



zephaniah

REMAINING CONFIDENT IN THE CULTURE WARS

A day is coming... a day is coming... a day is coming! The *Day of the Lord* was echoed throughout Jerusalem and Judea as a warning that destruction was “near and hastening fast.” Zephaniah’s ancient prophecy was fulfilled with “ruin and devastation” and yet, the voice of Zephaniah continues to resound across the pages of Scripture as we wait for future prophecy to be fulfilled. Ultimately, the *Day of the Lord* is the message of God’s triumph over His enemies, and as a result, it becomes a message of hope. As Christians, we can live with joy through conflict and confrontation, knowing we, too, may see the *Day of the Lord* in our generation.

I graduated from high school in 1976—America’s bicentennial year. There was a special effort to make the 200-year celebration something memorable in order to honor the best of our past.

But for all the focus given to the Bicentennial celebration, there was another event on the horizon that would ultimately shape culture and global history in a way no one could have ever imagined. What happened in 1977? On May 25, 1977, America, and ultimately the world, was impacted by an unfolding story that started like this: *A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.*

This was, of course, the amazing cultural revolution of *Star Wars*. And it is continuing today. Who could have ever imagined what a group of aliens and droids would do to create culture for us. But it

was imagination, creativity and ingenuity that brought together the oldest conflict known to man—the conflict between good and evil, darkness and light. And added into this conflict was another dimension—*The Force*.

40 years later, this saga continues at the storyline is yet to fully unfold.

While you may think I am going too far down the pop culture road, this is a way in which I can help you understand the reality of the conflict in which we live today.

Through the imaginary and creative world of *Star Wars*, we see conflict between an evil empire and groups of people called, rebels. The rebels are small in number, but people of the light (as though it were).

In a way, we live in that kind of reality today. It is not only something in which we live, but something that bridges us to the past.

In the book of Zephaniah, we find a prophetic message that takes us to the conflicts and confrontations that many of us know today, not living in *Star Wars*, but living in culture wars. As believers, we are often caught in the crossfires these battles. We are a part of the kingdom of light and yet, we are live and struggle with the kingdom of darkness around us.

“For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober... But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 5:5-6, 8-9 ESV).

The Bible is very clear. We are in a very real conflict between light and darkness, good and evil—a conflict that requires us to be equipped and “armed” for engagement.

We stand in the midst of a world filled with resistance and opposition. As a result, we are to take the ultimate “light saber”, the sword of the Spirit (the Word of God), and overcome conflict by the power of the Word of God.

Certainly the conflict of culture—the conflict of the ages—is finding its way in our own society. Everywhere around us, we feel the boiling point of conflict between ideologies, philosophies, platforms and forums.

As a child of light, I want to encourage you to light the darkness! There are many issues we face today including the justice and court systems; protecting life; and marriage and family, to name a few. You have an opportunity to “light the night” through your vote and speaking truth.

The name, Zephaniah, means *the Lord hides, protects*, and this book talks about its actual title. Although we live in conflict, we have a God who protects His own, a God who has a plan and purpose for His people.

In preparation for our study in the book of Zephaniah, let's read some background information from 2 Chronicles:

“Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign, and he reigned thirty-one years in Jerusalem. And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, and walked in the ways of David his father; and he did not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. For in the eighth year of his reign, while he was yet a boy, he began to seek the God of David his father, and in the twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places, the Asherim, and the carved and the

metal images" (2 Chronicles 34:1-3 ESV).

Although the people occupied the land, built their Temple and worshiped the one true and Holy God, there came a time when pluralism surfaced with the acceptance of varied religious ideas and ideologies. These had overtaken the city of Jerusalem.

But God raised up a king by the name of Josiah to be a great reformer and to make a difference in the lives of the people.

"He [Josiah] began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places, the Asherim, and the carved and the metal images" (2 Chronicles 34:3 ESV).

In much the same way on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther went to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, and nailed a piece of paper containing the 95 theses statements to say we will not live in the practice of religious tradition that is not true to the word of God.

And with the words of Habakkuk we studied last week, Luther stood and said, "The righteous shall live by his faith" (Habakkuk 2:4)—not by human works or effort. With that came the great Protestant Reformation.

There was also a reformation in ancient history in and through the life of Josiah. God used him in a mighty way.

But here is the tragedy:

"Jehoiachin was eighteen years old when he became king, and he reigned three months and ten days in Jerusalem. He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord" (2 Chronicles 36:9 ESV).

