

The Day of *the* Lord (Zephaniah)



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Zeph. 1:14–18, Joel 2:1–11, Zeph. 2:1–3, Isa. 11:4, Zeph. 3:1–5, Isa. 62:5, Nahum 1–3.*

Memory Text: “The LORD will be awesome to them, for He will reduce to nothing all the gods of the earth; people shall worship Him, each one from his place, indeed all the shores of the nations” (*Zephaniah 2:11, NKJV*).

Key Thought: Judgment is coming, but grace and mercy are still available for those who earnestly seek for it.

If the books of the prophets were placed in chronological order, Zephaniah's would fit between Isaiah and Jeremiah. Zephaniah's preaching condemned the hopeless corruption found in Judean society. He pointed to the need for repentance based on the fact that God's love still was calling His people to humility and faithfulness. His message was twofold: there is a threat of an imminent and universal judgment, which will include even God's own people; yet, there is also a promise that the saved from all nations will join the remnant of Israel in serving God and enjoying His blessings. This week's study will show that Zephaniah's message still matters to those who proclaim God's message of hope to a fallen world.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 1.*

A Day of Darkness

The focal point of Zephaniah's message is the "day of the LORD" (*Zeph. 1:7*). For biblical prophets, the day of the Lord refers to a specific period of time in which God intervenes in human affairs in order both to save and to judge. Most people in ancient Israel believed that on this day the Lord would save and exalt Israel while the enemy nations would be destroyed forever. To the great surprise of those who listened, the prophet declared that the day of the Lord would be a day of doom, even for God's people (*see Zeph. 1:1–5*), because they had sinned against Him (*Zeph. 1:17*).

Compare Zephaniah 1:14–18 with Joel 2:1–11 and Amos 5:18–20. When read together, what picture do they present about "the day of the Lord"?

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

The prophet warned the people that they would not be able to buy their way out of judgment (*Zeph. 1:18*). Neither silver nor gold would protect them from the Lord's anger. However, the complacent people in Jerusalem claimed that God would do neither good nor harm. They simply did not expect the Lord to do anything (*Zeph. 1:12*). But divine judgments reveal how much God actively works to ensure that there will be a future for His faithful people.

Zephaniah makes it clear that God's judgment is not only punitive but corrective. The Lord holds out a promise of shelter for those who seek Him (*Zeph. 2:3*). Thus, the day of the Lord is more than the end of the world. It is the beginning of the future establishment of God's rule, which will last forever.

Read Zephaniah 1:18. In what ways do we even now experience the truth of the principle expressed here? That is, what kind of situations have we faced in which all the money in the world could not save us?

The Humble of the Land

In Zephaniah 2:1–3, we see the prophet’s call to repentance. Even though the destruction is imminent, there is still time to be sheltered from calamity, but only if the nation will repent. The wicked who refuse to repent will be consumed like chaff on the day of judgment. In Psalm 1:4 the wicked are also likened to chaff and, in the end, they perish.

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 seeking righteousness and humility. This attitude of repentance is essential in order to escape the coming judgment.

Zephaniah calls the repentant people the “humble of the land” (*Zeph. 2:3, NIV*). **How do the following passages shed light on this expression, which is also translated as the “poor of the land”?** *Matt. 5:3, Ps. 76:9, Isa. 11:4, Amos 8:4.*

The humble are those people who remain faithful to God and who are led and taught by Him. The psalmist says: “Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way” (*Ps. 25:8, 9, NIV*). The humble are urged to prepare for the coming judgment by seeking God, righteousness, and humility.

The possibility of survival for the humble who are faithful is expressed through the word *perhaps*. It means that survival depends solely on divine grace, and grace is something that never should be taken for granted. In the face of impending doom, there is hope for the future from God, who is merciful. The Lord has promised to shelter all those who trust in Him (*Joel 3:16, Nah. 1:7*). This type of trust casts out self-reliance, guile, and deception.

“Nothing is apparently more helpless, yet really more invincible, than the soul that feels its nothingness and relies wholly on the merits of the Saviour. By prayer, by the study of His word, by faith in His abiding presence, the weakest of human beings may live in contact with the living Christ, and He will hold them by a hand that will never let go.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 182. What has been your own experience with these incredible promises? How can you learn to have that kind of close walk with the Lord?

