

Zephaniah

Chapter 1

The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah, during the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah:

1:1 *The word of the LORD.* A common introductory phrase in the prophets (see, e.g., Jer 1:4; Hos 1:1; Mic 1:1). (CSB)

Zephaniah. Means “The LORD hides” or “The LORD protects,” perhaps referring to God’s protection of Zephaniah during the infamous reigns of Manasseh and Amon, the predecessors of good King Josiah. (CSB)

son of ... Hezekiah. From the author’s pedigree, scholars suggest that he was in his early 20s when he began to prophesy. He is more closely identified with the ruling class than was Isaiah, although Isaiah also moved regularly in court circles and was perhaps of noble birth. (CSB)

Zephaniah traces his ancestry four generations to Hezekiah. If this is the good King Hezekiah who brought about religious reform in Judah, Zephaniah establishes himself as the connecting link who would help bring about a similar reform at the time of King Josiah. Josiah came to the throne of Judah in 649 BC following the religiously disastrous reigns of Manasseh and Amon. The Assyrian Empire was in decline, and Babylon was rising in importance. (TLSB)

Warning of Coming Destruction

²“I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD. ³“I will sweep away both men and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. The wicked will have only heaps of rubble when I cut off man from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD.

1:2–3 *sweep away.* Zephaniah speaks of the coming catastrophe in language reminiscent of God’s utterances prior to the flood (Ge 6:7). But this time it will be by God’s fire (v. 18; 3:8). (CSB)

God’s final judgment will come upon the entire earth. All life will perish. God promised Noah that He would never again destroy the world by water (Gen 8:21-22; 9:15). The judgment on the Last Day will be by fire. (TLSB)

1:3 *fish of the sea.* The final judgment will exceed even the flood by destroying life in the sea. (TLSB)

heaps of rubble. Alternatively, the sense may be that God will place formidable obstacles in the paths of the wicked and destroy them completely. (CSB)

Rubble is Hebrew *makshelah*, “stumbling block” or “idol,” i.e., those things that cause people to turn away from the Lord. The wicked here are the morally corrupt. Human wickedness has polluted the entire creation and is the reason everything is under judgment (Rm 8:19-22). (TLSB)

Against Judah

4 “I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem. I will cut off from this place every remnant of Baal, the names of the pagan and the idolatrous priests— **5** those who bow down on the roofs to worship the starry host, those who bow down and swear by the LORD and who also swear by Molech, **6** those who turn back from following the LORD and neither seek the LORD nor inquire of him. **7** Be silent before the Sovereign LORD, for the day of the LORD is near. The LORD has prepared a sacrifice; he has consecrated those he has invited. **8** On the day of the LORD’s sacrifice I will punish the princes and the king’s sons and all those clad in foreign clothes. **9** On that day I will punish all who avoid stepping on the threshold, who fill the temple of their gods with violence and deceit. **10** “On that day,” declares the LORD, “a cry will go up from the Fish Gate, wailing from the New Quarter, and a loud crash from the hills. **11** Wail, you who live in the market district, all your merchants will be wiped out, all who trade with silver will be ruined. **12** At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps and punish those who are complacent, who are like wine left on its dregs, who think, ‘The LORD will do nothing, either good or bad.’ **13** Their wealth will be plundered, their houses demolished. They will build houses but not live in them; they will plant vineyards but not drink the wine.

1:4–6 Seems to indicate that Zephaniah’s main ministry took place before 621 B.C., since the practices condemned here were abolished in Josiah’s reforms (2Ki 23:4–16). Perhaps Zephaniah’s message was partly instrumental in motivating King Josiah and the people to undertake the reforms (cf. 2Ch 34:1–7). (CSB)

1:4 *stretch out My hand.* Also used for the judgment God brought on Egypt at the exodus (Ex 7:5). (TLSB)

against Judah. After describing the final universal judgment, the Lord turns His attention to Judah (TLSB)

