

June 5
Lesson 1

THE DAY OF THE LORD

DEVOTIONAL READING: Isaiah 25:6-10

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Zephaniah 1:2-2:4

ZEPHANIAH 1:4-6, 14-16

⁴ “I will stretch out my hand against Judah
and against all who live in Jerusalem.
I will destroy every remnant of Baal worship in this
place,
the very names of the idolatrous priests—
⁵ those who bow down on the roofs
to worship the starry host,
those who bow down and swear by the LORD
and who also swear by Molek,
⁶ those who turn back from following the LORD
and neither seek the LORD nor inquire of him.”

¹⁴ The great day of the LORD is near—
near and coming quickly.
The cry on the day of the LORD is bitter;
the Mighty Warrior shouts his battle cry.
¹⁵ That day will be a day of wrath—
a day of distress and anguish,
a day of trouble and ruin,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and blackness—
¹⁶ a day of trumpet and battle cry
against the fortified cities
and against the corner towers.



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ZEPHANIAH 2:3

³ Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land,
you who do what he commands.
Seek righteousness, seek humility;
perhaps you will be sheltered
on the day of the LORD’s anger.

KEY VERSE

Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the LORD’s anger. —Zephaniah 2:3

LESSON AIMS

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

1. List characteristics of “the day of the Lord.”
2. Compare and contrast what Zephaniah says about the coming “day of the Lord” with what the New Testament says about “the day of the Lord,” when Christ returns.
3. Identify one hindrance in his or her life to seeking righteousness and make a plan to remove it.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Creator and Re-creator
- B. Lesson Background

I. God’s Intentions (ZEPHANIAH 1:4-6)

- A. Against the Idolaters (vv. 4, 5)
- B. Against the Indifferent (v. 6)

From Utopia to Dystopia and Back

II. Great Day’s Anguish (ZEPHANIAH 1:14-16)

- A. Coming Soon (v. 14)
- B. Coming with Sorrow (vv. 15, 16)

III. People’s Attitude (ZEPHANIAH 2:3)

- A. Call to Repent (v. 3a)
- B. Consequences of Humility (v. 3b)

Avoiding Divine Correction

Conclusion

- A. Ready or Not, Here It Comes
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Creator and Re-creator

When we pronounce the word *recreation*, we usually say the first syllable with a short *e* (so that it comes out sounding like the *e* in *wreck*). As such, the word typically refers to some kind of leisure activity that provides a break from daily routine.

Literally, the word *recreation* consists of the prefix *re-* (meaning “again”) attached to the word *creation*. So *recreation* describes being created anew. This is the thought expressed in the title “Creator and Re-creator” above. Not only does God create (as in [Genesis 1](#) and [2](#)), he also re-creates, thereby providing the opportunity for each person to become a new creation in Jesus ([2 Corinthians 5:17](#)). That promise is part of the title of the lessons for this quarter of studies: “Toward a New Creation.”

Someone has observed that the grand theme or big picture of the Bible can be stated as follows: God is out to get back what is rightfully his. His original creation was ruined by sin, but God declared his intention to reverse the curse of sin by means of the seed of the woman ([Genesis 3:15](#)). This is the first promise in the Old Testament regarding Jesus, and it highlights the purpose of his coming: to crush the head of the serpent—Satan ([Romans 16:20](#); [Revelation 12:9](#)).

B. Lesson Background

As the history of God’s people unfolded, he raised up prophets. Their messages included not only challenges to the people of their day but also glimpses into the future time of the Messiah, what we might call “the era of re-creation.”

One such prophet was Zephaniah, whose writings are part of the Old Testament grouping of 12 books known as the Minor Prophets. We keep in mind that these are called “minor” not because they are of lesser significance, but because they are not as lengthy as the books grouped under the heading of Major Prophets. (The book of Lamentations is an exception; it is shorter than three books in the Minor Prophets, but it is included in the Major Prophets grouping because Jeremiah is thought to be the author.) Like the other Old Testament prophets, Zephaniah was guided by the Spirit of God as he spoke ([2 Peter 1:21](#)).

[Zephaniah 1:1](#) establishes this prophet to have been the great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah, who reigned about 727-698 BC. Zephaniah carried out his ministry during the seventh century BC. A contemporary of prophets Nahum and Jeremiah, he delivered the Lord’s message to the southern kingdom of Judah during the reign of King Josiah, who ruled from 640 to 609 BC.

To put all this in the larger context of history, Josiah’s reign began about 300 years after the nation of Israel split into northern and southern kingdoms and almost 40 years before the Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar began a series of incursions into Judah that climaxed in the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC.

