

# Fear God: The Day of the Lord is Near

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[ 0 : 00 ] The book of Zephaniah as a whole encourages us to rejoice with hope, but in this first chapter, we're invited to fear God because the day of the Lord is near. So, Zephaniah chapter 1.

The word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah, son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah, during the reign of Josiah, son of Ammon, king of Judah.

I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth, declares the Lord. I will sweep away both man and beast. I will sweep away the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea and the idols that cause the wicked to stumble. When I destroy all mankind on the face of the earth, declares the Lord, 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, 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 Molech, those who turn back from following the Lord and neither seek the Lord nor inquire of Him. Be silent before the Sovereign Lord, for the day of the Lord is near. The Lord has prepared a sacrifice. He has consecrated those He has invited. On the day of the Lord's sacrifice, I will punish the officials and the king's sons and all those clad in foreign clothes.

On that day, I will punish all who avoid stepping on the threshold, who fill the temple of their gods with violence and deceit. On that day, declares the Lord, a cry will go up from the fish gate, wailing from the new quarter, and a loud crash from the hills. Wail, you who live in the market district.

All you merchants will be wiped out. All who trade with silver will be destroyed. At that time, I will search Jerusalem with lamps and punish those who are complacent, who are like wine left on its dregs, who think the Lord will do nothing, either good or bad. Their wealth will be plundered, their houses demolished. Though they build houses, they will not live in them. Though they plant vineyards, they will not drink the wine. 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. 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, a day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the corner towers. I will bring such distress on all people that they will grope about like those who are blind, because they have sinned against the Lord. Their blood will be poured out like dust and their entrails like dung. Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the

[ 3 : 00 ] Lord's wrath. In the fire of his jealousy, the whole earth will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live on the earth. Amen. Zephaniah's message, live a certain way because of that certain day, because the day of the Lord is near. Maybe we understand that, live a certain way because of a certain day. Think about in the world of education. There are times to study and to write because that day is coming, the day of the test, the exam, the deadline. Perhaps if you work in the financial sector, there are times when you know it's coming towards the end of the tax year, there are accounts that need to be completed. We live a certain way because of a certain day that is coming. And just as we saw this morning, this is true for the Christian life also. This is the message that Zephaniah is led to bring.

Verse 7, be silent, hush, fear the Lord, honour the Lord, because the day of the Lord is near.

There is this future reality in view, the return of the Lord Jesus, to bring judgment and salvation, to bring punishment and purifying. And this God calls us to fear him, to respond and to be ready that that future reality would shape our present reality. Zephaniah brings that.

Let's do some introductions before we get going. Verse 1 gives us an introduction to the book. But to introduce the book itself, Zephaniah focuses very clearly on those themes of the judgment of God and the salvation of God for his remnant. The message is really clear. Seek the Lord to avoid punishment.

Wait for the Lord if you are to enjoy salvation. Zephaniah also presents us with who the Lord is, his character. So in verse 1, we recognise that it's the Lord's word that comes through Zephaniah. [ 5 : 24 ] So this word has authority. This prophecy comes from the Lord himself. And we're given pictures of God through even this first chapter. So in verse 7, he's the sovereign king, he's the Lord. In verse 14, he's pictured as the mighty warrior. In verse 18, he is a God who is jealous for his people's worship.

