

The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 6: The Great Day of the Lord Is Near

Zephaniah 1:1-18

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson opens the book of Zephaniah and introduces ‘the day of the Lord,’ a major biblical theme that will run through the rest of the study, so getting the doctrine right here is essential. What is at stake is a sound understanding of the day of the Lord against the dispensational and premillennial misreadings common in our culture. Teach that the day of the Lord in the prophets was first a real historical reckoning (the Babylonian judgment on Judah) that also serves as a pattern and preview of God’s final judgment, fulfilled in Christ, in the gospel age, and at His second coming. It is emphatically not a prediction of a future earthly, political kingdom of national Israel or a thousand-year reign. The kingdom of God arrived with Christ and was established when His church began at Pentecost; Christ reigns now from the Father’s right hand. Keep this anchor in view, because the restoration language later in Zephaniah will tempt students toward a literalistic, nationalistic reading.

The lesson is also aiming powerfully at spiritual formation, and its target is complacency. Zephaniah’s generation was comfortable, drowsy, and practically unbelieving, saying in their hearts that God would do neither good nor evil. That is a startlingly accurate picture of much comfortable modern religion. The aim is to wake your students up: to expose divided loyalties, practical unbelief, and the assumption that there is always more time, and to call them to seek God wholeheartedly now. Let the nearness of the day function as Scripture intends, as both a warning and a mercy that grants time to repent.

Hold the tone between alarm and hope. The chapter is genuinely sobering and should not be softened into nothing, but it is not the whole book. Let students feel the seriousness of complacency while knowing that Zephaniah will end in song. The goal is awakened, wholehearted, joyful readiness, not anxious dread.

Question 1

Student Question:

Zephaniah announces, “The great day of the Lord is near, it is near, and hasteth greatly” (Zephaniah 1:14). What is “the day of the Lord” in Scripture, and how does this theme run from the prophets through to the final judgment, fulfilled in Christ and His coming rather than in an earthly political kingdom?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the central theme introduced here: ‘the great day of the Lord is near’ (verse 14), with the whole chapter describing it as a day of wrath, trouble, darkness, and trumpet (verses 15-16). The day of the Lord is a major biblical motif, and this is the place to teach it carefully.

Define it accurately. In the prophets, ‘the day of the Lord’ is any decisive time when God acts to judge sin and vindicate righteousness. For Zephaniah’s hearers, it referred first to the coming Babylonian judgment, a real historical event. But the prophets also use the phrase to point beyond any single event to God’s ultimate reckoning. There is a pattern: local days of the Lord foreshadow the final day of the Lord.

Now set the doctrinal guardrails clearly, consistent with sound teaching. The fulfillment of this theme is in Christ, the gospel age, and His second coming, not in a future earthly, political kingdom of national Israel. The New Testament takes up ‘the day of the Lord’ and applies it to the return of Christ and final judgment (2 Peter 3:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:2). The kingdom Christ established is His church, and He reigns now. Do not let students slide toward dispensational or premillennial schemes that postpone God’s kingdom to a future political restoration.

Apply it to the present. Because a day of reckoning is certain, the way we live now matters supremely. The doctrine is not meant to fuel speculation but readiness.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The day of the Lord as God’s decisive action to judge sin and vindicate righteousness.
- Local days of the Lord foreshadowing the final day.
- Fulfillment in Christ, the gospel age, and His second coming (2 Peter 3:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:2).
- A clear rejection of dispensational and premillennial readings; Christ reigns now and His kingdom is His church.
- The doctrine aimed at readiness, not speculation.

Discussion Prompts

- What does ‘the day of the Lord’ mean across the Scriptures?
- Why is it important to read this as fulfilled in Christ rather than a future political kingdom?
- How should the certainty of a coming reckoning shape how you live now?

Question 2

Student Question:

God condemns those who are “settled on their lees,” who say, “The Lord will not do good, neither will he do evil” (Zephaniah 1:12). Where have you been tempted to live as though God is not really watching or involved, and how does that practical unbelief shape the way you live?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question draws on verse 12: God will punish 'the men that are settled on their lees: that say in their heart, The Lord will not do good, neither will he do evil.' The image is of wine left undisturbed so long that it thickens on its sediment, a picture of spiritual stagnation and complacency.

Identify the heart of their sin: practical unbelief. They did not necessarily deny God's existence; they denied His involvement. They lived as if God neither blesses nor judges, as if their choices made no real difference to Him. This is functional atheism wearing a religious mask.

