

June 12
Lesson 2

THAT DAY IS COMING

DEVOTIONAL READING: Deuteronomy 8:11-18

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Zephaniah 3:1-8

ZEPHANIAH 3:1-8

¹ Woe to the city of oppressors,
rebellious and defiled!
² She obeys no one,
she accepts no correction.
She does not trust in the LORD,
she does not draw near to her God.
³ Her officials within her
are roaring lions;
her rulers are evening wolves,
who leave nothing for the morning.
⁴ Her prophets are unprincipled;
they are treacherous people.
Her priests profane the sanctuary
and do violence to the law.
⁵ The LORD within her is righteous;
he does no wrong.
Morning by morning he dispenses his justice,
and every new day he does not fail,
yet the unrighteous know no shame.
⁶ “I have destroyed nations;
their strongholds are demolished.
I have left their streets deserted,
with no one passing through.
Their cities are laid waste;
they are deserted and empty.
⁷ Of Jerusalem I thought,
‘Surely you will fear me
and accept correction!’
Then her place of refuge would not be destroyed,
nor all my punishments come upon her.
But they were still eager
to act corruptly in all they did.
⁸ Therefore wait for me,”
declares the LORD,
“for the day I will stand up to testify.
I have decided to assemble the nations,
to gather the kingdoms
and to pour out my wrath on them—
all my fierce anger.
The whole world will be consumed
by the fire of my jealous anger.”



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KEY VERSE

“Therefore wait for me,” declares the LORD, “for the day I will stand up to testify.”
Zephaniah 3:8

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the objects of the Lord’s condemnation and the reasons for it.
2. Explain why the topic of God’s judgment is as relevant today as it was to Zephaniah’s audience.
3. Tell specifically how the theme of God’s judgment will influence his or her daily living and message to an unsaved world.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. A Special Date
- B. Lesson Background

I. Rebellious City (ZEPHANIAH 3:1, 2)

- A. Defiled (v. 1)
What Happens in Vegas ...
- B. Defiant (v. 2)

II. Ruthless Leaders (ZEPHANIAH 3:3, 4)

- A. Civic (v. 3)
No Moral Compass
- B. Spiritual (v. 4)

III. Righteous God (ZEPHANIAH 3:5-8)

- A. Every Day (v. 5)
- B. Every Nation (v. 6)
- C. Evil City (v. 7)
- D. Extensive Judgment (v. 8)

Conclusion

- A. Preparing for Finals
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. A Special Date

June 12, 2016, the day on which this lesson is to be taught, is a special one for my wife and me—it’s our 40th wedding anniversary! Now, the reader should keep in mind that when I began work on this lesson it was early 2014, more than two years before the date’s arrival. As I was writing, I had no specific plans for celebrating the day. And of course there is no guarantee that either of us will still be living when the time comes. But there is no question as to when the date of our 40th wedding anniversary should be observed.

Getting ready for the day of the Lord is quite different, mainly because we do not know when that specific day will be. The prophet Zephaniah warned of a day of judgment in his own time, but he also prophesied a sweeping, global administration of divine judgment. Jesus provided an unmistakable warning regarding that final day: “About that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Matthew 24:36). This is not a date that one can circle on a calendar as we would “save the date” for an upcoming wedding. A better word of advice comes from Peter on the Day of Pentecost: “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation” (Acts 2:40).

In truth, the only way one can prepare for the coming day of the Lord is to be a devoted, day-by-day servant of Jesus. To be faithful to him, even in the little things, is to be making big plans for that special day.

B. Lesson Background

Last week’s lesson introduced us to the man and message of Zephaniah. The focus of that study was on his opening warning of judgment on the sinful people of Judah. The prophet followed with a series of similar announcements of judgment on peoples and nations beyond Judah’s borders, including the Philistines (Zephaniah 2:4-7), Moab and Ammon (2:8-11), the Cushites or Ethiopians (2:12), and Assyria (2:13-15).

