

# Zephaniah 1:14-18

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*Zephaniah announces the imminent day of the LORD's wrath. His prophecy applies both to Judah, and its imminent invasion by Babylon, as well as the ultimate conquering of earth by Jesus, when He will cleanse the earth of sin and restore it to its original, harmonious design.*

In the previous section, the prophet Zephaniah described the LORD's judgment on the people of Judah because of their wickedness and exploitation of others (vv. 8-13). There, he portrayed Judah as a sacrifice that God Himself would slaughter (vv 7-8). In the present section, Zephaniah's description of the LORD's judgment is not restricted to Judah alone but applies to all mankind because everyone has sinned against the LORD.

The prophet began by telling his readers that *the great day of the LORD* was *near* (vs 14).

The phrase *day of the LORD* refers to a time of divine intervention and judgment (Amos 5:18). It is a time when the LORD would exercise His supreme dominion and authority over human powers and human existence. Zephaniah picked up the motif of the *day of the LORD* first introduced in verse 7. He repeated the adjective *near* to strengthen the inevitability and imminence of the coming day of the LORD's judgment. He also characterized the *day of the LORD's* judgment as *great*. That means that God's judgment would be terrible. It would cause great damage and terror. (This came to pass when Babylon defeated Judah and exiled all but the poorest inhabitants—2 Kings 25:1-4).

That this *day of the LORD* is called *great* likely indicates that Zephaniah has returned to also speaking of the ultimate judgment of this earth, which comes at the end of the age (vv 2-3).

Not only was the *great day of the LORD near*, but also, it was *coming very quickly*. This is another parallel line to reinforce or intensify the thought about the nearness of the LORD's judgment. It means that God's judgment would not take long to take effect. It hastened fast.

The divine judgment on Judah was imminent because the people of Judah had sinned greatly against their covenant God, as recorded in the books of 2 Chronicles and 2 Kings. The *great day of the LORD* to judge the entire world is also imminent because for the LORD a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as a day:

“But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.”

(2 Peter 3:8-9)

As the Apostle Peter asserts in this quote from his second epistle, God's desire is always for people to come to repentance and follow His ways, which lead to human flourishing.

2 Chronicles and 2 Kings tell us that King Josiah encouraged the people of Judah to follow the LORD. Through his religious reform, he sought to purge all the altars of Baal along with the molten images (2 Chronicles 34:3–7). As a result, the people of Judah followed and turned from the pagan ways of exploitation during the reign of Josiah, but turned back to wickedness when he was gone.

Therefore, because the people repented under Josiah’s leadership, God honored Josiah’s faithfulness, and stayed His judgement against Judah until after his reign. Speaking of Josiah, God stated through the prophetess Huldah:

“Because your heart was tender and you humbled yourself before the LORD when you heard what I spoke against this place and against its inhabitants that they should become a desolation and a curse, and you have torn your clothes and wept before Me, I truly have heard you, declares the LORD. Therefore, behold, I will gather you to your fathers, and you will be gathered to your grave in peace, and your eyes will not see all the evil which I will bring on this place.”  
(2 Kings 22:19-20)

The LORD was patient with Judah. He sent multiple prophets to warn the people of their sinful deeds so that they could repent. But they failed to listen to the prophets of God in a persistent manner. Instead of believing the LORD’s law was for their good, they followed their own appetites and thoughts (Deuteronomy 10:13). They adopted the pagan culture of exploitation. Therefore the strong exploited the weak. The rich exploited the poor; the merchants took advantage of the buyers, and the people justified it all to themselves through idolatry. For this reason, they would fall under divine judgment, and the enforcement provisions of their covenant with God would be invoked (Deuteronomy 28:15-68).

Zephaniah told the people of Judah that there would be trauma *on the day of the LORD’s* judgment: *Listen, the day of the LORD! In it, the warrior cries out bitterly* (vs. 14). The sound produced by *the day of the LORD* would be bitter because it would bring despair and destruction. On that *day*, even the *warrior* would suffer. This is likely because the invading force will overwhelm and utterly defeat them.

