nation but gives an account of the prayers of the perplexed prophet and the Lord's response. Habakkuk was baffled by the age-old questions, 'Why does God allow ... ?' and 'Why does God work in such and such a way if he is righteous?' His name means 'to cling' or 'to embrace' and here we find him clinging to God in his perplexity.

Theme of Habakkuk

John Currid writes: 'The central theme of the book of Habakkuk is the sovereignty of God. This doctrine underpins the entire text and it emerges in almost every passage. What is the sovereignty of God? First of all, the sovereignty of God demands that God be viewed as the Creator, Ruler and Owner of the universe. It is he who sits enthroned forever' (THE EXPECTANT PROPHET, page 16 — Evangelical Press).

Outline of Habakkuk

1. Introduction – 1:1
2. The first complaint (How long until God hears his prayer; why doesn't he punish the sins of his people?) – 1:2–4
3. God's answer (He is about to use the Chaldeans to punish Judah) – 1:5–11
4. The second complaint (How can a holy God use an unholy nation as his instrument?) – 1:12–2:1
5. God's answer (His purpose is certain; patient faith is needed) – 2:2–4
6. Five woes upon sin – 2:5–20
7. A vision of judgment – 3:1–16
8. Faith triumphant – 3:17–19

O LORD, how long shall I cry, and you will not hear?

Judah was in serious trouble! Wickedness and corruption were widespread and plundering, violence, strife and contention were common (2–3). There was a breakdown in law and order and there was no justice for the victims of these crimes. Evil had won the day and God seemed to be inactive and unconcerned. The prophet had prayed and prayed but heaven was silent. ‘*O LORD, how long shall I cry, and you will not hear?*’ (2). He then asked God, ‘*Why do you show me iniquity, and cause me to see trouble?*’ (3).

The problems which troubled Habakkuk have troubled most of us. Why does the sovereign God allow wrong things to happen? The wicked appear to prosper; there is lawlessness and lack of real justice for the victims of crime; sexual immorality is destroying thousands of people and families; those in authority and government hardly seem to care, despite their promises. We then look at Christ’s church; a thriving church is torn apart by division; someone who appeared to be a keen Christian has drifted right away from the Lord. Personally, we may be crushed by one disappointment after another. Then there are those who are very dear to us who do not know the Lord. We have prayed for them for years but there has been no answer. ‘*O LORD, how long shall I cry, and you will not hear?*’ (2).

Satan may play havoc with our thoughts and emotions when we are perplexed and baffled. We ask our questions but let us trust him in the darkness (Isaiah 50:10). He will never fail us! We must continue to cry to him in our difficulty and distress knowing that he does indeed hear us. Let us remember that he loves us and cares for us and that he is working all things together for good (Romans 8:28).

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.*

(William Cowper)

In your presence is fullness of joy

Matthew Henry comments, ‘This psalm has something of David in it, but much more of Christ’. This psalm speaks of the humiliation of the Lord Jesus (1), his resurrection and his exaltation. He took human flesh and *was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin* (Hebrews 4:15). He submitted to the Father’s will (Philippians 2:6–8) and trusted in him (1–2). Both Peter and Paul quote this psalm indicating that it refers to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ (8–11; cp. Acts 2:25–31; 13:35–37). He is now exalted to the right hand of the Father (11).

We are able to apply much of this psalm to ourselves as believers, for we are ‘*in Christ.*’ Our own goodness is nothing apart from God (2). The child of God trusts in him and delights in having fellowship with his people (‘*saints ... excellent ones*’, 1–3). We will shun idolatry, and have the contentment that God alone can give (4–6). The Lord directs us and we should always keep him in view. We are secure in God because he is at our right hand – He is with us and beside us (8). We are glad and we rejoice in him (9).

The Lord Jesus is now at God’s right hand. The Christian has been raised from being dead in sin to have fellowship with God (Ephesians 2:4–6). *In your presence is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures for evermore* (11). **There is no joy like that found in fellowship with God, yet we are so slow to spend time with him.** We get so easily caught up in the rush and bustle of modern life. Fellowship with him is precious, it is a foretaste of heaven *If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God* (Colossians 3:1). We will only enjoy fellowship with God as we *seek those things which are above.*

*O the pure delight of a single hour
That before thy throne I spend,
When I kneel in prayer and with thee, my God,
I commune as friend with friend.*

(Frances J. Crosby)

LORD, who may abide in your tabernacle?

Psalm 14 speaks of the ‘fool’ who says in his heart, ‘*There is no God*’ By contrast, Psalm 15 speaks of the person who desires to worship God. The first verse of this psalm poses a question which is answered in the remaining four verses. ‘*Your holy hill*’ (1) refers to Mount Zion where David built a new tabernacle for the ark of the covenant (2 Chronicles 1:3–4). The ark symbolised God’s presence among his people. The psalmist thus asks, ‘*LORD, who may abide in your tabernacle? Who may dwell in your holy hill?*’ Who may abide in the presence of the One who is absolutely holy? Is it vain for man to hope for fellowship with God for all men are sinners (cp. Psalm 14)? The hymn ‘Eternal Light’ deals with this question:

*O how shall I, whose native sphere
Is dark, whose mind is dim,
Before the Ineffable appear,
And on my naked spirit bear
The uncreated beam?*

*There is a way for man to rise
To that sublime abode;
An offering and a sacrifice,
A Holy Spirit’s energies,
An advocate with God.*

(Thomas Binney).

We can appear before the Ineffable (the God who is so great and wonderful that he cannot be described) because of the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus on the cross! God has chosen us and called us to make us holy (Ephesians 1:4). True believers will show the fruit of the Holy Spirit in their lives (Galatians 5:22–25). Let us seek always to be upright in our walk (or conduct), righteous in our works and truthful in our speech, avoiding all gossip and slander (2–3). Let us honour those who fear the Lord and shun evil-doers (4). Christians must never be involved in extortion or bribery (5). Let us seek always to have a good conscience before God. We will then know stability in the midst of all the confusion around us. *He who does these things shall never be moved* (5).

I will work a work in your days which you would not believe

Habakkuk was deeply concerned for his wicked nation and he longed for God to send a spiritual revival (2). The Lord answered him by telling him that he was indeed working out his sovereign purposes to deal with the evil that had so much troubled the prophet. His answer was not the answer that the prophet was expecting. He was going to send judgment and not revival. ‘*Look among the nations and watch — Be utterly astounded! For I will work a work in your days which you would not believe, though it were told you*’ (5).

God reminded Habakkuk that he was in control of all the nations, even those who were enemies of Judah. He had raised up the Chaldeans (Babylonians) as his instrument to chastise and punish Judah. The wicked in Judah who inflicted violence on the righteous (2–3) would themselves suffer violence from the Chaldeans (9). The Chaldean army was on the rampage, conquering all in their path. They were *a bitter and hasty nation ... terrible and dreadful* (6–7). These people scorned kings and princes and had broken down every stronghold in their path. (10–11). They were unaware that almighty Jehovah was using them in his own purposes.

