

STUDY GUIDE

An Expository
Study Through



Feb 8

Apr 12

ZEPHANIAH

AN EXPOSITIONAL STUDY

Through the Book of Zephaniah

February 8 - April 12

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Beijing, China
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Written by TJ Johnson

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STUDY GUIDE

Feb 8

Cosmic
Judgment

Zephaniah 1:1-6



Sermon Series Overview

For the next nine weeks, we will work our way through the book of Zephaniah. In the time it takes you to finish your morning coffee or tea, you can read the entire book. Therefore, it is my prayer that each of us read through this book on our own as a way of preparing for corporate worship. One of my favorite Bible reading strategies is the COMA method: Context, Observation, Meaning, Application. I imagine not many of you have heard sermons on Zephaniah. In fact, many of you have probably never even read the book, and some of you might not be able to locate it in the Bible. Therefore, to help you get the most out of your time in Zephaniah, I will be providing a brief overview of the book (Context).

AUTHOR

Zephaniah (“Yahweh has hidden/protected”), a descendant of Hezekiah (Zeph 1:1), placing him in the royal lineage and making him a relative of the current King of Judah, Josiah.

DATE

Circa 640–621 BC (early reign of Josiah). The prophecy against Nineveh (2:13–15) requires it to be before 612 BC, when Nineveh fell.

HISTORICAL SETTING

Around 930 BC, following the death of King Solomon, Israel experienced a civil war and divided into two kingdoms: the Northern Kingdom (Israel) and the Southern Kingdom (Judah). The Northern Kingdom quickly fell into idolatry, and in 722 BC, after refusing to listen to the prophets, God sent the nation of Assyria to destroy it and send the people into exile (see the covenant curses in Deuteronomy 28:15–68).

Over the next 100 years, the Southern Kingdom slowly forsook the LORD, even losing the Law of God (literally! The Book of the Law was rediscovered by the high priest Hilkiah during repairs to the Temple—see 2 Kings 22–23 and 2 Chronicles 34–35). After decades of wicked kings (see 2 Kings 18–25) who introduced and encouraged pagan worship, God sends Zephaniah as a prophet to the Southern Kingdom to remind them to return to covenant faithfulness or face the same covenant curses that fell on the Northern Kingdom nearly 100 years earlier.

Zephaniah comes during the reign of King Josiah, who became king at the age of 8 after the assassination of his father, King Amon. Josiah, a righteous king in a long line of wicked kings, sought to bring the nation back to God by destroying all idolatrous worship sites and reinstating the covenant of Moses, with Jerusalem's Temple as the center of worship. It appears that God is drawing His people back to Himself through a prophet who preaches repentance and a king who enacts laws that create an environment for people to turn wholeheartedly to the LORD.

KEY VERSE AND THEME:

Zephaniah 1:14

The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast...

Zephaniah's message could be summarized in the phrase, "The Day of the LORD." Many prophets used this language (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Malachi). It spoke of a time when God Himself would visit His people. For some, this visit would be a time of great joy; for others, it would be a time of great terror. For the Day of the LORD is a time of judgment and salvation that reveals God's justice and mercy.

As you read this book, be aware that the Day of the LORD is a present event (Judah, Cush, etc., will be judged now) that ultimately points to a future event (Christ's second advent). For example, the Day of the LORD came to the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC when Assyria carried them into exile; the Day of the LORD came for the Southern Kingdom in 587/6 BC when Babylon carried them into exile; the Day of the LORD came to Israel in 70 AD when General Titus destroyed the city and burned the Temple.

These events are small pictures foreshadowing the ultimate Day of the LORD when Jesus comes back to judge the living and the dead. Keeping this in mind as we read Zephaniah should help us make connections with the original hearers, with us today, and ultimately with the second coming of Christ.

PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

Zephaniah writes to:

1. Announce the coming “Day of the LORD”—both a blessing and a curse.
2. Call Judah to repent before judgment falls.
3. Warn the nations that Yahweh judges all peoples, not just Israel.
4. Offer hope of a purified people and restored relationship with God.
5. Reaffirm God’s covenant faithfulness—He judges sin but preserves His remnant.
6. Foreshadow the ultimate Day of the LORD, which the church refers to as Christ’s second advent.