Josiah was one of Judah’s best kings, spiritually speaking. His efforts to restore the nation to a position of favor with God were sparked by the

discovery of “the Book of the Law” while the temple was being renovated ([2 Kings 22:3-10](#)). Perhaps we can think of Zephaniah’s efforts as working in tandem with those of the godly king. Their attempts to turn the nation back to God became the last ray of hope before Judah plunged into a spiritual free fall. The result of that continued decline was divine judgment.

HOW TO SAY IT

Ahab *Ay-hab*.
 Ammonites *Am-un-ites*.
 Baal *Bay-ul*.
 Babylonian *Bab-ih-low-nee-un*.
 Hezekiah *Hez-ih-kye-uh*.
 Jezebel *Jez-uh-bel*.
 Josiah *Jo-sigh-uh*.
 Judah *Joo-duh*.
 Malachi *Mal-uh-kye*.
 Molek *Mo-lek*.
 Nahum *Nay-hum*.
 Nebuchadnezzar *Neb-yuh-kud-nez-cr*.
 Obadiah *O-buh-dye-uh*.
 Zephaniah *Zef-uh-nye-uh*.

I. God’s Intentions

([ZEPHANIAH 1:4-6](#))

The book of Zephaniah begins with a broad-brush warning of judgment: “I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth,” declares the Lord” ([Zephaniah 1:2](#)). This perspective, shared by other Old Testament prophets, looks beyond the prophet’s own time to the distant future. But Zephaniah also addresses the spiritual crisis of his day: the sad state of Judah and its capital, Jerusalem.

A. Against the Idolaters ([vv. 4, 5](#))

4a. “I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem.”

At times, God’s intention to *stretch out* his hand and/or arm is to demonstrate his power to bless his people (examples: [Exodus 6:6](#); [Deuteronomy 4:34](#); [5:15](#)) or to strike their enemies (examples: [Exodus 3:20](#); [7:5](#)). Here, however, the Lord intends not to work for his people but against them. Indeed, they have become his enemies because of their sinful conduct.

4b. “I will destroy every remnant of Baal worship in this place, the very names of the idolatrous priests—

The message of judgment is further emphasized by the word *destroy*; the underlying Hebrew is also translated “cut off” in the Old Testament to express divine judgment (examples: [Genesis 17:14](#); [Leviticus 7:20, 21](#); [22:3](#)). It is unclear in some cases whether the term predicts death or simply some kind of excommunication.

Those to be destroyed are specified. *Every remnant of Baal worship* refers to those who continue to pay homage to that pagan deity. Baal is believed to be the god who controls issues related to fertility—the giving of life and productivity to humans, animals, and crops. To worship him is totally incompatible with the recognition of the Lord as the one who creates and sustains all.

Baal worship has been a problem among God’s people going back to the time of the judges, more than seven centuries previous ([Judges 2:10-13](#)). Following the division of the nation of Israel in 930 BC, such worship was promoted in the northern kingdom through the efforts of King Ahab and his wife, Jezebel ([1 Kings 16:29-33](#)). The Lord raised up the prophets Elijah and Elisha some 200 years before Zephaniah’s time to thwart this influence. Apparently, Judah has failed to learn a lesson from the judgment that God brought upon the northern kingdom in 722 BC because of its idolatrous behavior ([2 Kings 17:7-20](#)).

The Hebrew root behind the phrase *the idolatrous priests* suggests prostrating oneself in an act of worship and reverence. The word used by Zephaniah is quite rare in the Old Testament. One other occurrence is [2 Kings 23:5](#), where godly King Josiah is said to have removed from office “the idolatrous priests” who were sacrificing to Baal.

To destroy or cut off *the very names* of these priests is an especially humiliating act. To cause someone to be nameless in ancient times is to bring great shame upon that individual.

What Do You Think?

How do we overcome the various false gods that threaten our relationship with the true God?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding the god of “me first”
- Regarding the god of success and achievement
- Regarding the god of pleasure-seeking
- Other

**5a. “those who bow down on the roofs
to worship the starry host,**

Those who *worship the starry host*, which refers to the heavenly array ([Deuteronomy 4:19; 17:3; 2 Kings 23:5](#)), will also be destroyed in judgment. In his description of those who have turned from God to embrace sinful practices, Paul mentions people who “worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator” ([Romans 1:25](#) [see [lesson 4](#)]; compare [2 Kings 17:16; 21:4, 5](#)). That certainly applies to those indicted by Zephaniah!