The apostle Paul quoted verse 5 when preaching to Jews in the synagogue at Antioch in Pisidia. He warned them that if they rejected the Lord Jesus Christ, God’s promised Messiah, God would bring calamity upon Israel as he did when he visited the nation with judgment as the prophets had warned (Acts 13:40–41). The Roman legions surrounded Jerusalem in AD 70 and destroyed the city. The warning given by the apostles was despised just as the message of the prophets had been rejected centuries earlier.

God was working if only Habakkuk had eyes to see it! The days of the wicked in Judah were numbered. **We must remember that God is the Lord of history. He is in control of all that happens. He will surely bring his own wise purposes to pass, but often in ways we do not expect.**

Why do you look on those who deal treacherously?

Habakkuk again prayed and acknowledged that the Lord his God ('my God, my Holy One') is eternal, holy and almighty (the 'Rock'). Judah belongs to him and they will not die because God is just (12). If God is holy and just in all his ways, how could he use the wicked as his instrument to punish those who were more righteous than themselves? Does not this compromise his holy character? – 'You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness. Why do you look on (tolerate) those who deal treacherously, and hold your tongue when the wicked devours one more righteous than he?' (13). Tim Shenton comments, 'These questions do not indicate a shaken or feeble faith on the part of the prophet, but rather a genuine confidence in the character and works of the living God. Not a weak faith but a perplexed faith torments Habakkuk' (HABAKKUK – AN EXPOSITIONAL COMMENTARY, page 34, published by Day One).

The Chaldean army were like fishermen who treated people like fish of the sea to be taken and killed without pity to satisfy their own appetite (14–17). There is a pun in verse 16 on the word 'net' which is almost the same as the word 'accursed thing' in Hebrew. Habakkuk committed this problem to God and he then said, *I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower* (2:1). He likened himself to a watchman scanning the horizon for any approaching enemy. He was not looking out to be aware of enemy danger, but to God for an answer to the question that troubled him. The last part of chapter 2, verse 1 can be taken as 'what shall I answer when I am reproved (by God)' but some believe it should be rendered, 'What he (God) will say to me when he answers my complaint'.

The important principle in our reading is that we must not only tell God about the things that perplex us, but also continue to wait on him after we have prayed. This means trusting in him, being patient and submitting to his will, however trying and difficult the times. It means having an expectation that God will meet with us because he loves us and is working out his purposes for us.

The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God'

Dale Ralph Davis writes, 'The message of this psalm is straightforward: Mankind is universally depraved, yet there are a people who have been — and will be — delivered' (SLOGGING ALONG IN THE PATHS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, page 27).

Psalm 14 demonstrates the folly of atheism. *The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God'*. The Hebrew word translated 'fool' ('Nabal' – cp. 1 Samuel 25:25) implies stubbornness of heart rather than a lack of intelligence. Notice that the words 'There is' (1) are in italics in the NKJV and AV Bibles. This means that they are not in the Hebrew in the original manuscript. *The fool has said in his heart, 'No God.'* He refuses to acknowledge God. Anyone who professes himself to be an atheist is a fool! It is possible to pay lip-service to God's existence, but to live as if he did not exist (practical atheism). That is also folly! The atheist is foolish because:

- He closes his mind to the evidence of God's existence. He refuses to believe that God is our Creator. *Their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools* (Romans 1:21–22).
- He refuses to see that atheism breeds corruption and wickedness (1). We see the evidence of this throughout the world in atheistic regimes and wherever people reject the gospel. The rising tide of lawlessness gives great cause for concern but those in power generally fail to connect the problem with our rejection of the teaching of the Bible. *The LORD looks down from heaven* and sees universal corruption. Everyone has sinned (2–3; cp. Romans 3:10–12). It is a foolish notion to imagine that a man may be righteous apart from the work of God in his heart by the Holy Spirit.
- He does not seek God (2). God is our Creator and in him alone is the answer to every human problem. The atheist does not see his great need of God and so he does not seek him. **Do not let atheists intimidate you with their scorn. They are fools in the sight of the Lord!** *God is with the generation of the righteous* (5). He is their refuge (6). Let us rejoice in him and be glad (7).

I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me

Spurgeon calls this psalm the ‘How long psalm’. David begins in sorrow and ends with rejoicing and singing. The psalm divides into three parts:

1. The believer crying. – David prayed from a desolate and despairing heart and the question, ‘*How long?*’ is found four times in verses 1 and 2. He felt that God had forgotten him as he suffered the contempt of his enemies. When God hides his face from us, we too may feel that he has forgotten us as we languish in trouble and sorrow. After the Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem and taken the Jews into captivity, many of them thought that the Lord had forgotten them and forsaken them. — *But Zion said, ‘The LORD has forsaken me, and my Lord has forgotten me.’* God’s message for them was: ‘*Can a woman forget her nursing child, and not have compassion on the son of her womb? Surely they may forget, Yet I will not forget you. See I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me*’ (Isaiah 49:14–16). The Lord does test us and sometimes hides his face from us, but he never forgets us. We may cry out, ‘*How long?*’ but trial is not *forever* (1). The sufferings of the child of God are *of this present time* (Romans 8:18). They are not for ever!

2. The believer trusting. – David called upon the Lord to consider him and to hear him. He affirmed his trust in God: ‘*I have trusted in your mercy*’ (3–5).

3. The believer rejoicing. – David’s doleful complaint became a song of rejoicing. He writes, ‘*I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me*’ (5–6). His circumstances had not changed, but he had changed! There is a motto that says, ‘Prayer changes things.’ Actually, it is God who changes things, but prayer does change us! **Let us always remember to bring our troubles to God in prayer, trusting in him. We will prove the faithfulness of God and sing to the Lord because he has dealt bountifully with us.**

The just shall live by his faith

Habakkuk was perplexed by God’s revelation that he was to use the Chaldeans as his instrument to punish the people of Judah, who were more righteous than themselves (1:13). These verses give God’s answer to the puzzled prophet. The Lord told him to write his message plainly on large tablets to catch the attention of every passer-by so that they would be able to read it (2).

The Lord told Habakkuk that he would destroy the Chaldeans in his own appointed time. Though the prophet was impatient to see God’s hand revealed in power and judgment, he had to wait; the fulfilment of his vision would not tarry beyond the appointed time (3). There is a vital and encouraging principle here; we may be discouraged and baffled by dark providences but God is surely working out his purposes. We may cry out, ‘*How long?*’ (cp. 1:2) but let us learn to be patient and to trust in the Lord.