Judah is censured for its unrepentant participation in the gross idolatry of Baal worship. (CSB)

this place. Jerusalem, where Zephaniah probably lived. (CSB)

Baal. This would be those people in the land who still worshiped Baal. (TLSB)

IDOLATROUS PRIETS – The very memory of the priests of Baal and other false religions will be erased. (TLSB)

1:5 *on the roofs.* See 2Ki 23:12; Jer 19:13. (CSB)

worship the starry host. See Dt 4:15–19; 2Ki 17:16; 21:3; Isa 47:13. (CSB)

God will bring judgment on those who worship the stars and also on those hypocrites who only pretend to worship the Lord. (TLSB)

swear by the LORD... by Molech. Syncretism (worship of one's own god along with other gods). (CSB)

Milcom. Also known as Molech, the Ammonite idol to whom people sacrificed their children. Solomon permitted the worship of Molech (1Ki 11:7), which continued until Josiah destroyed the high places dedicated to his worship. (TLSB)

Molech. Worshiped by the Ammonites, his rituals sometimes involved child sacrifice. Molech worship was forbidden to the Israelites (Lev 18:21; 20:1–5). Despite this, Solomon set up an altar to Molech on the Mount of Olives (1Ki 11:7). Manasseh established the rituals in the Valley of Ben Hinnom (2Ch 33:6; Jer 7:31; 32:35). (CSB)

1:6 *turned back.* Judeans who had given up their faith in the Lord. (TLSB)

do not seek the LORD. Those who no longer prayed to the Lord to seek His guidance and help. (TLSB)

1:2–6 The Lord declares that final judgment will come worldwide, then pronounces specific judgments against faithless Judah. We also deserve God's anger when we replace God and His Word with what we find exciting, entertaining, or perhaps financially beneficial. But God's Law shows us our sin and drives us to repentance. He forgives our sins because Christ, our Savior, suffered judgment in our place. • Lord, forgive me for not always giving You first place in my life. Move me daily to seek Your guidance and help. Amen. (TLSB)

1:7 *Be silent before the Sovereign LORD.* See Hab 2:20. (CSB)

God's presence demanded such behavior. (TLSB)

Lord GOD. Lit, "Lord Yahweh." The two Hbr words usually translated as *lord* are here used side by side: the first word is comparable to "master," and the second is God's proper name, "Yahweh" (usually written as LORD). (TLSB)

The word Zephaniah uses to command silence is the same as our word “hush!” It is a strong command, calling for immediate and absolute compliance. The reasons are given. The people of Judah are standing before the Sovereign Lord. He is lord and master of the whole earth; He is God, who has chosen and saved Israel. In His presence the only proper response is silence. (PBC)

day of the LORD. Zephaniah’s main theme (see Introduction: Purpose and Theme); not of deliverance for Judah, but of divine vengeance on the idolatrous covenant nation. (CSB)

Refers to the time when the Lord will act, anticipating the wrath and salvation of Judgment Day. This phrase is used frequently in Jl and Zep. (TLSB)

The need for silence is especially true in view of the fact that the day of the Lord is coming, that the day of the Lord’s righteous judgment is near. Certainly this holds out the strongest possible reason for the people of Judah to give up their idolatry and return in true repentance to their Savior-God. (PBC)

sacrifice. The victim is Judah. (CSB)

The sacrifice spoken of here is the fellowship offering – one of the four blood offerings that were instituted in the Mosaic Law. In making this offering, the worshiper brought an animal to the sanctuary, confessed his sins over the animal’s head, and gave it to the priest to be sacrificed. What was different about the fellowship offering was that a portion of the meat from the sacrificial animal was given back to the worshiper. And then that meat was shared with the worshiper’s family and friends and other invited guests in a joyous family festival. Their eating part of the sacrificial meat together signified happy fellowship with the Lord and with one another much as Holy Communion does today, and also based on the shedding of blood. (PBC)

