

Zephaniah 3:9-13

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After the divine judgment, the LORD promises to purify the people's lips, take them under His refuge, and fill the earth with righteousness. So much so that the lowly and humble will be protected and prosperous, like a well-tended flock. This appears to refer to a future time when the earth will be restored.

The Suzerain (Ruler) God of Judah is avenging and wrathful against sin (Nahum 1:2). But He is also “gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness” (Joel 2:13). What appears to us as paradoxical is actually pointing us to the fact that God is our creator ([see link on TT article on paradox](#))

Thus, after a significant delay to allow all to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9), He would judge the nations for their wickedness (Zephaniah 3:8). The earth would “be devoured” (Zephaniah 3:8). But there will still be nations, and they will be purified, and the earth set to right. This infers that God will create a new earth, as He did in the days of Noah. This is confirmed in the New Testament (2 Peter 3:7, 13; Revelation 21:1).

The LORD began this section with the particles *for then* (vs 9) to indicate a temporal transition. In other words, He introduced *for then* to tell us what He would do after judging the nations: *For then I will give to the peoples purified lips* (vs 9). This likely refers to a new earth, where righteousness dwells (2 Peter 3:13).

The verb translated as *give* means to change or to transform. It can refer to an action that brings about a sudden change. For instance, in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses reminded the Israelites that the LORD their God “was not willing to listen to Balaam, but “turned the curse into a blessing” because of His love for them (Deuteronomy 23:5). Here in Zephaniah, the LORD would transform the speech of the peoples. He would then *give* them *purified lips*. The pagan peoples had unclean *lips* because they worshiped false gods. But after the judgment of the LORD, He would give them clean *lips*.

This brings to mind the experience of Isaiah, when he had a vision of being in the throne room of God. There, the righteous and faithful prophet Isaiah discovered that in the presence of God he became aware of his sinfulness (1 John 1:8). He expressed this by saying “I am a man of unclean lips” (Isaiah 6:5). God cleansed Isaiah’s unclean lips with fire, giving him a burning coal to apply to and cleanse his lips.

In the same way, God will purge the earth with judgement fire, and cleanse it. The *purified lips* will apply to all the nations of the earth, not just the Jews. For here it is said to apply to *the peoples*.

This cleansing will transform them. Then, like Isaiah it will be *that all of them may call on the name of the LORD* (vs 9). They will have a new heart that seeks what is right and good, rather than seeking wickedness.

To *call on the name of the LORD* means to acknowledge His power and goodness and to worship/follow Him. It means to recognize that the LORD has our best interest at heart, and His ways are the ways of life. Choosing this perspective leads us to approach *the LORD* with a spirit of gratitude, because we recognize that He provides for us. It prepares us to listen to Him, and offer petitions to Him with a sincere heart, seeking His will for us.

Abram is said to have called on the name of the Lord, after *the LORD* commanded Abram to leave his country and go to the land of Canaan. There, Abram obeyed *the LORD* and entered Canaan. While stationing between Ai and Bethel, “he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD” (Genesis 12:8).

In our passage, *the LORD* looks forward to the time when the nations will acknowledge Him as the only God, and serve and follow Him. At that time, they will *serve Him shoulder to shoulder* (vs 9).

In the ancient world, people used *shoulders* to bear objects. They would drape clothing over their *shoulders*. In Genesis 24, we see an instance where “Rebekah came out with her jar on her shoulder and went down to the spring and drew” (Genesis 24:45). Similarly in the book of Luke, Jesus gave a parable about how a shepherd would carry a lost sheep on his shoulders behind the neck when he has found it (Luke 15:5). Because of this ancient practice, the *shoulder* has become a metaphor for labor (Ezekiel 29:18).

Thus, the expression ‘*shoulder to shoulder*’ (literally, “with one shoulder”) portrays the unity and harmony of all the people who would experience spiritual transformation to follow the LORD in unity of purpose. This means that in the new earth, people will actually practice loving their neighbors as themselves. They will work for a common purpose to achieve mutual benefit. Exploitation and abuse will be no more (Revelation 21:4).