WHERE ZEPHANIAH FITS IN REDEMPTIVE HISTORY

- A pre-exilic prophet warning of the coming Babylonian devastation.
- Reinforces Deuteronomy’s covenant blessings/curses (Notice how often Zephaniah quotes whole phrases from Deuteronomy).
- Anticipates the global salvation promised to Abraham (“all nations”).
- Looks forward to a purified people, a restored Zion, and Yahweh dwelling among His own (3:9–20).

NEW TESTAMENT USAGE & ECHOES

- Day of the LORD: 1 Thess 5:2; 2 Pet 3:10
- Judgment of nations → Matthew 25; Rev 6:15–17
- Seek the Lord: Matthew 5:3, 5; James 4:6–10
- Purified speech & universal worship: Acts 2; Rom 15:9–12; Rev 7:9–10
- Yahweh’s presence among His people: John 1:14; Rev 21:3
- Remnant Rejoicing: Rom 9–11; Rev 21:3–4
- Yahweh as warrior-king: Rev 19

May the Spirit enable you to read this book with spiritual eyes, that you might better learn to love God and neighbor.

Reading with you,

Pastor TJ Johnson

Sermon Series Overview

February 8, 2026	Zephaniah 1:1-6	Cosmic Judgment
February 15, 2026	Zephaniah 1:7-13	Personal Judgment
February 22, 2026	Zephaniah 1:14-18	Eternal Judgment
March 1, 2026	Zephaniah 2:1-4	Escaped Judgment
March 8, 2026	Zephaniah 2:5-15	Exalted Judgment: God Glorified
March 15, 2026	Zephaniah 3:1-5	The Unjust's Judgment
March 22, 2026	Zephaniah 3:6-8	Merciful Judgment
March 29, 2026	Zephaniah 3:9-13	After Judgment
April 5, 2026	Acts 2:22-36	The Judge Who Was Judged
April 12, 2026	Zephaniah 3:14-20	Celebrating Judgment

Cosmic Judgment

At City Church, we are a people empowered by the Spirit to proclaim Christ so that, even in great opposition, the Gospel might reach all peoples in all places, thereby bringing all who believe into God's family—visibly represented through local churches.

This Sunday, we begin a new series studying one of the books of the Minor Prophets in the Old Testament: the Book of Zephaniah. In many ways, this series is a continuation of our 2026 Vision, as it reveals the *why* of evangelism.

Zephaniah was a nobleman in the 7th century BC to whom God spoke concerning judgment for the sins of the people. He faithfully wrote down this prophecy and delivered God's message to the people of Judah. That same message is one God has entrusted to us: to share with those around us that He loves them and sent His only Son, Jesus Christ, to save us from our sins (John 3:16). We are His messengers, called to proclaim this Good News to all people.

Proclaiming the Gospel with you,

Pastor Stas



"The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast..."

Sermon Outline

Fill out the points as you listen to the sermon.

1.

2.

3.

Sermon Notes

Sermon Applications



"The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast..."

Discussion Questions

1. According to this passage, why was God's judgment directed against Judah and the whole earth?
2. In the face of such a serious warning, what should our response be?
3. Does this passage (think wholistically: Book, Prophets, Old Testament, New Testament) offer any hope, if so, what?
4. If you were in Zephaniah's position, would you choose to deliver this harsh warning—knowing you might be rejected or blamed—or would you remain silent? Why?
5. In our lives today, how should we respond when God convicts us of our sin or wrongdoing?



"The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast..."

Prayer & Praise

End your time together by reflecting on the goodness of God and praying for one another.

Prayer Requests

Praise Reports

STUDY GUIDE

Feb 15

Personal
Judgment

Zephaniah 1:7-13



Personal Judgment

Church Family,

How did we get where we are? Have you ever asked that either personally or for a collective group such as a work colleagues, friendships, a marriage, or a relationship with a child or sibling? Often this question can be asked when we had this idea that something was going just fine and then one day all of a sudden we wake up and it's not; things aren't going well or things haven't been well for quite some time. That's a very personal question that I think the book of Zephaniah causes us to reflect on. However, Zephaniah's proclamation it most clearly directed at the community of Israel. In remembering our 2025 study of the Book of Joshua, isn't it sobering to think that Israel was a recipient of such blessing, of such promise, and of such inheritance? Yet, now, they find themselves under the all consuming wrath and judgment of the Lord declaring that ALL of those very blessings in the promised land will be stripped away.