Zephaniah now uses this imagery in a most unexpected way. The Lord is the one who supplies the sacrifice. This sacrifice is the nation of Judah, whose blood will be shed. (PBC)

consecrated. Since the coming slaughter of judgment is called a sacrifice, God’s preparation of his guests is called his consecration of them—in preparation for their feasting on the plunder. (CSB)

those ... invited. The pagan conquerors (mainly Babylon). (CSB)

Foreign nation appointed by God to consume the sacrifice. (TLSB)

The guests whom the Lord has designated to share in the eating of the sacrifice are the invading troops, probably Babylonians, whom God invites to share in the plundering of Judah. What irony! A sacrifice which normally expresses Israel’s

covenant relationship with God and which was meant to proclaim forgiveness, joy, and peace now becomes a picture of God's judgment. (PBC)

1:8 PRINCES AND THE KING'S SONS – The first segment of Judean society to fall under the Lord's judgment is its grandest, the king's relatives. When Zephaniah speaks of the princes and the king's sons, he could be looking into the future, to a day when Josiah's sons, who refused to walk in the footsteps of their God-fearing father, were killed or exiled to foreign lands. He also could be referring to the nobles, state officials, and other members of the extended royal family who enjoyed special privileges in the country. (PBC)

Leaders of Judah are singled out as objects of God's wrath. (TLSB)

CLAD IN FOREIGN CLOTHES – In and of itself, the kind of clothes these people wore was neither right nor wrong. The Lord had laid down very few stipulations concerning clothing in the Mosaic Law. But when He did, it had something to do with the people's relationship with Him (for example, see Numbers 15:37-40, where tassels on garments are required to remind the wearers to keep God's commandments). The point is that wearing foreign styles displayed a certain mindset. It showed that the members of the royal family admired and were influenced by the customs and beliefs they found in the heathen cultures of Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt. Perhaps the kind of clothing the godly in Judah wore looked dowdy and hopelessly out of style to them. As such, the clothing these people wore became a sign of the rejection of Israelite ways and of the Lord Himself. (PBC)

Some Judeans chose to imitate the dress of the heathen nations around them. (TLSB)

1:9 *avoid stepping on the threshold.* Perhaps referring to a pagan custom that began in the time of Samuel (see NIV text note – see 1 Samuel 5:5). (CSB)

Possibly refers to the superstitious practice of Philistine priests, who did not dare to step on the threshold of Dagon's temple. (TLSB)

The references Zephaniah makes in this verse were, no doubt, readily understood by the people of his day, but they are something of a mystery to modern readers. The first question that arises is, who is the prophet condemning here? Is he still speaking of the princes and other officials of the previous verse or does he have a different segment of society in mind? If it's a new group, then more than likely it's the priests of Judah that are being referred to. Second, the custom Zephaniah is speaking about is uncertain. It's true that the Philistine priests at the temple of Dagon in Ashdod avoided stepping on the threshold of their temple ever since their idol had fallen there before the captive ark of the Lord (1 Samuel 5:1-15), but the verb Zephaniah uses seems to imply more than just "stepping over" something. It speaks more of "jumping" or "leaping" in exuberance and joy. So it may even be that Zephaniah is talking about a totally

different heathen custom. Whatever the practice was that Zephaniah had in mind, it was totally unacceptable to the Lord. (PBC)

GODS – This can refer to idols or human masters, or it can be a word to describe the Lord. So who are the people being described here? They could be princes who practiced heathen customs before the Lord's temple and who brought offerings they had obtained in some violent or fraudulent way, or they could be priests who did the same thing. They might also be people who served the nobles in Judah, servants or slaves who filled the houses of their masters with ill-gotten gain. Whatever their situation might have been, they are cited as further examples of wickedness in Judah and, as such come under the Lord's condemnation. (PBC)

violence. Can refer to unjust gain. (TLSB)

fraud. Dishonesty and trickery. (TLSB)

1:10–13 Wailing throughout the city (contrast 3:14–17). (CSB)

1:10 Merchants who had grown rich through corrupt business practices would be destroyed. (CSB)