The first part of verse 4 probably refers to the Chaldeans who were arrogant and unrighteous. The righteous person, however, ‘*shall live by his faith.*’ We should trust in the Lord at all times, even when the going is very difficult; ‘*The just shall live by his faith.*’ This statement is quoted in Hebrews 10:38 to encourage us to persevere in the Christian life. It is also quoted in Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11 to show that we are justified (acquitted) of our sin by faith in Christ alone.

We are ungodly by nature but because of Christ’s righteousness the believer is pronounced ‘*just*’ or righteous in the sight of God. We are not saved by good works, though good works are the evidence of genuine faith (cp. Matthew 5:16; James 2:22–26). *The just shall live by his faith.* God spoke to Martin Luther through this verse to bring him to faith in Christ alone for salvation. It became the fundamental truth of the Reformation. **How is it with you? Are you living by faith? Are you trusting in the Lord Jesus alone to save you?**

*The earth will be filled with the knowledge of
the glory of the LORD*

Bible scholars are unclear about the meaning of the opening words of verse 5, which goes on to speak of the Chaldeans. The text of the Dead Sea scrolls has the word ‘wealth’ instead of ‘wine’ and this appears better suited to the context of verse 5. Wealth promises much but can never satisfy those who live to gain it. The wages of sin leave a nation, a man, woman, boy or girl restless (*he does not stay at home*). Such a people are like death and they *cannot be satisfied* (5). The pleasures of sin do not last (cp. Hebrews 11:25). We are very foolish if we seek satisfaction apart from following Christ and obeying God’s Word.

The five woes recorded in the remainder of this chapter are not only true regarding the Chaldeans, but of all the wicked:

- Woe to those who plunder, resorting to violence and bloodshed to increase in wealth. They (and this included the Babylonians) would themselves be plundered (6–8).
- Woe to them for building their house (nation) by evil gain (9–10). They had cut off many people and would themselves be cut off. The stones and timber-beams of their building will cry out against them (11).
- Woe to those who build a town with bloodshed and by iniquity (12). Their labour is in vain because it is not established by the Lord (cp. Psalm 127:1; Jeremiah 51:58).

Empires fall and kingdoms perish; many have done so since the destruction of Babylon, eg. Persian, Greek, Roman and British empires. The last twelve years of the 20th century saw the disintegration of the mighty communist Soviet Empire. **One thing is certain and it should greatly encourage us – God can never be toppled from his throne.** We belong to an everlasting kingdom and our Lord and Saviour will reign for ever (2 Peter 1:11; Revelation 11:15). *For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea* (14).

Arise ... Be of good courage, and do it

Ezra wept as he confessed his people’s sins to the Lord and he was joined by a great congregation who also *wept very bitterly* (1). These people saw that sin is horrendous in the sight of God who is holy and they made no excuses for their behaviour. Shechaniah, whose own family were among the culprits, spoke up and confessed their guilt (2; cp. verse 26). He encouraged the people, saying, ‘*Yet there is now hope in Israel in spite of this.*’ He urged them to make a covenant with God to put away their pagan wives. He promised Ezra their support, saying to his leader, ‘*Arise ... Be of good courage, and do it*’ (4). **Confession of sin is not enough! We must have a holy determination to deal with it in our own lives and to put away sinful thoughts, words and actions.**

The religious and civic leaders of Israel made a solemn promise to God that they would do whatever was needed to remedy the situation (5). Drastic action was necessary! A proclamation was issued to summon the people to gather at Jerusalem within three days. Those who refused to come would have their property confiscated and would be separated from God’s people (7–8). The New Testament also teaches that professing Christians who refuse to repent of sin must be put out of membership of their local church (Matthew 18:15–17; 1 Corinthians 5:1–8).

The people assembled before the house of God and sat down in the open in torrential rain. They trembled in body not only because of the heavy rain, but also because of their sin (9). When men and women are seeking to be right with God, they will seek him whatever the external hindrances. Ezra stood up and reminded the people of their unfaithfulness to God. He urged them to confess their sin to the Lord, to do his will, and to put away their pagan wives (10–11). They promised Ezra to do as he said but asked for time to deal with this problem because so many people were involved in this sin (12–14). The book closes with a list of the names of the priests and Levites who had inter-married with the heathen (18–44).

Grace has been shown from the LORD our God

Those who tremble at God's Word know that sin offends the Almighty who is holy and just. They will confess their sin and look at it from God's point of view, taking full responsibility for their actions. Ezra had fasted all day until the time of the evening sacrifice. He then fell on his knees, lifted up his hands to the Lord, and prayed. There is a moving eloquence in his confession of Israel's sin. He felt *ashamed and humiliated* because they were guilty of sinning against God who is good and who had been gracious to them. He had punished his erring people in the past by delivering them into the hands of their enemies. Ezra acknowledged that *'now for a little while grace has been shown from the LORD our God'* (5–8).

The Lord had extended mercy to them in the eyes of the Persian kings so that they had been able to rebuild the temple and the walls of Jerusalem. What could Ezra say to such a gracious God now that Israel had again forsaken his commandments and inter-married with their heathen neighbours (9–10)? He had punished them less than their sins deserved and had been gracious in giving them such a deliverance so that they were able to return to their land. Ezra feared that the Lord would consume them in his righteous anger so that there would be no remnant or survivor (13–15).

God chastens us when we sin, and this is not a pleasant experience. He may bring illness, disappointment and difficulties to us, but he does all this because he loves us and he cares when we sin (Hebrews 12:5–11; cp. 1 Corinthians 11:30–32). Let us always remember that God is gracious and that he punishes us less than our sins deserve. **The closer we are to God, the more we will loathe and shun sin.** Could it be that we do not mourn over our shortcomings because we have taken on board worldly views that such a thing is not good for our self-esteem? Jesus said, *'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted'* (Matthew 5:3–4).

But the LORD is in his holy temple

The two remaining woes are found in these verses:

- Woe to those who force strong drink on their neighbour to make him drunk and then to force him into shameful practices while in his inebriated condition (15). Taken literally, it would refer to the atrocities committed by the debauched Babylonian army in their triumph over Judah. Taken metaphorically, it could mean that having degraded their victims, they too would be shamed and made to drink from the cup of the fierceness of God's wrath (cp. Psalm 75:8; Revelation 16:19). The violence that they had inflicted on Lebanon would rebound upon them.
- Woe to those who make and worship idols (18–19). The prophet Isaiah poured scorn on the idol worship of the Babylonians (Isaiah 44:9–20; 46:1–7). Those who worship idols or trust in them are like them – dumb and stupid (Psalm 115:8).

But the LORD is in his holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before him (20). Not only must the heathen be silent, but also the Christian. We are foolish if we complain and ask, 'Why does God allow this to happen?' or 'Why doesn't God do something about it?' Remember the word of God to Habakkuk and trust in the Lord. **When we see that the Lord is in his holy temple, we will not be so ready to complain (cp. Job 40:4).** We will then humble ourselves before him and worship him. We should also remember to be reverent when we come to worship the Lord with his people. The chatter and noise that precedes many of our services hinders us from preparing our hearts to worship God. *The LORD is in his holy temple.* Let us be silent before him! Let us adore our great God for his power, wisdom, goodness and grace.

