

The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah

Lesson 6: The Great Day of the Lord Is Near -- Zephaniah 1:1-18

Some words are meant to wake us up. Zephaniah's are like a fire alarm in the middle of the night. He prophesied in the days of King Josiah, when Judah had drifted far from God, mixing the worship of the Lord with the worship of Baal and the starry host, bowing in the same breath to the Lord and to false gods. The nation had grown comfortable, settled like wine on its dregs, telling itself in its heart, 'The Lord will not do good, neither will he do evil.' In other words, God does not really get involved; He will not bless and He will not judge. Into that spiritual sleep, Zephaniah shouts a single, jarring announcement: the great day of the Lord is near.

The chapter opens with sweeping, almost overwhelming language of judgment. God declares He will consume all things from the face of the land, and then He turns specifically to Judah and Jerusalem. He will punish the idolaters, the half-hearted who swear by the Lord and by the false god Malcham, and those who have turned back from following Him. He will punish the complacent who say in their hearts that God does nothing. The point is not that God delights in destruction, but that He will not let His people sleep their way into ruin while pretending nothing is at stake.

Then comes the refrain that will echo through the rest of the book: 'the great day of the Lord is near, it is near, and hasteth greatly.' Zephaniah describes it as a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of trumpet and alarm. It is a day when neither silver nor gold can deliver, because the whole land will be consumed by the fire of God's jealousy. The 'day of the Lord' becomes one of the great themes of Scripture, a day of reckoning when God acts decisively to judge sin and vindicate righteousness.

We must read this rightly, and we will trace it carefully through the rest of Zephaniah. The day of the Lord that fell on Judah was a real, historical reckoning, and it also becomes a pattern and a preview of God's final judgment, fulfilled in Christ, in the gospel age, and at His return, not in some future earthly political kingdom. But before we get to the comfort and the restoration that close this book, we have to hear the alarm. Zephaniah is written for the comfortable believer who has quietly stopped expecting God to act. It asks each of us a piercing question: if the day of the Lord is near, am I ready, and am I awake?

Group Discussion: Read together Zephaniah's description of those who are 'settled on their lees,' who say in their hearts that the Lord will do neither good nor evil. What does this kind of spiritual complacency look like in comfortable, modern believers, and why is it so dangerous?

Personal Reflection: Zephaniah confronts a people who had grown spiritually drowsy and half-hearted, worshiping God while also clinging to other loyalties. Where do you see complacency or divided loyalty creeping into your own walk with God, and what would it take to wake up and seek Him wholeheartedly?

Read Zephaniah 1:1-18

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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)?
4. 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?

5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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)?
8. 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?
9. 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)?

10. 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.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Amos 5:18–24, the day of the Lord as darkness for the complacent, with God desiring justice over empty worship; Matthew 6:24, the impossibility of serving two masters; 2 Peter 3:9–13, God's patience giving time to repent before the day of the Lord; 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11, living awake and sober as children of the day; Revelation 3:14–22, Christ's warning to the lukewarm, complacent church.

More studies available on ChurchOfChristBibleStudies.com