The word *warrior* is “gibbor” in the Hebrew language. Broadly speaking, it denotes anyone who is exceptionally important or powerful in some fields. For instance, Nimrod was a “mighty one on the earth” (Genesis 10:8). Specifically, the word is used in military contexts to designate a strong man who can perform heroic deeds (1 Samuel 2:4; Hosea 10:13; Amos 2:14). Thus, the cry of the *warrior on the day of the LORD’s* judgment would demonstrate how terrible it would be because even strong *warriors* would not withstand it.

To show the magnitude and severity of the LORD’s judgment, Zephaniah utilized six phrases to describe it. Each phrase begins with the term *day* to draw attention to the topic. As noted, *the day of the LORD* refers to the time of His intervention in the world to punish human beings for their wicked deeds.

According to Zephaniah, *a day of wrath is that day* (vs 15). The *day* refers to the day of the LORD.

The term *wrath* refers to God's righteous response to wickedness and injustice. God often pours out His wrath by allowing people to suffer the natural consequences of their own actions, as in Romans 1:24, 26, 28. God also appoints human authorities to exercise force to punish evil, and says this is an exercise of His *wrath*, because He authorized it (Romans 13:3-4).

Here God will pour out His *wrath* through the agency of a foreign power invading Judah. This is in keeping with the covenant provisions of Israel and Judah's agreement with God, where they vowed to follow His commands, and love (rather than exploit) their neighbors (Exodus 19:8). Therefore, they would experience the *wrath* of God.

The *day* of the divine *wrath* would be *a day of trouble and distress* (vs 15). The words *trouble* and *distress* refer to afflictions and hardship encountered in life (Deuteronomy 28:53; 1 Samuel 22:2). For instance, *distress* designates the pain of childbirth (Jeremiah 4:31), the siege of the city of Jerusalem (Isaiah 37:3), and the hopeless trouble of someone's life (Psalm 20:1; Habakkuk 3:16). Zephaniah wanted his listeners to know that the judgment day of the LORD would bring *trouble* and *distress*.

It would be *a day of destruction and desolation* (vs 15). These two words *destruction and desolation* are part of the vocabulary of catastrophe. They speak of the damage that would take place in Judah on the day of judgment. This was all fulfilled when Babylon conquered and destroyed Jerusalem (2 Kings 25:1-4).

Zephaniah continued his description of the judgment of God and said that it would be *a day of darkness and gloom* (vs. 15). Such *darkness* would result in disorientation and confusion. In our passage, it is used figuratively in connection with the word *gloom* to depict the severe loss that will take place during the *day* of God's judgment (Joel 2:2; Amos 5:18).

That *day* of judgement would be *a day of clouds and thick darkness* (vs 15). These four terms *darkness, gloom, day of clouds, and thick darkness* are used to depict the devastating circumstances the judgment of God will inflict upon His disobedient people through the agency of Babylon (Joel 2:2).

The terms suggest that the LORD's presence amid the people of Jerusalem on *the day of the LORD* would be one of judgment and *distress*. It would be *a day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and the high corner towers* (vs 16). This phrase invokes the image of an invading foreign army, besieging the walls of the city.

To be invaded and conquered is in keeping with the covenant provision of God's covenant contract with Israel (Deuteronomy 28:49, 52). The covenant provided that if the people broke their vow to follow God's covenant law, which Jesus summarized as loving God and loving one's neighbor (Matthew 22:37-39), they would fall into a culture of paganism. Instead of loving one another, they would exploit one another. The resulting judgment would be that Israel would be turned over to the exploitation of the nations they trusted instead of trusting God.

The term translated as *trumpet* in the phrase *day of trumpet* is "shofar" in Hebrew. It refers to a wind instrument made from a ram's horn. In ancient times, the Israelites would blow *trumpets*

over burnt offerings and peace offerings to celebrate the New Moon feast (Numbers 10:10). The shofar was also used to announce the Feast of Trumpets. ([See our commentary on Leviticus 23:23-25](#))

Sometimes, watchmen would blow *trumpets* to signal impending danger, as when an enemy nation was approaching Israel (Numbers 10:9). Here in Zephaniah, *trumpets* would signal *the day of the LORD's* judgment on Judah and its *cities* as invaders besieged the city (Hosea 5:8; Joel 2:1).

