

The Day of the Lord (Zephaniah)



SABBATH—MAY 25

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Zephaniah 1:14–18; Joel 2:1–11; Zephaniah 2:1–3; Isaiah 11:4; Zephaniah 3:1–5; Isaiah 62:5; Nahum 1–3.

MEMORY VERSE: “The LORD who rules over all will terrify Moab and Ammon. He will destroy all of the gods on earth. Then the nations on every shore will worship him. All of them will serve him in their own lands” (Zephaniah 2:11, NIV).

KEY (IMPORTANT) THOUGHT: Judgment is coming. But grace¹ and mercy are still available for those who sincerely want it.

SUPPOSE THE BOOKS OF THE PROPHETS FOLLOWED THE HISTORICAL ORDER OF JUDAH.² Then Zephaniah's would fit between Isaiah and Jeremiah.

Zephaniah's preaching criticizes the hopeless dishonesty found in Judah. He points to the need for repentance³ because God's love still is calling His people to be humble (not proud) and faithful. His message has two parts. (1) There is a threat that God will judge all the world. His judgment will include God's own people. (2) But there is also a promise that the saved from all nations will join with the remnant⁴ of Israel. And together they will serve God and enjoys His blessings. This week's study will show that Zephaniah's message is still important to the people who preach God's message of hope to a fallen world.

1. grace—God's gift of mercy and forgiveness that He freely gives us to take away our sin.

2. Judah—the southern kingdom of the Jewish people.

3. repentance—the act of feeling sorrow for your sins and turning away from sin with the help of the Holy Spirit.

4. remnant—a small group of people who are faithful to God.

SUNDAY—MAY 26**A DAY OF DARKNESS
(Zephaniah 1:14–18)**

The most important point of Zephaniah's message is the "day of the LORD" (Zephaniah 1:7). For Bible prophets (special messengers), the day of the Lord is a certain period of time when God begins to save and to judge. Most people in Israel during Bible times believed that on this day the Lord would save and honor Israel while the enemy nations would be destroyed forever. To the great surprise of those who listened, Zephaniah announced that the day of the Lord would be a day of doom even for God's people (read Zephaniah 1:1–5). This is because they had sinned against Him (Zephaniah 1:17).

Compare⁵ Zephaniah 1:14–18 with Joel 2:1–11 and Amos 5:18–20. Together, what picture do they show about "the day of the LORD?"

Zephaniah compares the coming judgment to the way all life was swept away in the days of the great Flood (Genesis 6–8). The catalog of death in Zephaniah 1:2, 3 is arranged somewhat in reverse (backward) order of God's original Creation: people, land beasts, the creatures of the air, and those of the sea (compare with Genesis 1:20–27).

Zephaniah warns the people that they will not be able to buy (give money for favors) their way out of

judgment (Zephaniah 1:18). Silver and gold will not protect them from the Lord's anger. The unfaithful people in Jerusalem believe that God will not do good or harm. They do not expect the Lord to do anything at all (Zephaniah 1:12). But God's judgments show how hard God works to make sure that there will be a future for His faithful people.

Zephaniah also makes it clear that God's judgment both punishes and helps to correct people. The Lord holds out a promise of shelter to those who belong to him (Zephaniah 2:3). The day of the Lord is more than the end of the world. It is also the beginning of God's rule, which will continue forever.

Read Zephaniah 1:18. In what ways do we even now experience the truth of the principle (important rule) shown here? For example, what kinds of situations have we faced where all the money in the world could not save us?



Zephaniah compares the coming judgment to the Genesis Flood.

5. compare—to show how two or more things are the same or different.

MONDAY—MAY 27

THE HUMBLE PEOPLE OF THE LAND (Zephaniah 2:3)

In Zephaniah 2:1–3, the prophet calls to the people to repent (turn away from sin). If they do, the destruction still is sure to come, but there will be time to be protected from it. The wicked who refuse to repent will be destroyed like chaff⁶ on the day of judgment. In Psalm 1:4 the wicked are also compared to chaff, and they die in the end.

With the words “Seek the LORD,” Zephaniah is encouraging those who humble themselves before God to hold firm in their faith. The prophet teaches that to seek the Lord is the same as looking for righteousness (holiness). This attitude (feeling) of repentance is very important for escaping the coming judgment.

Zephaniah calls the repentant people the “humble of the land” (Zephaniah 2:3, NIV). How do the following verses explain this verse, which is also translated as the “poor of the land”? Read Matthew 5:3; Psalm 76:9; Isaiah 11:4; and Amos 8:4.