To picture the Lord's approaching judgment on Jerusalem, Zephaniah describes the advancement of an enemy army on the city of Jerusalem – invading the city from the north, the direction from which its most feared enemies, Assyria and Babylon came. The prophecy came true in a preliminary way when the armies of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon invaded Jerusalem in 586 BC. Again we need to remember, however, that Zephaniah, using OT pictures from Judah's experience and history, is also referring to the final judgment of God upon all the wicked. (PBC)

Fish Gate. In Jerusalem's north wall. Discovery of fish bones has confirmed that a fish market was here, likely stocked with dried or salted fish, since the Jordan and Great Sea were too far away to provide fresh fish. (TLSB)

This is located in the northwest portion of Hezekiah's wall. That is where the Israelite watchmen would sound the warning. That is where the inhabitants of Jerusalem would first cry out in pain as they felt the enemy's swords strike home. (PBC)

New Quarter. Likely the western hill of Jerusalem, an area with newer, wealthier homes. (TLSB)

This was the newest housing development in the city. It too was located in the northwest corner, west of the temple, and once the Fish Gate had been breached, it would have been starkly vulnerable. (PBC)

LOUD CRASH UP FROM THE HILLS – These “hills’ may also have been a newly developed area in the city. It too would have been easy pickings for the enemy. The wailing and crashing sounds Zephaniah mentions indicate the terrible human suffering involved in such a ruthless invasion and the destruction of the walls, houses, and buildings that would accompany such an invasion. (PBC)

Judah’s hills will be filled with the horrible sounds of havoc and destruction. (TLSB)

1:11 *market district*. May have been an area in the Tyropoeon Valley, just south of Mount Moriah, where some foreign merchants lived (see 1Ki 20:34 and note). (CSB)

Possibly a business area located in a shallow valley in Jerusalem. (TLSB)

The next section of the city Zephaniah mentions was zoned for commerce. Zephaniah calls it “the Mortar” or “the Hollow” (NIV market district). Most commentators assume that it refers to the Central Valley or Hollow, that ran north and south through the city between the old settlement to the east and the newly constructed ones to the west. This was the business district where the merchants plied their trades and bankers weighed out gold and silver. This would probably be the next section of the city to fall to the invading army. The verbs Zephaniah uses here paint interesting pictures. (Note: The word that the NIV translates as “be wiped out” could better be translated as “be silenced.”) They suggest a situation like this: At first there would just be the normal commotion and noise from the hustle and bustle taking place in the marketplace. That would be followed by the even louder wailing and howling and shrieking of people as the enemy soldiers caught up with them and attacked. Finally, there would be silence – an absolute eerie, unnatural silence. No one would be left to make noise. The people would have fled or been killed. This is part of what Zephaniah had in mind when he warned, “The day of the Lord is near” (1:7). (PBC)

traders. Businesspeople are referred to as Canaanites, who spent their lives in pursuit of money. The Phoenicians dominated regional trade. (TLSB)

weigh out silver. Not coins but pieces or “bits” of silver traded as currency. (TLSB)

cut off. The merchants and money-changers will be consumed and destroyed. (TLSB)

1:12 *search Jerusalem with lamps*. The Babylonians later dragged people from houses, streets, sewers and tombs, where they had hidden. (CSB)

As one uses a lamp at night to make a thorough search, so the Lord will search meticulously through Jerusalem. (TLSB)

Zephaniah does not want his readers to forget that the real arm of destruction he has been speaking about since verse 10 is not some army of men, some human agent. The real destroyer is the Lord. On the last day, the final “day of the Lord,” the Lord will use no agent, other than possible His angels, to carry out His justice. So here Zephaniah clarifies his picture. Even though he is still describing the activity of an invading army, now it is the Lord Himself searching every nook and cranny of the city. The contents of every dark corner will be revealed as the Lord seeks out the wicked, in the manner of invaders searching for soldiers and citizens who have hidden themselves. There is no possibility of hiding from Him. Absolutely no one will escape His wrath and punishment. (PBC)