Help students see how common this is among comfortable believers. We may affirm orthodox doctrine on Sunday and live Monday through Saturday as though God were distant and uninvolved, making decisions without reference to Him, sinning as though unseen, never expecting His intervention.

Move toward awakening. The cure is to live consciously before the God who is present and active. Invite each person to name one area where they have been living as though God is not watching or involved, and one way to bring that area back under His real presence this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Complacency as spiritual stagnation, 'settled on the lees.'
- Practical unbelief: denying God's involvement while affirming His existence.
- Functional atheism among comfortable, doctrinally orthodox believers.
- Living consciously before the present, active God.

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you live as though God is not really watching or involved?
- How does practical unbelief differ from outright denial of God?
- What would change if you lived each hour consciously before God?

Question 3

Student Question:

God specifically condemns those who swear "by the Lord, and that swear by Malcham" (Zephaniah 1:5), worshiping Him while also clinging to false gods. What does this divided worship reveal about the human heart, and why will God not accept worship that is shared with idols (Matthew 6:24)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 5 exposes divided worship: those 'that worship the host of heaven upon the housetops; and them that worship and that swear by the Lord, and that swear by Malcham.' They worshiped the Lord and false gods at the same time, hedging their bets, keeping a foot in both camps.

Teach what this reveals about the human heart: our deep tendency toward divided loyalty. We want God plus an insurance policy, the Lord plus the idol, heaven's blessing without heaven's exclusive claim. The first commandment confronts exactly this.

Show why God will not accept shared worship. He is not one option among many; He is the Lord, and to give Him partial allegiance is to deny who He is. Jesus stated the principle plainly: no one can serve two masters (Matthew 6:24). Divided worship is, at root, no worship at all.

Apply it to modern syncretism. We rarely swear by Malcham, but we readily mix devotion to God with devotion to money, comfort, career, or self. Invite students to name where they are trying to serve God and a rival, and to ask God for an undivided heart (Psalm 86:11).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Divided worship and the heart's tendency to hedge its bets.
- God's exclusive claim: He will not be one option among many.
- The impossibility of serving two masters (Matthew 6:24).
- Modern syncretism: mixing devotion to God with money, comfort, or self.
- Praying for an undivided heart (Psalm 86:11).

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you tempted to worship God and also hold onto a rival loyalty?
- Why can God not accept worship that is shared with idols?
- What would an undivided heart look like for you?

Question 4

Student Question:

Zephaniah exposes half-hearted faith, those "that are turned back from the Lord; and those that have not sought the Lord, nor enquired for him" (Zephaniah 1:6). Where in your life have you stopped actively seeking God, settling into spiritual coasting, and what would it look like to earnestly seek Him again?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question draws on verse 6: God will judge 'them that are turned back from the Lord; and those that have not sought the Lord, nor enquired for him.' Note that the sin here is not dramatic rebellion but drift, turning back, and the simple failure to seek God.

Help students see that spiritual decline is usually quiet. Few believers consciously decide to abandon God; they simply stop seeking Him, let prayer lapse, let the Word gather dust, coast on past devotion. The failure 'to enquire' of God is a sin of omission that hollows out a life over time.

Distinguish coasting from seeking. A living relationship with God requires active pursuit, regular prayer, attentive reading, genuine seeking of His will. When that pursuit stops, the relationship does not stay static; it slowly cools.

Move toward renewal. The remedy is to seek God again, deliberately and earnestly (the next lesson's 'seek the Lord' anticipates this). Invite each person to identify where they have been coasting and one concrete practice of seeking God they will resume this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Spiritual decline as quiet drift, not dramatic rebellion.
- The sin of failing to seek and enquire of God.
- A living relationship with God requires active pursuit.
- Renewal through deliberately seeking God again.

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you been coasting rather than actively seeking God?
- How does a relationship with God cool when we stop pursuing Him?
- What practice of seeking God will you resume this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

On the day of the Lord, "neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them" (Zephaniah 1:18). What does this teach about the limits of wealth and worldly security, and where are you tempted to trust in resources that cannot save you when it matters most?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 18 declares the limits of wealth: 'Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the Lord's wrath.' The very things people trust for security prove worthless when God acts in judgment.

Teach the limited reach of worldly resources. Money can buy much, but it cannot buy what matters most: it cannot deliver from death, judgment, or the wrath of God. The rich fool learned that his barns could not secure his soul (Luke 12:16-21).

This is a self-examining question, so press the point of misplaced trust. We are tempted to believe that enough money, insurance, or planning can keep us ultimately safe. These are not evil, but they are powerless at the deepest level. To trust them ultimately is to trust what cannot save.

