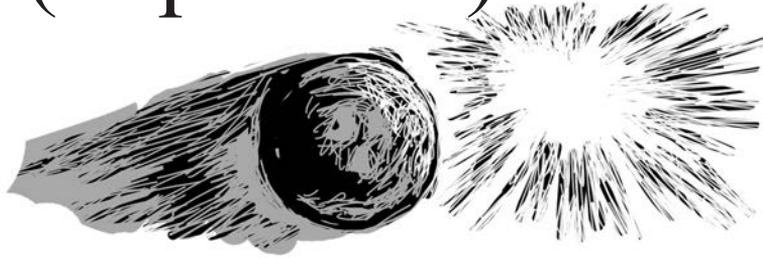


The Day of *the* Lord (Zephaniah)



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 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, and that 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” (NIV), 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, then, 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*). Zephaniah likens the corrupt court officials to "roaring lions," and the judges as "evening wolves." And the temple, he states, 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 did not last; 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:

- ❶ 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.
- ❷ 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?
- ❸ 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?
- ❹ 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?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Zephaniah 3:12, 13, 17*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Comprehend that God’s judgments show His greatness toward all people. Many from different nations will come and acknowledge Him.

Feel: Rejoice in the fact that God shows His unique love for His people by saving them, delighting in them, quieting their anxieties, and rejoicing over them with singing.

Do: Trust, obey, and worship God as part of God’s remnant, and serve others in response to His bountiful goodness.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Knowing God Leads to Worship

A Demonstrate from the book of Zephaniah that God wants to save everyone.

B How does true knowledge of God lead to true worship?

II. Feel: God Rejoices and Sings

A Knowing that God rejoices and sings over His people invokes what response in you?

B How do parents quiet their children when they are anxious, experience failure, or get into trouble? How does God’s ability to comfort exceed a parent’s comforting abilities or in what way does He respond differently when dealing with His children?

III. Do: Living the Ethical Life of the Remnant

A How are we able to change our behavior, as opposed to only making adjustments?

B What does it mean that the remnant will do no wrong?

C How would your church or community be different if no one lied or behaved deceitfully?

► **Summary:** The living God is the God of all nations. He not only loves everyone, but He wants all saved. He delights when a person responds to His love, comes to Him, becomes a new person, and worships Him.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Spotlight on Scripture: *Zephaniah 2:11 and 3:12, 13, 17*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: *Zephaniah presents an awesome God who will judge the entire world. He not only announces the coming of the day of the Lord but proclaims who can endure the day of judgment and how. As a result, the faithful remnant of all nations will come and worship the One true God.*

Just for Teachers: *This week’s lesson emphasizes the picture of God as a Judge who invites people to repent. This God preserves and saves the remnant from the nations and from Judah by embracing them with His unique, joyful love.*

Opening Discussion: A general reaction to the judgment of God is often fear. One preacher, who asked people on all continents of the world what they thought of God’s judgment, had this to say: “In spite of their different ethnicities, ages, political systems, and educational backgrounds, the answer was unanimous: ‘Fear!’ ” What is your first reaction, feeling, and thought when you hear that God will judge you?

Always remember that we are saved not on the basis of how we feel but because of God’s Word. Because God said that if we confess our sins, He will cleanse us from all our iniquity (*1 John 1:9*), we can rely on that promise. We can trust that God saves repentant sinners (*Zeph. 2:3; 3:12, 13, 17*). The meaning of the prophet Zephaniah’s name, “The Lord hides or shelters,” is also a powerful message. The Lord hides those who hide in Him on the day of the Lord. So, He protects, shelters, and saves. Everyone who trusts in the name of the Lord will be hidden and redeemed. Therefore, we do not need to be fearful of God’s judgment.

Application Questions:

- ❶ What is your only hope in the divine judgment?
- ❷ How are people to be saved? What do the Cross and Jesus’ victory at Calvary have to do with it?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Just for Teachers: *Prophet Zephaniah was from the royal line of King Hezekiah. He lived in the seventh century before Christ in the*

time of God’s people’s spiritual and moral decay and political decline. He most likely started the last reformation among God’s people in Judah and had a positive influence on King Josiah (641–609 B.C.), who secured spiritual revival and reformation. During his reign, the book of the law was found, and the monarch wanted to do everything according to the Word of God. (*See 2 Kings 23:1–25, 2 Chron. 34:29–32, 34:1–33.*)

Bible Commentary

The phrase “The day of the LORD” occurs seven times in the book of Zephaniah (*Zeph. 1:7, 8, 14 [twice], 18; 2:2, 3*). This day is a dreadful day, a day of God’s anger, and this day of judgment is near.

Zephaniah also mentions the word *remnant* three times (*Zeph. 2:7, 9; 3:13*). The remnant are the people who will be rescued and saved at the end.

When people are in a deadly serious situation from which there is no escape, the only solution is prayer, a repentant petition for God’s grace and mercy. God comes and responds in His love to such a contrite heart and the humble actions of a person’s life.