The *battle cry* was a sound associated with warfare. For example, when God commanded Joshua and the Israelites to march around the city of Jericho, He said, "It shall be that when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, and when you hear the sound of the trumpet, all the people shall shout with a great shout; and the wall of the city will fall down flat..." (Joshua 6:5). In the book of Amos, God stated that He would destroy the wall and fortresses of Rabbah, the capital of Ammon. At that time, there would be shouts on the day of battle (Amos 1:14). This is, again, an image of an invading force overtaking Judah.

The terms *fortified cities* and *high corner towers* represent a city's fortress to protect against invaders (Amos 5:9). The first one (*fortified cities*) means "inaccessible." It occurs in the book of Numbers, where the spies gave a hopeless report to Moses and the Israelites, saying that the Canaanite cities were unassailable (Numbers 13:27-28). In Zephaniah, the two terms are used together to convey the idea of a city under siege and attack. The content of the message affirms that the LORD would send His instrument violently to attack the city of Jerusalem. This was fulfilled when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem in 586 BC.

In the next verse, Zephaniah reintroduced the LORD as the speaker. The switch also introduces the LORD's activity against human beings. God stated, *I will bring distress on men* (vs 17). The term for *men* ("ādham" in Hebrew) occurred at the beginning of the text, where the LORD declared, "I will remove man and beast...I will cut off man from the face of the earth" (Zephaniah 1:3). Here "man" includes all of humanity.

The double use of the term for man/men suggests a universal extent of the LORD's destructive power. And the purpose is *so that they will walk like the blind* (vs 17), meaning that human beings would stumble in the dark with no sense of direction. This again reflects that God will bring judgment on the wickedness of Judah, who broke His covenant contract. Everything that was familiar to them will be wiped away.

But God will also bring judgment on the wickedness of the earth, and eliminate wickedness, violence, exploitation, and deceit, and replace it with a kingdom of righteousness. Because of this, the Apostle Peter exhorts New Testament believers to live lives of holy conduct and godliness, and constantly be:

"...looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells."  
(2 Peter 3:12-13)

The rationale for such a powerful judgment on mankind was *because they have sinned against the LORD* (vs 17). To *sin* means to transgress the design of God for His creation, and/or to rebel against His ways of mutual benefit and collaboration (Deuteronomy 9:7; Joshua 1:18). God would act in judgment against human beings because they had forsaken His ways; instead of loving one another, they sunk to exploiting one another, as in the days before Noah, when the earth filled with violence (Genesis 6:11).

For God to judge sins is for Him to reset all things according to His original design for creation. For the earth to be full of “righteousness” is for the earth to be aligned with His standard of mutual collaboration, service of one to another, and shared vision for human flourishing. Or, said another way, to love God with all our being and love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-39).

When the LORD exercised judgment, *their blood will be poured out like dust and their flesh like dung* (vs17). This prophecy likely has immediate application to the imminent siege and conquest of Jerusalem by Babylon, which will occur in two stages (2 Kings 25:1-9). But it can also figuratively apply to the great day of judgment over all the earth (Revelation 19:17-18).

The term *dust* in the phrase *poured out like dust* is used in a figurative way to show how God would pour out man’s *blood*. This is a picture of massive and broad-scale death. Similarly, the term *dung* in the phrase *and their flesh like dung* is used to portray the way God would treat man’s *flesh*. Just as *dung* is cast out of the city as a waste product, so will be the flesh of men, because of the heaps of dead carcasses. This event is pictured graphically in the companion book of Jeremiah:

“Therefore, behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when it will no longer be called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of the Slaughter; for they will bury in Topheth because there is no other place. The dead bodies of this people will be food for the birds of the sky and for the beasts of the earth; and no one will frighten them away.” (Jeremiah 7:32-33)

The “valley of the son of Hinnom” referred to in this passage from Jeremiah is a valley bordering Jerusalem, still called the Hinnom Valley to this day. Jeremiah states that there will be so many dead bodies, no one will have time or space to bury them, but they will fill the Hinnom Valley with them. The Hinnom Valley was used in ancient times as a sort of landfill, where dung and dead carcasses were taken. In this way, the *flesh* of Jerusalem’s inhabitants would become like *dung* and be disposed of in the Hinnom Valley. In the New Testament, the Hinnom Valley is referred to in the Greek as “Gehenna,” and is usually translated to English as “hell” **Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.**

These two terms (*dust* and *dung*) refer to that which is worthless. There would be widespread death of humans, with insufficient labor and space to bury their dead bodies. This would be inevitable, and would apply to poor and rich alike: *Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to deliver them on the day of the LORD’s wrath* (vs 18). Those who trusted in their wealth instead of trusting in their LORD God would be sorely disappointed.

