

Zephaniah

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[0 : 0 0] The great day is approaching. Now, a statement like that might be seen as quite a suggestive announcement. The great day is approaching. But what day might that be? If we think of our own context in Scotland this year, if somebody were to say to you, the great day is approaching, you might imagine that they're talking about the referendum on independence. That's a great day that is approaching. Or those of you who have other concerns, and maybe concerns that we've already touched on with the children, if you hear somebody saying the great day is approaching, you say, well, yes, indeed, this week on Thursday, the World Cup begins, the great day that many have been waiting for. For some, it might bring to mind something more personal, a significant birthday that is approaching. A great day is approaching. I wonder if there is, in actual fact, a great day that will be great, however that's defined, for everybody. A great day that will be the same day for every people and for every nation. Well, the prophet Zephaniah certainly seems to think so.

His prophecy revolves around this one theme, the day of the Lord. And he assures us that the great day of the Lord is near. There we read in verse 14 of the first chapter, the great day of the Lord is near, near and coming quickly. How are we to understand this language or expression? What is this day all about?

And can we put a date on it? Maybe it's past already. How are we to understand the language that Zephaniah uses? I think to understand the language, indeed, the concept of the day of the Lord, we need to be clear on two core truths concerning the day of the Lord as it is spoken of and presented to us in the Bible, what we might call the what and the when. First of all, the what. What is this day? Well, as we find described to us in the Bible, and particularly in Zephaniah, we find that it is both a day of wrath and judgment, but also a day of hope and blessing. And these two things must be seen together. The day of the Lord combines these two great elements, a day of wrath, a day of God's anger, a day of judgment, but also a day of great hope and blessing. That concerning the what, but also concerning the when.

When is this great day? Well, I think we can think of the day of the Lord as a day or indeed days throughout history where God in a particular way gives expression to His judgment and His blessing, but also as a future and ultimate day of the Lord. In Zephaniah, the day of the Lord is described or spoken of in a manner that reflects this reality of the what and the when. And we want to consider the whole prophecy today in the morning concerning what is said of the day of the Lord as a day of God's wrath and judgment. And this evening, looking at the other side of the picture or the complementary side really of the picture of the great day of the Lord as a day of hope and blessing. In order to do so, it will help if we briefly familiarize ourselves with the historical context in which Zephaniah lived and ministered. In chapter 1 and in verse 1, we're told that the word of the Lord came to Zephaniah during the reign of

King Josiah. And by identifying during which reign Zephaniah ministered, we're able to locate the prophecy between the year 640 and 609 before Christ. Those are the years that King Josiah reigned. So, it's somewhere within that 30-year period approximately. Now, to place this in the bigger picture of the history of Israel, it corresponds to the period between the fall of the northern kingdom, commonly known as Israel when we're speaking of the two kingdoms. That was in 722 when Samaria, the capital, fell to the Assyrians and many were sent into exile. So, this period falls between that great event and the eventual fall of Jerusalem and the southern kingdom, or Judah, that was destroyed in such horrendous circumstances by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. So, there's this century, just over a century really, in between, and it's during that in-between period that Josiah reigned and Zephaniah prophesied. And it was quite a century for Judah with a succession of contrasting kings. Hezekiah, who is identified here, it's, I think, reasonable to presume that the Hezekiah spoken of there in verse 1 is King Hezekiah. And if that's so, well, he was the great, great grandfather of Zephaniah. And so, there is a kingly lineage to

[6 : 00] Zephaniah. Well, Hezekiah, he reigned from 715 to 686. He was a good king, a godly king, but he was followed by Manasseh, who was a brutal and idolatrous despot. He reigned for 40 years or so, from 680 through to 640. And Manasseh was followed very fleetingly, just a couple of years by Amon, as is mentioned there in verse 1. And then the boy king, Josiah, he became king just as a young lad, and others really reigned in his place until he was able to take on that responsibility. And Josiah was a godly and reforming monarch. And we read much of his very laudable reforms during his reign.

And even as we get that picture, and as we remind ourselves of Josiah and what kind of king he was, it is sobering to note how the reign of Josiah promised so much, and in some measure also delivered. The king and the prophet, Zephaniah, shared a deep love for and loyalty to the Lord.

They were, if you wish, a dream team of king and prophet working together. And yet, as Zephaniah's prophecy makes clear, the spiritual impact on Jerusalem and Judah was minimal, very sadly minimal.

Well, with this background or context in mind, let's now consider the day of the Lord as a day of God's wrath or anger, a day of God's judgment. Now, I wonder how you react to even the very idea of considering or spending time considering God's wrath, God's anger, God's judgment. Is it a theme or reality that has been largely airbrushed out of the Christian message? Is it not the case that so often now the gospel is being increasingly, we might say, photoshopped with the convenient removal of the unpleasant stuff? Let's not speak about wrath and anger and judgment and hell. We don't want to speak about those things. We don't like thinking about those things. But is that a convenient thing to do at all if indeed that is something that the church is guilty of? Richard Niebuhr, in his book, *The Kingdom of God in America*, a book written about 20 years ago, writes perceptively on the price to be paid if we would remove God's wrath or anger and judgment from the picture. And I quote, a God without wrath brings men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministry of a

Christ without the cross. In other words, nothing of substance is left. Whether we like it or not, the wrath, the anger, the judgment of God is an integral element of the Bible's big story. And we can consider what Zephaniah has to say on the subject of the day of the Lord as a day of God's wrath and judgment by posing and answering the following questions. Why does God judge? Who does God judge? How does God judge?

