

Zephaniah 1:8-13

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The LORD announces judgment on the people of Judah for their exploitation and spiritual arrogance. He invites the commercial interests and possessors of property to mourn, as their wealth will be pilfered and expropriated by invaders.

After Zephaniah admonished the idolatrous people of Judah to “be silent” before the Suzerain God because the divine judgment was imminent (v. 7), he provides details regarding God’s coming judgment on the people of Judah.

As the prophet reported God’s speech to Judah, he said, *Then it will come about on the day of the LORD’s sacrifice* (vs 8). The *sacrifice* in this case is the nation of Judah. It will be slaughtered by the invading Babylonians.

The word *sacrifice* is “zevah” in Hebrew. In its literal sense, it refers to animal sacrifices like a sheep or a goat. In our text, however, it is used figuratively for the people of Judah (v. 7). The phrase *day of the LORD* refers to the time in which *the LORD* would intervene in human affairs to judge wickedness and restore righteousness (Isaiah 13:6; Ezekiel 13:5; Amos 5:18).

Sometimes, the name of the *day* is derived from what *the LORD* would do or what would happen. For example, we read about the “day of tumult” (Ezekiel 7:7), the “day of punishment” (Isaiah 10:3), a “day of darkness” (Joel 2:2), etc. In our passage, the *day* is one of *sacrifice* because the people of Judah would be slaughtered like animal sacrifices (Leviticus 9:23-24). And since the *LORD* would perform the *sacrifice*, it is called *the LORD’s sacrifice*.

On that *day*, *the LORD* would *punish the princes, the king’s sons* (vs. 8). The *princes* of Judah were the officers of the *king’s* court (Jeremiah 36:12). The *king’s sons* likely refer to the sons of King Josiah, who ruled over Judah beginning in 609 BC.

According to the book of 2 Kings, the *LORD* punished the sons of Josiah for their wickedness. After the death of the king, the people of the land anointed Jehoahaz and made him king in place of his father (2 Kings 23:30). But the Egyptians took the new king as a prisoner to Egypt and appointed Jehoiakim, another of Josiah’s sons (2 Kings 23:31–34). During Jehoiakim’s reign (609–598 BC), Judah plunged into idolatry and persisted in disobedience and lawlessness.

God chastised the northern kingdom of Israel for diplomatically flitting between Assyria and Babylon like a “silly dove” (Hosea 7:11). It seems Judah did likewise, for soon after Egypt abused Jehoiakim, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon defeated Jehoiakim and put Jehoiachin (Jehoiakim’s son) on the throne. Jehoiachin ruled over Judah for only three months then was taken captive in Babylon (2 Kings 24:8-16).

Later, King Nebuchadnezzar blinded Zedekiah, another of Josiah’s sons, and took him captive (2 Kings 24:18-25:7). All this happened because the sons of the king were under God’s judgment

for their wickedness, and the wickedness of their fathers, particularly Manasseh, who led Judah to indulge in the pagan worship practice of child sacrifice, making his son “pass through the fire” (2 Kings 21:6,9, 23:26-27, 24:3-4; Jeremiah 15:4).

Another group that would fall under the *LORD*’s judgment includes *all those who clothe themselves with foreign garments* (vs 8). The wearing of *foreign* clothes shows an attachment to foreign customs and practices. The people of Judah wanted to identify themselves with the foreigners and foreign culture, so they wore their *garments* to show that they adopted their customs and values rather than living by God’s design of harmony and mutual collaboration.

By doing so, they abandoned their identity as a people holy to *the LORD* their God (Deuteronomy 7:6; 14:2). In adopting the pagan culture, they adopted a culture of exploitation, deception, injustice, and violence (Hosea 4:2; Amos 5:12). For this reason, God would judge them.

A third group that God would punish includes *all those who leap on the temple threshold, who fill the house of their lord with violence and deceit* (vs 9). The *threshold* was made of a single stone that spanned the doorway and raised slightly from the level of the floor. It had sockets cut into its outer edges, and its height would preclude the doors from swinging out. Ancient people considered the entryways of a *threshold* both sacred and vulnerable.

The expression *all who leap on the temple threshold* might refer to avoiding contact with the *threshold* of the *temple* as a copy of a pagan superstition. This practice originated with the Philistine priests, who avoided stepping on the *threshold* at the god Dagon’s temple in Ashdod (1 Samuel 5:1-5). This practice stemmed from the episode of God toppling a Philistine idol and severing its head on the threshold of its temple (1 Samuel 5:5). Perhaps the pagan priests invented a story to explain away the Living God’s intervention and converted it to something they controlled by avoiding stepping on the threshold. Syncretism with the pagan religions appeared to be common practice across Judah (Ezekiel 8:12-16).

Not only did the people of Judah practice the pagan superstition of avoiding contact with the *temple threshold*, but also they filled *the house of their lord with violence and deceit* (vs 9). Ideas have consequences, and the pagan culture of “I can fulfill my appetites and justify them through worshipping the idol I made” is a culture of rationalization. Once rationalization and self-focus is embraced, it inevitably turns to deception, exploitation, and violence (Hosea 4:2).

