

H.L. Rossier

Comments on the book of the Prophet Zephaniah

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Preliminary Remarks

The Book of Zephaniah has two distinctive features. Unlike other prophets, it no longer distinguishes between the people of Israel and the nations; rather, it passes the same judgement on both, for, sharing the same characteristics as fallen humanity—and particularly idolatry—they must face a common sentence.

But God—and this is the second distinctive feature of our prophet—separates from the mass those whom he wishes to spare. Thus is formed the Remnant of Israel. Zephaniah does not speak to us of a Remnant of the nations (or rather, he touches on this subject only incidentally, 2:8–10), although the latter forms part of God’s plan for the future; whilst other prophets mention the restoration of the captives of Moab and Ammon, of Elam and Egypt, that is to say, the formation of a Remnant from these peoples who will share in the final Restoration (Jeremiah 48:47; 49:6, 39; Ezek. 29:14).

Our prophet merely announces that, although Israel shares the same judgement as the nations, God’s grace will bring forth a

new people from this condemned nation. Its formation and its eternal blessing give the book under consideration a mark of incomparable freshness.

The Remnant is the fruit of a Revival amongst the unbelieving people. Revivals, as we have shown in other writings, never hinder decline, nor do they in any way alter the condition of the mass of the people. God has two purposes in bringing them about: the first is to raise up a testimony, the rejection of which will render the people inexcusable; the second, as we have just seen, is to set apart, with a view to the future constitution of a new people, a certain number of faithful ones who have served the Lord amidst the decline and general apostasy. The product of the Revival thus becomes the stock of God's people. It is upon the Remnant that we see the Lord's care concentrated; it is them that He preserves amidst the great tribulation, the terrible 'distress of Jacob'; them that He separates from the apostate nation doomed to final destruction; finally, it is in them that the characteristics of the future people are concentrated, a people of free will whose youth shall spring forth like the dew from the bosom of the dawn (Ps. 110). The Remnant,

at first small and despised, will grow and become a nation as numerous as the stars of the heavens and the sand on the sea-shore; this people will surround the throne of the great King in Jerusalem and will rule over all other nations. Of these latter, a great multitude which no one can number (Rev. 7) will submit, by faith, to Christ's millennial sceptre, whilst those among the peoples who have not been destroyed at Christ's appearing will submit to Him only with 'lying lips' (Ps. 18:44; 66:3). They will be annihilated during the final revolt instigated by Satan, released from his prison at the end of the millennium, a revolt which will precede the coming of the Day of God (Rev. 20:7–9; 2 Pet. 3:12). It will not be so with the people of the Lord: consisting of the Remnant, 'all Israel will be saved' (Rom. 11:26). Those among them who are 'wicked' (for the Millennium is not the eternal day when all will be perfect) will be 'cut off from the land every morning' (Ps. 101:8).

As we have just said: the formation of a Remnant is always the result of a Revival. Thus this Remnant will be formed in Jerusalem, amidst the Jewish people who have returned to unbelief in Palestine (Dan. 12:3, 10). It is remarkable that, speaking ex-

clusively of this prophetic Remnant of Israel, Zephaniah is called to prophesy during the last Revival of this people mentioned in Scripture, under the reign of Josiah.

Zephaniah, if he himself is of royal descent, as is thought, is a descendant of King Hezekiah. Thus, under Josiah, the Revival of Hezekiah's time begins anew, when the blessings granted to David are lost, and Zephaniah himself becomes the instrument to proclaim the prophetic Revival and the formation of a Remnant amongst God's ancient people. The Revival under Josiah occurred upon the discovery of the Book of the Law. Josiah read therein that God's wrath had been poured out upon Israel because 'the fathers had not kept the word of the Lord to do all that was written in this book'. Then the king 'sought the Lord for himself and for those who remained in Israel and Judah' (2 Chron. 34:21). Huldah, the prophetess, announced God's curses against Jerusalem, but added that by virtue of Josiah's humiliation, he, the leader of the Remnant, would be spared (vv. 23–28). We therefore have, in type, in Josiah, the central theme of the book of Zephaniah.

This final Revival will aim to prepare the hearts and consciences of the Remnant for the reign of Christ as King of Israel; thus Zephaniah presents the Lord to us only in this character: ‘The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst’ (3:15). There is no question here, as in Isaiah, Zechariah, Micah and other prophets, of the atoning sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that were to follow them (1 Peter 1:11), but of the power and the coming of the King (2 Peter 1:16), the victor and triumphant One who, having saved the people of his choice, finds his delight in them.

Three facts are therefore immediately united in the prophecy of Zephaniah: 1. The iniquity and idolatry of the people of Israel and the nations, and the judgement that will fall upon them all alike, though it will be far more severe upon apostate Israel, which was originally set apart from the idolatrous Gentiles. 2. The formation of a Remnant according to the election of grace. 3. The Remnant becoming the one true Israel, gathered under the sceptre of the Messiah King.

But other characteristics further distinguish our prophet: from beginning to end, whenever judgement is mentioned, Zephaniah speaks of the day of the Lord.

We have often seen, in the course of these studies, that this day may have a partial and preliminary fulfilment (see, for example, Joel 1). Here, indeed, this day is as it were foreshadowed during Nebuchadnezzar's terrible attack; but, however dreadful that judgement was, it was but a faint shadow of the day of the Lord. Moreover, Babylon, the historical agent of judgement, is not even named in Zephaniah, as this prophet had in view the final judgement, and not, like Habakkuk, the conduct of the righteous, living by their faith during the days of historical judgement. The Day of the Lord is therefore, above all, for Zephaniah, a prophetic day, when the Lord, instead of employing, as previously, instruments of his vengeance, will judge himself. This is why Zephaniah makes no mention of the Chaldeans, even though, historically, they are the only nation in view in this prophet's prophecy concerning the judgement of Philistia, Ammon, Moab, Assyria, and finally Jerusalem itself.

The day of the Lord is called the day of the Lord in the New Testament. It is the day of judgement and vengeance. The day of Christ does not have the same meaning, for it is the day Christians await, the day of his appearing, a day they can love, which they call for in the fear of the Lord, yet before which they do not tremble (cf. Hab. 2:3, 16; 2 Tim. 4:8). To love his appearing is to live in the hope of sharing in his glory, of obtaining his approval when he comes to bestow crowns upon his own. Then his witnesses will experience a loss, or will hear, before the judgment seat, these blessed words: ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of your Lord.’ The Day of the Lord concerns the world, the Day of Christ concerns the Christians. It is undoubtedly the same day, but with two aspects: one turned towards the reprobate and the darkness, the other towards the elect and the full light of God’s presence.

In Zephaniah, Jerusalem, as the birthplace of the Remnant, takes centre stage in the Restoration, although Judah and the ten tribes are also mentioned. But, since the Remnant is the people, it is only ever spoken of in this way, and the words ‘my people’, so frequent in other prophets to denote the whole na-

tion, are never uttered by Zephaniah; whereas the unbelieving people are called ‘the nation without shame’.

These preliminary remarks will help to facilitate an understanding of the details of the book we are about to examine.

CHAPTERS 1–2

The great day of the Lord

Chapter 1

General judgement falling upon the whole creation; upon Judah and Jerusalem; upon living men.

General judgement falling upon creation. vv. 2, 3

‘I will wipe out, I will remove everything from the face of the earth,’ says the Lord. I will destroy mankind and beasts, I will destroy the birds of the air and the fish of the sea, and the stumbling blocks along with the wicked, and I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth, says the Lord’ (vv. 2, 3).

