

# Zephaniah 1:2-6

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*The LORD announces that He will sweep away all living creatures on the face of the earth because of man's idolatry and rebellion. If He will thus judge the earth, then most certainly He will judge His own people who have violated their covenant agreement to follow His ways.*

In the previous section (v. 1), the title verse introduced the reader to the prophet Zephaniah and confirmed the divine nature of his message. It tells us that the prophet received a revelation from the LORD during the reign of King Josiah of Judah and was responsible to relay that revelation to the covenant people of God.

In the present passage, the revelation begins with the voice of the LORD describing what He intended to do to both Judah and the nations of the earth.

The LORD began His speech with a general statement regarding His judgment: *I will completely remove all things from the face of the earth* (vs. 2).

The Hebrew verb translated as *remove* is often used in the sense of “destroy.” In the book of 1 Samuel, for instance, Saul commanded the Kenites, saying, “Go, depart, go down from among the Amalekites, so that I do not destroy you with them; for you showed kindness to all the sons of Israel when they came up from Egypt” (1 Samuel 15:6).

This is a stark opening, and a reminder that all we see on this present earth is a temporary placeholder. Nothing is permanent. The Apostle Peter states the same basic thing in other words:

“But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.”  
(2 Peter 3:7)

Revelation tells us that there will be a new heaven and new earth, for the present earth will have “passed away” (Revelation 21:1). The only reason the current world holds together is because God holds it together (Colossians 1:17). God’s covenant name of Yahweh expresses existence itself. It is only out of God that all things exist. This Existent One will destroy and reshape all that is. He will destroy wickedness:

“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.”  
(2 Peter 3:10)

God will reshape a “new earth” where “according to His promise” “righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13).

After reporting what the LORD said about removing all things from the earth, Zephaniah added the formula: *declares the LORD*. The statement *declares the LORD* is a formula that occurs in the prophetic books with frequency. It carries much weight and affirms the truthfulness of the prophet's message (Joel 2:12; Hosea 2:16, 21; Amos 9:13). When the prophet Zephaniah said, *declares the LORD*, he added weight and emphasis to the message, indicating that it did not come from him. Instead, the message came from *the LORD*, the One who is faithful and true in all His ways (Deuteronomy 32:4).

Thus, the function of the prophetic formula *declares the LORD* is twofold: (1) it made clear that Zephaniah's message of judgment on the entire earth comes from the *LORD* and as such, would surely come to pass; and (2) it follows that if God will judge wickedness on the entire earth, it stands to reason that God will also judge Judah for the same wicked practices.

In vv 2-3, God explains the severity of His eventual judgment on the entire earth by listing the various living creatures that He would destroy. This sets up for the message to Judah beginning in vs 4 that follows; if God will destroy wickedness on the entire earth, He will surely judge wickedness among His own people.

The list begins and ends with mankind, thus indicating that man was the primary focus of the message. The LORD declared, *I will remove man and beast* (vs 3). On the sixth day of creation, "God made the beasts of the earth after their kind" and "created man in His own image" (Genesis 1:25, 27). Everything that "God had made was very good" (Genesis 1:31).

However, men rebelled against God and practiced wickedness. God destroyed almost everything on the earth in the days of Noah (Genesis 6:7). He did this because the earth had filled with violence (Genesis 6:11). God's design is for humans to reign over the earth in harmony with one another, as well as with God and nature. But when the earth filled with violence He destroyed it and started anew (2 Peter 3:6). Zephaniah's prophecy begins with God asserting that He will repeat this once again, although this time it will be with fire rather than water, as the Lord promised to never destroy the earth with water again (2 Peter 3:7, 12).

After pronouncing judgment on mankind and animals, *the LORD* turned His attention to the birds and the fish, emphasizing His original statement that He will *completely remove all things* (vs 2): *I will remove the birds of the sky and the fish of the sea* (vs 3). The all-powerful God created the *birds of the sky* and the *fish of the sea* on the fifth day (Genesis 1:20-23). But He will destroy them on the day of His judgment because of man's disobedience.

Not only would the LORD's judgment affect every living creature, but also it would affect the earth's cities: *And the ruins along with the wicked* (vs 3).

The Hebrew term translated as *ruins* refers to a heap of ruins and is used for a city reduced to a state of decay (Isaiah 3:6). The term *wicked* refers to those who deviate from God's moral standard, which is for neighbors to love and serve one another (Leviticus 19:18). The alternative is to live in pride, which results in people competing to exploit one another (Habakkuk 2:4). On the day of God's judgment, He would devastate the cities of the earth as He judged the *wicked*.

To emphasize His judgment on mankind, *the LORD* further said, *I will cut off man from the face of the earth* (vs 3). The verb *cut off* is a strong verb indicating destruction. The *LORD* used the same verb in Leviticus, where He listed the curses that would fall upon Israel for disobedience: “I will let loose among you the beasts of the field, which will bereave you of your children and destroy [cut off] your cattle and reduce your number so that your roads lie deserted” (Leviticus 26:22).