Redirect trust to the only deliverer. What silver cannot do, the blood of Christ has done, redeeming us not with corruptible things like silver and gold but with His own precious blood (1

Peter 1:18-19). Invite students to name where they have leaned on resources that cannot save and to re-anchor their security in Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The limits of wealth: it cannot deliver in the day of judgment.
- The rich fool whose barns could not secure his soul (Luke 12:16-21).
- Misplaced trust in money, insurance, and planning.
- Redemption not by silver and gold but by the blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:18-19).

Discussion Prompts

- What worldly security are you tempted to trust to keep you ultimately safe?
- Why can wealth not deliver when it matters most?
- How does Christ's redemption re-anchor your security?

Question 6

Student Question:

Zephaniah pictures God searching Jerusalem "with candles," so that nothing hidden escapes His notice (Zephaniah 1:12). How does it affect you to know that God sees even the hidden corners of your heart and life, and what is there that you have been keeping in the dark that He is inviting you to bring into the light?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 12 gives a searching image: 'I will search Jerusalem with candles.' God will go through the city with a lamp, leaving no dark corner unexamined. Nothing hidden escapes His notice.

Teach the doctrine of God's complete knowledge. God sees not only public actions but hidden hearts, secret sins, private complacency. 'All things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do' (Hebrews 4:13). There is no corner of our lives outside His searching light.

This is a self-examining question, so make it personal but pastoral. The thought of God seeing everything can terrify or comfort depending on our posture. To the one hiding sin, it is a summons to bring it into the light; to the one walking honestly, it is the comfort of being fully known and still loved.

Move toward confession. The healthiest response to God's searching light is not to hide but to invite it: 'Search me, O God, and know my heart' (Psalm 139:23-24). Invite each person to name one thing they have kept in the dark and to bring it into God's light through honest confession and, where needed, the help of a trusted brother or sister.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's complete knowledge, searching every hidden corner (Hebrews 4:13).
- Nothing in our hearts or lives is hidden from God.
- God's searching light as terror to the hiding and comfort to the honest.
- Inviting God's search and confessing what is hidden (Psalm 139:23-24).

Discussion Prompts

- How does it affect you to know God sees even the hidden corners of your life?
- What have you been keeping in the dark that God is inviting into the light?
- Can you pray, 'Search me, O God,' and mean it?

Question 7

Student Question:

The judgment falls on those who are complacent and on the idolaters, but the call running underneath is to repentance before the day comes. How does the nearness of the day of the Lord function as both a warning and a mercy, giving us time to turn before judgment arrives (2 Peter 3:9-10)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Underneath all the warning of this chapter runs an implicit mercy: the day is announced as 'near' but not yet here. The warning itself is an act of grace, giving the complacent time to repent before judgment falls. A God who wished only to destroy would not send a prophet first.

Teach the relationship between God's warnings and His mercy. Every prophetic announcement of judgment is also an invitation to repent. The nearness of the day is meant to provoke not despair but turning. As Peter says, God is longsuffering, 'not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance' (2 Peter 3:9).

Help students hold warning and mercy together. The warning is serious (the day is near and hastening); the mercy is real (it has not yet come). To take the warning seriously without the mercy leads to terror; to take the mercy without the warning leads to presumption. Both together lead to repentance.

Apply it to the present window of grace. The same dynamic holds for us: the final day is certain but not yet, and the delay is mercy granting time to turn. Invite students to receive the warning as kindness and to respond while the window is open.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Warning of judgment as itself an act of mercy.
- God's patience giving time to repent (2 Peter 3:9).
- Holding warning and mercy together to produce repentance rather than terror or presumption.

- The present delay as a window of grace.

Discussion Prompts

- How is the warning of judgment actually a mercy?
- What happens when we take the warning without the mercy, or the mercy without the warning?
- How will you respond to God's warning while the window of grace is open?

Question 8

Student Question:

Zephaniah's generation assumed there was plenty of time and that God would not act. Where are you assuming you have more time, putting off some obedience or repentance you know God is calling you to, and what would it mean to respond today rather than later?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question targets the deadly assumption of Zephaniah's generation: that there was plenty of time and that God would not really act. Complacency always assumes a tomorrow that may not come.

Help students name where they are presuming on time. We tell ourselves we will deal with that sin later, start that obedience eventually, repair that relationship someday, get serious about God when life settles down. Zephaniah's alarm is precisely against this 'later.'

Teach the biblical urgency of 'today.' Scripture repeatedly presses the present moment: 'To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts' (Hebrews 3:15); 'now is the accepted time' (2 Corinthians 6:2). We are never promised tomorrow.