Such a spiritual change would not be confined to one location but would extend *beyond the rivers of Ethiopia* (vs 10). This is likely a metaphor for the entire world.

The term for *Ethiopia* is “Cush” in the Hebrew text. The area to which “Cush” refers is not modern Ethiopia but the area along the Nile just south of Egypt. This place was also called Nubia, roughly corresponding to modern Sudan (Zephaniah 2:12).

In our context, the phrase *beyond the rivers of Ethiopia* stands for a remote place. Previously in Zephaniah, the prophet has spoken of neighboring nations and *Ethiopia*. It seems *Ethiopia* is the furthest nation considered a neighbor to Israel.

Thus this phrase *beyond the rivers of Ethiopia* likely represents the people living beyond Israel’s immediate neighbors, reaching to the farthest regions of the earth. The point is that even the

people living in the farthest places of the earth would serve *the LORD* in unity and sincerity of heart. As *the LORD* added, *My worshipers, My dispersed ones, will bring My offerings* (vs 10).

The term translated *worshipers* is “‘āṭār” in Hebrew. It means “suppliant,” that is, a person making a humble plea to someone in authority. The phrase *my dispersed ones* is literally “the daughter of my dispersed ones.” In our context, it refers specifically to those people groups living *beyond the rivers of Ethiopia*. Thus this would seem to refer to people from all over the earth. This could refer to all peoples who have faith in God, but would likely include the Israelites that are exiled and dispersed among the nations of the earth.

The time when *dispersed ones* from all over the earth are bringing *offerings* to Jerusalem could refer to the thousand-year reign, when Christ will rule on the current earth, which will include a new Temple (Revelation 20:4; Ezekiel 40-45). If so, then there will be many who come to worship in Jerusalem from all over the world, at the new temple as described in the book of Ezekiel. However, the nations will be deceived and fall once again when Satan is released from the abyss after being imprisoned for a thousand years (Revelation 20:7-10). It may also apply to the new earth, which will be filled with righteousness (Revelation 21:1). It could refer to both, as prophecies often do.

The term translated as *offerings* in the phrase *My dispersed ones will bring my offerings* is “minḥāh” in Hebrew. It can refer to gifts in general, as in Genesis 32:13. More frequently, it refers to offerings made to *the LORD*. Such offerings were gifts of wheat or barley that worshipers offered to the Suzerain God to show their gratitude and dedication to Him (Lev. 2:1, 11). The fact that even the people living in *Ethiopia* and *beyond* would entreat *the LORD* and bring *offerings* to Him indicates that the entire world is united in serving God and following His ways. It also infers that Jerusalem will become the center of world worship.

In the remaining verses (vv. 11–13), the LORD turned His attention to Judah to describe the spiritual transformation they would experience in this restored earth. He introduced the phrase *in that day* to remind His covenant people that the time of their deliverance was still future. He spoke of the time when He would intervene in the affairs of His covenant people to restore them. At that time, He said, *You will feel no shame* (vs 11). This indicates that there would be full repentance and recovery, because God’s people will feel *no shame because of all their deeds by which they rebelled* against God.

The people of Judah (and Israel) had a covenant relationship with the Suzerain God, making them a special nation on the face of the earth, because of their special mission to demonstrate that following God’s ways leads to human flourishing (Exodus 19:4–6). The nation experienced glory and great blessings in the land of Canaan when they obeyed God’s commands.

As the people of Judah flourished and enjoyed God’s blessings, all the other nations respected them. But they experienced *shame* when they disobeyed the Suzerain God because pagan nations (like Assyria and Babylon) conquered them and took them as vassals/servants. In Zephaniah, the LORD reminded Judah that this happened *because of all your deeds by which you have rebelled against Me* (vs 11). This refers to Israel’s failure to keep their covenant vow to God (Exodus 19:8).

But that *shame* will be reversed, because God *will remove from your midst Your proud, exulting ones, And you will never again be haughty On My holy mountain* (vs 11). This infers that the source of the rebellion that brought them *shame* was pride. This is consistent with the biblical assertion that the opposite of faith is pride (Habakkuk 2:4). Another way to say this is that the opposite of faith in God (that His ways are for our best) is to have faith in ourselves, that we know better (pride).