Here in Zephaniah, *the LORD* made it clear that He would destroy mankind for their disobedience and rebellion. Zephaniah added the formula *declares the LORD* to add weight and emphasis to the divine message that He intended to remove all that is of what is currently known.

God will judge all of humankind and the earth upon which we dwell. If He will judge the entire earth, then most certainly He will judge His people. Therefore He now zeroes in on Judah, part of His covenant people, and said: *So I will stretch out My hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem* (vs 4).

God’s just judgment will apply to the entire earth, but also to His people. The Bible tells us that the people of Israel and Judah were the people of God. God chose them because He loved them (Deuteronomy 4:37, 7:7). Their Suzerain (Ruler) God had established a covenant relationship with them, taking them as His treasured possession and making them a holy nation (Exodus 19:4-6). The covenant/contract provided clearly that Israel had a choice, and their choice would result either in blessings or judgement. Now Zephaniah is pronouncing judgement; Judah/Israel chose it.

The *LORD* focused His judgment on the people of Judah because they had ignored His covenantal laws, which they had promised to keep (Exodus 24:7). The other nations practiced wickedness and displeased the *LORD* also. But they were not in a covenant relationship with Him, and had not taken a vow to follow His commands (Exodus 19:8). They did not have the covenantal laws of God to provide them with guidance and instructions regarding how to conduct their lives.

But Judah had the divine laws. They knew that following these laws led to blessing. Much of that was quite practical; a society based on love and service to one another will naturally be highly productive and lead to human flourishing. But God also promised divine blessings on top of the natural consequences if they followed His ways.

However, they rejected God’s laws and practiced wickedness, causing a stumbling block to their fellowship with Him. Accordingly, they failed to fulfill their assigned role of showing a better way to other nations (Exodus 19:6). To restore fellowship, and to honor the covenant agreement, *the LORD* would judge them. So, He would *stretch out His hand* against them (vs 4).

The term *hand* represents God’s power and strength (Exodus 3:20; Deuteronomy 4:34). To *stretch out one’s hand* means to be ready to perform an action, usually hostile. For example, in the book of Exodus, *the LORD stretched out His hand* against the Egyptians, and they knew that He is Yahweh (Exodus 7:5). Here in Zephaniah, *the LORD* would *stretch out His hand* against

*Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem* (vs 4). Judah's judgment would be a direct result of God's actions.

The term *Jerusalem* means "possession of peace." Jerusalem was the capital city of *Judah* and the chief city of ancient Israel as well as the modern state of Israel. It rises just over 2500 feet above sea level and rests some 14 miles west of the northern end of the Dead Sea, approximately 33 miles east of the Mediterranean coast. It is called "the holy city" in Isaiah 52:1.

Unfortunately, the city of *Jerusalem* had become corrupt. The people of *Judah* practiced idolatry and ignored the true God, thereby polluting *Judah* and its main city, *Jerusalem*. They were not at peace with God, because they were willfully violating their vow to keep their covenant agreement with Him. For this reason, the Suzerain God would judge them in order to restore righteousness in the land.

God would halt pagan worship; He stated, *I will cut off the remnant of Baal from this place, and the names of the idolatrous priests along with the priests* (vs 4). This statement indicates that Judah was practicing paganism, completely contrary to their vow to worship God alone (Exodus 19:8). Just as loving our neighbor as ourselves naturally follows loving God with all our being, so exploiting our neighbor follows pagan idolatrous worship.

Idolatry is transactional; it promises we can manipulate divine powers to get our way. Thus it elevates pride and self-focus. The natural result is entitlement and rationalization, which leads to exploitation. Thus, instead of loving God and loving and serving others, Judah fell into deception, exploitation, and violence (Hosea 4:2). Just as God destroyed the earth when it filled with violence, God will now destroy Judah (Genesis 6:11).

The term *Baal* in the phrase *I will cut off the remnant of Baal* means "lord." It refers to the Canaanite fertility god. The Canaanites worshiped *Baal*, hoping to appease him to get more rain for their crops. *Baal* worship featured immoral fertility rites, including engagement with prostitutes. The term *place* in the phrase *I will cut off the remnant of Baal from this place* refers to *Judah* and *Jerusalem* (vs 4). But it may also refer to the Temple, the central sanctuary in *Jerusalem* where the people were supposed to offer their sacrifices to the LORD their God (Deuteronomy 12:5, 11, 21).

God also said He would cut off *the names of the idolatrous priests along with the priests* (vs 4). The Hebrew term translated as *idolatrous priests* is "kemārîm." It refers exclusively to pagan priests appointed by the kings (2 Kings 23:5). The "Kemārîms" were not from the tribe of Levi, as required by the covenant law. They were outside of God's covenant relationship with Israel and Judah. Thus, the kings of Judah violated God's precepts by appointing pagan priests to serve in the land.