One reason the day of the Lord brings judgment is because people are not truly worshipping God. Zephaniah also introduces himself, doesn't he? We have some very brief descriptions of Zephaniah and his family. A couple of interesting facts to draw to your attention. First, that Zephaniah belongs to the royal family. See, he's a descendant of Hezekiah, great-great-grandson, or great-great-great. I'm useless at working that out. So he's from the royal family. And likely as well, he's a son of Cush. And he has a real interest in the region of Cush. This region of North Africa, Black Africa. So he is likely a biracial Jew. So he has this real interest in the region and what God is doing within the region. And he also stands for us as a reminder of God's design and desire to bring blessing to people from all nations. We're also introduced to the setting. Notice in verse 1, Zephaniah's prophetic ministry takes place during the reign of Josiah. So Josiah was one of the good kings. He was the great reforming king. He was the one who rediscovered Scripture after a hundred years or so where it had been lost from the life of the nation. He set about trying to purify worship throughout Judah, tearing down shrines to idols. And Zephaniah is part of Josiah's reforming work as he brings this message. And the fifth thing, by way of introduction, and we'll get into this much more as we keep going, is to introduce the idea of the day of the Lord. The day of the Lord, if you read the prophets, you read the minor prophets, major prophets, the day of the Lord is a significant reality that they bring over and over. And it's brought in two ways, and we're going to see both of them here in chapter 1. There is the ultimate day of the Lord, God's final and decisive coming to execute justice and bring salvation for His people. But there's another sense in which the day of the Lord is used, and that's foretastes within history. So whenever God sort of deals with His enemies and brings peace, there are times when that too is spoken of as a day of the Lord, and we're going to think about both of those. But those are some introductions. But our main point, it is really just one point that's repeated twice, fear God, or be silent before the Lord, because the day of the Lord is near. But let's see that in the first seven verses, or in verse 2 to 7, really. Let's ask some questions of the text to help us. First question from verses 2 and 3, what will the day of the Lord be like? Listen to some of the language again. I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth, declares the Lord. I will sweep away both man and beast, the birds in the sky, the fish in the sea. I'll destroy all mankind of the face of the earth.

I think Zephaniah is led to draw us back to the book of Genesis, and to remind us of what God did in the flood, the time of Noah. That sense of wiping the earth clean of wickedness, of God decisively acting against the wickedness seen in humanity. But there's another way in which we're drawn back to Genesis, because this sounds like creation in reverse, or it's like de-creation back to chaos. Because notice the way the days of creation are reversed. In the original creation, man is the climax, but here man comes first, then beast, then birds, then fish. And we're invited to understand that the cause for God's judgment is because of humanity. It's our sin that has brought chaos and destruction into God's world. In fact, there are idols mentioned here, drawing to our attention the fact that we alone are God's image bearers in this world that He created, but we alone are the one part of creation that chooses to turn our back on God and worship idols.

[ 10 : 27 ] We fail to do what we were made for. And so the day of the Lord is going to be like that flood of judgment and like a de-creation back to chaos. So then the next question that follows then is, well, why does the day of the Lord come? Look with me at verses four to six, where we see God deliberately turn attention to Judah and to Jerusalem. And that's significant, isn't it?

Because this represents God's people. This is God's place. This is where God's temple is. This is where God's dwelling place with man is. But what's happening now is that God's hand is stretched against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem. Go to the book of Exodus and we think time and time again of God's hand being stretched against Pharaoh as those plagues came as judgment. But now the hand of the Lord is against His own people because they've been polluting the temple, polluting the city with their idol worship. See the mention there of Baal worship in verse four. And so Zephaniah catalogues, makes absolutely clear, here's why the day of the Lord is going to come.

Verse four, I will destroy every remnant of Baal worship in this place, the very names of the idolatrous priests. And one of the things that becomes clear is that within God's temple, you've got priests who are going about their business, but alongside them, there are the priests of Baal who are engaging in false worship and pulling the people towards false worship. And the priests, well they're culpable. Just as Adam was told to guard and protect the garden, God's holy place, the priests were to protect and to guard God's holy temple, but they're failing to do so. And so idol worship is happening even in the temple. Carry on in verse five, there are those who bow down on the roofs to worship the starry host. There are star worshipers, those who are worshiping created things rather than their creator. There's divided loyalty in verse five, those who bow down and swear by the Lord and who also swear by Molech. I am the Lord and there is no other. These people are worshiping God with their lips, but their hearts are being drawn towards idols. And then there are those in verse six, who turn back from following the Lord and neither seek the Lord nor inquire of Him. They are living in God's world, in God's city, in God's presence as practical atheists. They're depending on themselves and not God. They're living by their own wisdom, not

God's wisdom. And so because of this rejection and turning away from God, this is why the day of the Lord is coming. Moment to pause. What are we to learn as we read about this Old Testament prophecy of judgment? Recognize, first of all, who is acting? Verse two to four, see the emphasis, here's the Lord speaking, I will sweep away, declares the Lord. I will sweep away. When I destroy all mankind, declares the Lord, I will stretch out my hand. It's the Lord who brings judgment. We're being reminded as we see that all through the Bible, God is holy and God takes sin seriously. God hates sin and so should we.