What ultimately happened during the reigns of both good and bad kings to bring Israel to a place where the Lord sends a messenger to pronounce a day of doom? The minor prophet certainly answers this question. It's clear from the very beginning of the book that Israel was at least guilty of serving false gods, of intermingling their own worship of Yahweh with pagan practices, and of complacency. While this is clearly laid out and charged to Israel by Zephaniah, we too should hear this warning of the coming Day of the Lord. We too should be reflecting on our relationships with the Lord and our neighbors and asking if our current circumstances are related in any way to specific disobedience in our lives. This coming Lord's Day we will look at the truths recorded in Zephaniah 1:7-13.

Brothers and sisters, we are called to a public assembly of worship for the one true and living God. I hope you will join part of God's visible covenant community this Lord's Day.

Sincerely,

Elder Grant Jones



"The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast..."

Sermon Outline

Fill out the points as you listen to the sermon.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Sermon Notes

Sermon Applications



"The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast..."

Discussion Questions

- 1. In Zephaniah 1:7, the Israelites are given a charge to "be silent" in the presence of the Lord. A gut reaction to this might be "make sure you have quiet time with God," BUT that doesn't really fit the larger context. The all-consuming wrath of God is being declared over Israel, specifically the southern tribe of Judah. The context is that Israel is being told to hear this charge laid on them through the prophet Zephaniah. They are being told to be quiet because of who God is and because there is nothing they could say to justify their sin. Are there areas in your life (e.g., relationships, entertainment, speech) that you refuse to be corrected by God's word because you tune out "those verses"? Past or present, has there ever been a situation where, in your own sin and rebellion, you were too quick to speak in an effort to justify yourself rather than listen to a genuine concern from an elder, a spouse, or a close friend? Are there faithful Christians you're avoiding because you don't want to hear a rightful rebuke?**
- 2. From Zephaniah 1:7 — The Lord tells His own chosen nation that He is preparing them to be the sacrifice (not goats) on which He will pour out His judgment. What does this teach us about the Lord's character both as Judge and Father?**
- 3. From Zephaniah 3:10–11 — It's clear that the Lord's judgment will also strike where many have placed their trust...in the marketplace. To draw that into modern terms, we could say the Lord's judgment would destroy their economy and their bank accounts. Have there been seasons of your life, or are you currently disobeying the Lord's commands because your financial stability has been elevated to having an idolatrous hold on your heart?**



"The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast..."

Discussion Questions

4. Zephaniah forces us to draw our eyes to the wrath of the God we profess to serve. We ourselves are subject to the complete wrath of the Lord apart from Christ. Many of us know people who have been turned away from Christianity because of a perception of the wrath of God. The Lord's righteous judgment is certainly a topic worthy of discussion. The Lord's wrath is terrifying. Having a proper view of the wrath of God drives us to the cross and helps us realize the hopeless condition we face without Jesus. So, if we don't have a biblical conception of God's wrath and judgment, we also might have misconceptions about Christ's work, humiliation, and exaltation. Knowing that, what distortions have you heard taught about God's wrath within Christian circles that need to be clarified by God's word?

5. In the sermon, we discussed how we can become like the "dregs" (Zephaniah 1:12). Discuss current or past seasons of your life where you were lukewarm in your faith. This complacency is something that Zephaniah is addressing. Notice the way he's addressing it—by warning the people of their coming doom, which will be brought to them by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It may seem like a strange concept to meditate upon the righteous wrath of the Lord. Make no mistake, the prophet Zephaniah is presenting this warning because it WILL happen (the Babylonian captivity). However, there is a hope that his charge will draw out some of those who have become lukewarm and complacent in their obedience to the Lord. Through this proclamation, he is calling those who will truly listen to repent and to be restored. Could it be that you need a season of being reminded of the wrath of God to spur you out of being like the dregs? And in case you missed it, the dregs are the undesirable portion, the portion thrown out.