This image will apply to the immediate prophetic application to Judah, as well as to the future application of judgement upon the entire world. In Revelation 18, we see a lament by the world's commercial interests, "for in one hour such great wealth has been laid waste!" (Revelation 18:17). This is part of a sequence of events leading up to a time when Jesus returns and destroys the armies of the nations of the earth, and their carcasses are heaped as in the day of Jerusalem's destruction (Revelation 19:11, 17-18). The looming Babylonian invasion will be a picture of the conquest of the earth by Jesus at the end of this age.

From the patriarchal period to the present day, people measure wealth in terms of goods and precious metals, particularly *silver and gold* (Genesis 13:2). These metals remain universally acceptable mediums of exchange. The wealthy people in Zephaniah's day would not be able to rely on their riches for security *on the day of the LORD's wrath* against sin.

God pours His *wrath* out upon sin (Romans 1:18). Scripture says that God appoints human government as an agent to inflict His wrath upon evil and injustice (Romans 13:3-4). God also pours out His wrath upon sin by removing His hand of protection and allowing sin to have its natural consequence, which is death (Romans 1:24,26,28, 6:23). Death is separation, and much of the consequence of sin is to separate humans from their original design; in place of a harmonious community of collaboration and mutual flourishing, sin leads to exploitation and violence.

*And all the earth will be devoured in the fire of His jealousy* (vs. 18). This speaks of the consequence of God's *wrath* being poured out upon the sin of the earth. This now again speaks of the universal judgment of the entire earth. The judgement here is depicted as *fire* which is a symbol used for judgment throughout scripture (1 Corinthians 3:13). Scripture says that God is a consuming *fire*, which is a picture that He is the very essence not only of existence but also of justice (Hebrews 12:29).

The noun *jealousy* is "qin'â" or "qannâ" in Hebrew. It refers to a zealous preservation of relationship, as when a spouse has intense feelings of desiring to preserve the unity of their marriage. In this case, the LORD is zealous that the earth be restored to its original design, which is to be filled with righteousness (2 Peter 3:13). The biblical term "righteousness" in this application refers to all things working in harmony, according to God's original design.

God intended for humans to reign over the earth in service and harmony with Him, with one another, and with nature ([see our commentary on Psalm 8](#)). When humanity fell, the earth filled with violence, exploitation, and separation (Genesis 6:11).

As a result, *He will make a complete end, indeed a terrifying one of all the inhabitants of the earth* (vs 18). The *day of the LORD's* wrath and judgment will end the brokenness of the earth, cleanse it from exploitation, violence, and deceit, and restore it to its original intent. Those who live their lives as a faithful testimony, and overcome the influence of the world, will gain the immense reward of reigning on the new earth in the harmony and joy of Christ (Revelation 3:21).

This verse echoes a passage found in the book of Revelation, which portrays the day of the LORD's judgment in graphic detail:

“The kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?’”

(Revelation 6:15-17)

### **Biblical Text**

**<sup>14</sup> Near is the great day of the LORD,  
Near and coming very quickly;  
Listen, the day of the LORD!  
In it the warrior cries out bitterly.**

**<sup>15</sup> A day of wrath is that day,  
A day of trouble and distress,  
A day of destruction and desolation,  
A day of darkness and gloom,  
A day of clouds and thick darkness,**

**<sup>16</sup> A day of trumpet and battle cry  
Against the fortified cities  
And the high corner towers.**

**<sup>17</sup> I will bring distress on men  
So that they will walk like the blind,  
Because they have sinned against the Lord;  
And their blood will be poured out like dust  
And their flesh like dung.**

**<sup>18</sup> Neither their silver nor their gold  
Will be able to deliver them  
On the day of the Lord's wrath;  
And all the earth will be devoured  
In the fire of His jealousy,  
For He will make a complete end,  
Indeed a terrifying one,  
Of all the inhabitants of the earth.**