The most beautiful and encouraging picture of God in the book of Zephaniah is presented in Zephaniah 3:17. This verse summarizes well God’s unique activities for His faithful people.

I. The Lord Is a Mighty Warrior (*Review Exodus 15:3 with your class.*)

Our God is for us. He is a powerful Warrior who fights for us and defeats our enemies. Sin, evil, Satan, and his allies cannot prevail over God’s people. The Lord brings victory and saves.

Moses, in his song of victory in Exodus 15, expresses the idea that God is a Warrior (*Exod. 15:3*). He defeated the entire ancient Egyptian army and brought down human pride and arrogance. The greatness of His majesty threw down all who opposed Him. He is the Victor not because of His force, but because of His moral strength and the power of His love.

Consider This: Jesus is for you. He fights for your salvation because He does not want to lose you when Satan desires to put you down. What are God’s weapons against Satan? Upon what is God’s status as Victor over Satan based?

II. The Lord Delights in You (*Review Luke 15:7 with your class.*)

Zephaniah’s picture of God is very personal. It is as though the Lord were saying to us: “It may be that some people despise you and do not take you seriously. I am different. You have enormous value to Me. I love you so

much that I even died for you! I love you more than you love yourself. I, your God, rejoice over you!”

Jesus states the reason why God rejoices: “ ‘I tell you that in the same way there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent’ ” (*Luke 15:7, NIV*).

Consider This: God delights in His faithful followers. What does Zephaniah’s portrayal of God reveal to us about who He is? What reason does Jesus give for God’s rejoicing over us?

III. The Lord Quiets You With His Love (*Review Zephaniah 3:17 with your class.*)

God speaks to us in His language of love just as a parent will quiet a child who is hurt, crying, afraid, or disappointed, with loving caresses, kisses, and gentle words until he or she becomes quiet and goes to sleep in the parent’s arms, trusting and resting in that love. Likewise, God assures His children that they are safe and secure in His love; in this way, He quiets us.

This biblical phrase, “he will quiet you with his love” (*vs. 17, NIV*), has an alternate translation that brings another important nuance to God’s love. The New American Standard Bible translates it in the following way: “ ‘He will be quiet in His love’ ” (*Zeph. 3:17*). This textual ambiguity is probably intentional in order to evoke multiple positive feelings. The text says that the Lord “will quiet you with His love.” Thus, after speaking and assuring us that He loves us with an everlasting love, He becomes quiet so that we can rest in His arms of love and enjoy the warmth of His presence.

Consider This: What words or actions of God make you feel secure in His arms of love? How does God quiet us with His love? What is the meaning of God’s growing quiet after assuring us of His love?

IV. The Lord Rejoices Over You With Singing (*Review Genesis 15:3 with your class.*)

One function of such a song is that it expresses love. God expresses His love and joy over us. He sings a unique song over each of us!

Another function of the song is that it expresses victory. See, as examples, the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb (*Genesis 49, Exodus 15, Rev. 15:3*).

Consider This: Why do we receive God’s grace? Why is it something we cannot earn?

Discussion Question: Why is there no place where we can hide from God?

Zephaniah does not say that we can “hide” from God or from the day of the Lord in order to avoid it. He emphasizes that one can be hidden “in” that day, which means that one can be sheltered only “in the Lord” on that day in order to be protected and saved.

Discussion: You do not need to be terrified of God’s judgment. On the contrary, you can have full confidence, boldness, and joy of salvation when facing God’s judgment. This is possible because the primary meaning of God’s judgment is to justify, save, and deliver people who have faith in Him. Discuss with your class biblical texts like Genesis 15:6; Psalm 76:8, 9; Isaiah 35:4; Daniel 7:22; John 5:24; 1 John 2:28; and 4:17. Give the members of your class hope and fix their eyes on God, who loves people, wants to save them, assures them of His enduring mercy, and who does not delight in punishment, condemnation, or destruction (*Ezek. 18:23, 32*). Stress the uniqueness of the warm imagery that Zephaniah paints in Zephaniah 3:17. Unpack each sentence very carefully and in colorful language so that those who hear you can see, understand, and be touched by the beauty and love of our God.

► **STEP 3**—Apply

Just for Teachers: God delights and rejoices over His people. What can you do so that members of your Sabbath School class will be more cheerful and joyful in their personal interactions and relationships with other brothers and sisters in the church?

Life Application: Ask various members of your class to read Zephaniah 3:17 from different Bible translations (if available). Compare the differences between the translations, explain them, and apply the nuances to real life in order to gain a better understanding of God’s character of love.

► **STEP 4**—Create

Just for Teachers: God sings over His people. Stress the importance of singing in worship.

Activities:

- 1 Ask your class if they know any song that expresses God’s joy over His people. Sing the song together in class.
- 2 Have the members of the class compose song lyrics based on the hope that we can find in the judgment—specifically the fact that we are hidden in Christ and sheltered in the Lord. Share the song’s lyrics with the class.