That the worshippers engage in this activity *on the roofs* reflects how deeply this practice has permeated the people’s conduct. It is not enough for them to worship at a pagan shrine or altar ([2 Kings 21:5](#)); they go so far as to do homage at their own homes, where their children, sadly, will be further influenced by their parents’ bad example (compare [Jeremiah 19:13](#)).

**5b. “those who bow down and swear by the LORD
and who also swear by Molek,**

Molek is the false god described in [1 Kings 11:5](#) as “the detestable god of the Ammonites” (compare [1 Kings 11:33; 2 Kings 23:13](#)). Zephaniah declares the Lord’s judgment upon those who desire to worship both the Lord and this fictitious deity. Such people want “the best of both worlds” and do not give their total allegiance to the Lord. This violates the First Commandment ([Exodus 20:3](#)).

God requires complete devotion simply because he is the only God there really is. He does not want us to live our lives worshipping a fraud, which is what Molek and all other so-called gods are.

What Do You Think?

- What are some ways to resist temptations to compromise our sole allegiance to the Lord?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Before temptation occurs
- While in the midst of being tempted

B. Against the Indifferent (v. 6)

**6. “those who turn back from following the LORD
and neither seek the LORD nor inquire of him.”**

While the previous verse describes those who blend their devotion to the Lord with pagan practices, this verse pictures a group that seems to have lost all interest in serving the Lord. The description *those who turn back from following the Lord* seems to imply a former commitment to him. For whatever reason, that passion is gone. Any interest in pursuing spiritual matters in truth is nonexistent. One may think of Jesus’ parable of the sower and the seed, where some of the seed failed to mature fully due either to persecution or worldly influences ([Matthew 13:20-22](#)). Those are conditions that have always posed a threat to genuine discipleship.

FROM UTOPIA TO DYSTOPIA AND BACK

Humans enjoyed a utopian existence in the Garden of Eden. Then sin entered the picture, and utopia was no more. History ever since has witnessed humanity’s attempts to find (or recreate) utopia.

The result of every such attempt has been mere failure at best and increasing dystopia at worst. Dystopia—an environment where people are unhappy and afraid—serves as fodder for literature and movies. The popularity of fictional superheroes who fight society’s evils speaks to people’s hunger for a better world. In September 2014, TV offered the “reality” show *Utopia*, where 15 people went to an isolated location to create a perfect society.

The prophet Zephaniah tells us that God, the ultimate hero, is the only one who can and will bring back utopia ([Revelation 22:1-5](#)). But as he looks down on the dystopia that sinful, idolatrous humans create, he knows he has to take corrective action first. What is God calling you to do as he brings his plans to fruition?—C. R. B.

What Do You Think?

- What techniques, resources, etc., do you use to maintain your spiritual passion so that you continue to seek the Lord?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- When alone
- In the context of the gathered church

In the home
At work or school
Other

II. Great Day's Anguish

(ZEPHANIAH 1:14-16)

Verses 7-13, not in today's text, introduce the "day of the Lord" concept in this book. Such a day is emphasized by several Old Testament prophets. [Isaiah 13:6](#); [Joel 2:1, 31](#); [Amos 5:18-20](#); [Obadiah 15](#); and [Malachi 4:5](#) provide just a few examples.

Some believe that the idea of such a day has its roots in ancient near-eastern terminology. Kings would boast of having won a battle or conquered a city or nation in a single day. In the passages noted above (as in Zephaniah), the day is associated with the Lord's judgment.

A. Coming Soon (v. 14)

**14. The great day of the LORD is near—
near and coming quickly.
The cry on the day of the LORD is bitter;
the Mighty Warrior shouts his battle cry.**

Many of God's covenant people assume that *the great day of the Lord* will be a day in which his judgment is to be poured out on other nations. God's people anticipate that they will triumph over their enemies and bring them into complete submission at that time.

Those who hold this view seldom pause to consider whether they themselves are in fact the ones who are the enemies of the Lord! They become his enemies because of inconsistency between what they claim to believe and how they actually live. The prophet Amos declared, "Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord!" and noted that that day will be one of darkness, not light, for God's people. This will be so because of their insincere worship and their failure to live the righteous lives expected of the covenant people ([Amos 5:18-24](#)).

Thus *the cry* to be heard on that great day will not be one of delight and gladness. The translation *the Mighty Warrior shouts his battle cry*, referring to God, is a change from "the shouting of the warrior there" in the 1984 edition of the NIV, based on the latest scholarly research.

B. Coming with Sorrow (vv. 15, 16)

**15. That day will be a day of wrath—
a day of distress and anguish,
a day of trouble and ruin,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and blackness—**

Zephaniah uses repetition to hammer home the tragic nature of the coming day of the Lord. It certainly will not be the day of joy and deliverance that many anticipate! First and foremost, it *will be a day of wrath*—the righteous anger of the Lord against his sinful people. We are reminded of the description in Revelation of those who will cry in vain to the mountains and rocks for shelter: "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?" ([Revelation 6:16, 17](#)).