Today's lesson text refocuses the theme of judgment back on Judah, specifically the capital city of Jerusalem.

I. Rebellious City

(ZEPHANIAH 3:1, 2)

A. Defiled (v. 1)

1. Woe to the city of oppressors, rebellious and defiled!

Woe is a word in Scripture that often introduces oracles of judgment against individuals or nations. Several decades earlier, Isaiah declared a series of woes against God's people (Isaiah 5:8-23); several centuries later, Jesus will utter a series of woes against the teachers of the law and Pharisees (Matthew 23). Here the woe is directed against *the city of oppressors, rebellious and defiled*. But which city?

We initially may think the reference is to the city of Nineveh, which is mentioned by name just three verses earlier. But the content and context of what follows indicate that the reference is to Jerusalem. The idealized "holy city" of Isaiah 52:1 is anything but!

"WHAT HAPPENS IN VEGAS ..."

Many fine Christians live in Las Vegas, Nevada, but the rest of the world doesn't seem to be aware of that fact. Most people have been taught to think of Vegas as "Sin City."

That reputation was promoted by the "What Happens in Vegas Stays in Vegas" marketing campaign that began in 2003, as commissioned by the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority. One of the first video ads featured a sultry woman in a slinky dress inside a limousine as it departed from downtown Las Vegas. She ended up wearing a business suit and having her hair in a bun as she exited the limo at the airport on her way back home.

HOW TO SAY IT

Ammon *Am-mun*.

Assyria *Uh-sear-ee-uh*.

Blagojevich *Blah-goi-yuh-vich*.

Ethiopians *E-thee-o-pee-unz* (*th* as in *thin*).

Judah *Joo-duh*.

Lamentations *Lam-en-tay-shunz*.

Nineveh *Nin-uh-vuh*.

Pentecost *Pent-ih-kost*.

Philistines *Fuh-liss-teenz* or *Fill-us-teenz*.

Reuben *Roo-ben*.

Zephaniah *Zef-uh-nye-uh*.

In other words, the message is that you can "let your hair down" in Vegas and become someone else for a while. But as you depart, you can leave your alter ego behind, no harm done! No one back home will know what wild things you did while in Sin City. When shown the ads, women in certain focus groups said they found them to be "empowering"—whatever that means!

In Zephaniah's time, Jerusalem was a morally polluted city that oppressed its inhabitants in various ways. That was the cause for the wrath of God that destroyed the city in 586 BC. That should make us wonder: How much patience does God have left when he sees all the moral pollution and oppression that exist today?—C. R. B.

What Do You Think?

What are some ways to address the tragic spiritual condition of modern cities? What will be your part in this?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding involvement with existing ministries

Regarding creation of new ministries

Other

B. Defiant (v. 2)

2a. She obeys no one,

Zephaniah proceeds with a litany of charges against the city. (In the Hebrew Old Testament, the feminine pronoun *she* is used of cities because

they are considered to be “mothers” of those who live within them; see [2 Samuel 20:19](#).) The *one* not obeyed is the Lord, the only one to whom his people should be giving their attention. As one of the Lord’s prophets, Zephaniah speaks for him. But it appears that his words fall on deaf ears.

2b. she accepts no correction.

The fact that Jerusalem *accepts no correction* highlights the people’s arrogance toward God. They are unwilling to be disciplined by the Lord’s standards. The Hebrew word translated *correction* occurs 30 times in the book of Proverbs, often translated there as “instruction” (examples: [Proverbs 1:8](#); [4:1](#)). In its sense of “discipline” (as used here), it describes a result of living by the principles of wisdom (compare [Proverbs 1:2](#), [3:11](#), [12](#)).

What Do You Think?

How can we discern and accept the Lord’s correction in various circumstances?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- In times of personal struggle
- In times of family crisis
- In response to seemingly unanswered prayer
- When asked by others during their struggles
- Other

2c. She does not trust in the LORD, she does not draw near to her God.