[14:17] Whether that looks like setting up idols in our hearts where we, like these priests, are breaking the first commandment. Whether it looks like living day to day, ignoring God and His ways. Whether it might even be coming to church but giving our heart to something else. God hates the sin that He sees.

God is holy and God is just. God must punish every failure to be faithful to His character. Just as we want justice and we believe in right and wrong because we're made in God's image, the righteous judge. Zephaniah presents us with a God who very much cares about judgment and justice. And Zephaniah is showing to us very clearly what every sin deserves. When it brings to mind that flood of God's holy anger that we see in Noah's day, we're invited to recognize that's what sin deserves. And it's no wonder then that we have verse 7, be silent before the sovereign Lord. Fear Him, revere Him, honor Him, and verse 7, trust the sacrifice He provides. Verse 7, the Lord has prepared a sacrifice. We'll come back to that. But we need to recognize that provision, even in the midst of judgment. There is that hope of grace if we're trusting in Jesus and His sacrifice to deal with our sins. Now let's look at that same point from a different angle. Fear God, the day of the Lord is near. Let's see it again in verse 8 to 18. This section gives us, as we said, both the day of the Lord as a moment in history, anticipation or a foreshadowing, and then a promise of that ultimate, final future judgment. So let's begin with that foretaste. Verse 7 to 13, it deals with this, predicting the punishment that Babylon would bring on Jerusalem in 586. God's people would be led into exile because of their sin and their lack of repentance. Again, let's ask some questions of our text. First of all, who will face this day of wrath? On the day of the Lord's sacrifice, verse 8, I will punish the officials and the king's sons and all those clad in foreign clothes. So the political leaders are going to face this judgment. And notice the emphasis on their clothing.

[17:02] They're wearing foreign clothes, perhaps suggesting that they're trusting in foreign powers and in foreign alliances rather than trusting in their God. Verse 9, on that day I will punish all who avoid stepping on the threshold, who fill the temple of their gods with violence and deceit. It seems kind of obscure, all those who avoid stepping on the threshold. But maybe you remember that wonderful scene as Samuel records it, when the ark of the Lord, God's ark, had been captured and brought into Dagon's temple. And the people that brought it to Dagon's temple thought, ah, our God Dagon, he's more powerful than the God of Israel. And two times what happened is that Dagon's statue fell to the ground. And the second time, his hands and his head were smashed and the head was smashed on the threshold. And so from that moment on, there was that superstition that appeared that they wouldn't then step on it, they would step over it. And what this is telling us is that within Israel, this superstitious false worship is now taking place where true worship should be happening. So the religious leaders are going to come under judgment. The verse, verses 10 and

11, also remind us of the business community.

Verse 11, wail you who live in the market district, all your merchants will be wiped out, presumably because of corruption, presumably because of greed. We're not told at this point.

And then we recognize that actually it's the whole city that comes into the spotlight. At that time, I will search Jerusalem with lamps and punish those who are complacent, who are like wine left on its dregs. There's a couple of pictures there, isn't there? There's the picture of a careful search. Here is a search party with their lamps, with their torches, making sure that everybody is found, searching down every back alley. But then this idea of the wine left on its dregs, you know, making sure that, you know that when you have a bottle, there's always that little few drops, a real struggle to get out. Those were the people that thought, oh, God will avoid us.

We'll miss the judgment. He's saying, no, every last drop is going to be poured out. Judgment will certainly come, and it will be appropriate. So again, the question is, why will they face this day of wrath? And three factors are brought to light. And we've already seen in verse 9, idolatry.