These verses foretell a general judgement, in contrast to the judgement that befalls Judah and Jerusalem in verse 4, yet closely linked to it. Indeed, the judgement on Judah is all the more solemn because it has sinned in the same way as the nations. The nature of this common sin is mentioned in v. 17: ‘They have sinned against the Lord’, and the objects destroyed by the judgement indicate to us what the cause was. Here we find the four main classes of living beings, which, according to the Bible, make up the whole of animate creation: humans, animals (including livestock, creeping things, and beasts of the earth), the fish of the sea, and the birds of the air (Gen. 1). Why this destruction? Chapter 4 of Deuteronomy (vv. 16–19) tells us. The Lord had warned his people to guard themselves carefully against the idolatry of the nations, for, he said, ‘you saw no form on the day the Lord spoke to you from the midst of the fire at Horeb—lest you be corrupted and make for yourselves any graven image, the form of any image, the figure of a male or a female, the figure of any beast that is on the earth, the figure of any winged bird that flies in the heavens, the figure of any creeping thing of the ground, the likeness of any fish that is

in the waters beneath the earth’ and lest ‘you lift up your eyes to the heavens and see the sun, the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, and be enticed to bow down to them and serve them’. Such had been the practice of the nations who had ‘exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image resembling a corruptible man and birds and four-footed animals and reptiles’ (Rom. 1:23). Therefore the Lord was going to destroy all these ‘stumbling blocks’—the animals and the man—which they had made into idols, and He would cut off ‘the wicked’ who had devoted themselves to their worship. But what would become of Judah?

JUDGEMENT ON JUDAH AND JERUSALEM. VV. 4–13

‘And I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I will cut off from this place the remnant of Baal and the name of the Kammim, together with the priests; and those who bow down on the housetops before the host of heaven, and those who bow down before the Lord, who swear by him and swear by their king (Malcam); and those who turn away from the Lord, and those who do not seek the Lord, nor inquire of him.’”

One might be surprised to see, in more than one place in the prophecies, the most severe threats uttered against the people, at the very moment when a king after God's own heart comes to interrupt the line of wicked kings of Judah; but we must remember that revivals, such as those of Hezekiah and Josiah, had not changed the moral state of the people, as our prophet himself testifies. This is, moreover, the case with all revivals. Whilst they are a serious call to men to repent, their invariable failure proves that the world decidedly does not want God. Undoubtedly, revivals bring about, by God's grace, a temporary halt in the execution of judgments, for as long as God gathers souls through the preaching of the Gospel; and thus judgment, as we see today, has not yet reached its zenith. It is like a brake that slows the journey, but does not prevent the carriage from reaching the bottom of the valley. Moreover, let us not forget that, whilst man readily casts the veil of forgetfulness over his past, the latter remains entirely present before God. The idolatry of Judah under Manasseh, even though the king had been restored through judgement, was not forgotten. Under Josiah, a reform took place, but not a true repentance on the part of the

people. Nothing was further from repentance than the habit of reconciling the worship of idols with that of the true God, a God who cannot tolerate ‘iniquity and solemn feasts’ (Isaiah 1:13). On the other hand, Revivals are an occasion for immense blessing: souls are saved, withdrawn from the world, and form a faithful Remnant amidst general unfaithfulness. It will be so until the end. The Jewish Remnant and that of the nations will have no other origin than the Revivals brought about by the ‘preaching of righteousness’ in Jerusalem (Dan. 12:3), and by ‘the gospel of the kingdom’ in Israel and among the nations (Matt. 24:14).

In fact, Josiah’s reform merely transformed the people’s poor moral state into a far worse one. God hates idolatry, but He hates even more the mixing of His worship with that of idols. A heart completely alien to God, a soul plunged into darkness and which has never received a direct revelation of the divine light, is less guilty than those who, knowing the truth, mix it with the practices of paganism; and let us not forget that this state of affairs, from which the Jewish house remains purified for a time even to this day, is found today in what is called the Christian

world. God’s severe judgement once fell upon Israel for having celebrated ‘a feast to the Lord’ in the presence of the golden calf. The same was true of the calves of Dan and Bethel. The people, whilst worshipping idols, had some knowledge of the true God, but this mixture was precisely what God abhorred in Judah, and the Revival had brought the nation no other result than this. The worship of Baal had certainly lost some of its popularity, though it had not disappeared entirely, for our prophet speaks of the remnant of Baal (v. 4); yet the decline in idolatry does not constitute a return to God. Personally, Josiah had completely broken with Baal and was leading the people along this path, but the people, stopping halfway, had compromised. The priests of the true God walked side by side with the Camarim, priests of Baal; white robes and black robes crossed paths in the streets of Jerusalem. Other cults, less crude in appearance, continued to seduce the people. They ‘bowed down on the rooftops before the host of heaven’, a cult that Josiah could neither fully control nor prohibit. Now that the Law had been rediscovered in the temple, Israel had been able to convince itself of what God thought of these idolatrous prac-

tices. God's goodness had given the stars 'as a portion to all the peoples under the whole heaven to give light upon the earth' (Deut. 4:19; Gen. 1:14–17), and men, taking as their masters the stars instituted to serve them, 'also bowed down before the Lord'. They gave to the creature, to inanimate things, the same authority as to the Creator of heaven and earth. What a strange aberration! But what is the sinful man not capable of? Sin has separated him from a God whom he no longer knows! The prophet adds: 'And those who swear by him and who swear by their king.' Still the same aberration! They call upon God as a witness, but also upon Malcam, the deity of the sons of Ammon (Jer. 49:1, 3); they swear by both God and the devil. But there is yet a fourth class of transgressors, more abominable than the others: 'Those who turn away from the Lord, and those who do not seek the Lord and do not inquire of him.' Having known him, they turn away from the God who says: 'If anyone turns away, my soul takes no pleasure in him.' To turn away from God was to turn towards perdition, to choose hell rather than Him (Heb. 10:38, 39). A hybrid religion, which seeks to reconcile the world and God, always leads, in the end,

to this ‘willful’ sin for which ‘there remains no sacrifice, but a certain dreadful expectation of judgement and the fury of a fire that will devour the adversaries’ (Heb. 10:27). ‘Turning away from the Lord’—such will be the state of the apostate Jewish people on the last day. Having regained for a time the continual sacrifice—Jewish worship in their rebuilt temple—the people will be seduced by the ‘deceptive wonders’ of ‘the man of sin’ and ‘take pleasure in unrighteousness’ (2 Thess. 2). These unbelievers “will run after another,” as it is said in Ps. 16:4, “and their troubles will be multiplied.” One final trait characterises them: ‘they do not enquire after Him.’ If there is anything worse than the impiety that rises up against God, it is perhaps indifference. To such men, God is a negligible quantity. Absorbed by the lusts of the world, the sinner seeks its allure to satisfy the needs of his heart, for, despite everything, being unable to be without needs, he directs them towards evil, without realising that he is thus walking towards the darkness of eternal darkness. Such men do not enquire after God. People take an interest in a man whose name, moral character or deeds arouse curiosity; one would like to learn the smallest details of his life,

everything concerning his person, his circle, his home, his family; one desires to know his opinions and his words, but when the name of God is spoken, who takes an interest in Him? Truly, indifference is worse than hatred!

‘Be silent before the Lord, the Eternal One! For the day of the Eternal One is near; for the Eternal One has prepared a sacrifice, He has consecrated His guests. And it shall come to pass, on the day of the Eternal One’s sacrifice, that I will punish the princes and the king’s sons, and all those who clothe themselves in foreign garments. And on that day I will punish all those who leap over the threshold, those who fill their master’s house with violence and deceit” (vv. 7–9).

In vv. 2–6, the Lord had announced that he would remove all stumbling blocks from among the nations and in Israel, as well as the men who commit these abominations. He had placed particular emphasis on the aggravating nature of idolatry in Israel, which dared to combine the worship of God with idols. Now we are witnessing the execution of the sentence. It will

first strike Jerusalem, for guilt is measured by the privileges one enjoys.