To refuse to *trust in the Lord* is to ignore the admonishment to do so that appears throughout Scripture (examples: [Psalm 20:7](#); [Proverbs 3:5](#), [6](#); [Isaiah 26:3](#), [4](#); [Hebrews 2:13](#)). To fail to *draw near* to God is to spurn one of his most gracious invitations ([Isaiah 55:1-7](#); [Hebrews 7:19](#)). Zephaniah’s list of charges reveals the rejection of some of the most essential and foundational attitudes that are to characterize God’s covenant people. The city’s spiritual condition is tragic indeed.

II. Ruthless Leaders

([ZEPHANIAH 3:3, 4](#))

A. Civic (v. 3)

3. Her officials within her are roaring lions; her rulers are evening wolves, who leave nothing for the morning.

Zephaniah cites a major contributor to Jerusalem’s sad spiritual state: the leadership is corrupt. The phrase *her officials* likely refers to kings of Judah and their royal sons. After the death of godly King Josiah (see last week’s Lesson Background), none of the four kings who rule Judah until its fall in 586 BC—three of whom are sons of Josiah—are considered righteous (see [2 Kings 23:30-24:20](#)). Here they are portrayed as lions on the prowl, roaring as they seek their prey.

Corruption extends to the city’s *rulers*, or judges. These men are supposed to be just and fair. Instead they are ruthless, like wolves that stalk their prey under cover of darkness. Such judges consider themselves to be above the law.

The phrase *who leave nothing for the morning* describes the thoroughness of these judges’ heartless efforts. Nothing remains when they finish devouring their victims. Jesus will use similar language of the religious leaders of his day, of men who “devour widows’ houses” ([Luke 20:47](#)).

NO MORAL COMPASS

For several years, the state of Illinois suffered the infamy of being the only state in America with two former governors serving prison terms at the same time. They were George Ryan and Rod Blagojevich. Ryan, governor from 1999 to 2003, was convicted of racketeering; Blagojevich, governor from 2003 to 2009, was convicted on various corruption charges, including trying to sell President Obama’s former seat in the U.S. Senate.

Two other Illinois governors sent to prison were Dan Walker, governor from 1973 to 1977, and Otto Kerner Jr., governor from 1961 to 1968. This isn’t meant to pick on Illinois, however. All states and nations have had leaders who disgraced themselves by misusing the power of their offices.

The problem seems to have been even worse in ancient Jerusalem, the city that was supposed to be ruled by the laws of God. Zephaniah’s description of her corrupt leaders boggles the mind. Of all the people who should have known better! With elections approaching, how high do morals and ethics count on your list of criteria regarding which candidates will receive your vote?—C. R. B.

B. Spiritual (v. 4)

4a. Her prophets are unprincipled; they are treacherous people.

While the previous verse focuses on those who might be termed the civic leaders of Jerusalem, here Zephaniah indicts the spiritual leaders. *Prophets* should speak God's truth, but these men do not. The Hebrew verb translated *unprincipled* is rare. It occurs in [Judges 9:4](#), where it describes certain people who lack moral compunction as "reckless scoundrels," and in [Genesis 49:4](#), where it characterizes the man Reuben as "turbulent." A closely related word is used in [Jeremiah 23:32](#) to describe the recklessness of "those who prophesy false dreams." It means nothing to these *treacherous people* to trivialize God's Word.

4b. Her priests profane the sanctuary and do violence to the law.

The sanctuary cannot remain holy when unholy priests officiate there. The prophet Ezekiel will later describe some of the hideous, disgusting practices that are taking place in the temple ([Ezekiel 8](#)). Such activities will eventually result in the Lord's glory departing from there ([8:6](#); [10:15-19](#)).

Using the same two Hebrew words that Zephaniah uses, Ezekiel will also have his say regarding how "her priests do violence to my law" ([Ezekiel 22:26](#)). And as Ezekiel will go on to note in that same passage, it is not just the law that suffers from such shameful actions by the priests; the Lord himself is "profaned among them."