The second term for *priests* ("cohenim") refers to the regular Levitical priests in Judah who embraced pagan practices and gods. As God's chosen people, the citizens of Judah were to be a "kingdom of priests" to represent God on the earth (Exodus 19:4-6). They were to keep the divine statutes and ordinances to display their "wisdom and understanding" in the sight of the pagan nations to bring them to God (Deuteronomy 4:6). However, rather than influencing the

pagans, the people of Judah were influenced by them. The true God would destroy both the *idolatrous priests* and the Levitical *priests* because they all were corrupt.

The all-powerful God would not leave the wicked unpunished. He would *stretch out His hand against those who bow down on the housetops to the host of heaven* (vs 5). To *bow down* means to prostrate oneself or to bend low in worship, and submit to that authority. The *housetops* refer to the roof of a house, which was flat and solid enough to support people (Deuteronomy 22:8).

According to Zephaniah, many people in Judah climbed to the flat roofs of their houses to worship *the host of heaven* (Jeremiah 19:13). That is, they pledged allegiance to the sun, moon, planets, and stars, in exchange for some imagined benefit. Such worship was against the revealed Word of God (Deuteronomy 4:19; 17:3). Rather than submit to their covenant God, trusting that He had their best interest at heart, the people believed the lie that they could manipulate divine powers to their own end, and that they knew what was best for themselves. It is the same basic lie that caused Adam and Eve to fall (Genesis 3:4).

But believing this lie leads to the earth filling with violence (Genesis 6:11; Hosea 4:2). Accordingly, God will judge the resulting wickedness. Not only would God judge those who worshiped false gods, but also, He would judge the ones who practiced syncretism; those who mix true worship with pagan worship. That is, *those who bow down and swear to the LORD and yet swear by Milcom* (vs 5).

The term *Milcom* refers to the god of the Ammonites (1 Kings 11:5). In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses instructed the people of Israel to *swear* to the *LORD* only. That means that they were to partake in the worship of the true God (Deuteronomy 6:13; 10:20). However, the people of Judah worshiped God while giving allegiance to the pagan god, *Milcom*.

*Baal* and *Milcom* were popular gods during the reign of King Josiah, who initiated a reform in the land of Judah to purge such idols (2 Kings 23:4-5, 13). For this reason, the ones who worshiped these idols would be *cut off* along with all *those who have turned back from following the LORD, and those who have not sought the LORD or inquired of Him* (vs 6). Rather than seeking to listen to the LORD, believing that His ways are for our best, the people sought their own ways.

Turning *back from following the LORD* (vs 6) implies a movement away from Him rather than toward Him. Someone who turns *back from the LORD* had at one time demonstrated a commitment to serving Him, but he has since reverted to wicked behavior (Psalm 78:57). That person had thus stopped following God's ways of serving Him and loving their neighbor as themselves (Matthew 22:37-39).

To seek *the LORD* means to repent from evil and turn to God in faith (Amos 5:4). It denotes having a proper attitude before the LORD, which includes repentance and fear of God, trusting that He knows what is for our best, and has our best interest at heart. To *inquire of the LORD* means to seek His counsel and guidance, to seek His will in every situation, believing that His ways are the best ways. Listening to God will result in following His ways, turning from exploitation, and loving one's neighbor.

In Zephaniah's day, the people of Judah practiced syncretism: they worshiped God while also worshiping false pagan gods. This would indicate that they were simply looking for whatever got them what they desired. Therefore, they trusted themselves. When each person thinks they know best, that ultimately will lead to exploitation and violence. They were not seeking to know their Creator, and follow His design.

As a result, they failed to *seek the LORD* or *inquire of Him* (vs 6). Syncretism is dangerous. It leads to deception and confusion. That is why, knowing the negative effects of syncretism, Jesus stated, "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other" (Matthew 6:24).

### **Biblical Text**

<sup>2</sup> **"I will completely remove all *things*  
From the face of the earth," declares the LORD.**

<sup>3</sup> **"I will remove man and beast;  
I will remove the birds of the sky  
And the fish of the sea,  
And the ruins along with the wicked;  
And I will cut off man from the face of the earth," declares the LORD.**

<sup>4</sup> **"So I will stretch out My hand against Judah  
And against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem.  
And I will cut off the remnant of Baal from this place,  
And the names of the idolatrous priests along with the priests.**

<sup>5</sup> **"And those who bow down on the housetops to the host of heaven,  
And those who bow down *and* swear to the LORD and *yet* swear by Milcom,**

<sup>6</sup> **And those who have turned back from following the Lord,  
And those who have not sought the LORD or inquired of Him."**