*Lo, God is here! Let us adore,
And own how holy is this place!
Let all within us feel his power,
And silent bow before his face;
Who know his power, his grace who prove,
Serve him with awe, with reverence love.*

(Gerhard Tersteegen, translated by John Wesley)

O LORD, revive your work in the midst of the years!

John Currid writes, ‘The opening chapter of the book describes Habakkuk’s lamentations, complaints and sorrows. Chapter 2 provides God’s answer to him. And now in this final chapter, Habakkuk comes under great conviction and he sings praises to the almighty, sovereign God of the universe. He now sings about the marvellous works of God that he had so recently questioned. His eyes had been opened to the majesty of God’ (THE EXPECTANT PROPHET, page 106).

The meaning of the word ‘Shigionoth’ (1) is uncertain; it may refer to a psalm played with a stringed instrument (compare the end of verse 19). The work of God was languishing and the spiritual outlook in Judah was very bleak. Habakkuk prayed, ‘*O LORD, revive your work in the midst of the years! ... In wrath remember mercy*’ (2; the word ‘*wrath*’ here means ‘trouble’, ‘trembling’, ‘commotion’; the verb of the same Hebrew word is found in verses 7 and 16). In the midst of the years of trouble, he called on God, the righteous Judge, to have mercy on his people. Whatever the trouble around us, we must never give up praying that God will revive his work.

Habakkuk encouraged himself by thinking about the majesty of God and of his mighty works in former times:

- In the giving of the law at Sinai (3–4; cp. Deuteronomy 33:2).
- The plagues visited upon the Egyptians (5; cp. Exodus chapters 7 to 10).
- The passing of Israel through the Red sea (8,10,15; cp. Exodus chapter 14).
- God’s victories over the Canaanite nations (11–14; cp. Joshua chapters 10 and 11).

Do you ever pray that God will revive his work in these difficult times? Encourage yourself by reading about the mighty acts of God recorded in Scripture and in church history. God does not change; he is still the same! **Let us pray earnestly that he will be pleased to revive our churches and to magnify his holy name among us.**

Everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel

Ezra would have left Babylon full of expectation when he led a group of exiles back to Jerusalem, but he was to encounter disappointment. He discovered that many of the people had inter-married with their heathen neighbours. Even more shocking, the leaders and the priests were the worst offenders (1–2)! Ezra was so distressed at this sin that he tore his clothes and plucked out some of his hair and beard as a sign of mourning (3). The Israelites and their priests are described as ‘*the holy seed*’ (2). To be holy is to be separated from all that is sinful and to be set apart to God. Israel was chosen by God to be holy (Deuteronomy 7:6–7) and had been warned not to marry those who were ungodly (12).

To marry an unbelieving partner is sin, it is to turn away from the Lord (Deuteronomy 7:3–4). Solomon is the classic example of this sin even though it may seem incredible after he had enjoyed such great experiences of the Lord (1 Kings 11:1–4). Christians too are called to be holy and we must not marry unbelievers (1 Peter 1:15; 2:9; 2 Corinthians 6:14–18). The loneliness of the single state may be very hard to bear but if you are single please understand that this is preferable to marriage to someone who does not love your precious Saviour. If you are ‘in Christ’, how can you choose to share your life in him with someone who is not a believer or with one who is very shallow in their profession of faith?

Everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel assembled with Ezra who sat appalled as he fasted until the time of the evening sacrifice (3–5). They trembled because they knew that God’s Word had been disobeyed. **Trembling at the words of God is a rare thing today, but it will keep us from sin and lead us into paths of righteousness.** Do you come to hear the preaching of God’s Word with a sense of privilege and awe that the almighty, eternal God who created all things should speak to you? Do you pray that the Lord will speak to you as you read his holy Word? Do you tremble when the Word of God exposes sin in your life and rebukes you?

I was ashamed to request of the king an escort of soldiers

Ezra gives two reasons for proclaiming a fast before leading his company on the journey to Jerusalem:

1. That they might humble themselves before God (21). There is a misplaced emphasis today on self-esteem while fasting and self-humbling are neglected disciplines. When did you last humble yourself before God? *Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he will lift you up* (James 4:10).
2. To seek guidance from the Lord (21). Ezra and his company had with them a huge amount of gold and silver (25–27) and they were very vulnerable to attack from robbers. It would have been advisable to have an armed escort in such circumstances but Ezra had testified to the king of the hand of God upon them to care for them and to protect them. He records, *‘I was ashamed to request of the king an escort of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the road, because we had spoken to the king saying, “The hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek him”’* (22). Ezra was concerned to honour the Lord with a consistent testimony and their prayer for protection was answered (23, 31). The journey to Jerusalem took four months, including a stop of twelve days at Ahava (15, 31; cp. 7:8–9).

We must not take the Lord’s care of us as an excuse to tempt God by neglecting to take measures to protect our life and property. Faith must be accompanied by prudence. When Paul’s life was in danger, he had the Roman authorities informed of the plot against him (Acts 23:11–23). Ezra’s dilemma arose because he had made a point of testifying to the king that God would protect them. **Let us seek always to have a testimony that honours God. Let us be prayerful and humble in our walk with the Lord. We will then experience his good hand upon our lives.**

Yet I will rejoice in the LORD

The Lord had told Habakkuk, *‘The just shall live by his faith’* (2:4) and in these verses, the prophet affirms his faith in God. You will recall that his name means ‘to cling’. He is prepared to cling to God even in the darkest of providences, with destitution because of failed harvests and the destruction of livestock. He could say, *‘Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The LORD God is my strength’* (18–19). Here is faith triumphant in times of testing. Here is faith which clings to God and to his promises when there is hardship. Here is faith which enables him to rejoice in the Lord when those around would be complaining or murmuring against God because of their suffering.

Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes, ‘We now see clearly the divinely provided way to deal with the fear which we cannot control ourselves. We look back and think about God. When the prophet did this, he began to feel better. He forgot his nerves and, in contemplation of the mighty, miracle-working God, he was so filled with wonder that he began to rejoice. He then felt he could face whatever might come. In spite of everything he could rejoice in the Lord, and joy in the God of his salvation. Such a God, he knew, would not forget him, and such a God would certainly bring him through’ (FROM FEAR TO FAITH first published by The Inter-Varsity Fellowship 1953).

When his wife Mary died in 1790, the hymn-writer John Newton confessed, ‘The world seemed to die with her.’ The grief-stricken pastor mounted his pulpit steps the Lord’s Day following her death, and preached from Habakkuk 3:17–19. Though numb with grief, he trusted in God! **Are you passing through some severe, perplexing trial? Child of God, cling to the Lord as Habakkuk did!** You will then rest in the day of trouble (16). The heavy feet will feel lighter; they will become like deer’s feet (19), and your valley of trial will become a high hill of blessing as you joy in the God of your salvation.