The words of Jeremiah, a contemporary of Zephaniah, offer a fitting summation of Judah's plight: "A horrible and shocking thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy lies, the priests rule by their own authority, and my people love it this way. But what will you do in the end?" ([Jeremiah 5:30, 31](#)). With such leaders guiding God's people, can his judgment be far behind?

What Do You Think?

In addition to praying, what can we do when leaders fail to carry out their responsibilities?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding the local church
- Regarding church leaders on the national stage
- Within the home

III. Righteous God

([ZEPHANIAH 3:5-8](#))

A. Every Day (v. 5)

5. The LORD within her is righteous; he does no wrong. Morning by morning he dispenses his justice, and every new day he does not fail, yet the unrighteous know no shame.

In contrast with how far God's people have strayed from him, God himself has never moved one inch from his own holy standards. The fact that he is *within her* implies that he sees everything that goes on among his people and their leaders. It is similar to how Jesus describes himself as walking "among the seven golden lampstands" ([Revelation 2:1](#)), which represent the seven churches ([1:20](#)). He knows their works and says so at the beginning of each of his seven messages ([2:2, 9, 13, 19](#); [3:1, 8, 15](#)).

Zephaniah's statement *morning by morning he dispenses his justice* is similar to that of [Lamentations 3:22, 23](#), which proclaims that the Lord's "compassions ... are new every morning." God works among his people on a daily basis, though admittedly we as finite human beings may not be able to recognize every such instance of justice or compassion. The final Day of Judgment will be the consummation of what God the righteous judge has been doing all along.

Everything about *the Lord* who is *righteous* stands in sharp contrast with *the unrighteous* who *know no shame*. In their minds, they have outgrown the need for God's straitjacket of right and wrong standards. Like many today, they do not sin secretly, but rather they gloat and boast over actions of which they should be ashamed. As Jeremiah astutely puts it, "Are they ashamed of their detestable conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush" ([Jeremiah 6:15](#)).

What Do You Think?

How can shame be used to honor God today?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- In witnessing
- In disciplining children
- In preaching and teaching
- In holding a fellow believer accountable
- In standing up for a specific moral issue
- Other

B. Every Nation (v. 6)

**6. “I have destroyed nations;
their strongholds are demolished.
I have left their streets deserted,
with no one passing through.
Their cities are laid waste;
they are deserted and empty.**

Thus far this chapter has focused on the judgment that awaits God’s covenant people. But by no means is it limited to them. Though the nations have built *strongholds*, such efforts are useless in withstanding divine judgment (1:16, 17).

A complete desolation is pictured here: *their cities are laid waste*, and no inhabitants remain. Consider, for example, what the prophet Isaiah declared concerning mighty Babylon, which arose after his day: “Babylon, the jewel of kingdoms, the pride and glory of the Babylonians, will be overthrown by God like Sodom and Gomorrah. She will never be inhabited or lived in through all generations” (Isaiah 13:19, 20). Isaiah’s prophecy comes to pass, as does Zephaniah’s.

C. Evil City (v. 7)

**7. “Of Jerusalem I thought,
‘Surely you will fear me
and accept correction!’
Then her place of refuge would not be destroyed,
nor all my punishments come upon her.
But they were still eager
to act corruptly in all they did.**

Here the Lord’s words are redirected to Jerusalem. God expects more from the city of David, the holy city, the home of the temple. Surely its inhabitants will not reach the point where they will have to *be destroyed* in judgment! Surely they will be willing to *accept correction* from the Lord!



Visual for Lessons 1 & 2. As you discuss the lesson's **Introduction**, point to this visual and ask, "In what senses can we and can we not 'save the date'?"