‘Be silent before the Lord, the Eternal One!’ Who has not witnessed the eerie silence that precedes a storm? Suddenly, lightning strikes, thunder roars; a fierce wind rises, sweeping everything before it. That silence was the prelude to a raging storm that nothing can now stop, the sign of something inexorable. So it is here. No more excuses to offer, no more hasty repentance to seek, no more supplications to make! The decree, long suspended, is suddenly carried out. Amos, referring to the same circumstances—the judgment of Jerusalem by Babylon—also says: ‘Silence’ (6:10), but when the judgment has been executed and no one remains. Here we are at the moment when it is about to be, when, as Nahum says, ‘it is decreed’ (2:7). When the day of the Lord begins, it is too late, and all hope is lost. In Hab. 2:20, it is said: ‘Silence’ when, after the execution of the judgement, we see the Lord ‘in the palace of his holiness’. He has established his reign; he dwells once more in his temple. The whole world acknowledges that the judgement was just,

and understands that it was necessary so that God might at last be glorified.

That dreadful day of the Lord — the day of the Lord, the day of the Son of Man in the New Testament — is always a day of judgement. We find a certain progression in this term: ‘The day of the Lord is near’ (v. 7); this refers, so to speak, to the historical judgement of Jerusalem by Babylon. ‘The great day of the Lord is near; it is near and hastening greatly’ (v. 14). This phrase extends to the prophetic and final judgement. ‘The day of the Lord’s wrath is at the door’ (2:2); the term encompasses both the present and future judgement of Jerusalem and of all the nations. As a prophetic judgement, this day is the hour of trial that must come upon the whole inhabited earth, and that of the great tribulation.

‘For the Lord has prepared a sacrifice.’ The same image is found in Isa. 34:6, 7, in Ezek. 39:17–20, concerning Assyria, and in Obad. 16, concerning Edom. This is the great supper of God in Rev. 19:17, but here in connection with the historical judgement executed on Jerusalem by Babylon, and a forerun-

ner of a more terrible judgement on the last day. It is useful and beneficial for us to be familiar with God's judgements. Undoubtedly, as far as we are concerned, we have learnt that judgement fell upon Christ on the cross, in order to deliver us by opening the door of grace to us; but, I repeat, it is beneficial for us to contemplate God's judgements upon the world, so that we may learn to be truly strangers to the order of things upon which they will fall. We shall thus be filled with the fear of participating in any way in the ways of the world, like Lot, despite the perfect assurance we have of being delivered from the wrath that is to come.

On the other hand, let us not forget that the sacrifice of judgement will be followed by a sacrifice of prosperity on the day when, on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, the Lord will prepare for the nations 'a feast of rich food, a feast of aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined' (Isaiah 25:6, 7). On the day of the judicial sacrifice, the Lord 'will punish the princes and the king's sons, and all those who wear foreign garments'. They were, by the Lord's appointment, the leaders, responsible for guiding the people. The king himself is

not mentioned here, for Josiah, leader of the faithful Remnant, had been spared according to Huldah's prophecy (2 Chronicles 34:27, 28); the reference is to his successors. These dressed in foreign garments, as did their imitators. To adopt the customs, even outward ones, of the nations was to adopt their luxury (Amos 6:3–6), to which were inevitably added the moral accompaniments of their effeminate habits.

'And I will punish, on that day, all those who leap over the threshold, those who fill their master's house with violence and fraud' (v. 9).

1 The second punishment falls upon those who add violence and fraud to superstitious practices (see 1 Sam. 5:5), just as the nations themselves do (Hab. 2:17). All these things were part of the customs of Babylon, to which Jerusalem was to fall prey.

Verses 10 and 11 foretell the destruction of Jerusalem by the Chaldeans. The enemy will invade from all sides, but this calamity will also take away the trade and all the wealth of the Jewish people, a 'people of merchants' who shared the same customs and aspirations as the people of Canaan or the multi-

tude of foreign traders. ‘And on that day,’ says the Lord, ‘there will be the sound of a cry from the Fish Gate, and a wailing from the Second Quarter of the city, and a great crash from the hills. Wail, inhabitants of Maktesh, for all the people of Canaan will be destroyed, all those laden with silver will be exterminated. And it shall come to pass in that day, that I will search Jerusalem with lamps’ (vv. 10–12). Not a single corner of the capital shall be left unexplored, not one that escapes God’s judgement. Its men shall be exterminated, and all that it contains delivered to plunder.

‘I will punish the men who rest on their lees, — who say in their hearts: “The Lord will do neither good nor evil”’ (v. 12). The third punishment falls upon those who were accustomed to a comfortable rest that nothing had ever disturbed, those who, not having been poured out from vessel to vessel, believed themselves safe from calamities (Jer. 48:11). The result of this apparent calm and the rest they had enjoyed for so long ought to have filled them with gratitude towards the Lord. Instead, they said: ‘The Lord will do neither good nor evil!’ They concluded, from their well-being, that God is indifferent to good or

evil. A dreadful conclusion, which is none other than that of the unbelievers of the end: ‘Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation’ (2 Peter 3:4). These indifferent people, resting on their material prosperity, deny that God is concerned with the affairs of the world and that there is any retribution on his part. All their well-being will come to an end, giving way to desolation; their possessions, patiently amassed, will fall prey to another; their wealth and comfort, for which they had laboured so hard, will serve only to enrich their enemies (Amos 5:11).

JUDGEMENT OF THE LIVING. VV. 14–18

Verses 14 to 18 draw us into the general terrors of the great day of the Lord. He is in great haste, but, though He begins with Jerusalem, His waves will overflow on every side. This will be the judgement of mankind on earth, known as the judgement of the living. Then, when the Lord makes his voice heard, the mightiest will tremble with fear and cry out in anguish. This day will have six characteristics:

First and foremost, it will be a day of fury. God’s wrath will no longer merely be ‘revealed from heaven’ (Rom. 1:18), but executed. — It will then be ‘a day of distress and anguish — a day of devastation and ruin — a day of darkness and gloom — a day of clouds and thick darkness — a day of trumpet and battle-cry against the fortified cities and against the high battlements’. This day shall be called ‘the time of distress.’ As we have often observed in the study of the prophets, distress always refers here to the time of the end, to the last half-week of Daniel, when judgments shall fall upon the Jewish people. It will be ‘the distress of Jacob’, but this day will also affect all nations, for whom it will be the day of general trial and of the ‘great tribulation’. On that day, men will walk as though blind (v. 17). A power of delusion will be sent upon them so that they may believe a lie (2 Thess. 2:11). There will be no possible means of deliverance for them (v. 18), for, says the prophet: ‘They have sinned against the Lord.’ They have loved falsehood, committed iniquity, despised God, passed by His grace with indifference, esteemed the salvation of the Lord as nothing; they have worshipped idols, defiled themselves with every

abomination; not once, driven by their lusts, did they consider that God was observing all their conduct; they regarded Him as indifferent, whilst the storm of vengeance was already gathering over their heads. They acted like fools, ‘saying in their hearts, “There is no God”’ (Ps. 14:1). Note ‘in their hearts’, not with their mouths, for without believing in God, one may still follow certain religious practices; but they acted and thought as though God did not exist. By God’s grace, this is not the case for those who think and act by faith. The Word says of them: ‘Anyone who comes to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him’ (Heb. 11:6).

In Zephaniah, the focus is on the testimony given to the Lord by Israel amongst the nations. As a whole, this testimony had borne no fruit, because Israel, far from being a people set apart for the Lord amidst a perverse generation, had joined forces against God with those who denied or hated Him. Just like the nations, Israel had ‘sinned against the Lord’; and its sin had nullified its testimony. Therefore, this people was judged first and foremost.