ZEPHANIAH

23 DECEMBER

Ezra 8:1–20

And I looked ... and found none of the sons of Levi there

Zephaniah prophesied in during the reign of Josiah who reigned from 640 to 609 BC (1:1). His ministry may have been used to encourage the young King Josiah in his reforming work when he purged the country of idolatry and restored the worship of Jehovah (2 Kings 22 and 23). Zephaniah means ‘the Lord hides’ which may indicate that he was born and hidden during the time of much slaughter in Manasseh’s wicked reign (2 Kings 21:16). He may have been thinking about his own name when he appealed to the people of Judah, ‘*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*’ (2:3).

Zephaniah warns of the coming of *the great day of the LORD* (1:14). Judgment would be visited on Judah and her wicked neighbours (1:4 to 3:8). Though he is a prophet of God’s wrath (1:15–18), Zephaniah is also the prophet of God’s tender care for his people. He concludes his prophecy with promises of blessing for the godly remnant of Israel (3:13); this also points to the church, the heavenly Jerusalem (3:14–20; cp. Galatians 4:26; Hebrews 12:22–24; Revelation 21:2, 9–10).

Outline of Zephaniah

1. The day of the LORD, a day of judgment – 1:1 to 2:3
2. Judgment on the nations – 2:4–15
3. Judgment on Jerusalem – 3:1–8
4. The restoration of God’s people – 3:9–20

The first fourteen verses of this chapter provide a list of family heads who went with Ezra from Babylon to Jerusalem. There were just under one thousand, five hundred males. If we suppose that the total in the company was ten thousand, including women and children, this was considerably smaller than the group who had returned with Zerubbabel some eighty years earlier (2:64).

When Ezra gathered together his company before the journey, he checked to see whether there were any Levites among them, apart from priests. He records, *And I looked among the people and the priests, and found none of the sons of Levi there* (15). Levites not descended from Aaron could not be priests, but they were used to care for the tabernacle and afterwards the temple (Leviticus chapters 3 and 4). Ezra recognised that they were just as necessary as the priests if true worship were to be maintained. Leaders at Casiphia (location unknown) were asked to provide servants for the house of God (15–17).

Ezra acknowledged the good hand of God upon them as thirty-eight Levites and two hundred and twenty Nethinim were designated to go with Ezra to Jerusalem (18–20). The Nethinim were described as ‘temple slaves’ by Jewish historian Josephus. They may have been the descendants of foreigners who had been captured in war.

Workers (or servants) were urgently needed for the service of God in Ezra’s time and they are still in short supply. Your pastor and a handful of keen Christians must not be left to do all the work in your church. **We are all needed. How are you using the stewardship of your time, talents and money (1 Corinthians 3:11–15; 4:1–5)? How are you serving the Lord?**

The hand of the LORD my God was upon me

The rebuilding of the temple was completed in approximately 516 BC. The words *'Now after these things'* (1) take us to a period when Ezra was not writing past history, but was himself part of that history. Fifty-eight years had passed and he led another group of Jews back to Jerusalem from Babylon in 458 BC. Ezra was not only a priest but also a scribe who was an *expert in the words of the commandments of the LORD* (11).

The Persian king Artaxerxes dealt very favourably with Ezra and issued a royal decree allowing him to lead a group of Jews back to Jerusalem. He gave Ezra a letter in which he ordered the authorities in the region beyond the River Euphrates (which covered Israel) to help him and forbidding them to impose taxes on the priests and all those involved in the service of the house of God (11–26). This was a remarkable decree coming from a heathen king.

Ezra acknowledged, *'So I was encouraged, as the hand of the LORD my God was upon me'* (28). We also read of the hand of God being upon Ezra in verses 6 and 9. What does it mean to have the hand of God upon us? It means that God is with us, watching over us and helping us. When God's hand is upon us there is a God-consciousness about our lives because we are aware of his holy and awesome presence. When God's hand is upon us, we are able to accomplish great things for him even in the most adverse circumstances. What a tremendous privilege it is to know that almighty God who created the universe will condescend to have his hand upon us.

The blessing of God does not come to the lazy or half-hearted person. *Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it* (10). **Do you want to know God's hand upon your life?** You must prepare your heart by putting to death every trace of sin you can find in it. You must seek to hear God's voice speaking to you through the Bible and obey his holy Word. If you will walk with the Lord in the light of his Word, you too will know his hand upon you.

I will stretch out my hand against Judah

Zephaniah's ancestry is traced back through four generations to Hezekiah. If this Hezekiah (1), is the king who reigned over Judah from approximately 715 to 686 BC, the prophet would have been young when he commenced his ministry (early twenties?). Zephaniah may have prophesied before the reformation which began in the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign, 621 BC (2 Kings 22:3). These reforms recorded in 2 Kings chapter 23 were short-lived and Judah again fell into idolatry after his death in 609 BC. A remnant of Baal worshippers remained though their alters and shrines had been destroyed (4). Matthew Henry rightly observes in his commentary on this chapter, 'What good can the best reformers do with a people that hate to be reformed, as if they long to be ruined?'

The prophet brings before us a vivid picture of the desolation that comes with divine judgment on sinners — *'I will utterly consume ... I will cut off ... I will stretch out my hand ... wailing ... loud crashing'* (2–4,10). Judgment must begin at the house of God (1 Peter 4:17) and God warns that he would punish the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the holy city (4). He will remove every trace of Baal, the false god which was worshipped by many of Judah's neighbours. The Hebrew word translated *'idolatrous priests'* is 'chemarim'(4; cp. 2 Kings 23:5); it is never used with reference to the priests of Jehovah. The word is not translated in the AV but remains as 'chemarim'. These idolatrous priests and the unfaithful priests of Judah would be destroyed together with the astrologers and followers of the god, Milcom (Molech). Those who *turned back from following the LORD* and had not sought him would also be punished (5–6).

Those who live without God and who refuse to seek him or to follow him will have no reason to complain when he visits them with judgment. **How real is your Christianity and your walk with God?**

I will punish the men who are settled in complacency

The prophets used the expression, *'The day of the LORD'* with reference to the time God visits judgment on sinners (cp. Joel 2:11; Amos 5:18). *'The day of the LORD'* for the northern kingdom of Israel came when they were carried off into captivity in Assyria (2 Kings 17:5–23), for Judah, the captivity in Babylon (2 Chronicles 36:15–21). *'The day of the LORD'* is found seven times in Zephaniah 1:7 to 2:3 (1:7,8, twice in verse 14, 18; 2:2,3).