The humble are those people who have remained faithful to God. They are the ones who are led and taught by God. The writer of Psalms says, “The Lord is honest and good. He teaches sinners to walk in his ways. He shows those who aren’t [are not] proud how to

do what is right. He teaches them his ways” (Psalm 25:8, 9, NIV). So, the humble are encouraged to prepare for the coming judgment by seeking God.

Humble people who are faithful may be able to escape God’s punishment. The word *perhaps* (Zephaniah 2:3, NIV) tells us this. But the safety of the humble depends completely on God’s grace. We should always be thankful for this grace. In the face of coming doom, there is hope for the future from God, who is merciful. The Lord has promised to shelter (protect) all those who trust in Him (Joel 3:16; Nahum 1:7). This type of trust throws out self-pride and lying.

“Nothing is more helpless, but still stronger, than the soul that feels very humble and depends completely on the Savior’s sacrifice. By prayer, by the study of His word, by faith in His abiding [lasting] presence, the weakest of humans may live closely to the living Christ. And He will hold them by a hand that will never let go.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, page 182. **What has been your own experience with these wonderful promises? How can you learn to have that kind of close walk with the Lord?**

TUESDAY—MAY 28

A SINFUL CITY (Zephaniah 3:1–5)

A wise, old saying in Chinese says

6. chaff—the outer shells of grains of wheat that cannot be eaten and can be blown away by the wind.

that the darkest spot in the room is right under the candle. This saying could be used to explain the sinful condition of Jerusalem in Zephaniah's time. The prophet has just finished announcing God's judgments on Judah's neighboring countries (read Zephaniah 2). These countries are Philistia in the west, Moab and Ammon in the east, Cush in the south, and Assyria in the east. But Zephaniah does not stop there. Then he exposes the sins of those who live in God's own city on earth, Jerusalem itself.



The darkest spot in the room is right under the candle.

Read Zephaniah 3:1–5. Who is guilty, and why? God's people had so much light and truth. How could they have been so sinful? How can we protect ourselves from having the same thing happen to us?

The capital city of Judah (Jerusalem) lies at the heart of Zephaniah's concern. He blames its leaders for the city's sinful condition. He says that the sinful condition has happened because the leaders have failed to do what is right (compare with Jeremiah 18:18; Ezekiel 22:23–30). Zephaniah compares the dishonest court run by

these officials to "roaring lions." And he describes the judges as "evening wolves." The temple is doing no better because the priests do not teach God's Word. And the false prophets do not speak the truth.

"During the time that Josiah ruled, the word of the Lord came to Zephaniah, telling him about what the results would be of continued backsliding [falling away from God]. God also tells the true church to look up to the glorious future ahead. Zephaniah's prophecies⁷ of upcoming judgment upon Judah may be compared to the judgments that are to fall upon a sin-hardened world at the time of the second coming of Christ."—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, page 389.

Look around. The world may be attractive, but in the end it is going to be destroyed. A person does not even need to believe in the Bible to see how easily this could happen. Why is the Lord our only hope? How can we learn to depend on Him more and more and not trust in the empty things of this world?



The dishonest judges are described as evening wolves.

7. prophecies—special messages from God, often explaining what will happen in the future.

WEDNESDAY—MAY 29**GOD'S GREATEST DELIGHT
(Zephaniah 3:17)**

In the closing part of his book (Zephaniah 3:9–20), Zephaniah turns from a theme of anger to one of restoration.⁸ When the nations have been punished and corrected, they will together call on the Lord and serve Him. The lips of the people will be made pure so that all may worship and praise the Lord. A small but humble and faithful remnant (remaining group) will escape. They will live in Judah and will take the place of the proud leaders.

Most important, God will live among His people. And He will make past wrongs right. No longer will His people need to live in fear because the Lord will be living among them. He will be their Deliverer (One who frees another) and Savior. “ ‘They will eat and lie down in peace. And no one will make them afraid’ ” (Zephaniah 3:13, NIV).

Such a blessing would normally cause God's people to rejoice (be glad) over Him. But God's love and joy for His people will be so great. And He will shout over them with great joy and celebration.

According to Isaiah 62:5 and Isaiah 65:19, how does the prophet Isaiah describe God's joy over His saved people?

The great King, the divine Warrior, will protect and clear His people's name. He will give them all the benefits of His victory. He won this victory for us at the Cross. He will honor the humble. He will turn disgrace, suffering, and separation into an experience of honor and blessings. Honors will be given to the lame and the outcast.⁹ And He will live among His people. This is a theme that lies at the heart of the message preached by Jesus Christ.

Along with such serious warnings, the Lord offers His people hope. How can we, as Seventh-day Adventists, learn to live day by day with that hope while waiting for the Second Coming? How can we learn to keep that hope alive, especially in times of trouble when the world offers us nothing but sorrow?