Whilst the judgment of God’s people is carried out through the nations (vv. 7–13), the judgment of the nations will come directly from heaven (v. 14). The day of the Lord is of the utmost importance to us believers. Can we hold on to anything of the things He is about to destroy? Whilst it is true, on the one hand, as we have said above, that we do not await the day of the Lord, it is true, on the other hand, that we await the day of Christ. Such is the nature of that day, as far as we are concerned, a day on which those who have borne witness to Christ will receive a reward, or suffer loss, according to the degree of faithfulness in their walk.

Chapter 2

Judgement of apostate Israel and the nations. Formation of a Remnant.

APOSTATE ISRAEL. A FAITHFUL REMNANT IS PRESERVED. VV. 1–3

‘Gather together, gather together, O nation without shame, before the decree is brought forth, before the day passes like chaff, before the fierceness of the Lord’s wrath comes upon

you, before the day of the Lord’s wrath comes upon you. Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, who do what is right in his sight; seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord’s wrath” (vv. 1–3).

This is a general call to the unbelieving and shameless nation, just as the day of the Lord is about to begin. Already the threatening clouds are filling the sky; already the voice of thunder is heard. Perhaps there is still time to escape; just a moment, one last moment to repent and be sheltered! What patience God has, and how clear it is that He does not want judgement, but that He wants mercy!

‘Gather together.’ This is the same call as ‘Gather the people’ in Joel 2:15; only in Joel this call, which here finds only rebels, is heeded by the faithful. The people, the nation without shame, gather together, but with the aim of resisting, on the day of wrath, the ‘flood of destruction’, in the belief that it will not reach them (Isaiah 28:15). They gather for their judgement, just as God will gather the nations for the same purpose (3:8). Hasten, says the Lord, before all these things come upon you.

If you delay until tomorrow, it will be too late; the day will have passed like chaff scattered by the wind.

‘Seek the Lord...’ (v. 3). Here we encounter the first mention of a Remnant. In the midst of the shameless nation, a company of meek ones has formed, the family of the children of the kingdom, of whom Jesus said: ‘Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.’ They will walk in the footsteps of their Master, who said: ‘I am gentle and humble in heart.’ These few, small (Zech. 13:7), poor, despised, persecuted, occupy the thoughts of the Lord. We encounter them everywhere, in the Psalms, in the Prophets, even in the Gospels before a new body of believers, the Church, was formed through the death and resurrection of Christ. We can trace the history of these meek ones, from the moment when, after the rapture of the Church, God will renew His relationship with His former people of Israel, until the moment when He will bring them, as His now recognised people, into the glory of their earthly inheritance. These are the wise men of Daniel who teach righteousness to the multitude and who, after having been persecuted, martyred, driven out, and hated by all, will shine like the splendour of the

heavens, like the stars, for ever and ever (Dan. 12:3). These are the members of Joel’s congregation who weep between the porch and the altar as the day of the Lord dawns (Joel 2:17), and who look upon Him whom they have pierced (Zech. 12:10). The role of these few is immense; at every turn we meet them, bearing witness among the people without shame. The Lord thinks of them and regards them as his special treasure (Mal. 3:17). His eyes rest upon them.

Yet they too will pass through the day of the Lord, for they will bear the weight of God’s governing wrath, as belonging to this nation that rejected and crucified its Messiah. But whilst the unbelieving nation is unashamed of its crime, they will bear the consequences with loud cries and tears. They will understand why they have been rejected: ‘Deliver us,’ they will say, ‘from the guilt of blood!’ They will acknowledge the judgment upon them as just, yet they will endure it by faith, as we see in Habakkuk. They will say, ‘How long?’, knowing that God will not fail to mark out for them the hour of deliverance. They will rely on His mercy as their only hope. They will understand that ‘perhaps’ (the ‘perhaps’ of David, fleeing from Absalom as a

consequence of his sin: 2 Sam. 16:12), ‘they will be sheltered on the day of the Lord’s wrath’ (v. 3). This ‘perhaps’ will be transformed into certainty at the hour of deliverance. Whilst awaiting that hour, they ‘shall seek righteousness and meekness’. Their sole concern, in these calamitous times, will be not to lose sight of, and to realise in their ways—scrupulously careful to guard themselves against sin—the character of the Messiah to whom they belong and against whom they were once so guilty. Thus, even in the midst of distress, they will experience what it is to be ‘sheltered’, as Israel was in the fateful night when the destroying Angel passed through the land of Egypt. They will obey this word: ‘Come, my people, enter your chambers and shut your doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while, until the wrath has passed by’ (Isaiah 26:20). On the day of the great persecution, assailed by all, pursued by Satan, they will find refuge in the wilderness of the nations, and when many of them, faithful witnesses, fall as martyrs under the blows of their adversaries in Jerusalem, they will be hidden among the nations who, willingly or unwillingly, will shelter them (Rev. 12:6). What a source of confidence for their

faith, this ‘perhaps’ spoken from the mouth of the Lord! We shall follow them, step by step, through this prophecy, until the day of triumph, joy and final rest under the sceptre of the Messiah!

But first we witness the terrors of the day of the Lord upon all the nations that have enslaved Judah.

JUDGEMENT ON THE PHILISTINES. VV. 4–6

‘For Gaza shall be forsaken, and Ashkelon shall be a desolation; Ashdod shall be driven out at midday, and Ekron shall be uprooted. Woe to those who dwell on the seashore, the nation of the Kerethites: the word of the Lord is against you, Canaan, land of the Philistines! And I will destroy you, so that there shall be no inhabitant.’

The principal cities of the Philistine confederacy, except Gath, which had previously been recaptured by Uzziah (2 Chr 26:6), are mentioned here, with puns on their names somewhat similar to those in Micah 1:10–16. The nation of the Philistines is called: ‘Those who dwell on the seacoast, the nation of the

Cherethites.’ They are named similarly in Ezek. 25:16. The Philistines were originally emigrants from Crete and are also described as having come from Caphtor (Amos 9:7; Jer. 47:4). Upon arriving in Canaan, they settled ‘by the seacoast’, the shores of the Mediterranean. All the prophecies concerning their destruction allude to their defeat, either at the hands of Pharaoh (Jer. 47:1), or, in the same chapter and in our passage, by Nebuchadnezzar, or by Alexander the Great, in Zech. 9:5–8. But these historical events, like all those in prophecy, are merely the forerunners of a final destruction in the future, for ‘no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation’ (2 Peter 1:20).

Like so many other nations, the Philistines will reappear for the great drama of the Day of the Lord. The ruin of the ‘coasts of the sea’ will result in sheltering the Remnant of Judah in the days of its tribulation. Never has anything like this taken place in the past. Zephaniah tells us this expressly in this passage: ‘And the coasts of the sea shall be pastures for the shepherds, and pastures for the flocks. And the coasts shall be for the Remnant of the house of Judah: there they shall feed; in the

evening they shall lie down in the houses of Ashkelon; for the Lord their God will visit them, and restore their captives’ (vv. 6, 7). It is there that part of the Remnant will find refuge for their flocks and assured rest in the devastated cities of Philistia. The characteristic words: ‘the Lord will restore their captives’ always refer to the days of the end. It is a very common term, a special phrase, literally translated as ‘turning the captivity’ (Shub Shebuth), to denote the return of all the captives with a view to their definitive restoration. Yet, never since the dispersion of the Jewish people has such an event taken place.