A Corrupt City

A Chinese proverb says that the darkest spot in the room is located right under the candle. This proverb could be applied to the moral state of Jerusalem in Zephaniah's time. The prophet just has completed the pronouncement of divine judgments on Judah's neighboring countries (see *Zephaniah 2*) such as Philistia in the west, Moab and Ammon in the east, Cush in the south, and Assyria in the east. Yet, he does not stop there. He proceeds to expose the sins of those who dwell in God's own city on earth, Jerusalem itself.

Read Zephaniah 3:1–5. Who is being condemned, and why? Ask yourself, How could God's people, those who have been given so much light and truth, end up so corrupted? How can we protect ourselves from having the same thing happen to us?

The capital city of Judah lies at the heart of Zephaniah's concern. He indicts its leaders concerning the city's moral degradation. The corruption stems directly from the failure of its leaders to live up to their designated roles and responsibilities (*compare with Jer. 18:18, Ezek. 22:23–30*). The corrupt court officials are likened to "roaring lions," and the judges are characterized as "evening wolves." And the temple fares no better because the priests do not teach God's Word, nor do the prophets speak the truth.

"During the reign of Josiah the word of the Lord came to Zephaniah, specifying plainly the results of continued apostasy, and calling the attention of the true church to the glorious prospect beyond. His prophecies of impending judgment upon Judah apply with equal force to the judgments that are to fall upon an impenitent world at the time of the second advent of Christ."—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 389.

Look around. However alluring, the world is doomed to ultimate destruction. One does not even need to believe in the Bible to see how easily this destruction could happen. Why is the Lord our only hope? How can we learn to lean on Him more and more and not trust in the vain and empty things of this world?

God's Greatest Delight

“The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.” (*Zeph. 3:17, NIV*).

In the closing section of his book (*Zeph. 3:9–20*), Zephaniah turns from a theme of anger to one of restoration. Beyond the judgment, we come to God's ultimate goals. When the nations have been disciplined, they will together call on the Lord and serve Him cordially. The lips of the people will be purified so that all may worship and praise the Lord by serving Him. A small, yet humble and faithful remnant will survive in Judah and will take the place of the proud leaders.

Most important, God will dwell 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 with them, dwelling in their midst. He will be their Deliverer and Savior. “They will eat and lie down and no one will make them afraid” (*Zeph. 3:13, NIV*).

Such blessings would normally cause God's people to rejoice over Him, but the prophet declares that God will rejoice over them. His love and joy for His people will be so great that He will shout over them with jubilation.

How did the prophet Isaiah describe God's joy over His redeemed people? *Isa. 62:5, 65:19*.

The great King, the divine Warrior, will protect and vindicate His people. He will grant them all the benefits of His victory, the one that He won for us at the cross. He will exalt the humble and turn disgrace, suffering, and alienation into an experience of honor, blessings, and His own presence. Prominence will be given to the lame and the outcast, a theme that lies at the heart of the message proclaimed by Jesus Christ.

Even amid such dire warnings, the Lord offered His people hope. How can we, as Seventh-day Adventists, trusting in the promise of the Second Coming, learn to live day by day with that hope? How can we learn to keep that hope alive, especially in times of trouble when the world offers us nothing but sorrow?

God's Answer to Injustice

Read Nahum 1–3. What verses especially teach us about the character of God? How can we apply what is seen here to our understanding of last-day events?

The prophecy of Nahum is God's Word against the kingdoms of this world as represented by Nineveh. As the prophet looked at his world, he saw the hand of God moving against the Assyrian Empire. He announced that its capital city, Nineveh, would soon fall, never to rise again. Nahum spoke with absolute confidence because he knew God's character, and, through the gift of prophecy (*Nah. 1:1*), he had been shown by the Lord what would happen. The Lord will not leave the guilty unpunished (*Nah. 1:3; Exod. 34:6, 7*).

The Assyrians had plundered many nations and had an insatiable lust for power. Their cruelty was notorious. As God's "razor" (*Isa. 7:20*), they eagerly had shorn their neighbors. Now it was time for the razor to be broken. Instruments of God's judgment are not exempt from judgment. Nineveh exists no more, but the prophetic testimony lives on. It reminds us that though God's justice seems slow, nothing ultimately can stop it.

As we have seen in an earlier lesson, years before Nahum's time, the Ninevites, having heard Jonah's preaching, had repented, and God had spared their city. But the repentance had not lasted; the people returned to their old ways. Many countries that had suffered under Nineveh's oppressive yoke would greet the news of its fall with thunderous applause. A messenger will come to bring good news (*Isa. 52:7*) that the power of Assyria is broken, with its gods. God's people will again be able to worship in peace (*Nah. 1:15*).