The LORD will do nothing. A typical depiction of the arrogance of the wicked (see note on Ps 10:11). (CSB)

Judeans had become like pagans who believed the Lord would neither help nor harm them. (TLSB)

The objects of the Lord’s search are men who are like wine that has been left on its dregs. The dregs are the impurities that settle out of new wine during the fermenting process. The Israelites left that wine on the dregs for a while to strengthen the wine’s taste. If the wine was left too long, however, the dregs would embitter the wine, finally turning it into an unusable, jellied mass. The prophet’s point is that the wicked in Jerusalem have remained there undisturbed for such a long time that they have grown spiritually smug and complacent. The quality of their spiritual life has been destroyed. They have settled into their wickedness, are beyond redemption, and are totally useless to the Lord. Zephaniah describes their attitude by putting words into their mouths. “The Lord will do nothing, either good or bad,” they assert confidently. (PBC)

1:13 *goods ... houses ... vineyards.* Like practical atheists in any age, the people of Judah valued only wealth, real estate, and business. The Lord would destroy it all. (TLSB)

The assets of those who have become wealthy through dishonesty will be exposed and plundered (see Dt 28:30). (CSB)

What a shock the Lord’s judgment would be when it came. The wealth they had spent so much time acquiring would become the spoils of war. The houses they had so proudly built would be razed to the ground. Their marvelously groomed and tended vineyards would become a heap of frying, withering vines. Everything that replaced the Lord in their hearts as a basis for their confidence would be gone. The Lord’s judgment on them would rival and surpass any destruction that an invading army can inflict on a defenseless city. (PBC)

The Great day of the Lord

¹⁴ “The great day of the LORD is near— near and coming quickly. Listen! The cry on the day of the LORD will be bitter, the shouting of the warrior there. ¹⁵ That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness, ¹⁶ a day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the corner towers. ¹⁷ I will bring distress on the people and they will walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the LORD. Their blood will be poured out like dust and their entrails like filth. ¹⁸ Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the LORD’s wrath. In the fire of his jealousy the whole world will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth.”

1:14–18 In a dramatic passage of great lyrical power, the Lord describes the destruction that will sweep the earth in the day of God’s wrath. (CSB)

1:14 *great day of the LORD is near.* Some things Zephaniah prophesied took place at the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. Other details would be fulfilled later. The ultimate fulfillment will be on Judgment Day.

Zephaniah’s chief point is that the day is near. It will be here before anyone expects it. There is little time to prepare. This is the message that the Lord has given throughout the Scriptures through His apostles, His prophets, and His own Son. In fact, the last recorded words of Jesus in the Bible have Him saying, “Yes, I am coming soon” (Revelation 22:20). (PBC)

God says these things so often because His people need to hear them over and over again. We tend not to have the same view of time that the Lord does. Two thousand six hundred years ago Zephaniah said the day of the Lord is near. And two thousand years have passed since the exalted Christ spoke to the apostle John in Revelation. As you and I mark the passing days and years, that’s a very long time. Without the Lord’s constant reminder that the end is coming soon, our spiritual sense would become dull. We would become like the unbelieving scoffers that Peter describes: “They will say, ‘Where is this “coming” He promised? Ever since our fathers died everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation” (2 Peter 3:4). With the help of the Lord’s Spirit, we confidently say, “The end is just around the corner.” For that day is near at any moment and every moment – in Zephaniah’s day, in Jesus’ day, in Paul and Peter’s day, or in our day. (PBC)

sound ... is bitter. To hear and read about the Lord’s judgment causes even the bravest soldier to cry out in despair. (TLSB)

Zephaniah ends his chapter by describing the Lord’s judgment in a climatic way. After warning that God’s day of judgment will strike Judah soon, Zephaniah uses

some of the most vivid imagery anywhere in the Bible, to describe what God's final judgment on the earth will be like. His words paint a mural of judgment and wrath that is hard to ignore. (PBC)