The return of Judah to its land, under the reign of Cyrus, was not the return of the entire people, but a partial return which did not put an end to captivity, even partial captivity, for Judah, having returned to its land, remained enslaved to the nations, and these nations continue to this day to ‘trample Jerusalem underfoot’ (see Neh. 9:36, 37; Psalm 126:1 in contrast to v. 4). The partial return of Judah was ordained by God so that a portion of this people might receive the Messiah in Judea and in Jerusalem. Had they received him, the ‘captivity would have been turned’ and the kingdom of Israel restored. The people’s

crime in crucifying Jesus put an end, until the prophetic times, to the hope of seeing ‘his captivity turned’.

This phrase therefore points to an entirely future event, and it is of the utmost importance to note this, because the future history of Israel and the glorious reign of the Messiah are inseparable. The final restoration will not take place only for Israel, but for Moab, Ammon and other nations in the last days; yet it relates specifically to God’s people, the true Remnant, as can be seen from the passages indicated in the footnote (*).

(*) Deut. 30:3; Ps. 14:7; 53:6; 85:1; 126:4; Jer. 29:14; 31:23; 32:44; 33:7, 11, 26; Hosea 6:11; Joel 3:1; Amos 9:14; Zeph. 2:7; 3:20.

It is therefore certain that this sojourn of the ‘remnant of the house of Judah’ relates to the time of the end, since we read: ‘For the Lord their God will visit them and restore their captives.’ And even if the sojourn of a few ‘survivors’ from Judah had taken place in Philistia after the conquest by Nebuchadnezzar or Alexander (which history does not reveal to us), this would not alter the fact stated by the prophet. The only ques-

tion that might be asked is to which period of the ‘restoration’ this passage refers, for the restoration of Israel will not take place in a single day. We have suggested elsewhere that this event might take place upon the return of the fugitive Remnant of Judah to their land, ‘before the glory’, that is to say, before the appearance of Christ and the destruction of the nations gathered around Jerusalem, including Assyria. This suggestion might be contested without altering what we are putting forward. We shall see in chapter 3 what underpins our assertion. One thing is certain: during the millennial division of the land of Israel, Philistia will form part of the territory of Judah and Benjamin (Ezek. 48).

MOAB, THE SONS OF AMMON, THE ETHIOPIANS. VV. 8–12

What characterised Moab and the sons of Ammon was, first of all, the outrage and insults with which they had affronted the people of God; in doing so, they were waging war against God Himself without realising the significance of this cruel hatred towards Israel. Secondly, it was pride that had driven them to attack the borders of the people’s inheritance. Thus the vengeance of the day of the Lord will be executed upon them by

the Remnant: ‘The Remnant of my people shall plunder them, and the rest of my nation shall inherit them’ (v. 9). This has never yet occurred in history, and the final retribution still awaits these two nations. Even the prophetic Assyrian, when he invades Palestine in the last days, will not reach them or subdue them (Dan. 11:41), for a different fate is in store for them. Edom will suffer the same judgement (see Obadiah), but even more terrible, for Edom will be utterly destroyed without a ‘remnant’, partly by the Lord, and partly by Israel.

‘The Lord will be terrible towards them’ (v. 11). Indeed, this upheaval will be terrible; their gods, Chemosh and Milcom, whose protection we so often hear them boasting of, will be destroyed and will not prevent desolation from spreading its net over them. But the curse upon these guilty nations is not the Lord’s final word concerning them. They will be forced to acknowledge Christ’s supremacy and to bow the knee before Him. What a blessing that this is so, and that God does not stop at the judgement of His enemies! We learn, no doubt, that this submission will not be of ‘free will’ in everyone. Many men from among the nations, from among the ‘sons of the stranger’,

will submit to Him in pretence, paying Him feigned obedience (Ps. 18:44; 66:3), but many others, converted by ‘the gospel of the kingdom’, will acknowledge the Lordship of Christ. Thus, in most nations, Remnants will be formed who will share in the universal restoration. The ‘islands of the nations’, the regions furthest from the city of the great King, will acknowledge His supremacy, ‘each from his own place’ (v. 11). This will in no way prevent the Remnants of the nations from going up to Jerusalem year after year to bow down before the King, the Lord of hosts, and to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles (Zech. 14:16).

The sword of the Lord will also strike directly at the Ethiopians (v. 12), in whom Israel had once placed its trust and to whom it had turned for help against the king of Assyria (Isa. 20:5, 6).

NINEVEH. vv. 13–15

These judgments lead the prophetic Spirit to turn its attention to Nineveh and Assyria (vv. 13–15). At the time Zephaniah was prophesying, Nineveh had not yet been destroyed. He therefore announces this momentous event—the fall of Nineveh, the spe-

cial subject of Nahum’s prophecy—as a future occurrence. Yet Zephaniah, far more than Nahum, directs our gaze towards the end times. In Nahum, the Lord destroys Nineveh, and with it Assyria, through instruments chosen by Him, through ‘his mighty men’, the Chaldeans (Nah. 2:3). Here, the judgement is carried out by the Lord Himself: it is He who stretches out His hand towards the north, He who lays bare the cedar panelling. Not that Nineveh, any more than Babylon, is to rise from its ashes in the last days. Its desolation is final, but the destruction of the historical Assyrian, led to its downfall by the capture of its capital, is not, and the Word here foreshadows the direct annihilation of this power, by the hand of the Lord in the last days. Nineveh was rejoicing, dwelling in safety, saying in its heart: ‘I, and none besides me!’ Her confidence in her own strength, her selfish pride, taking account only of her own interests, her self-worship, conceding no rival rights to others—all this becomes the cause of a crushing judgement. The same principles are loudly proclaimed today by certain nations, and will lead to the same disasters.

CHAPTER 3

Final Judgement and Final Restoration

THE LORD AS JUDGE IN THE MIDST OF JERUSALEM: VV. 1–7

‘Woe to the rebellious, the corrupt, the oppressive city! She does not heed the voice, she does not receive instruction, she does not trust in the Lord, she does not draw near to her God. Her princes within her are roaring lions; her judges, evening wolves: they leave nothing until morning. Her prophets are boastful, treacherous men; her priests profane the sanctuary, they violate the law. The righteous Lord is in her midst; he does no wrong; every morning he brings his righteous judgement to light: he does not fail; but the wicked know no shame. I have cut off nations; their battlements are laid waste; I have made their streets desolate, so that no one passes through; their cities are ravaged, so that there is no man left, no inhabitant. I said: ‘Fear me only, receive instruction; and his dwelling shall not be cut off, whatever punishment I inflict upon him.’ But they rose early and corrupted all their deeds.”

The prophet now moves from Nineveh to Jerusalem, from one capital to another. Will the fate of both be the same? There is, however, a great difference between them: ‘The Lord is in the midst’ of the latter and has never been in the midst of Nineveh. Alas! this fact aggravates the guilt of the city of God! Thus the ‘Woe’ is pronounced upon Jerusalem, and in Zephaniah we find only this single ‘Woe’. In the course of our studies, we have often had occasion to note this word in the prophets. Let us recall only the ‘Song of Woe’ in the prophet Habakkuk (2:6–20), addressed entirely to the Chaldeans and their king, whilst there remains no ‘Woe’ for the righteous who live by their faith. Here we find ‘Woe’ striking like a single, unexpected bolt of lightning upon the hollow Jewish profession that bears the name of the Lord, a profession contradicted by the moral character of those who dwelt in Jerusalem, the city privileged above all others. God demands reality. To bear His name and live like the nations brings upon that profession—whether Jewish or Christian—a judgement without reservation. ‘Woe to the rebellious, the corrupt who oppress!’ Such have always been the three characteristics of men separated from God by sin, characterist-

ics which everyone is capable of discerning. But there are others which fall under the judgement of God alone. Jerusalem, placed in direct relationship with God, since He dwells in her midst, in her temple, what does she reveal to the Lord's scrutinising gaze? Note that in Zephaniah, God has not yet left His temple, as in Ezekiel. He still dwells there, but how could He remain there other than as a judge? 'The righteous Lord is in her midst' (v. 5). Yet He finds in Jerusalem only purely negative moral traits:

1. 'She does not listen to the voice' when God speaks to her through his law and his prophets. How many times has he risen early in the morning to cry out: 'Let anyone with ears listen!' She remains deaf to his word, whilst possessing ears with a very keen hearing to listen to what the nations say to her.
2. 'She does not accept instruction.' How often has she been rebuked, exhorted, disciplined, and chastised, yet she has remained unmoved!