The verb translated as *rebelled* means to transgress or revolt. It is a willful, knowledgeable violation of a norm or standard. It includes the breach of allegiance through violation of a covenant, such as Judah's breach of its vow to honor its covenant with God (Exodus 19:8).

We see an example of such a covenant/treaty violation in the book of 2 Kings, where "Moab rebelled against Israel after the death of Ahab" (2 Kings 1:1). This refers to Moab refusing to honor a treaty obligation to pay tribute to Israel. Later, "Edom revolted from under the hand of Judah and made a king over themselves" (2 Kings 8:20, 22). In Judah's case, she rebelled against her Suzerain (or Ruler) God by refusing to follow His commands. Instead of loving and serving the best interest of one another, they adopted the pagan culture of exploiting one another.

Disobedience to God always has negative consequences, one of which is *shame*. Although the people of Judah belonged to God, He allowed them to experience shame as a consequence of their rebellion. God made the moral universe to have cause-effect, just as He did the physical universe. When people deceive and exploit, they do (and ought to) experience *shame* as a result.

This appears to apply to all nations. Everyone knows what is right; God is evident in creation, and His ways are discernible to all who are willing to see (Romans 1:19-20, 10:18; Psalm 19:4). Though fallen, each human is made in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27). Accordingly, God put His law in the heart of each human; it is a part of their nature, so people know moral right, deep down (Romans 2:14). But, they bring *shame* to themselves when they suppress that knowledge, and embrace the darkness (Romans 1:19-21).

The same principle applies to the people of God, who are also accountable to God's moral universe of cause-effect. Not only did Israel/Judah have God's word wound into their nature by virtue of creation, they also had God's law set forth to them in writing. And they had vowed, as a marriage vow, to be faithful to uphold the words of the covenant with their Suzerain (Ruler) God (Exodus 19:8). This written covenant set forth clearly the negative consequences for disobeying God's law, for seeking to exploit others, rather than love others as themselves (Leviticus 19:18).

Accordingly, God's people would experience *shame* also, for breaking God's law. This principle carries over to the New Testament as well, sin brings negative consequences (Romans 1:18, 24, 26, 28).

However, God's people would not be ashamed forever. One day, they would regain their dignity and honor. But God had to clean up the land first and preserve a righteous remnant. As He said, *For then I will remove from your midst your proud, exulting ones, and you will never again be haughty on My holy mountain* (vs 11).

Shame would be removed in large part by removing the *proud* and *haughty* individuals from the midst of His people. Those who are *proud* follow their own ways instead of God's ways. Scripture places pride as the opposite of faith (Habakkuk 2:4). We either have faith that God's ways are for our best, or we believe that we know better.

Throughout the Bible, God detests the *proud* and *haughty* because these are characteristics of the wicked—those who walk apart from God's design for creation. The book of Proverbs makes clear that “pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling” (Proverbs 16:18). Therefore, “the LORD will tear down the house of the proud” (Proverbs 15:25).

God would remove all the proud and arrogant ones on His *holy mountain*. The phrase *holy mountain* usually refers to Mount Zion, located in the southeastern part of the city of Jerusalem (Joel 2:1). It was the place where God's temple was built (Isaiah 8:18). Only the humble ones would remain in His city.

This prophecy could apply to either or both of an era on the current earth, or the new earth that is to come (Revelation 21:1; 2 Peter 3:13). At the end of this age, before the new earth, Satan will be thrown into “the abyss” for a thousand years, and Jesus will rule from Jerusalem (Revelation 20:1-4). It is likely during this time that Ezekiel's temple will be constructed, and the many prophecies will be fulfilled of a complete restoration of the land of Israel, such as the Dead Sea being made alive due to a river whose headwater begins from the new temple (Ezekiel 40-45; Ezekiel 47:1-10).

As the LORD stated, during this time *I will leave among you a humble and lowly people* (vs 12). The word translated *lowly* is often translated “poor.” Since this is paired with *humble*, *lowly* here likely refers to the idea of being poor in spirit (Matthew 5:3). To be poor in spirit is the opposite of pride. It is to recognize human limitations. This is similar to being *humble*, which is to recognize reality as it is, including that God is the creator, and we are His creatures.