The term translated as *lord* is “Adonai” in Hebrew. It means ruler or master and can be used for both God and man (see Zephaniah 1:7 and Genesis 18:12, respectively). The NASB translates as *lord* indicating that Judah was worshipping the wrong God. It is probably better translated *Lord* because the temple was God’s house, regardless of the people’s sin.

The Hebrew term for *violence* in the phrase *fill the house of their lord with violence* is “chāmās.” It ranges from murder and rape to wickedness and bloodshed (Hosea 4:2; Obadiah 1:10; Habakkuk 2:8). Violence is a serious matter because human beings are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26; 9:6). God’s primary covenant law for Israel was to love and follow Him, and love their neighbors as themselves (Matthew 22:37-39).

In the New Testament, Jesus's primary command was to love one another as God loves us (John 13:34). When we love our neighbor, we seek their best interest. But when we practice *deceit* we seek to exploit.

The Hebrew term for *deceit* in the phrase *fill the house of their lord with violence and deceit* is "mirmâ." Someone who employs *deceit* speaks in a manner to gain a personal advantage. To exploit for gain. In Zephaniah's day, the people of Judah filled their master's *house* with goods acquired through *violence* and *deceit*. They mistreated others to gain personal interests. This reflected the culture of paganism. Idolatry provides moral rationalization for self-seeking exploitation of others. As we manipulate the idol, so we may manipulate others. However, when everyone practices this, we merely end up with a society where the strong exploit the weak.

As Zephaniah continued the solemn speech concerning God's intention to punish the sinful people of Judah, he emphasized the *day of sacrifice* again and stated what would happen *on that day*.

The prophet adds the formula, *declares the LORD* in the phrase "*On that day,*" *declares the LORD* (vs 10) to add weight to the message and confirm its truthfulness. He wanted to make clear that the message came directly from the LORD, the all-powerful God who had a covenant relationship with Judah. The phrase *On that day* refers to the time in which God would intervene to judge Judah; (Judah would be slaughtered as a sacrifice by Babylon, as set forth in vs 7).

The *LORD* through Zephaniah described the reactions of the people of Judah on *the day* of His judgment. He said that *there will be the sound of a cry from the Fish Gate and a wail from the Second Quarter* (vs 10). The *Fish Gate* and the *Second Quarter* refer to locations in Jerusalem.

The *sound of a cry* is the noise the people of Judah would produce to express their afflictions. Similarly, the *wail* describes the lament of the Judahites when they would express their distressful circumstances. On *the day* of the *LORD's* judgment, Judah would feel great discomfort and would cry for help in despair (Psalm 9:12). Their *cry* would be heard from the *Fish Gate* and the *Second Quarter*.

In ancient times, the *Fish Gate* was one of the main gates leading into Jerusalem. It was near the northern wall around the Temple Mount. It was the place where people would buy and sell *fish*. The *Fish Gate* provided an entrance through the northern wall just to the West of the Tower of Hananel (Nehemiah 12:38-39). It was built in David's time. Later, it formed part of Manasseh's fortifications (2 Chronicles 33:14). Under the leadership of Nehemiah, the people of Judah restored the *Fish Gate* after the Babylonian exile (Nehemiah 3:3).

The *Second Quarter* was a district of Jerusalem where Huldah the prophetess lived (2 Kings 22:14). It came into existence when King Hezekiah built the first defensive walls around the western hills of the city (2 Chronicles 32:5). King Manasseh repaired these walls during his reign, "He built the outer wall of the city of David on the west side of Gihon, in the valley, even to the entrance of the Fish Gate" (2 Chronicles 33:14).

In addition to the outcry of the people of Judah, there would be *a loud crash from the hills* (vs 10). Jerusalem is built on a series of hills. This could mean that when the adversaries attacked Judah, the buildings would collapse, causing *a loud crash from the hills*. Destruction would occur everywhere in the city of Jerusalem because of Judah's rebellion. It could also refer to the surrounding hills, where the attackers would gather and assault the city (2 Kings 25:1-4).

The magnitude of the disaster prompted the prophet to issue a command to Judah: *Wail, O inhabitants of the Mortar* (vs 11). The term *Mortar* refers to a trading district in Jerusalem. It was enclosed within the city walls of Jerusalem in the seventh century. As God called each district of Jerusalem to turn to lament, He asked the *Mortar* district in the western section to join in this wailing. The reason was that *all the people of Canaan will be silenced* (vs 11).

The Hebrew word “kēna’an,” translated in our text as “Canaan,” can also be rendered as “merchants” or traders (Hosea 12:7). This is probably the meaning intended here. In this case, the term is a wordplay that evokes the idea of Canaanite influence. The Judahite merchants reproduced the dishonest practices of the Canaanites as they utilized false balances in their financial transactions to deceive those who bought from them. Once again, this is the pagan culture of exploitation working its way into daily life, and breaking God's covenant with Israel that required the people to engage with one another truthfully and constructively.