What Do You Think?

How can we help our church family focus more on the coming day of the Lord? Why is it important to do so?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

When gathered for Bible study
When gathered for worship
Other

**16. a day of trumpet and battle cry
against the fortified cities
and against the corner towers.**

The ominous description continues. In a time before electronic communication, trumpets are used to sound alarms so people can prepare to defend themselves against an invader. But such will prove futile in this case. Even those in *the fortified cities*—where one expects to be most prepared to withstand an assault—will find themselves powerless to resist the attacker. For in truth they will not be fighting against a human enemy; they will be fighting against the Lord himself, who is carrying out his sentence of judgment. Doom is certain.

Corner towers are the key defensive positions along city walls. Inhabitants of the city of Jerusalem, which has such defenses ([2 Chronicles 26:9, 15](#)), will find them to be worthless since the Lord's holy purpose is being carried out (compare [Zephaniah 3:6-8](#)).

III. People's Attitude

(ZEPHANIAH 2:3)

Zephaniah 1:17, 18 (not in today's text) describes further the dire consequences of pending judgment. But chapter 2 opens with a glimmer of hope.

A. Call to Repent (v. 3a)

**3a. Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land,
you who do what he commands.
Seek righteousness, seek humility;**

Zephaniah offers an invitation to the people to change course—simply put, to repent. He uses the word *seek* three times, again employing repetition to highlight his appeal. Other prophets use this same terminology to challenge God's people to take the steps necessary to escape the kind of doom pictured by Zephaniah (compare [Jeremiah 29:13](#); [Amos 5:4, 14](#)).

The quality of being *humble* or having *humility* is highlighted twice in the half verse before us. A humble heart recognizes its utter dependence on the Lord for help and salvation. It desires to follow his standards of righteousness—to seek him on his terms and his terms alone.

What Do You Think?

What are some ways to seek righteousness in a secularized culture?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Without compromising biblical standards
- Without appearing as “holier than thou”
- While demonstrating the love of Christ
- Other

B. Consequences of Humility (v. 3b)

**3b. perhaps you will be sheltered
on the day of the LORD's anger.**

Escaping the terror associated with *the day of the Lord's anger* can happen only if the people humble themselves before the Lord and flee to him for shelter. Zephaniah himself does not know when the day of the Lord's anger will occur; all he can do is warn his people to prepare themselves for it.

The same principle applies to the Christian's preparation for the coming “day of the Lord,” when Jesus returns. That day will come like a thief ([Matthew 24:42-44](#); [2 Peter 3:10](#)). We must live daily in a spirit of preparation, knowing that as each day passes we draw ever closer to “the day.” The people of Zephaniah's time cannot escape God's wrath by fleeing *from* him, but by fleeing *to* him. The same is true for us.

AVOIDING DIVINE CORRECTION

Adam and Eve set the tone for us all when they decided they knew better than God. Many millennia later, humanity still has not discovered the virtue of humility in this regard.

The Great Recession of 2007-2011 should remind us of the danger of hubris. The economy we enjoyed prior to that downturn had generated a prideful belief that humanity was too smart and sophisticated to suffer ever again an economic situation like the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Zephaniah's admonition runs contrary to our nature: he tells us the cure for our situation is to seek righteousness and humility. The source of any “good life” we have is the Lord. To congratulate ourselves vainly on what we have accomplished is to risk a divine correction like that experienced by King Nebuchadnezzar, either individually or as a nation. See [Daniel 4:28-37](#).—C. R. B.

Conclusion

A. Ready or Not, Here It Comes

During my time in Bible college a little over 40 years ago, I was preaching in a church in rural Kentucky. One of the songs that the congregation would often sing during Sunday morning worship included the following words, penned by Will L. Thompson (1847-1909):

*There's a great day coming, a great day coming;
There's a great day coming by and by,
When the saints and the sinners shall be parted right and left,
Are you ready for that day to come?*

The refrain repeats the question of that last line:

Are you ready? Are you ready? Are you ready for the judgment day? Are you ready? Are you ready? For the judgment day?

We do not know whether the prophet Zephaniah was a singer. (He does describe the Lord as “singing” in [Zephaniah 3:17](#).) But he clearly warned God's people that there's a great day coming ([1:14](#)). The New Testament echoes that thought as it foresees the day of Jesus' return.