Jerusalem is now taking on false worship. Verse 9 also tells us about injustice. They're filling the temple of their gods with violence and deceit. So judgment is coming because they're failing to love and worship the one true God. Judgment is coming because they're failing to love their neighbor.

[ 19 : 56 ] And judgment comes, verse 12, on those who are complacent, who think the Lord will do nothing. Either good or bad. They've dismissed God. God is passive or God is powerless. God's like the blind watchmaker. He wound the world up and he set it off, but now he just sits back and he does nothing and he cares little. And because of that, there is this group of people who have no fear of God. They don't honor him. They don't worship him. They don't desire God or his blessing. Judgment will come.

That judgment will come when Babylon comes to take them into exile. Their wealth will be plundered.

Verse 13, their houses demolished. And we saw that in history. And then there's a shift, verses 14 to 18, to recognize that final judgment is coming. Notice the change in language. Verse 7, be silent before the sovereign Lord for the day of the Lord is near. Verse 14, the great day of the Lord is near, near and coming quickly. So this is moving us towards the end of history, the climactic judgment and salvation. Who will face this day? And to go to the end of our text, verse 17, I will bring such distress on all people. Second half of verse 18, in the fire of his jealousy, the whole earth will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live on the earth.

Here is a reminder that God is not just the creator and the judge of some, but the creator and the judge of all. It was not uncommon for the nations to have their regional gods and idols. And it was not uncommon then to fall into the trap that Israel's God was a small regional God. The God of the Bible is not regional. He is global and universal. And so this day of the Lord is one that everybody is going to be taken up with. And because of that, as Jesus told us this morning in Luke 12, all of us need to listen and all of us need to be ready. You know, sometimes we live in a house, we live in a flat, somebody has an exam, everybody knows the day is coming, but only one person suffers it. The great day of the Lord is not like that. It is comprehensive.

What will the great day of the Lord be like? There's a very important correction that Zephaniah brings for the people of his day. Because again, the Old Testament, people of God fall into complacency.

[ 22 : 51 ] Well, we've got God on our side, so we're safe. You know, God lives here in this temple, so we are secure. No matter how we're living, you know, so long as we go to the temple, you know, we make a show of worship, then we'll be fine. And so when they heard the message about the day of the Lord, they're like, this is wonderful. This is going to be good news.

My enemies are going to be destroyed, and I'm going to live in peace. And what happened so often in their history is that they failed to take their own sins seriously, and they failed to take God's holiness seriously, and they forgot that they live under the covenant, where yes, if you obey, you receive blessing, but when you disobey, you can expect the curse of God to fall. So they were complacent and imagined that God's coming would bring good news for everybody, regardless of how they were living. In our day, I suppose, people hear about the return of Jesus, or the idea of heaven. You know, people either, you know, reject the idea of the judgment of Jesus, or on the other hand, presume everybody will get there. If God is loved, then surely everybody goes to heaven. And so in our day, we can similarly become complacent and make mistakes. And so God, through Zephaniah, provides a wake-up call for His day and for our day as well, and for us

personally, there are three word pictures used to describe this day of the Lord. The first, I'm quite sure how to capture it, but it sounds a bit like a storm. Verse 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. Imagine a complacent people hearing this, all of a sudden they realize the day of the Lord for them will be judgment and not salvation.

They don't repent. It'll be darkness and not light. The terrifying reality of God's holy presence coming in judgment, of God's holy wrath against sin is one that they dare not take lightly. So there's the picture of the day of the Lord as a storm. There's the picture of the day of the Lord as a conquest. Takes us back to verse 14.

[ 25 : 15 ] The cry on the day of the Lord is bitter. The mighty warrior shouts his battle cry. Verse 16, a day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the corner towers. Here is the warrior God going into battle against wickedness. And the language that is used I think is intended to remind us of the conquest that Joshua led. So remember when Joshua led the people of God into the promised land and they had battles and they defeated God's enemies and they were settled in the land. Think about, for example, when they arrive at Jericho. How is Jericho defeated?