3. ‘She does not put her trust in the Lord.’ She places her trust in man, throws herself into the arms of God’s worst enemies, turns her back on Him whom she ought to regard as her only friend. Faith and trust in God are entirely lacking in her.

4. She does not draw near to her God’—who was, however, within her reach and very easy to find; but Jerusalem, despite the countless advantages offered by the dwelling of the Lord in her midst, had preferred to draw near to false gods by denying her God.

What, then, does the Lord discover in the leaders of the people? Note that the king himself is no more at issue here than in chapter 1:8, for Josiah was pleasing to God and had received His promises (2 Chron. 34:27, 28), but apart from Josiah, the princes, the leaders responsible for the people, were ‘roaring lions’: they bore the character of the devil, not that of God, and sought whom they might devour. This trait, highlighted by the prophet, will be even more pronounced in the end times, when the people will have chosen the Antichrist as their king. The

judges all act together like evening wolves to feast at night on their prey, of which not a trace will remain by daybreak (Hab. 1:8). Among the prophets, one finds nothing but boasting and treachery. The priests defile by their presence the temple where God dwells and, violating the law, adapt it to their own thoughts. Nowadays, unfaithful Christianity is increasingly taking on this character. Spiritual leaders twist the word of God, teach unbelief towards Him and contradict the teaching of the Holy Spirit. Their presence and their words defile the house of God, the Assembly of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.

But all these men cannot escape the fact that ‘the righteous Lord is in her midst’. He is righteous and cannot allow sin to come into contact with Him. Though He was pleased to come and make His dwelling among men, He cannot in any way renounce His own character. We shall see, in v. 13, that He recognises what is His own, the fruit of His grace, that Remnant which He has begotten; but the world must learn that God is a holy God who ‘commits no iniquity’ and brings to light, as evil occurs, the judgement that condemns it. His presence in His

house has always had, and will always have, this same result, whether in Israel or in the Church. When His government is recognised, even in an outward manner and without the conscience being involved, this principle is revealed; and when He takes the reins of an openly recognised government in His millennial kingdom, this principle will remain the same: ‘He will cut off the wicked from the land every morning.’ When the people’s iniquity has forced Him to leave, as in Ezekiel, the public seat of His government, it might seem that He ‘sleeps’ and allows evil to be committed without taking notice. But let us not be deceived; His government, even when hidden, His ‘kingdom in mystery’, always bears the same characteristics. The prophets have provided us with ample proof of this, so there is no need to return to it here. ‘He does not fail’: If the Christian world were convinced of this truth, it would not venture to commit ambitious, unjust and treacherous acts, and would fear a God who cannot deny Himself. ‘But the wicked know no shame.’ This is how Judah is described in chapter 2:1. To feel shame will always be the response of a sinful man who encounters God. Adam, after his sin, felt shame, but hid him-

self. As his conscience was not yet pricked, he still sought to deceive God. With a conscience truly pricked, one loathes oneself, like Job, and repentance—the sorrow of having offended God—fills the heart, for repentance is the fruit of faith, which mere shame is not. Yet God takes account of this first step, however incomplete it may be, on the path that will lead the sinner to Him. ‘The wicked’ do not know this first impulse, however basic it may be. Indeed, the wicked take pride in what ought to be their shame (Phil. 3:19). Do we not see every day men boasting of their immorality and their depravity, encouraging others to do as they do, to follow their example?

In verse 6, God shows how he had dealt with the nations in the past, just as he had declared in chapter 1:16–17 what he intended to do to them in the future. He had ‘cut them off’. God takes this as his starting point to make a final appeal to Jerusalem. ‘Fear me alone,’ he tells her, for fear is the beginning of wisdom. Was this asking too much of her? ‘You have not received instruction’ (v. 2); ‘receive it now’ (v. 7). He demands nothing else. ‘Your dwelling place, in that case, will not be cut off’, like that of the nations, ‘whatever punishment I inflict

upon you’—for this punishment had been announced (1:8, 9, 12) and could no longer be revoked—but at least, if Jerusalem took a single step towards God, He would not place it on the same level as the nations.

What became of these appeals, these urgent rebukes, addressed to this rebellious people right up to the very last moment? The final word of the Lord’s urgent concern for Israel is this: ‘But they rose early and corrupted all their deeds!’

GOD’S INDIGNATION AGAINST THE NATIONS IS THE SIGNAL FOR THE DELIVERANCE OF THE REMNANT OF ISRAEL AND THE REMNANT OF JERUSALEM. VV. 8–13

‘Therefore, wait for me,’ says the Lord, ‘for the day when I rise up for the spoil’ (v. 8).

The men of Jerusalem “had risen early to corrupt all their deeds” (v. 7), so God’s judgement had fallen upon these wicked men. Now God turns His attention to the nations. ‘Wait for me,’ he says: it is I who will rise up. Ah! How they would wish they could refuse to wait for him! But, willingly or unwillingly, they must obey this summons and meet the Lord face to face. The

unbelieving Jews will be compelled, like the other nations, to obey this call. To them too, the Lord had said: ‘Gather yourselves together’, when He wished to assemble them in mercy (2:1): they refused, and will be included in the universal judgement that will overtake the whole inhabited earth.

‘For I have determined to gather the nations, to assemble the kingdoms, to pour out upon them my indignation, the full fury of my wrath; for the whole earth shall be devoured by the fire of my jealousy’ (v. 8).

The Day of the Lord, of which our prophet speaks so much, will dawn: indignation, the fury of wrath, the fire of jealousy, will be poured out upon all, for God is jealous to see his name dishonoured and despised among the peoples (Nah. 1:2). What will happen next? O wonder of God’s goodness and infinite mercy! Distress will lead a remnant of the nations as well as a remnant of Israel to the desired haven! (Ps. 107:26, 30).

‘For then I will change the language of the peoples into a purified language, so that they may all call upon the name of the Lord and serve him with one heart’ (v. 9).

The nations will be blessed. It will no longer be what is presented to us in chapter 2:11, a forced submission to the supremacy of Christ, a submission that will not necessarily imply faith; no, it will be a submission of the heart, the submission of a Remnant of the nations, of a ‘great multitude which no one could number’ and who will receive Jesus as Lord and King (Rev. 7). Then their defiled tongue will be changed into a purified tongue. This change will take place through the working of the Holy Spirit. At Pentecost tongues of purifying fire fell upon the disciples, and the apostle Peter quoted in this regard the words of the prophet Joel: ‘It shall come to pass in the last days that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.’ In our passage we find the future fulfilment of this word concerning the nations, which Acts presents to us as having already taken place for the Church. Through the Holy Spirit, who will give them one heart, the peoples will call upon the name of the Lord, united in serving Him.

Now the Lord, having executed judgement on the one hand upon the nations, and on the other upon the Jews—‘the nation without shame’ which will share the fate of all other peoples—

turns towards the Remnant of this guilty people. They will not remain scattered:

‘From beyond the rivers of Cush, my supplicants, the daughter of my exiles, shall bring my offering’ (v. 10).