But no—if anything, they are as determined as ever to refuse to listen. Their eagerness to pursue wrongdoing seems to know no bounds. Of course, this will not escape the attention of the Lord, who "morning by morning" implements his justice (v. 5, above).

What Do You Think?

What place should fear of God have in our daily walk with Him? Why?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding times when we seek His will

Regarding times when we carry out His will

Considering "do fear" passages (1 Peter 2:17;

D. Extensive Judgment (v. 8)

**8. "Therefore wait for me,"
declares the LORD,
"for the day I will stand up to testify.
I have decided to assemble the nations,
to gather the kingdoms
and to pour out my wrath on them—
all my fierce anger.
The whole world will be consumed
by the fire of my jealous anger."**

Sometimes in Scripture the command to wait for the Lord is meant to offer comfort and encouragement to those who are enduring an

especially trying experience. Two notable examples of this are found in [Psalm 27:14](#); [37:7](#). Here, however, the command to *wait for me* is associated with God's intention to *stand up to testify* and *pour out his wrath*, that is, to carry out his judgment. Thus individuals such as the leaders of God's people who have treated people as prey ([Zephaniah 3:3](#), above) will end up finding themselves to be the Lord's prey in turn.

But God's judgment, as he has earlier stated in [verse 6](#), will also encompass *the nations* and *the kingdoms*. The language of pouring out judgment is similar to that found in [Revelation 16](#) concerning the bowls of God's wrath that are to be poured out upon the earth.

God also speaks in this verse of *the fire of my jealous anger*. God's jealousy should not be viewed in the same way we think of jealousy as being wrong for people, which implies covetousness. Just as God's wrath is his holy anger against sin, his jealousy reflects his holy zeal for what is right and his passionate hatred of what is wrong. He is jealous in a positive sense for his people, desiring only what is good for them and despising anything that threatens their relationship with him.

God earnestly desires that his people choose what is right and remain faithful, and he is deeply grieved when they do not. But at the same time, he allows people to choose whether or not they will obey. Judgment awaits those who turn from God and spurn his mercy, but rich blessings are promised to those who remain faithful. We will consider some of those blessings in next week's third and final study from Zephaniah.

Conclusion

A. Preparing for Finals

The late comedian George Carlin is quoted as saying, "I was thinking about how people seem to read the Bible a whole lot more as they get older; then it dawned on me—they're cramming for their final exam." In the process of receiving certain degrees as part of my education, I learned what it's like to have to prepare for a major exam.

Prior to receiving my Master of Divinity degree, I had to prepare for an oral examination, during which I was to be questioned about various subjects that were part of my field of study. Some years later, I had to prepare for a series of written examinations as I neared the completion of a doctoral program. Believe me, there were plenty of "butterflies," especially the night before these exams were administered!

Even so, things were made easier by the fact that every exam was scheduled for a certain day or a series of days. I knew exactly when each was to occur and could plan my preparation accordingly. I shudder to think what my frame of mind would have been if a test could have happened at any time and I had to live "on pins and needles" knowing that any night I could receive a phone call saying, "Tomorrow's the day of the test. Be here at 8:00 a.m.!"

However, we don't know the day or the hour when we will take God's "final exam." Such a day is indeed coming—a Day of Judgment—and no one will be exempt ([2 Corinthians 5:10](#); [Romans 14:12](#)). But even though we do not know when that day will be, we do not have to live in a constant state of dread regarding whether or not we will "pass our final." We know that we can stand before the Lord, the righteous judge, on that day, because Jesus took the penalty for our sins upon himself at the cross ([1 Peter 2:24](#)).

As [1 John 2:1](#) tells us, we have an "advocate" to speak up on our behalf, "Jesus Christ, the Righteous One," so that we will have nothing to fear when we face the ultimate judge. We can rest assured knowing that the "wages of sin" ([Romans 6:23](#)) have been paid in full. As Elvina M. Hall (1822-1899) put it in these oft-sung words:

*Jesus paid it all,
All to Him I owe;
Sin had left a crimson stain,
He washed it white as snow.*

Even so, we are cautioned by the fact that Judah, the nation of God's covenant people, is the first nation mentioned by name in Zephaniah's judgment list ([Zephaniah 1:4](#)). This calls to mind the truth in [1 Peter 4:17](#): "For it is time for judgment to begin with God's household."