'Be silent in the presence of the Lord GOD' (7). — God's presence is awesome! Do we remember this when we come before him to worship? *The day of the LORD* was likened to a sacrifice for which God had already consecrated those who would destroy Judah (7). The prophet has already singled out some who were ripe for judgment in Judah (4–6) and he now mentions others. The godless nobility with their love of luxury and fashion (8) and those who leap over the threshold, perhaps a reference to worshippers of the idol, Dagon (9; cp. 1 Samuel 5:3). Zephaniah goes on to describe scenes of wailing coming from Jerusalem's Fish Gate, Second Quarter and from the merchants in Maktesh, the market district (10–11). God said, *'I will search Jerusalem ... and punish the men who are settled in complacency.'* They believed that God would do nothing to disturb their sinful, affluent way of life, but their possessions would be plundered and their houses destroyed (12–13). This prophecy was fulfilled within forty years.

'The day of the LORD' also refers to the great day of judgment when Christ will return (1 Thessalonians 5:2–3). Scoffers are still complacent in their sin and do not believe that God will do anything to punish them (cp. 2 Peter 3:1–13). **If you are not a Christian, beware of complacency and pay attention to the warnings of God's Word. Repent of your sin and come to the Lord Jesus before it is too late!**

The LORD ... turned the heart of the king of Assyria

The decree of Cyrus was not found in Babylon but in the palace at Achmetha (Ecbatana), the ancient capital of Media (1–2). Darius confirmed that the decree should stand and he wrote to Tattenai and his Persian officials instructing that:

- The building work must not be hindered (6–7).
- The work was to be assisted from taxes paid to the king (8).
- Animals were to be supplied for sacrifices and prayers should be offered for the king and his sons (9–10).
- Any who changed this edict should be put to death (11).

Why was the king so favourable to the Jews? Was it because the decree of Cyrus had been found? That was an important discovery, but the real reason is found in verse 22: *For the LORD made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria towards them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God. The Lord is sovereign and he still moves upon the hearts of ungodly people*, either to save them, or to make them favour his people (cp. 1:1; Proverbs 21:1). There was great joy when the work was finished and the temple dedicated (15–16).

The work prospered through the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah (14). The prophetic gift is not available today because Scripture is complete. God now speaks through the reading and preaching of his Word! The motto of Glasgow which sat beneath the city coat of arms was, 'Let Glasgow flourish through the preaching of the Word.' In the twentieth century it was changed to, 'Let Glasgow flourish.' That city has followed the way of those churches who no longer have time for the preaching of God's Word. Is it any wonder that there is such confusion about religion in church and nation? We neglect preaching and teaching at our peril! **If we are to know God's blessing, we must also separate ourselves from all that displeases the Lord (21).** We are sanctified (separated) in Christ Jesus, called to be saints (1 Corinthians 1:2). Let us always seek to lead a life worthy of our calling (Ephesians 4:1).

The eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews

The people became so discouraged by opposition that they made no attempt to restart their work of rebuilding the temple until stirred up to do so by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (1–2). By this time the people had not only lost heart but also lost interest in the challenge of rebuilding the temple (Haggai 1:7–11).

When they restarted the work, they were visited by Tattenai, who was governor over all the provinces west of the River Euphrates (3–5). This visit may have been prompted by a complaint from the Samaritans and it seems that Tattenai was on a fact-finding visit. Zerubbabel, the governor of Jerusalem, whose Babylonian name was Sheshbazzar, (14, 16), was answerable to him. Tattenai listened to what the Jews had to say before he sent a letter to King Darius. The elders told him how God had brought the Babylonians against Jerusalem to destroy the temple and to take the Jews into captivity. God did this because their ancestors had provoked God to wrath by their sin (11–12). It is interesting to see that Tattenai refers to the Lord as *‘the great God’* (8). He mentioned the decree of Cyrus and asked the king if he would confirm that such a decree had been made (13–17).

Tattenai might have insisted that the building work cease until a reply was received from the king, *but the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews* (5). **Whenever you face opposition or trouble as you seek to obey God, remember that *the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him* (Psalm 33:18).** He lovingly watches over you and he is working all things together for good (Romans 8:28). He will never leave you nor forsake you (Hebrews 13:5–6).

*But saints are lovely in his sight;
He views his children with delight;
He sees their hope, he knows their fear;
And looks, and loves his image there.*

(Isaac Watts)

Seek the LORD ... seek righteousness ... seek humility

Verses 14 to 16 describe Jerusalem when the Babylonians destroyed the city in 586 BC. — *The great day of the LORD ... is a day of wrath ... of trouble and distress ... of devastation and desolation ... of darkness and gloominess ... of trumpet and alarm.* The prophet warned that there is no escape from God’s wrath. People say that ‘money talks’ but it is not able to deliver anyone from God’s judgment (18).

Zephaniah not only warned the nation of judgment but also called the people to repent of their sin before the day of God’s anger came upon them (2:1–2). We must never take God’s mercy for granted! Notice the words, *‘It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the LORD’S anger’* (2:3). Many people today dismiss with contempt the teaching of the Bible concerning the wrath of God. How foolish it is to believe that judgment will never come upon us because we are ‘good people!’ How foolish it is to disregard God’s Word and his offers of mercy. If we reject the Lord Jesus Christ who died to save sinners, we will perish in our sin (John 3:17–18, 36).

If we want to be saved from our sin, there are three things that we must do. — *Seek the LORD ... seek righteousness ... seek humility* (2:3). What is involved in seeking God?

- You must be serious in your search and persist like a treasure-seeker who will not give up until he has found his gold or precious stones.
- You have to call upon the Lord, asking him to forgive you and to save you from your sin.
- You must also seek righteousness, which involves repenting of your sin. When you repent, you change your attitude to sin and loathe it instead of loving it. You begin to obey God’s Word and to lead a godly life.
- You must humble yourself because God hates pride (James 4:6).

Do you seek the LORD ... seek righteousness ... seek humility?

The LORD ... will be awesome to them

The Lord God is the King of kings and the Lord of lords (Daniel 2:47; Revelation 19:16). If he was to visit judgment on Judah (chapter 1), how much more would he punish her wicked neighbours? The prophets had much to say to the nations around Judah (eg. Isaiah chapters 14 to 23; Jeremiah chapters 46 to 51) and Zephaniah was no exception. His prophecies of judgment are here directed against Philistia, a long-standing adversary of Judah (4–7), proud Moab and Ammon (8–11), Ethiopia (12; – this probably refers to Egypt which was her ally in war; cp. Jeremiah 46:8–9) and Assyria (13–15).

God warned these nations (except Ethiopia), that they would cease to exist. Their cities would lie in ruins and would become pasture for the flocks. The words, ‘desolate’ and ‘desolation’ are found in verses 4,9,13,14 and 15. The identity of the animals translated ‘pelican’ and ‘bittern’ in verse 14 is uncertain. Some translations have ‘the owl and the hedgehog’ (ESV). These prophecies have all been fulfilled. Assyria which had conquered and terrified many nations, believed that she was completely secure (15). She was conquered in 612 BC by the Medes and Babylonians, and Nineveh, her capital, was destroyed. By the time the Lord Jesus came to this earth, Philistia, Moab, Ammon and Assyria were no more.