As great as the Lord's anger is, more tender is His mercy. He protects those who await the fullness of His goodness. Nahum teaches that God cares for those who trust in Him, but that with an overwhelming flood He will pursue His enemies into darkness (*Nah. 1:8*). He teaches also that God is behind it all, for He has determined that Nineveh's day of judgment has come.

The prophet shows that God has awesome power. All creation trembles before Him. He does not tolerate sin 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. " 'He who is not with Me,' Jesus said, 'is against Me' " (*Matt. 12:30, NKJV*).

Further Study: “With unerring accuracy the Infinite One still keeps account with the nations. While His mercy is tendered, with calls to repentance, this account remains open; but when the figures reach a certain amount which God has fixed, the ministry of His wrath begins. The account is closed. Divine patience ceases. Mercy no longer pleads in their behalf.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 364.

“Before the worlds unfallen and the heavenly universe, the world will have to give an account to the Judge of the whole earth, the very One they condemned and crucified. What a reckoning day that will be! It is the great day of God’s vengeance. Christ does not then stand at Pilate’s bar. Pilate and Herod, and all that mocked, scourged, rejected, and crucified Him will then understand what it means to feel the wrath of the Lamb. Their deeds will appear before them in their true character.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 132.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Some of the people in Zephaniah’s time did terrible things against both the Lord and their fellow countrymen while others were just complacent as such evils unfolded. Which of these two sins do you think is worse in God’s eyes? Justify your answer.
- 2 Go back over the final question at the end of Monday’s lesson, where these words were quoted: “Nothing is apparently more helpless, yet really more invincible, than the soul that feels its nothingness and relies wholly on the merits of the Saviour.” What does it mean to rely “wholly on the merits of the Saviour”? How do these words reveal to us the great truth of salvation by faith in Christ alone, and why is that truth so central to all that we believe? If we do not rely on His merits, on whose merits can we rely?
- 3 Why is it so easy, especially for those who live in wealth and comfort, to forget just how utterly dependent we are upon God for everything that we have? How can we protect ourselves from this fatal delusion?
- 4 Dwell more upon this idea of the Lord singing and rejoicing over His people. We tend to think of ourselves singing and rejoicing over God and what He has done for us. What does it mean that He sings and rejoices over us? How could that be, considering the rather pathetic state in which we all find ourselves?

Standing Up for Jesus: Part 1

The ropes bit into Bien's [bee-YEN] wrists as she struggled to free herself. Her brothers had tied her to the small boat before they left to get gas for the boat's engine. They planned to take her to the small offshore island where their grandmother lived so she couldn't attend the heretics' church she had been visiting. She knew she had little time. She saw some friends passing nearby and called them to help her. They quickly untied the rough ropes and helped her from the boat before her brothers returned.

As 14-year-old Bien and her friends hurried through the streets of the small town, she explained that her family was angry because she had been attending the Seventh-day Adventist church, and her brothers were trying to keep her from going.

"Why don't you just give up the church?" one of her friends asked. "Is church worth all this trouble?"

"It's not just going to church," Bien explained. "I've learned that God loves me, that Jesus died for me, and that He wants me to follow Him. I want to be His daughter, even if it means losing my own family."

"Where can you go to be safe?" another girl asked.

"The pastor's house," Bien said and led the way. When they arrived, Bien thanked her friends and begged them not to tell her parents where she was. Safely inside, Bien told the pastor and his wife what had happened, and they agreed to let her stay with them for a while. But three days later Bien's mother knocked on the door. Bien fought her fear and bravely followed the pastor to the door.

When the pastor opened the door, Bien's mother lunged at her daughter, grabbing her by the hair. She tried to drag Bien from the house.

"Stop!" the pastor's wife said. Bien's mother let go and faced the pastor's wife. "We're concerned about her," the pastor's wife said. "Can we talk?" Bien's mother finally agreed to leave without her daughter, but the pastor promised to bring Bien to see her later that day.

Bien whispered, "I'm afraid."

"We'll go with you and stay with you while we try to sort this out," the pastor said. Bien nodded. She knew she couldn't stay with the pastor forever.

The pastor took Bien to her parents' house and agreed to let them speak in private. But when he left, Bien's parents unleashed their anger.

"You are useless to us and a problem," her father began. "We don't want you around here, and we don't want you near those Seventh-day Adventists. You're going to go live with your grandmother where you won't find any Seventh-day Adventists."

(Continued next week.)