Some years before Zephaniah, the prophet Amos denounced such practices in Israel (Amos 4:1; 8:5-6). Because the people of Judah reproduced the immoral and exploitative practices of the Canaanites, they would *all be silenced*. They would be no more. *All who weigh out silver will be cut off* (vs 11). This means commerce would cease, and businesses in Judah would be destroyed.

In the ancient world, people used weights to measure pieces of *silver*. One weight was a “shekel,” which was the basic unit of the Israelite weight system and equaled 11.4 grams of silver. The people of Judah cheated in the marketplace and became rich by exploiting others. But God would punish them, and they would lose all their wealth (v. 13). For this reason, the prophet commanded them to *wail* for their loss.

The remainder of this section constitutes the *LORD's* statements of the actions to be taken against the disobedient people of Judah and the consequences they would suffer. The *LORD* introduced such actions with the formula, *It will come about at that time* (vs 12). This introduction served to tell the people of Judah that God's judgment was coming.

Having announced His judgment, the *LORD* spelled it out in two parts. In the first, He declared, *I will search Jerusalem with lamps* (vs 12). To *search* for something *with lamps* means to conduct a thorough investigation, to look in every dark corner to find the desired object. The book of 2 Kings illustrates this practice. When King Jehu “went into the house of Baal with Jehonadab the son of Rechab, he said to the worshipers of Baal: ‘Search and see that there is here with you none of the servants of the LORD, but only the worshipers of Baal’” (2 Kings 10:23). In our passage, *the LORD* would *search Jerusalem* to expose the complacent Judahites who had adopted the pagan culture of exploitation and indulgence (see also Ezekiel 8:12-16).

In the second part, the *LORD* described the people He would punish using a metaphor drawn from the fermentation process of wine: *I will punish the men who are stagnant in spirit* (vs. 12).

In the fermentation of wine, people would pour it from one vessel to another to separate it from the sediment. If the wine sits too long on its lees, it stagnates. It thickens and is destroyed (Jeremiah 48:11-12).

In the book of Zephaniah, the *LORD* used the wine metaphor to refer to those Judahites who were at ease. They enjoyed their uninterrupted wealth for so long that they trusted in themselves rather than putting their trust in God. They became *stagnant in spirit*. Those complacent people forgot the One who provided for their needs, so they became arrogant and said *in their hearts*, ‘*The LORD will not do good or evil* (vs 12).’

These people apparently decided that God was a force to be manipulated, like the idols. They became confident in themselves and ignored the *LORD*, the all-powerful God.

Therefore, speaking on God’s behalf, the prophet described the consequences the complacent men would suffer. *Their wealth will become plunder and their houses desolate* (vs 13). The people of Judah would have nothing because the enemy would take away their material goods and destroy their houses.

Yes, they will build houses but not inhabit them (Deuteronomy 28:30). They would *plant vineyards but not drink their wine* (vs 13). The *LORD* would invoke the corrective provisions of His covenant with them, and they would be exiled away from their homes and land (Deuteronomy 28:37, 49-50, 64). Thus they would no longer *inhabit* their own *houses* nor would they drink *wine* from their own *vineyards*. All their lands and dwellings would be possessed by others.

Building *houses* and planting *vineyards* require energy, planning, patience, and financial resources. Such projects are long-term investments and increase in value over time. Thus, for someone to lose his *house* or *vineyard* is to experience a great tragedy. But the Suzerain (Ruler) God would give the people of Judah justice. They chose to exploit others, so God will give them over to Babylon to be exploited (Matthew 7:2). He would deprive them of all their ill-gotten treasures because they had ignored Him and His covenantal laws. He gave ample notice and opportunity to repent. But now He will invoke the corrective provisions of the covenant. The principle of “do unto others” will be invoked, but this time as a matter of judgement. Judah did wickedness to others, and now will have wickedness done to them.

Biblical Text

**⁸“Then it will come about on the day of the LORD’s sacrifice
That I will punish the princes, the king’s sons**

And all who clothe themselves with foreign garments.

**⁹“And I will punish on that day all who leap on the *temple* threshold,
Who fill the house of their lord with violence and deceit.**

¹⁰“On that day,” declares the LORD,

**“There will be the sound of a cry from the Fish Gate,
A wail from the Second Quarter,
And a loud crash from the hills.**

**¹¹“Wail, O inhabitants of the Mortar,
For all the people of Canaan will be silenced;
All who weigh out silver will be cut off.**

**¹²“It will come about at that time
That I will search Jerusalem with lamps,
And I will punish the men
Who are stagnant in spirit,**

**Who say in their hearts,
‘The LORD will not do good or evil!’**

**¹³“Moreover, their wealth will become plunder
And their houses desolate;
Yes, they will build houses but not inhabit *them*,
And plant vineyards but not drink their wine.”**