As Numbers states, Moses was more *humble* than any man on the earth (Numbers 12:3). Humility is the ability to see things as they are.

There was certainly nothing timid or passive about Moses when he led Israel out of Egypt, and through the wilderness. Humility can be thought of as “seeing reality as it is” or “the capacity to see and act upon what is true.”

Moses had the humility to know his role in serving the mission, and he played that role faithfully, and persistently.

- - The mission God gave Moses was to lead God's people to become self-governing, under the rule of law given by God. In doing this, they would become a priestly nation, showing the world a better way, to love rather than exploit their neighbors (Exodus 19:8).
 - Moses's role in this mission was to be the leader, which meant to serve the mission regardless of the consequences.

This is the kind of people God will leave to inhabit Jerusalem and Israel; those who are willing to embrace reality, and serve their role faithfully. Like any great team, when each person serves their best role, the society will predictably thrive. This is, in fact, the meaning of the biblical word “justice” or “righteousness”—when all is done according to God’s perfect design. That is when human flourishing occurs.

When God removes those who are proud, He will *give to the peoples purified lips* (vs 9). So it seems the purification of Israel is directly connected to spiritual prosperity for the entire earth (*the peoples*). *The peoples* of the earth will begin to speak what is true and right in this time of restoration.

In the book of Exodus, the LORD commanded His covenant people and said to them, “You shall not follow the masses in doing evil, nor shall you testify in a dispute so as to turn aside after a multitude in order to pervert *justice*; nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his dispute” (Exodus 23:2–3). Although Israel failed to live up to this standard, in the future will come a time when this will be the norm.

Although the *humble and lowly people* in Judah (and Israel) were often the ones who suffered all kinds of afflictions, the LORD always cared about them and provided for them. And according to the book of Proverbs, “It is better to be humble in spirit with the lowly than to divide the spoil with the proud” (Proverbs 16:18).

Appropriately, the *humble and lowly people* of Judah will *take refuge in the name of the LORD* (vs 12). That means that the Suzerain God would sustain and preserve them. At that time, *the remnant of Israel will do no wrong and tell no lies, nor will a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths* (vs 13). It is appropriate that God’s *refuge* for the *humble and lowly* is connected with a culture without *lies* and deceit. Falsehood generally favors those with power to exploit others.

The *remnant of Israel* refers to the faithful people from Israel and Judah who will remain after God’s divine judgment. That remnant would rely on God, as faithful witnesses and overcomers (Revelation 3:21). They would do no wrong and would not tell any lies because they would have purified lips. During this period, the earth will be filled with righteousness (2 Peter 13).

In those days, *humble and lowly people* will not be exploited by deceit. They will be protected and provided for, *for they will feed and lie down with no one to make them tremble* (vs 13). This phrase appears to picture a domestic herd animal, such as a sheep. A sheep has no defense against predators, so they *tremble*.

Like well-protected sheep that *feed and lie down* due to feeling safe and provided for, so will the *humble and lowly people* be in this new era of prosperity upon the earth. The inference is that people will still work (*feed*). But they will be safe (*lie down*) and not be exploited (*tremble*).

They will enjoy security and peace. Nobody will make them afraid (Revelation 21:3-4).

Biblical Text

**⁹“For then I will give to the peoples purified lips,
That all of them may call on the name of the LORD,
To serve Him shoulder to shoulder.**

**¹⁰“From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia
My worshipers, My dispersed ones,
Will bring My offerings.**

**¹¹“In that day you will feel no shame
Because of all your deeds
By which you have rebelled against Me;
For then I will remove from your midst
Your proud, exulting ones,
And you will never again be haughty
On My holy mountain.**

**¹²“But I will leave among you
A humble and lowly people,
And they will take refuge in the name of the LORD.**

**¹³“The remnant of Israel will do no wrong
And tell no lies,
Nor will a deceitful tongue
Be found in their mouths;
For they will feed and lie down
With no one to make them tremble.”**