First, there was a great reformation, then there was a great retraction, a great fall. The nation fell again into its background and sin. As a result of this, God raised up a prophet with a message (*paraphrased*), "Just as the northern kingdom of Israel had fallen in 721 to the Assyrians, there is going to be an assault on the southern kingdom of Israel and the city of Jerusalem." Ultimately, the Babylonians (Chaldeans) would come and take the people into captivity.

"Therefore He brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, who killed their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or aged. He gave them all into his hand. And all the vessels of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his princes, all these he brought to Babylon. And they burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem and burned all its palaces with fire and destroyed all its precious vessels. He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became

servants to him and to his sons”
(2 Chronicles 36:17-20a ESV).

Ultimately, the Chaldeans took the people and the holy vessels of the Temple into captivity—a 70-year period of captivity in Babylon. There was dispersion and destruction of the city of Jerusalem.

Zephaniah was the prophet God sent to declare the reality of what was going to happen then, as well as the reality of what is still yet to happen at another day in the future. A simple phrase so common and replete in the book of Zephaniah is this: the *Day of the Lord*.

Know the “Day of the Lord” is Coming!

Zephaniah 1:1-3, 7,14-16

God is going to move and act in time and history. He dealt with His people in Jerusalem, in Judah, in ancient history, and He is going to move and work in the present and future.

“The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah the son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah. ‘I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth,’ declares the LORD. ‘I will sweep away man and beast; I will sweep away the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, and the rubble with the wicked. I will cut off mankind from the face

of the earth,’ declares the LORD... Be silent before the Lord GOD! For the day of the LORD is near; the LORD has prepared a sacrifice and consecrated His guests... The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter; the mighty man cries aloud there. A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements. I will bring distress on mankind, so that they shall walk like the blind, because they have sinned against the LORD” (Zephaniah 1:1-3, 7, 14-17a ESV).

This passage is not exactly an expression of encouragement, is it? A day is coming... a day is coming... a day is coming. This is the language and rhetoric found in the book of Zephaniah. Some people may rationalize the Bible is irrelevant, that it is only read by extremists. Some of you may even struggle with your faith when you read passages of Scripture that are filled with such doom and gloom.

Others may prefer to move over to the “nice side” of the street, the happy place, and talk about the good and positive things—how Jesus makes their lives better, how they can live without concern for the futures, and ultimately, how they can be better people, live happier lives and have more significance.

When we read gloom and doom passages like this in Zephaniah and books by other minor prophets, should we question the character of God and the credibility of Scripture? No!

If you only focus on the “happy side” of Scripture, you have never heard the whole truth. The whole truth involves the fact that God has spoken of a future day of reckoning. And we see it here in Zephaniah—the *Day of the Lord*.

The Day of Lord had immediate and specific application to Judah and Jerusalem then, but the *Day of the Lord* also has tremendous emphasis and expression of what is still yet to come on the horizon of the future.

Why does this matter? Why would we spend time looking and thinking about this beyond just a fear factor?

Ultimately, the *Day of the Lord* is the message of God’s triumph over His enemies, and as a result, it becomes a message of hope in our hearts. One day God will triumph over the darkness, the evil, the enemies of this world. God, in light and truth, *will* ultimately triumph.

The *Day of the Lord* is expressed 20 times in this short three-chapter book—a day when judgment will be brought on the wicked and God’s blessing will be brought on the righteous.

The *Day of the Lord* is both ancient and future. When we study the

prophets and biblical prophecy, in many ways it is like looking at a mountain range. From a distance, the farthest mountains look like a line of small bumps. What may look like a line is actually something tremendous in terrain with valleys, distances, expanses and foothills. And there can be extreme distance between the first peak and the last peak.

This is how prophecy is in Scripture. Sometimes Scripture passages are folded over and overlaid with other Scripture. We tend to see one big range, but what we really have are things that are near and far.

So in the book of Zephaniah, we have things that are near in scope and far on the horizon. In fact, the *Day of the Lord* happened in 586 B.C. when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and took the people into captivity. God promised that beyond this, He still had a plan. God would not negate the covenant He made with Abraham. But at the same time, the *Day of the Lord* referenced a future event. So the *Day of the Lord* is significant in Scripture.

We also find the *Day of the Lord* mentioned in the Old Testament books of Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Malachi; and in the New Testament books of Luke, Acts, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 2 Peter and Revelation.

In fact, the most important person to mentioned *the Day of the Lord* in the New Testament was Jesus. See Luke 21:25-31, 34-36.

In Luke 21, Jesus told a parable about a fig tree:

“Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near” (Luke 21:29-31 ESV).