SHOUTING OF THE WARRIOR – Most commentators see the warrior as one of the defenders of the city. As the day of the Lord falls upon the city, the defender on the wall is the first to cry out in anguish at the terrible judgment that is about to come upon him and his fellow citizens. (PBC)

1:15-16 At the beginning of this chapter, Zephaniah suggested that the “day of the Lord” would reverse creation. God would “sweep away everything” that He created (1:2). Commentators suggest that Zephaniah is saying the same thing in verse 15. God created the world in six days. Here Zephaniah mentions the day of the Lord six times. It will reverse everything God did in those first six days of the earth's history and will bring history to a close. (PBC)

1:15 Reversal of the days of creation. Instead of light and life, there will be distress and darkness and death. God's anger at sin will be manifested. This phrase served as the title of a long thirteenth-century Latin hymn, “Dies Irae” (TLH 607), which became part of the Requiem Mass famously set to music by Mozart and Verdi. (TLSB)

According to the prophet Amos (5:18), the Israelites thought that the day of the Lord would be the day on which the Lord would exalt Israel at the expense of the other nations of the world and that they would be totally exempt from the punishment and destruction that day would bring. Not so, says Zephaniah. It will be a day on which the Lord punishes sin and wickedness, a day on which He gives full expression to His wrath. Beware! (PBC)

distress. Any kind of adversity, affliction, or trouble. (TLSB)

Words seem to fail the prophet as he struggles to describe what God permits him to see. To compensate he heaps up all the terms he can find for the suffering and the mental and spiritual despair that will accompany it. The description reminds us of Jesus' words, “There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 22:13). (PBC)

anguish. Severe mental or physical suffering. (TLSB)

Again the terms are piled up. What a reversal of creation! On the first day of creation God called out in the darkness, “Let there be light,” and light, the basic ingredient for life, came into existence. Now God calls out in judgment, “Let there be darkness!” and sinners are separated from the life-giving God, cast into the eternal night. No battlefield or conquered city – with suffocating smoke rising from its burning buildings and the odious stench of death rising from corpses rotting in its streets – ever presented a more hideous scene than the one Zephaniah paints of the world's end. (PBC)

1:16 *trumpet*. Hbr *shophar*, “ram’s horn.” Used to sound alarms and signal the last judgment (1Co 15:52; Rv 8:6). (TLSB)

fortified cities. Cities deemed inaccessible and unconquerable because of their strong construction. (TLSB)

lofty battlements. High towers. (TLSB)

The day of the Lord’s judgment will be unstoppable. It will roll forward like the mightiest army the world has ever seen. No walls or towers of human construction will be able to prevent it from happening or will protect people from its destructive power. (PBC)

1:17 *like blind men*. See Dt 28:28–29. (CSB)

They are helpless, bewildered, and lost. (TLSB)

SINNED AGAINST THE LORD – Sin is serious, not simply because it ruins a person’s life or disrupts society, but because it offends the Lord. (TLSB)

BLOOD...POURED...DUST – Humanity is totally sinful and deserves to be thrown out like things unclean and worthless. (TLSB)

1:18 *Neither ... silver nor ... gold will ... save them*. In the day of God’s judgment, material wealth cannot buy deliverance from punishment. (CSB)

1:18 On Judgment Day, no one will be able to buy salvation. (TLSB)

fire of His jealousy. The Lord is a jealous God (Ex 34:14), who demands the full devotion and worship of His people for Himself alone. (TLSB)

1:7–18 God’s day of wrath would come swiftly on the people of Judah because of their materialism, worldliness, and general disobedience. The final Day of Judgment will likewise come unexpectedly, as a thief in the night (1Th 5:2). We have all missed the mark of God’s perfection and deserve only His punishment, now and eternally. However, God so loved the world that He sent His only Son to endure the punishment for our sins. All who believe in Jesus have no need to fear the Day of Judgment. • Lord, fill me with joyful anticipation for the day of Your return. Give me confidence that I shall stand before You cleansed and holy because of Jesus. Amen. (TLSB)