This passage does not refer solely to the Remnant of Judah, but to the entire Remnant of Israel returning to the Promised Land. When the Spirit of God moves in the hearts of the nations, ‘the daughter of the scattered ones’ of Israel (not the scattered ones themselves, but those born of them through faith) will return to the Lord as supplicants and bring the Remnant as an offering to the city of the great King. They will return ‘from beyond the rivers of Cush’, from the Nile and the Euphrates, for there was an African Cush (or Ethiopia) and an Asian Cush (see Isaiah 66:18–21).

We learn from Isaiah 18 that before this time, the nation—the one referred to here as the ‘nation without shame’ (and not the Remnant)—will be brought back by a maritime power, ‘from beyond the rivers of Cush’ (18:1), to its own land. This return of the Jews, of the unbelieving nation, returning to Palestine

with the support of the nations, will bear no fruit for God. They will not come as supplicants, under the leading of the Holy Spirit, but will believe they are reclaiming the rights of their nationality, and the result will be that, after a certain time, they will choose the Antichrist as their king. The current effort of Zionism to gather Israel together will lead only to this result; therefore, God ‘will remain silent’ (v. 4) in the face of this attempt to restore the nation’s unity without Him (*). It is only then that ‘the offering of the people’ (v. 7) will be accepted by the Lord of Hosts on Mount Zion. When this unity according to God is restored, the scene of reintegration will take on a wholly different character. The remnant of Israel will proclaim among the nations the appearance of Christ’s glory in Zion. Then, says the prophet: ‘They shall bring all your brothers, from all the nations, as an offering to the Lord, on horses, and in chariots, and in covered wagons, and on mules, and on camels, to my holy mountain, to Jerusalem, says the Lord, just as the sons of Israel bring the offering in a clean vessel to the house of the Lord’ (Isaiah 66:20).

(*) At the time of writing (note from the first edition, 1916), the proposal to re-establish a Jewish Republic in Palestine, under the auspices of the United States, is spreading persistently. The (Jewish) US ambassador in Constantinople appears to be securing the Sultan's authorisation for this. A massive Zionist rally in Boston declared: 'We have reached the psychological moment when we must possess Palestine in order to establish the new kingdom of David there.'

'On that day you will no longer be ashamed of all the deeds by which you have rebelled against me; for then I will remove from your midst those who rejoice in your pride, and you will no longer be haughty because of my holy mountain' (v. 11).

At that time, when the Remnant has been brought back to Jerusalem, that city where iniquity and pride dwelt and were practised without shame (see 2:1; 3:5), where the adversary of Christ had established his throne, will not be ashamed of all her evil deeds, for the Lord will have removed from her midst the haughty and those who adorned themselves with the name of his holy mountain to feed their pride.

‘And I will leave in your midst a humble and lowly people, and they shall trust in the name of the Lord’ (v. 12).

Such will be the character of the Remnant of Judah in Jerusalem. Verse 10 had described the return of the entire Remnant to their land, but, as we have shown elsewhere, there is an important distinction to be made between the Remnant of Judah and that of Israel. The former, guilty of the murder of the Messiah, will go through the great tribulation; the latter, chastened and purified during their return journey, as was once the case in the wilderness with the people who came out of Egypt, will return ‘only after the glory’. A small portion of the former will remain in Jerusalem to suffer persecution and martyrdom there under the Antichrist, whilst the greater part will have fled beyond the borders of the land of Israel in the face of the unprecedented persecution known as the ‘trouble of Jacob’. From this exile, during which they will be ‘kept safe’, they will return, as the ‘survivors’ of Babylon once did, to receive their Messiah. It is then that a portion of this ‘Remnant of the house of Judah’ will ‘graze on the coasts of Philistia and lie down in the deserted houses of Ashkelon’ (2:7). Such will be the first

stage of their restoration. The second will take place when the whole Remnant is brought back by the nations as an offering to the Lord (3:10); the third, the goal now having been attained for ever, when the Remnant ‘shall feed and lie down’, enjoying a definitive rest (v. 13). This same future, but far more glorious, awaits the Church, for it will be one of heavenly rest.

Then what is said in Zech. 10:5, 6 and Micah 5:5 will be fulfilled for the people; then also the afflicted and humbled Remnant, remaining in Jerusalem, will put their trust in the name of the Lord. Then, at last, when Christ’s feet stand once more upon the Mount of Olives, the apostate people will be removed from the midst of Jerusalem and will flee to fall under the blows of divine vengeance, and the humbled Remnant, remaining in the midst of it, will at last acclaim their long-awaited King (Zech. 14:3–5) (*).

(*) See: ‘The Book of the Prophet Zechariah’, by H. R.

“The Remnant of Israel shall not practise iniquity, nor speak a lie, nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths: for

they shall feed and lie down, and there shall be none to make them afraid” (v. 13).

Here we find a beautiful description of the moral condition of the Remnant. It is, so to speak, its negative aspect, following the positive aspect described in verse 12. There, it is afflicted, humbled, and puts its trust in the name of the Lord; here, sorrow and humiliation, combined with faith in the name of Christ whom they shall see appear in his glory as their Saviour, will be united with sinlessness in their conduct, with truth and sincerity: a stark contrast to what we shall see among their enemies (Ps. 120:2). Then they shall feed and rest with no one to frighten them. It will no longer be a partial rest like that of the Remnant of Judah (2:7), but a general rest for the Remnant. Their enemies having been destroyed, every cause for fear will have vanished and henceforth no one will come to frighten them.

Let us note that all these blessings follow the annihilation of the nations and the apostate Jewish people. We are entering into the blessings of the millennial reign. The Lord finally

grants His people food, rest and security, under the guidance of the Sovereign Shepherd of Israel. We find these same graces in Psalm 23: but with a view to the journey through the wilderness, for the passage through the valley of the shadow of death and in the face of persecution by enemies. In this beautiful Psalm, faith realises these blessings in advance, amidst countless difficulties, as we also see at the end of the prophet Habakkuk. In Zephaniah, faith is finally rewarded and transformed into reality. For the flock, the reign of peace begins. Their bread is given to them; they no longer see the defiant people; Jerusalem is a peaceful dwelling, a tent that will not be moved. The Remnant sees the King in his beauty! (Isaiah 33:16, 19, 20).

GLORIOUS RESTORATION OF THE PEOPLE UNDER THE REIGN OF
THE KING OF ISRAEL. VV. 14–20

‘Rejoice, O daughter of Zion; shout for joy, O Israel! Rejoice and be glad with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! The Lord has removed your judgments; he has driven away your enemy’ (vv. 14, 15).

Having reached the end of their affliction and humiliation, and having finally found a place of nourishment and rest, with no one to frighten them, Jerusalem and Israel are invited to shout for joy and rejoice with all their heart. The prophet Habakkuk knew this exultation when he sang ‘on Shigionoth’, and anticipated this glorious moment by faith; but now this rest is no longer anticipated; the Lord’s flock has entered into it. Divine reality far surpasses hope. In Ps. 3:5, 6 and Ps. 4:8, David, fleeing from Absalom and enduring the most cruel trials, was able to lie down, fall asleep without fear, and rest in peace. What, then, will this rest be like when it is tasted in its all-powerful reality? Our Christian joys are the same, but with a heavenly character. We rest in hope whilst awaiting ‘the rest that remains for the people of God’, but this rest belongs to us; we shall enter it in resurrection and in power, having tasted it and savoured it in advance with the full certainty that it is ours, for it is said: ‘We are entering into rest.’ God’s discipline of His people, the punishments He had to inflict upon them to make them partakers of His holiness—all this will henceforth be past and gone forever. ‘The Lord has removed your judgments’;

‘the Enemy of Israel is driven away’; the Enemy: not merely the hostile nations, but the Antichrist who led the people to their ruin, and Satan himself, the great Enemy of God’s people.

‘The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst: you shall see no more evil’ (v. 15).