Jericho is defeated as the people of God walk around as there's the blowing of trumpets and there is a cry, a battle cry. Verse 16, a day of trumpet and battle cry. So we're being invited to think about the conquest led by Joshua. And what was the purpose of that conquest? Well, partly it was God executing judgment against the wickedness that existed within the land.

But this in itself should have been a wake-up call for God's own people. They needed to fear God and honor him or that curse that came on their enemies then would come on them today. They were not guaranteed blessing. A further purpose of the conquest, you're dealing with enemies. It was part of it, but fighting for a renewed promised land was another part of it. Because God's great desire was that he might dwell in the promised land with his people. And just to give us a preview of next week, that strikes a note of hope. Chapter 2 and verse 7. There is this promise that the land of the Philistines, verse 7, that land will belong to the remnant of the people of Judah. There they will find pasture.

Verse 9, speaking of the region of Moab and Ammon, the remnant of my people will plunder them. The survivors of my nation will inherit their land. So here again, although there is judgment, there are notes of hope, hope of salvation, hope for a remnant. For those who would repent of sin, for those who would remain faithful to God, there is this reality that God is with you, that God is for you, that God will bring you to the promised land and settle you there.

But otherwise, an unrepentant, unholy people can expect judgment. So there's the image of storm, there's the image of conquest, and then there's the image of sacrifice. Verse 7, the Lord has prepared a sacrifice. He has consecrated those he has invited. So we remember why God gave sacrifice. It was a gift from him. It was a way of atonement, a way to cover over sin, a way to cleanse people, a way to deal with God's holy anger against sin as God's justice would fall on a substitute rather than on the sinner. Sacrifice was God's way to put things right and to make his people clean.

[ 28 : 43 ] And Zephaniah chapter 1 reminds us of this. There are two ways that God can put things right and be just. It's either the death of the sinner or the death of the substitute, the sacrifice.

Verse 7 focuses on God's grace. A sacrifice has been prepared. An invitation has been given. Be silent before God. Honor Him. Revere Him. Let the sacrifice be your substitute. Let Jesus be your substitute, and you will be saved. But the problem that Zephaniah addresses is that by and large the people didn't accept or want that invitation. Verse 18, we see them trusting in their silver and their gold to save them. And so, there is that vivid warning at the end of verse 17, for those who have sinned against the Lord, their blood will be poured out like dust and their entrails like dung. And that imagery is intended to make us think of sacrifice. Judgment falling as the lives of sinful, unrepentant people are sacrificed. Those who say no to God's sacrifice and God's way of salvation. So again, what do we learn? We learn that God hates and punishes sin. Every sin. Whether that's bowing in our hearts on an idol or acting with greed. Whether we're guilty of false worship or guilty of telling lies. Whether it's forgetting God and being cold towards Him. Whether it's empty formal worship that just goes through the motions. Whether it's rejecting God's word and wisdom or rejecting God's saving sacrifice. The message is clear that God's judgment must fall. The foretaste in history happened.

Jerusalem went into exile. God's word can be trusted. So, we know that there is a day coming when Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead. Here's the last question we need to ask. How does the day of the Lord connect with Jesus? So far, we've heard a lot of bad news. And we need to hear that. We need to hear the reality of God's law and God's holiness and His hatred of our sin. But it's uncomfortable.

It's like being in the doctor's office and you hear the bad news of an illness. But we need that so that when we're offered the treatment, when we're offered the surgery, we're glad to receive it.

[ 31 : 41 ] And so, hearing of God's judgment in the day of the Lord gives us an opportunity to hear the gospel. To hear about Jesus. Two ways we need to see how Jesus connects with the day of the Lord. First, we need to recognize that He is the agent. He is God's appointed judge. As Paul told the people in Athens in Acts 17, as Jesus told the people that listened to Him, all those parables that speak of Jesus dividing and gathering. You know, He spoke about gathering the wheat into the harvest, but burning up the chaff. Dividing people into the sheep and the goats. As Jesus is saying, He's saying He is the one who has been appointed to bring eternal judgment or eternal salvation.