"The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast..."

Prayer & Praise

End your time together by reflecting on the goodness of God and praying for one another.

Prayer Requests

Praise Reports

STUDY GUIDE

Feb 22

Eternal
Judgment

Zephaniah 1:14-18



Eternal Judgment

In Zephaniah 1:14–18, God tell the nation of Judah that His coming judgment on sin will be soon, severe, and inescapable. These were not empty words. Within fifty years, Babylon had invaded Judah, destroyed the temple, and carried thousands off into exile as slaves—where they would remain for the next seventy years. And yet, at the time, Zephaniah’s words seemed unbelievable. Would God really judge sin? Would God, who is love, really destroy those made in His image?

There are many today, even in the church, who cannot imagine Jesus executing judgment against sinners. That lie—that a loving God would never punish people for their sin—is as old as the Garden of Eden, when Satan told Eve, “You will not surely die.” But Eve did die. And Judah did go into exile. In other words, God keeps His promise to judge sin.

Nearly three thousand years later, we are confronted with the same message Judah heard. The Great and Awesome Day of the Lord is coming—soon. It will be a day of terror and darkness, when sin is exposed and finally and fully dealt with.

The warning of Zephaniah is for all humanity to take note and respond: to believe that Jesus has ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father, from where He will come to judge the living and the dead. While this is not a popular message, it is a needed one. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Hearing and Responding with You,

Elder TJ Johnson



"The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast..."

Sermon Outline

Title: Immanent Judgment

Text: Zephaniah 1:14–18

Prop: The coming day of Christ's judgment is so soon, severe, and unescapable, that it demands our urgent repentance and compels us to point others to the only safe refuge: the cross where Jesus bore that day for us.

Sermon Outline

1. The Day is Soon.
2. The Day is Severe.
3. The Day is Unstoppable.

Sermon Notes



"The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast..."

Discussion Questions

1. Read Zephaniah 1:14–18. How does the Bible use the phrase “The Day of the Lord” in both the Old and New Testaments? Have you ever struggled to reconcile the idea of a loving God with the reality that He judges sinners? Explain.
2. Read Zephaniah 1:17 and Romans 1:24–32. What specific sins are described in these passages? Ultimately, against whom is sin committed? Why does it matter that we understand the true object of sin?
3. Read Zephaniah 1:14; Romans 13:11–12; James 5:8–9; 1 Peter 4:7; and Revelation 22:12. How is the timing of God’s judgment against Judah described, and how soon after Zephaniah’s prophecy did that Day come? In light of this, how should we think about and respond — practically — to the repeated New Testament language that Jesus’ return is “near” or “soon”?
4. Read Zephaniah 1:15-16. How do you feel reading about “God’s wrath”? How does this compare with how often and openly the Old and New Testament discusses the wrath of God (yes, even Jesus – John 3:36)? Do you think the church today overemphasizes or underemphasizes wrath? Explain.
5. Read Zephaniah 1:15–16. How does each phrase (the synonymous parallelism) describe what The Day of the Lord would be like for Judah? How does that compare with the New Testament’s description of Jesus’ second coming?
6. What were the ways in which Judah was hoping to prevent The Day of the Lord from happening and why did they ultimately fail? What are some ways people today - consciously or unconsciously - try to avoid or dismiss the reality of God’s final judgment?



"The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast..."

Discussion Questions

7. Though no one can stop The Day of the Lord from coming, how can a person be sheltered from God's coming judgment against sin? How would you explain this clearly and simply to a non-Christian?
8. In what specific ways should The Day of the Lord encourage and strengthen Christians?
9. How should the reality of The Day of the Lord move us toward greater seriousness in evangelism? What would that look like in real life?



"The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast..."

Prayer & Praise

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Prayer Requests

Praise Reports

STUDY GUIDE

Mar 1

Escaped
Judgment

Zephaniah 2:1-4



Escaped Judgment

Join us this Sunday as we explore Zephaniah 2:1-4 and God's loving "early warning system" for our lives. In the busyness of work, family, and life overseas, it is easy to stay active yet spiritually asleep.