He who was once like a Judge in the midst of Jerusalem (v. 5) is now in the midst of her as her King. Far more than that, he is in the midst of her as her God (v. 17). What a privilege! How could ‘Zion fear, and her hands grow weak?’ This is no longer the God of Sinai, consenting to dwell in Jerusalem, ‘in the midst of a people of unclean lips’ (Isaiah 6:5), the God whose presence was to be a perpetual judgement upon Israel; no, this King, this God, is the Saviour of his people:

‘The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty Saviour; he will save’ (v. 17).

There is no mention in Zephaniah, as in other prophets, of the work He has accomplished and upon which the millennial blessing may be established. Our prophet does not address this

subject; he merely shows the Lord restoring Israel, following a work of repentance in the hearts of the Remnant, elsewhere called ‘those who were to be saved’ (Acts 2:47). To create a new people, worthy of the splendour of his reign, He takes the poor from the flock. ‘From the dust He raises the lowly, from the dunghill He lifts the poor, to seat them with princes: and He gives them a throne of glory as their inheritance’ (1 Sam. 2:8). ‘He does not take his eyes off the righteous, and they sit with kings on the throne; he establishes them for ever, and they are exalted’ (Job 36:7).

In this blessed position, the Remnant, the ‘all Israel’ of Rom. 11:26, is in full communion with its King and Saviour. ‘On that day it will be said to Jerusalem: “Do not fear! Zion, let not your hands grow weak! The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty Saviour; he will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will be quiet (or be still) in his love; he will exult over you with singing of triumph” (vv. 16, 17).

The Remnant rests: their King rests; the Remnant rejoices with all their heart: their Saviour rejoices over them; the Remnant

shouts for joy: their Saviour rejoices in them with a song of triumph. They exult in the triumph He has won; He exults in having won it for them. These feelings are mutual. It is no longer the ‘inexpressible and glorious joy’ (1 Peter 1:8) as in Habakkuk (3:18) amidst adverse circumstances. The joy will be commensurate with the circumstances of Christ’s glorious reign. No more contrasts, no more suffering, no more reproach, no more distress: a perfect balance is established between the state of the faithful’s hearts and their surroundings; even more so, between their feelings and the feelings of their Saviour. Their happiness depends entirely on Him; He is mighty, He is the Saviour; He rejoices over those He has saved, having so clearly protected them during the days of their distress. This is the final deliverance: in the past He was Judge (v. 5), now He is Triumphant and Saviour for ever.

When we rest, He too will rest. Today He is still working, and we are working with Him. Tomorrow Zion will be His rest for ever (Ps. 132:14); tomorrow, His Church, His heavenly Bride, the New Jerusalem, will also be His rest. He will see the fruit of the labour of His soul and be fully satisfied (Isaiah 53:11).

Here we find an even more precious thought: ‘He will rest in his love’; this will be His alone. This is Christ’s rest in all the results of the immense work that his love has undertaken. He will henceforth have all that his heart has so longed for, a Bride (here the Jewish Bride) acquired at the price of his sufferings, for whom he sacrificed his own glory, now seated at the centre of the glory he has regained as a man. ‘They shall call you,’ he says, ‘My delight is in her, and your land: The Bride; for the delight of the Lord is in you, and your land shall be married. For... as the bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so shall your God rejoice over you’ (Isaiah 62:4, 5). “You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride... your love is better than wine!” (Song of Solomon 4:9, 10.) To win Jerusalem, he suffered, then fought alone against all the nations. To win His Church, by dying on the cross, He triumphed alone over the Prince of this world, over Satan himself. His priesthood, too, was wholly devoted to purifying His Bride along the way, to present her, according to all the desires of His heart, without spot or wrinkle, holy and blameless, and to possess her forever!

‘I will gather those who mourn because of the solemn assemblies; they were yours; shame lay upon them’ (v. 18).

Verse 18 describes a further characteristic of the Remnant of Jerusalem whom we saw ‘afflicted and humbled’ in verse 12. These are those ‘who mourn because of the solemn assemblies’. In their distress, neither they nor the fleeing Jewish Remnant had the privilege of a general gathering of the people. Deprived of the Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles, their public and direct relationship with God was severed. Driven out of Jerusalem, the faithful Remnant said: ‘All day long they said to me: “Where is your God?” I remembered these things, and I poured out my soul within me: how I used to go with the crowd, and I would go forth in their company, with a voice of triumph and praise, to the house of God... a festive multitude’ (Ps. 42:3, 4). In Jerusalem, after a period of relative calm, they had seen the abomination of which the prophet speaks, established in the temple, and had fled. Worship had ceased; the continual sacrifice had been removed (Daniel 8:11). However, deprived of all that had once been their joy, they were from Jerusalem, the true sons of the city of God, as it is said here:

‘They were of you’, in contrast to the people of the Antichrist. Psalm 87 tells us: ‘This one (Christ) and that one (the faithful of the Remnant) were born in her.’ But they were marked on the forehead as ‘those who sigh and groan because of all the abominations committed within her’ (Ezek. 9:4). ‘The reproach lay upon them’ (v. 18) just as it had lain upon their Messiah (Ps. 69:19). But the Lord declares that he will gather them together, whereas the ‘nation without shame’ had refused to gather together to humble themselves before God. He will gather them together and stand at their head as Shepherd of the flock (Micah 2:12, 13).

‘Behold, in those days I will deal with all those who afflict you, and I will save the one who limped, and I will gather the one who was cast out, and I will make them a praise and a name in all the lands where they were covered with shame’ (v. 19).

The Shepherd of Israel intervenes: distress and dispersion, the fruits of their unfaithfulness, are now nothing but a memory. The same will be true of the Church, which is currently scattered far and wide as a consequence of its unfaithfulness.

The Lord will gather her together in the twinkling of an eye and take her up to the heavenly mansions, where there will be but one flock, one ‘great Shepherd of the sheep’. What compassion, what love, in this heart that is both divine and human! The infirm are the object of his care; he is the sovereign Physician, just as he is the good Shepherd. He will save the lamb that limped, for he knows the remedy to heal it. He will provide a refuge for the one who was cast out, and He Himself will be that refuge: ‘I will take her in.’ The nations had banded together to torment them, to humiliate them, to ‘cover them with shame’: ‘In that day,’ he says, ‘I will bring you back, at the very time when I gather you together, for I will make you a name and a praise among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your captives before your very eyes, says the Lord’ (v. 20).

The prophet Micah announces the same things: “I will make the one who limped a remnant, and the one who was cast far off a mighty nation; and the Lord will reign over them on Mount Zion from that time forth and for ever” (Micah 4:7). This name, this praise, will not be bestowed upon them only in

the lands from which they were driven: everywhere, among all the peoples of the earth, the renown of the Lord's people will spread when he 'turns their captivity'.

"I will gather you together!" What a delightful prospect for us Christians, as well as for Israel! Currently covered in shame, the just consequence of our unfaithfulness, scattered through our own fault, whereas the purpose of Christ's death was to gather us into one, we wait in humiliation and, we hope, in true repentance, we who have brought so much dishonour upon the name of our Saviour! But now a cry reaches our ears: the day of gathering is beginning to dawn! The Morning Star (Jesus coming in grace) illuminates our hearts. It will appear in the sky. After it, the Sun of Righteousness will rise, illuminating the earth and the heavens. Just as He will 'turn the captivity' of Israel, so He will 'turn' ours too!

Against this marvellous backdrop of communion, joy, triumph, praise, and glorious, definitive, and eternal rest, the book of Zephaniah draws to a close. Whilst it bears witness to Israel's sin, it also bears witness to its restoration, its regeneration, and

its new position, into which a new people will enter, emerging from the bosom of the dawn. The Church too shall enter there, when the saints shall shine like the sun in their Father's kingdom!