Jesus used the backdrop of a fig tree to show how the seasons come and go, when there is fruit and harvest and barrenness. In the same way, Jesus said there is a day coming when the kingdom of the Lord will be near.

In Luke 21, 22 and 24, Jesus talked about a day that would come with suddenness, and how you need to be prepared.

“But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap” (Luke 21:34 ESV).

... “because He [God] has fixed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by a Man whom He has appointed; and of this He has given assurance to all by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:31 ESV).

... “[Christ] who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:8 ESV).

I love the fact that the *Day of the Lord* is finally identified as the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is the consummation of Christ completing what He began when He came to this planet. He came to create redemption and reconciliation, making a way for us to be right with our Creator God. We can never establish a right way in our own ability, but He will complete and finalize it at the end of the age when He comes again and establishes His eternal kingdom.

Many of you know the following verse, but you may not have thought of it in light of the *day of the Lord*:

“And I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ... so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ” (Philippians 1:6, 10 ESV).

“Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, ‘There is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will

not escape. But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that Day to surprise you like a thief” (1 Thessalonians 5:1-4 ESV).

“Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to Him, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come” (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2 ESV).

This is not past history; it is still yet to come!

“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed” (2 Peter 3:10 ESV).

“For they are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty. (‘Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!’) And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon. (Revelation 16:14-16 ESV).

All of this is done and brought together for us to see and to know that in the ancient world, there was a day when God brought

punishment on His own people, Israel. They were plundered, dispersed and taken away. They were held until a future date.

And yet, the Bible also says there is still a massive event yet on the horizon of the future—the coming of Jesus Christ.

What did Jesus say? “I will come again” (John 14:3 ESV).

The Day of the Lord is one of the most vital things for us to see and understand when we study the Bible. Fierce and fearsome are God’s works toward the completion of His final plan, even as His intent was in the creation and the beginning of this place called planet Earth.

Admittedly, this flies in the face of atheists who deny the reality of God and Universalists who declare the equality of all religions. It also speaks against the annihilationists who discard any idea of a day that is coming since they see death as the end of all things.

No one gives better expression to atheistic response than Richard Dawkins who wrote the book, *The God Delusion*:

“The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: ... a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser;... a capriciously malevolent bully.” —Richard Dawkins

That is how Dawkins described God—the “God of the Old Testament” as Dawkins called Him. Dawkins is very much in error. God is not just the God of the Old Testament. The God of the New Testament is also the God of judgment. Dawkins is also greatly in error because he loses sight of the fact that if there is no *Day of the Lord*, then there is no hope of ever having or seeing justice or righteousness among men. Never.

“The whole record of history is one great longing for justice.”
—R. John Rushdoony

Can wrongs ever be made right? Can there ever be justice and responsibility in such a twisted, distorted and evil world? Contrary to God being some sort of a “malevolent bully” (as described by Richard Dawkins), D.A. Carson’s words are actually correct:

“A wrath-less god does not make him more attractive. It makes him morally indifferent.” —D.A. Carson

If you need God to look attractive in order to negate His wrath, then you have completely missed the point. It is the wrath of God that gives us confidence in the judgment and justice of God in a broken, darkened world.

That is why the Apostle Paul, in writing to the believers in Corinthians, said this:

“For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.

But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at His coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet”
(1 Corinthians 15:22-25 ESV).

By one man (Adam) came death, and by one Man (Jesus) has also come the resurrection.

This Jesus whom we sing about, serve and proclaim is the Christ of conquest. He will be the fulfillment of all that God has said, pictured, prophesied and promised. One day Jesus will make things right on this earth.

In fact, in the same passage, the Apostle Paul wrote,

“If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Corinthians 15:19 ESV).

It is pathetic to be a Christian if Christianity is just some sort of a sedative in this life. Christianity is not a sedative for weak and broken people. Christianity is the hope of triumph when Christ will subdue every evil thing and put it all under His feet.

Interestingly enough, at the conclusion of 1 Corinthians 15, we learn the last enemy to be destroyed is death.

Nothing is greater than knowing that Jesus triumphed over death through the power of His resurrection. So the *Day of the Lord* is both a past event that occurred in the ancient world, but it is also a future hope and reality.

We cannot live without looking and understanding our need to live in light of such a coming day. May I also add this? That day is not an election day. Oh, it is for the elect, but it is not an election day. You don't get a voice or a vote. It will simply come. That is why we have to understand our hope is in Christ.