There is hope in these prophecies of judgment. God was also working judgment on behalf of his people. A remnant would return to possess Philistia, Moab and Ammon (7,9). God is awesome in his majesty, power and justice, and this will bring fear and terror to those he punishes. — *The LORD will be awesome to them, for he will reduce to nothing all the gods of the earth; people shall worship him* (11). Those who repent of their sin and obey his Word, will be filled with awe to worship and to adore him. **Worship without a sense of awe and adoration of God is not true worship. How do you worship God?**

Let us build with you, for we seek your God as you do

The enemies of the returned exiles tried many tactics to hinder the rebuilding of the temple. They began with the friendly approach and offered, ‘*Let us build with you, for we seek your God as you do*’ (1–2). These people had been settled in the land by the Assyrians and they did have a form of religion that incorporated Jewish sacrifices, but they did not seek God in the same manner as the Jews; theirs was a multi-faith religion. We read of them, *They feared the LORD, yet served their own gods* (2 Kings 17:33).

The people of God rightly refused their help, knowing that it is impossible to do the work of God in cooperation with those who deny the teaching contained in the Word of God which had been given to them (the portions of the Old Testament Scriptures which they possessed). **The lesson for us today is quite obvious. We must not compromise the gospel by working with those who deny its essentials (see Galatians 1:6–9).** We cannot cooperate with those who deny the divine inspiration and authority of the Bible. We have nothing in common with those who deny that Jesus is God the Son, who laid down his life to save sinners and that he rose bodily from the grave. We cannot have fellowship with those who teach that Christianity is one of many ways to heaven. The ecumenical movement does not represent true Christian unity.

The enemies of the temple builders then harassed them in order to discourage them (4–5). Force was used to stop the building work and it was not recommenced until the second year of Darius, some fifteen years later in 520 BC (24; Darius I of Persia is not to be confused with Darius the Mede who conquered Babylon in partnership with the Persians in 539 BC). The letter sent to the king which slandered the Jews refers to a later period and was not about the temple, but referred to the rebuilding of the city walls (12–16). If we are faithful to God, we will be misunderstood, maligned and opposed, but he will vindicate us. Let us always look to him for he will never fail us.

Praising and giving thanks to the LORD

The exiles who returned to Jerusalem are described as those ‘*whose spirits God had moved*’ (1:5). When the Lord works in our hearts we become worshippers (cp. John 4:23). The returning Jews met with hostility from those who had occupied Judah during the captivity. The leaders of the exiles were filled with fear because of their enemies, but they built an altar for sacrifices to be made to God each day and the feasts were also observed (3–5).

We saw yesterday that when the Lord works in our hearts, we will also give generously to his work (7; cp. 2:68–69). The priests and those associated with them (2:70) had to be supported, the workers who built the temple had to be paid, and materials for the building had to be purchased (7).

The building work began in the fourteenth month after the return from exile (8; 536 BC). The people were filled with joy when the foundation of the temple was laid. Some of the old men who had remembered the temple before its destruction were overcome with emotion and they wept (11–13). The priests and the Levites led the people in *praising and giving thanks to the LORD* (11).

The church is described as ‘*the temple of God*’ (1 Corinthians 3:16–17); it is *built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner-stone* (Ephesians 2:20–21). **The Lord Jesus has done so much for us and we who know the grace of God in our lives have greater reason than the returning exiles for ‘praising and giving thanks to the LORD’.**

*Fill thou my life, O Lord my God,
In every part with praise,
That my whole being may proclaim
Thy being and thy ways.*

(Horatius Bonar)

Nations featured in the prophecies of Zephaniah 2:4–15

The LORD is righteous in her midst

God turns again to the judgment of Jerusalem which had not lived up to its calling as the holy city of God (11; cp. Psalm 87:1–3; Isaiah 52:1). Jerusalem is here described as a rebellious, unholy, oppressing city which would not receive correction and had not trusted in the Lord nor come near to him in prayer (1–2). The Lord condemns the civil and religious leaders of Jerusalem. Josiah, the king of Judah is not mentioned among these wicked groups, perhaps because he sought to serve the Lord:

- The princes were like ‘*roaring lions*’ – violent and cruel. The judges were like ‘*wolves*’, failing to administer justice (3).
- The prophets she recognised were false and are described as ‘*insolent, treacherous people*’. The priests were corrupt and had polluted the temple with their wickedness and had done violence to God’s holy law (4). Jeremiah, whose ministry began in the reign of Josiah was from a family of priests, but they turned against the faithful prophet, even to the point of threatening his life (Jeremiah 1:1; 11:21; 12:6). Pashhur, a leading priest in Jerusalem had Jeremiah put in stocks (Jeremiah 23:9–40). Is it any wonder that the Lord condemned such people through the prophet Zephaniah?

Zephaniah speaks of God being in the ‘*midst*’ of his people three times. He is in their midst for judgment (5) and for blessing (15,17). — *The LORD is righteous, he is in her midst* (5). The leaders and people of Jerusalem had forgotten this great truth, but God who is unfailing in his justice would punish Jerusalem as well as the wicked nations (6–7).

God’s presence is a great source of encouragement to every child of God. He hears our prayers, he cares for us in all our trials, he is with us to keep us and to strengthen us. **The thought of God in the midst of us should also restrain us from sinning. Remember, he knows our thoughts, he hears all that we say, he sees all that we do.** The righteous Lord has called us to be holy (1 Peter 1:15–16). Let us always seek to lead a life worthy of our calling (Ephesians 4:1).

They ... offered freely ... according to their ability

This chapter supplies us with a long list of the names of those people *whose spirits God had moved* (1:5). There were forty-two thousand three hundred and sixty such people together with seven thousand three hundred and thirty-seven servants (64–65). This may seem a large number, but it was estimated that there were about three million Jews scattered throughout the Medo-Persian empire at that time.

The heads of the returning families *came to the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem*. The building lay in ruins and they *... offered freely for the house of God, to erect it in its place: according to their ability, they gave to the treasury for the work* (68–69; cp. 3:5). These pioneers did not withhold their offerings because others had given generously (1:6). They did not put their own house-building as a priority when they settled back in the land. They were concerned for the rebuilding of the house of God. It has been truly said that when God touches a man’s heart, he also touches his pocket so that he will give generously to the Lord’s work.

They offered freely ... according to their ability. The Lord’s work is hindered for lack of funds and the lack of financial support for missionary work gives rise to increasing concern. **Many Christians are facing financial hardship but we are able to support God’s work according to our ability (1 Corinthians 16:2).** What are the priorities in your life? Are you more interested in laying up treasures on earth than in heaven or are you seeking first the interests of God’s kingdom (Matthew 6:19–21,33)?