Move toward immediate response. Ask each person to identify one obedience or repentance they have been postponing and to take a concrete step today rather than later. The whole point of the alarm is to move us from 'someday' to 'now.'

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Complacency's assumption of unlimited time.
- The areas where we say 'later' to God's call.
- The biblical urgency of 'today' (Hebrews 3:15; 2 Corinthians 6:2).
- Moving from 'someday' to 'now' in obedience and repentance.

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you assuming you have more time than you may have?
- What obedience or repentance have you been postponing?

- What step can you take today rather than later?

Question 9

Student Question:

The “day of the Lord” in the prophets points forward to the final day of judgment when Christ returns. How should the certainty of that coming day shape the way a Christian lives now, and how does the New Testament guard us against both careless complacency and fearful obsession with end-times speculation (1 Thessalonians 5:1-11)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal question of the lesson, drawing the day of the Lord forward to its fulfillment in Christ’s return and pressing how that certainty should shape Christian living. Reaffirm the doctrinal anchor and then apply it.

Establish the fulfillment clearly. The New Testament takes the prophets’ ‘day of the Lord’ and applies it directly to the return of Christ and the final judgment (2 Peter 3:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10). This is the climactic day of the Lord toward which all the smaller ones pointed. Consistent with sound teaching, this is not a future earthly millennial kingdom; Christ reigns now, and He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Teach the two errors the New Testament guards against. On one side is careless complacency, exactly Zephaniah’s problem, living as though no reckoning is coming. On the other side is fearful, speculative obsession with end-times timetables, against which Paul writes that the day will come ‘as a thief in the night,’ so we cannot calculate it and should not try (1 Thessalonians 5:1-3). The faithful path is between the two.

Show the proper response from 1 Thessalonians 5:4-11: because we are children of the day, we are to be awake, sober, clothed in faith, love, and hope, and to encourage one another. The certainty of Christ’s coming produces not anxiety but watchful, loving, hopeful living. We live ready, doing our Master’s work, so that whenever He comes we are found faithful (Luke 12:35-40).

Bring it home pastorally. The day of the Lord is terror to the complacent and unprepared, but for those in Christ it is the day of final salvation and vindication. The same coming we are warned to be ready for is the coming we are taught to love and await with hope.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The day of the Lord fulfilled in Christ’s return and final judgment (2 Peter 3:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10).
- A clear rejection of a future earthly millennial kingdom; Christ reigns now and will come to judge.

- Guarding against careless complacency on one side and end-times speculation on the other (1 Thessalonians 5:1-3).
- The proper response: awake, sober, faithful, hopeful, encouraging one another (1 Thessalonians 5:4-11).
- Living ready, found faithful at His coming (Luke 12:35-40).
- The coming day as terror to the unprepared but salvation to those in Christ.

Discussion Prompts

- How should the certainty of Christ's return shape your daily life?
- How do we avoid both complacency and unhealthy end-times obsession?
- Is the coming day, for you, more a source of dread or of hope, and why?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over this sobering chapter and its alarm against complacency. Name one specific way the Lord is calling you, through this passage, to wake up, seek Him wholeheartedly, and live each day ready to meet Him, becoming more like Christ, who lived every moment fully awake to the Father.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question asks students to look back over the chapter's alarm against complacency and respond personally. The aim is awakened, wholehearted readiness, not lingering dread.

Help students translate the warning into self-knowledge and action. The most Christlike response to Zephaniah 1 is not anxiety but awakening: to seek God wholeheartedly, to surrender divided loyalties, to stop presuming on time, and to live each day consciously before the God who sees and is coming.

Point them to Christ as the one who lived perfectly awake. Jesus lived every moment fully alert to the Father, never complacent, never divided, always about the Father's business. To become like Christ is to live with that same wakeful, undivided, ready devotion. And it is Christ who makes us ready, cleansing us and clothing us so that we need not fear the day.

Invite a concrete response: one complacency to abandon, one divided loyalty to surrender, one postponed obedience to take up today, one practice of seeking God to begin. Encourage each person to name it and act on it this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Awakened, wholehearted readiness as the Christlike response, not dread.
- Surrendering divided loyalties and presumption on time.
- Christ as the one who lived perfectly awake to the Father.

- Becoming like Christ: wakeful, undivided, ready devotion.

Discussion Prompts

- What is the single most important way this chapter is calling you to wake up?
- What divided loyalty or postponed obedience will you address this week?
- How does Christ both model readiness and make you ready for the day?