This is a crucial question: Who shall be able to stand on the great day of the Lord? The answer: those who treat each day as the day of the Lord

in order to be ready when that day actually arrives. This means seeing each day as a gift from God and as a day to trust that Jesus will keep his promise to return, in spite of scoffers ([2 Peter 3:3, 4](#)).



Visual for Lessons 1 & 2. Point to this visual as you pose the discussion question that is associated with [verse 15](#).

[Psalm 90:12](#) provides an appropriate prayer for each day: “Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” Many are familiar with the words of [Psalm 118:24](#): “Let us rejoice today and be glad.” We often refer to Sunday as “the Lord’s Day,” but in truth each day is his—a gift to be used in his service to his glory. Thus if we are living each day as faithful servants of the Lord, then the great day coming will be a day of joy. If we are like the people described in [Zephaniah 1:6](#), who “neither seek the Lord nor inquire of him,” then we will be among those who cry bitterly.

Most in that congregation in Kentucky where I preached years ago have gone on to be with the Lord. But the question they sang cannot be silenced: Are you ready for the judgment day?

B. Prayer

Father, help us live with an eternal perspective in mind, preparing ourselves for the place prepared by Jesus himself for his faithful servants of righteousness. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Be ready, always.

VISUALS FOR THESE LESSONS

The visual pictured in each lesson (see example above) is a small reproduction of a large, full-color poster included in the *Adult Resources* packet for the Fall Quarter. That packet also contains the very useful *Presentation Tools* CD for teacher use. Order No.

020049216 from your supplier.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Into the Lesson

Have the phrase *Recreation Time!* displayed as learners arrive. Ask, “How would you say this?” Your goal is to have someone say *RE-creation* (with a long *e* in the prefix) as a lead-in to discussing both the quarter’s theme and the lesson’s Introduction.

To set a context for today’s study, have a learner stand and read [2 Kings 22:1, 2, 8-11, 18-20](#); [23:2, 3, 19-21, 25, 26](#) regarding King Josiah and his reforms. Note that Zephaniah was undoubtedly aware of all this, since he prophesied in Josiah’s day (see the Lesson Background).

Alternative 1. Deliver the following dramatic monologue (or have a learner do so) in the role of King Josiah:

Though I was young when I became king, I had been taught well by my mother and others; I wanted to do what was right in God’s sight. After a copy of God’s law was found in the temple as it was being cleaned, I was stunned as it was read to me—stunned by the utter sinfulness of my people. God made it clear that our sinfulness would be punished. So I proclaimed in a public assembly that we would walk after the Lord, that we would keep His commandments. Elements of Baal worship were torn down; idolatrous priests were done away with. Wizards and false teachers? Destroyed! As I reinstated the Passover observance, my nation of Judah began to look new ... and right!

Alternative 2. Set the wider context of “the day of the Lord” concept by distributing copies of the “The Day of the Lord” exercise from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have learners complete as indicated, individually or in pairs.

Into the Word

Have [Zephaniah 1:4-6, 14-16](#); [2:3](#) read aloud. Then give each learner a face-down copy of the word-find puzzle below. Give these directions verbally, also including them printed at the top of the puzzle: “Find the 11 words listed, all being from [Zephaniah 1:4-6, 14-16](#). When you finish, the unused letters will form an important phrase when read left to right, top to bottom. When you discover the phrase, raise your hand.” Before saying *go*, announce that this is a contest to see who can finish first. (*Words to find: Baal, clouds, darkness, distress, great, host, Jerusalem, Judah, remnant, trumpet, wrath.*)

T M E L A S U R E J
R S H H E D G A Y D
E D O T F T R H E I
M U A A L O E R D S
N O T R H E A D A T
A L Y W K O T F T R
N C H T E N L L O E
T R S D Z X E A Z S
Q O H A D U J S A S
H T R U M P E T S B

Call time after three learners have raised their hands. The phrase to be found is *the day of the Lord*. After congratulating the winner, say, “What a sad and dreary list! Which word or words seem like they shouldn’t be on this list, and why?” Various responses are possible, one being “Jerusalem, because it was supposed to be the holy city.”

Option. Distribute copies of the “God’s Clear Intentions” exercise from the reproducible page. The second part of this activity can serve as a segue into the Into Life segment.

Into Life

Give each learner a 3" x 5" index card, a pen, and a pencil. Say, “Fold your card across the middle to end up with two panels of 3" x 2½" each. Then write the word *Righteousness* in ink on the inside of the left half, and one hindrance to righteousness in pencil on the inside of the right

half. Take this card and stand it on a desk or counter in such a way that you can see both words daily in the week ahead. Every time you glance at it, remind yourself that the hindrance can be erased!"