*We lose what on ourselves we spend,
We have as treasure without end
Whatever, Lord, to thee we lend,
Who givest all.*

(Christopher Wordsworth)

The LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus

Daniel had lived through the captivity of the Jews in Babylon and soon after the fall of that city, the very aged servant of God set himself to pray. He called upon God for Jerusalem, for the rebuilding of the temple and for his own people, the Jews (Daniel 9:15–19). He had remembered the prophecy of Jeremiah concerning the seventy years of captivity and desolation, and that time was almost accomplished (Daniel 9:1). He confessed the sins of the people and called upon God, ‘O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and act! Do not delay for your own sake, my God, for your own city and your people are called by your name’ (Daniel 9:19).

The Lord very soon honoured Daniel’s fervent prayer when Cyrus, king of Persia, set in motion the return of the captives to Judah (1). At the end of 2 Chronicles we read that *the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia* (2 Chronicles 36:22–23). The same words are repeated in the first verse of Ezra. Cyrus encouraged the Jews to rebuild the temple (2–4) and the foundation was laid in 536 BC. He also returned to the Jews the treasures that had been taken from the temple (7–11).

It may seem amazing that a heathen king was so sympathetic to the Jews and to the work of God, but Isaiah had predicted this almost two centuries earlier, even naming Cyrus (Isaiah 44:28 to 45:6). We must remember that God sovereignly controls the affairs of men (Daniel 4:34–35). There weren’t any displays of spectacular miracles such as we see in the experience of Daniel and his friends, but God was sovereignly working. *The LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus* (1) and he also moved the spirits of those who were to rebuild the temple (5). Daniel’s prayer was answered. **We should feel a great sense of awe and privilege that our sovereign God answers prayer and that he moves upon people’s hearts and lives.** Let us persevere in prayer (Luke 18:1), especially for those we have brought before the Lord for many years. Nothing is impossible with our almighty, sovereign God!

‘Therefore wait for me,’ says the LORD

The opening verses of this chapter present a bleak picture of Jerusalem which was in rebellion against God; it was a wicked, corrupt and rotten city (1–4). What were the faithful believers in Jerusalem to do, seeing that the city was ripe for judgment? *‘Therefore wait for me,’ says the LORD ... ‘until the day I rise up for plunder’* (8). They were to be patient in those evil times because God would surely judge the nations and he would bless the Jews with a return from captivity of a faithful remnant (9–10). Let us look at the kind of people described here:

- They are pure in their speech (9). No lies or deceit will be found in their mouth (13).
- They *call on the name of the Lord* (9; cp. 1 Corinthians 1:2).
- They serve the Lord (9).
- They worship God (10).
- They are meek and humble (11–12).
- They *trust in the name of the LORD* (12).
- They are a holy people. — *The remnant of Israel shall do no unrighteousness* (13).

Think about these things and ask yourself, ‘Do they describe me?’

Matthew Henry comments on verse 8, ‘Let them that lament the corruptions of the church, wait upon God, till he send his Son into the world, to save his people from their sins, till he send his gospel to reform and refine his church, and to purify to himself a peculiar (special) people both of Jews and Gentiles. And there were those who, according to this direction and encouragement, *waited for redemption*, for this redemption in Jerusalem (Luke 2:36–38).’

We also live in times similar to Zephaniah. Many churches are weak and confused in their doctrine and many professing Christians show little interest in seeking *first the kingdom of God and his righteousness* (Matthew 6:33). **Let us be diligent in prayer and wait for the Lord. Who knows what he will do among us?**

He will rejoice over you with gladness ... with singing

Habakkuk ended his prophecy singing, ‘*Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation.*’ (Habakkuk 3:18). Zephaniah concludes his prophecy encouraging God’s people to sing because of all that the Lord has done for them: ‘*Sing, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!*’ (14). We can sing because God is in our midst (15). You may wonder how these promises can be applied to the church and Christians when they are addressed to Jerusalem? The church is described as ‘*Jerusalem above*’ and ‘*the Israel of God*’ (Galatians 4:26; 6:16). The Old Testament promises for the glorious future of Israel have a greater application for Christians (eg Isaiah 54:1; Galatians 4:27).

God’s Word for his church (‘*Jerusalem*’ and ‘*Zion*,’ 16) is, ‘*Do not fear; ... let not your hands be weak. The LORD your God is in your midst, the Mighty One, will save*’ (16–17). The almighty, eternal, sovereign God is among us and he delights in us. Think of that! — ‘*He will rejoice over you with gladness, he will quiet you in his love, he will rejoice over you with singing*’ (17). The Almighty sings over us because he delights in us. He gave his beloved Son to die for us, to save us from our sin. What amazing grace! What wondrous love! God sings and rejoices over us, tenderly caring for us. Hallelujah!

Are you filled with fear and discouragement as you face the coming new year? Do not let your hands be too weak to work for God (16). Take heart, battle on in the strength of the Lord and persevere in prayer. God loves you and delights in you!

*But saints are lovely in his sight;
He views his children with delight;
He sees their hope, he knows their fear,
And looks, and loves his image there.* (Isaac Watts)

EZRA

The book of Ezra covers over eighty years of Jewish history. He exercised his ministry during the reign of Persian king, Artaxerxes I (464 to 424 BC). Ezra was a priest and a skilled scribe in the law of Moses (7:6,12). He was a descendant of Seraiah, the high priest who was slain by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC (7:1; cp. 2 Kings 25:18–21). God raised him up to teach the people his law and to lead the reformation some sixty years after the rebuilding of the temple. The book of Ezra deals with the history of the Jews after they returned to Jerusalem from Babylon in 538 BC. It is divided into two sections:

- Chapters 1 to 6 which cover the return of the exiles from Babylon and the rebuilding of the temple by Zerubbabel. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah prophesied during this period (6:14). After a lapse in the building work because of opposition the work was finally completed in 516 BC (70 years after the destruction of the temple in 586 BC).
- Chapters 7 to 10 which cover the return of Ezra from Babylon (458 BC) and his work of reformation.

An outline of events and dates:

605 BC — The Babylonians conquer Jerusalem in the third year of the reign of King Jehoiakim of Judah and put the nation to tribute. Many young Jews of royal or noble descent are taken captive to Babylon, among them Daniel and his three friends (Daniel 1:1–7).

604 BC — Jeremiah prophesies that the captivity would last for seventy years (Jeremiah 25:12). The seventy years date from this captivity, not the captivity of the nation which came in 586 BC when Jerusalem was destroyed. Jeremiah repeated the prophecy after Jehoiachin was deposed in 597 BC (Jeremiah 29:10).

539 BC — The Babylonian captivity comes to an end after the Medes and Persians conquered Babylon. Soon after the fall of Babylon Cyrus, king of Persia, set in motion the return of the captives to Judah fulfilling the prophecy of Jeremiah (Ezra 1:1).