This message is a timely call to wake up, seek the Lord with humility and urgency, and rediscover the mercy we have in Jesus before the day comes.

Come and be encouraged to pause, refocus, and take the next step back toward God.

Elder Ling Lai



"The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast..."

Sermon Outline

Title: Escaped Judgment: Gather together and repent

Text: Zephaniah 2:1-4

Prop: God's judgment invites urgent repentance — humility is the path to refuge.

Sermon Outline

1. Wake up (Alarm) – Zephaniah 2:1
2. Before (Urgency) – Zephaniah 2:2
3. Seek (Response) – Zephaniah 2:3
4. Hide (Gospel) – Zephaniah 2:3

Sermon Notes



"The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast..."

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways does "gathering together" help bring about spiritual renewal? Reflecting on your current rhythms in Beijing, are you using the opportunities to gather (church, small group, etc.) in a way that actually leads to honesty and change, or merely routine attendance? Explain.
2. What sins or compromises have you seen become quietly normalized in your workplace, social circle, church, or even your own heart?
3. What is one area of obedience—a conversation you need to have, a habit you need to break, a step of faith you need to take—that you have been telling yourself you will deal with "later" (after this contract, after this season, after things settle down) and what would help you to move forward in obedience?
4. In a city where so much of our energy is spent on navigating visas, career moves, and family stability, how can we tell the difference between seeking God's hand (what he can do for us) and seeking God's face (who He is)? Practically, what would change in your daily routine this week if your primary goal was to seek Him, not just manage your life?
5. What areas of your life do you find it most tempting to be proud or self-promoting? What would it look like for you to "seek humility" in that specific environment this week?
6. Who is one person in your network (a colleague, a neighbor, a parent at your child's school) that God is prompting you to have a more intentional spiritual conversation with, and what is one little thing you could do this week to take a step toward that person?



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Prayer & Praise

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Prayer Requests

Praise Reports

STUDY GUIDE

Exalted Judgment:
God Glorified

Zephaniah 2:5-15

Mar 8



ZEPHANIAH



Exalted Judgment: God Glorified

This week in our study of Zephaniah, the prophet widens the lens and speaks of God's judgment against the proud and boastful nations surrounding Judah and against the gods they worship.

Our situation today has changed, but human hearts have not - the nations still rage, and the people still plot vain things. This word from Zephaniah reminds us that God is exalted above all nations and all gods, and He will preserve and restore a remnant of His people. In light of this, we must be willing to sound the warning and stay hopeful and faithful.

Exalting the Lord with you,
Elder Ben Whitmore



"The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast..."

Sermon Outline

Title: Exalted Judgment: God Glorified

Text: Zephaniah 2:5-15

Proposition: God is exalted in judgment above all nations and their gods, and He will preserve and restore a remnant of His people, therefore we must be willing to sound the warning, stay hopeful and faithful.

Sermon Outline

- 1. God will be exalted over all nations**
 - So sound the alarm to all people
- 2. God will be exalted over all gods**
 - So stay faithful to Jesus and starve the gods
- 3. God will preserve a remnant of His people**
 - So hold on to hope

Sermon Notes



"The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast..."

Discussion Questions

- 1. Have you ever heard someone say that Christianity is a Western religion, or 'the white man's religion'? How might you respond to that, and how does this passage apply?**
- 2. Read Romans 1:18-32 and 2:12-16. Why is God bringing judgment against nations that did not receive His law?**
- 3. In this passage, God promises to humble proud and haughty nations. What examples can you think of from Scripture and history of proud rulers and nations being humbled?**
- 4. How can we warn people of different faiths and backgrounds of the coming judgment?**
- 5. Read Zephaniah 2:11. What does the Lord mean when He says that He will 'famish the gods?'**
- 6. What are some of the gods (idols) that people turn to in Beijing, and how can we participate in the Lord's famishing those gods?**
- 7. What does it look like to live as God's faithful remnant in this world that is often still ruled by the proud and wicked, and how can we hold onto hope?**



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