Jesus is the one who both punishes enemies and purifies His people and establishes the new creation. He is the agent who brings the final day of the Lord. And so, we should be silent and we should fear the Lord Jesus. We should submit to Him and trust Him. But we also need to see that not only is Jesus the agent of the day of the Lord, but in God's grace and in His plan of salvation, Jesus becomes the object of the day of the Lord. The judgment of the day of the Lord, in other words, falls on Jesus.

Back to verse 7, the sacrifice the Lord has prepared is His own Son, Jesus, given to make atonement for our sin, given so we could be graciously forgiven. Think about those pictures of the day of the Lord, that picture of storm and darkness and blackness. Jesus on the cross, we know this from Matthew's gospel, was in the eye of a storm as He experienced God's holy wrath, as He became sin for His people.

Jesus died in darkness, there was earthquake, the curtain torn in two, all of this a reminder that this was the day of the Lord, the day of God's wrath against sin, falling on Jesus so it might not fall on us. Jesus experienced God's war against evil as Jesus became the sin bearer. Yes, Jesus is the mighty warrior who fought and defeated the dark forces of evil on behalf of His people. He is our great champion, but He also experienced the wrath of God on our behalf so that we can testify with joy, with John the Baptist, that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Zephaniah invites us to fear God because the day of the Lord is near. He reminds us that all of us will experience this day. There is that urgent call to be ready to fear the Lord, to receive salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. We're invited to love the one who experienced God's wrath so we might know God's welcome. To live for the one who felt a sense of being abandoned by His Father so that we might be adopted by our Father in heaven. Zephaniah reminds us that God takes sin seriously, so seriously that He sent His Son as the only way to put things right, and so should we.

[ 35 : 16 ] Zephaniah ultimately is going to call us to repent and to believe in Jesus as Lord, that we might be saved. Let's pray together. Lord God, when Your Word functions as a mirror and it holds up some of the darkness in our hearts and in our lives to us, we don't like what we see. It can make us feel profoundly uncomfortable.

But Lord, we need Your holiness. We need to take seriously Your judgment against sin so that we might receive that invitation to trust in Jesus, to turn to Him, to receive that sacrifice that You prepared as that way for us to be made right with You, to atone for our sin.

Lord, we thank You that though our sins are many, that Your mercy is more. And so Lord, we pray that You would cause us to be silent, to have that sense of reverence before You, the Creator and the Judge and the Saviour, that we might be ready for that day by trusting in Jesus.

On this day, we pray in His name. Amen. Amen. Now we're going to sing. And we're going to sing the hymn, In the Valley, Bless the Lord.

And we're going to stand as we sing this together. Amen. When the path that I feared is the way He has set, and I long to give in and retreat.

[ 37 : 30 ] Still to Jesus I hope as I face every step, For the Lord He will give me His peace.

Bless the Lord, He will give me His peace. Bless the Lord, He will give me His peace.

And if I should remain in the valley today, Bless the Lord, He will give me His peace.

When the road that I tread fills my heart with despair, And it seems that my grief has no end.

Still to Jesus I hope as I face every step, And it seems that my grief has no end. Still to Jesus I hope, Who will walk with me there, And the Lord, He will give me His strength.

[ 38 : 43 ] Bless the Lord, He will give me His strength.

And if I should remain in the valley today, Bless the Lord, He will give me His strength.

Bless the Lord, He will give me His strength. On the road that you walked, With the way of the cross, All my pain and my sorrow you held.

So to you I shall hold, You redeem every loss, For my Lord, You have given yourself.

Bless the Lord, for He gives me Himself. Bless the Lord, for He gives me Himself.

[ 39 : 55 ] And if I should remain in the valley today, Bless the Lord, for He gives me Himself.

Now may the God of peace, Who through the blood of the eternal covenant, Brought back from the dead, Our Lord Jesus, That great Shepherd of the sheep, Equip you with everything good for doing His will, And may He work in us what is pleasing to Him, Through Jesus Christ, To whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.

[ 41 : 57 ] Amen. Amen. Amen. Everyaya is a building inside, That really brings me a■ of grace.