More than just being a merchant of misery, Zephaniah is also a broker of joy and hope.

Although from Zephaniah 1:1-3:13 we see the *Day of the Lord* in darkness and judgment, it is as though the sighing concludes, and in the third and last chapter, suddenly there is singing.

“Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away the judgments against you; He has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: ‘Fear not, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak. The LORD your God is in your midst, a Mighty One who will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness; He will quiet you by His

love; He will exult over you with loud singing” (Zephaniah 3:14-17 ESV).

Singing! This whole prophecy seems as if it is one big sigh, one big wrong, one big disaster. Yet, Zephaniah says (paraphrased), “Don't just know that the *Day of the Lord* is coming, but ...”

Let the “Joy of the Lord” Rule Your Heart!

Zephaniah 3:14-20

The joy of our lives is the strength of our lives. It is not just in knowing that God will make it all right in the end, but that God changes how we live. He changes our perspective. He changes our view. Although we struggle to live in the conflict of an evil culture, we stand knowing there is great triumph through the power of our God.

I love the fact that Zephaniah 3:17 affirms “the LORD your God is in your midst.” At the time Jesus ascended into heaven, it was made known that He would come back in the same way:

“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw Him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11 ESV).

But Jesus also said, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to

observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20 ESV).

God is with His people. He was with His people, Israel, even in the ancient world when they were displaced and in exile. In all these things, God continued to be faithful. Although the exiled people of Israel did not have the temple where God’s presence could be seen and known, God was still with His people. And God is with His people today.

One thing we must never lose sight of is the presence and the power of our God living and working among us in these days. Not only that, but look at what the Scripture says:

“He [God] will rejoice over you with gladness; He will quiet you by His love; He will exult over you with loud singing” (Zephaniah 3:17 ESV).

Our God is singing! Our God is caring!

Have you ever seen how unashamed a mother is when she is holding, rocking and singing over her child? It doesn’t matter where she is or what she is doing, she is willing to sing over that child because of her affection. The Bible literally says that we have a God who loves His children, who holds His children, and who sings over His children. That is why we can have joy because we are

secure in the midst of conflict and confrontation. The Bible declares that there will be a day when we will be gathered together with the Lord and we will sing as unto the Lord.

“And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are You to take the scroll and to open its seals, for You were slain, and by Your blood You ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and You have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth”” (Revelation 5:9-10 ESV).

There is coming a day when Jesus will rule and reign, and as Christians, we will be a part of that kingdom. We will exalt, worship and celebrate the power of our God and His conquest over all His enemies.

“And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, and they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders” (Revelation 14:2-3a ESV).

Singing! You realize that is one of the great distinctions of the Christian faith. We are a singing faith. We sing in the triumphs of joy and we have joy to sing even through tears and sorrow. Why? Because we know the Lord will prevail. The Lord will overcome. The Lord will right the wrongs. The Lord will bring justice to this world.

There is a big difference between joy and happiness. Joy is much deeper than happiness. Happiness is a surface thing. Happiness is based on the circumstances of life, the happenstances. If whatever happens to you happens to make you happy, you'll be happy.

Joy is not based on circumstances; it is based on confidences. Our great confidence through all the good and bad (not just the cataclysmic things of the future, but in the daily conflicts and struggles of life) is knowing the joy of the Lord.

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:4-7 ESV).

Do you realize what a stressed-out, anxious-prone, driven world we live in? It seems like everyone is caught up in the headlines, hysteria, fears and problems. But listen. We can live in "fear no evil" because God is with us. He gave us the promise of His great peace because the *Day of the Lord* is at hand.

I read a tweet the other day—one of the best 140-character tweets I have ever read:

"One day America and all its presidents will be a footnote in history, but the kingdom of Jesus will never end." —John Piper

To that I say, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10 ESV).



Lord, thank You today for the privilege of opening Your Word. On the one hand, we feel as if we've just had garlic on our hands, on our breath, all around us, and it's strong, it's hard, it's undeniable. But in the midst of it, You give us the sweetness and the confidence that You have come and conquered the power of sin, death and the grave. You have overcome!

Lord, may Your kingdom come and Your will be done on a day yet to come. Thank you for this hope.

Father, how I pray today that there will be joy, peace and confidence found in the lives of Your people. We know the Day of the Lord is coming and we trust "the joy of the Lord is our strength."

I pray this now for us and for those who are not ready for that day. May they hear and be warned, and may they know they need to look to Jesus, to turn their eyes to Jesus, and to put their trust in Him, for it is in His name I pray, Amen.

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