The promise of a coming *day of the Lord* should never produce a sense of smugness among Christians that all the sinners will get their just deserts in the end. The promise of that day should instead move us to remain continually humble before the Lord and to be more committed than ever to helping others prepare for the day of the Lord.

B. Prayer

Father, we recognize that your wrath against sin is real and that our sin is real. But just as real is your grace demonstrated in Jesus' payment for our sins on the cross. We praise you for being not only just but also merciful. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Prepare for the final day every day.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Into the Lesson

Give each learner a blank calendar sheet (template) for a month. Have the year 2016 prominent at the top; have listed column headings for the seven days of the week. Do not include the name of a month or numerals for days.

Give this direction: "Pick a month—past, present, or future—in the year 2016 that has a day that is special to you in some way and fill in the numerals for all the days of that month." (Have a 2016 calendar handy to help learners know the correct numbering for any particular month.)

After learners finish, say, "Draw a star on any day that either did or will require special planning on your part." After a minute or two, ask for volunteers to tell about the dates they chose, the reasons, and the planning required.

Following that time of sharing, say, "Now write this on your calendar on any day of your choosing, with a question mark: *The Day of the Lord?*" Ask, "What preparations can one make for that day?" Allow a few brief responses, then comment, "Today's text pictures a people of God who are not expecting such a day, or at least they don't expect such a day to be wielded against them. Consequently, they do not prepare for it. Let's see how all this relates to us."

Alternative. Place in chairs copies of the "Big Little Words" activity from the reproducible page, which you can download, for learners to begin working on as they arrive. This will introduce the importance of the coming day of the Lord.

Into the Word

Say, "About 40 years before it was destroyed, God said of Jerusalem [read [Zephaniah 3:1, 2](#)]. He explained why things are so bad this way: [read [verses 3 and 4](#)]."

Assign each learner one of these four designations to research: *official*, *ruler (judge)*, *prophet*, *priest*. Say, "Look at [verses 3 and 4](#) to develop quickly a list of adjectives and behaviors that are expressed or implied for the type of individual you have been assigned. You have 90 seconds. Go!"

After calling time, encourage free discussion. Ask for explanations where appropriate. Sample responses that are possible and/or expected: *official*—loud, threatening, ready to kill; *ruler (judge)*—cruel, voracious, unjust, deceitful; *prophet*—treacherous, reckless, careless with truth; *priest*—profane, lawless, impure. Jot responses on the board. Wrap up by asking rhetorically, "Is it any wonder that God characterized Jerusalem as filthy, polluted, and oppressive?"

Direct learners' attention to [verses 5-8](#). After someone reads them aloud, ask, "What contrasts do you see between God and his corrupt people?" As learners respond, refer as appropriate to the list you made regarding officials, rulers (judges), prophets, and priests. *Possible responses:* God is just, his justice is sure and constant, he speaks truth, he is completely dependable, he hates sin.

Be ready to point out responses that are not contrasts. Example: "God expects obedience" is a true statement, but it is not a contrast with the corrupt leaders, since they too expect obedience. Paint a vivid word picture of how ungodly the Jerusalem leadership had become.

Into Life

Give each learner a 2" x 3½" card (size of a business card) featuring *THAT DAY Is Coming!* on the front and *How does That Day affect THIS DAY for me?* on the back. Have learners read in unison first the front, then the back. Comment: "The fact that God intends a day of universal judgment and justice should influence our behavior every day. Carry your card as a daily reminder."

Option. Distribute copies of the "That Day Is Coming" activity from the reproducible page. Form learners into pairs to complete and discuss as indicated.