THURSDAY—MAY 30**GOD'S ANSWER TO INJUSTICE
(Nahum 1–3)**

Read Nahum 1–3. Which verses teach us about the character (who God is) of God? How can we use them in our understanding of last-day events?

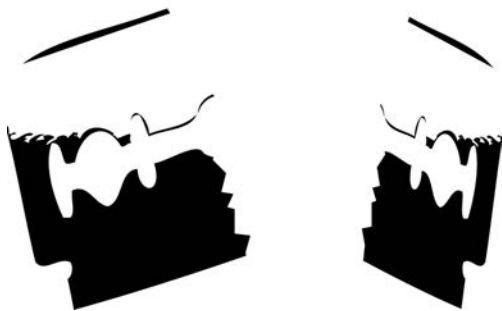
The prophecy of Nahum is God's Word against the kingdoms of this world, such as Nineveh. As Nahum thinks about his world, he under-

8. restoration—the act or process of returning something to its original condition.

9. outcast—someone who is not accepted by other people.

stands that the hand of God is moving against the Assyrian Empire. Nahum announces that the capital city would soon fall and never rise again. Nineveh is that city. Nahum speaks with absolute confidence because he knows God's character. Through the gift of prophecy (Nahum 1:1), Nahum has been shown by the Lord what will happen. The Lord will not leave the guilty unpunished (Nahum 1:3; Exodus 34:6, 7).

The Assyrians had invaded and robbed many nations. They were never satisfied with what they had. They always wanted more power. Their cruelty was terrible. As God's "razor" (Isaiah 7:20), they eagerly had robbed their neighbors until their neighbors were poor. Now it was time for the razor to be broken. This is because tools of God's judgment are not free from judgment. So, there is no more Nineveh today. But the prophecy of its doom lives on. It reminds us that God's justice seems slow, but nothing, finally, can stop it.



It was time for Nineveh, "God's razor," to be broken.

As we have learned in an earlier lesson, the people of Nineveh

had heard Jonah's preaching years before Nahum's time. Because they had repented (turned away from sin), God had saved their city. But their repentance did not last, and the people returned to their old ways. Many countries had suffered under the cruel Assyrian power. These countries would greet the news of Nineveh's fall with loud applause.

The Lord's anger is great. But His mercy is greater. God protects those who await the fullness of His goodness. So, Nahum teaches that God cares for those who trust in Him. But he also teaches that with a great flood He will drive His enemies into darkness (Nahum 1:8). Nahum shows that God is behind it all, for He has decided that Nineveh's day of judgment has come.

Nahum shows that God has great power. All creation worships Him. He does not allow sin to go unpunished forever. At the same time, He is the Savior of those who trust in Him. There is no middle ground. We are on one side or the other. As Jesus said, " 'Anyone who is not with Me is against Me' " (Matthew 12:30, NIV).

FRIDAY—MAY 31

ADDITIONAL STUDY: "God still keeps careful and correct account with the nations. While His mercy continues with calls for repentance, this account remains open. But when the figures reach a certain amount on which God has decided, the ministry [work] of His wrath [anger] begins. The account is closed. God's patience

stops. Mercy is no longer given for their good.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, page 364.

“The world will have to give an account to the Judge of the whole earth. He is the very One they condemned [found guilty] and crucified [put to death on a cross]. What a terrible day that will be! It is the great day of God’s judgment. Christ does not then stand at Pilate’s bar. Pilate and Herod, and all who mocked and crucified Him will then understand what it means to feel the wrath of the Lamb. Their actions will appear before them as they really are.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, page 132.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ❶ Some of the people in Zephaniah’s time did terrible things against both the Lord and their fellow countrymen. Others were just lazy in punishing such evils. Which of these two sins do you think is worse in God’s eyes? Defend your answer.
- ❷ Go back over the final question at the end of Monday’s lesson, where these words were quoted: “Nothing is more helpless, but still stronger, than the soul that feels very humble and depends completely on the Savior’s sacrifice.”—(adapted). What does it mean to depend “completely on the Savior’s sacrifice”? How do these words show us the great truth of salvation by faith in Christ alone? And why is that truth so important to all that we believe? If we do not depend on His sacrifice, on what or on whom else can we depend?
- ❸ Why is it so easy for us to forget just how dependent we are upon God for everything that we have? How can we protect ourselves from being deceived into thinking that we do not need God?
- ❹ Think more deeply about the idea that the Lord sings and is joyful over His people. We like to think of ourselves as singing and being joyful over God for what He has done for us. What does it mean that He sings and is joyful over us? How can we also be joyful when we find ourselves in sad and sinful conditions?