[9 : 28] And when does God judge? All of these questions are answered in the words of the prophet Zephaniah. Now, it will be obvious, given what we are seeking to cover in the limited time available, that we will have to deal with this in a very overview kind of way. Evidently, we will not be getting into details, but I hope that we will be able, as we consider these questions and find answers to these questions in the book of Zephaniah, to get an appreciation of the bigger picture of the day of the Lord as a day of God's anger and judgment. The first question then that we posed, why does God judge? And we'll limit ourselves to the heart of the matter as explained by Zephaniah in chapter 1 and in verse 17. I will bring distress on the people, and they will walk like blind men because they have sinned against the Lord. This is the heart of the matter in answer to the question, why does God judge?

Because they have sinned against the Lord. Now, let's just dissect that declaration for a moment. Because they, who are they? Men and women as accountable moral creatures. You and me, accountable moral beings. What have we done? We've sinned. We have done what God forbids and failed to do what He requires. And we have sinned against the Lord. Consciously or otherwise, our sin, their sin, is against God.

God is the one who is principally offended and affronted by your sin. And why is sin a problem for God? Well, what does Zephaniah go on to say in the following verse? In the second half of verse 18, in the fire of his jealousy, the whole world will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth. Again, language that is very, to many years, quite unpleasant in the fire of his jealousy. How are we to speak of the God of love in such crude terms? But of course, we discover time and again in the scriptures that God presents himself as a jealous God. Jealous for his own honor and glory and name. His jealousy is a holy jealousy. It is a pure jealousy. And it finds expression in his holy and just judgment upon sin. Why does God judge? Because they, we, have sinned against the Lord. And before we go any further, we should pause and note that this is intensely personal. This message from so far removed, so long ago, intensely personal and immediately relevant to us all. Why? Because we have all sinned against the Lord. Why does God judge? But then Zephaniah also deals in some detail with the question, who does God judge? And in the prophecy, God's judgment is pronounced on two distinct groups. First of all, we have God's own people, or Jerusalem. Remember that the northern kingdom had already been defeated. They're in exile. What remains is Judah and its capital, Jerusalem. And so when

Jerusalem is spoken of, really the city represents God's people. And very clearly, Zephaniah speaks of judgment upon Jerusalem. But then also, Zephaniah speaks very clearly about judgment upon the nations. And a number of nations are referred to in the prophecy. I think we can reasonably say that those that are made mention of are a sample group of nations that represent all the nations. So who does God judge? He judges His own people, and He judges the nations. Well, let's think of each of these two distinct groups in turn. First of all, His own people. Now, God's judgment, upon His own people is dealt with in two sections of the prophecy, perhaps in more, but two that we want to just highlight. First of all, in chapter 1 from verse 4 through to verse 13 in our Bibles, it's helpfully entitled, Against Judah. And in this section, effectively, Zephaniah speaks of God's judgment against Judah, against Jerusalem, against God's own people. And then again, having moved on to speak of other nations, Zephaniah returns in chapter 3 from verses 1 to 4 to speak of God's judgment on

Jerusalem. So these two distinct passages within the whole that deal with this matter of God's judgment upon His own people. So what's the problem with God's own people that requires this response from God?

[14 : 58] If we were to distinguish between the two passages, and it's somewhat artificial to do so, but if we were, we could maybe entitle the two as describing, first of all, God's people guilty of bad religion, and then secondly, guilty of bad behavior, although the two are intimately connected. But in chapter 1, and from verse 4 to verse 13, we discover what we could call bad religion. Now, the language of Zephaniah, as I've said already, seems so alien and foreign to us that we struggle to see perhaps what he is saying. But as we scratch below the surface, we discover how contemporary are the religious sins the people were guilty of. And we can essentially identify three classes of bad or false religion identified by Zephaniah. First of all, Zephaniah accuses Judah of the worship of other gods.

Notice that in verse 4 of chapter 1, I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem. I will cut off from this place every remnant of Baal the names of the pagan and the idolatrous priests. Now, that reference to every remnant of Baal is maybe significant. It maybe is suggestive of a measure of success that Zephaniah had had in removing idolatry from the nation, but there was still this remnant. There were still those dedicated, you might say exclusively, to the worship of false gods. And Zephaniah says, for this reason, God will judge Judah.

But there's not only the worship of other gods, there's also what is perhaps so common then and indeed now, what we might call a mix and match religiosity. Notice in verse 5, Zephaniah goes on to say, those who bow down on the roofs to worship the starry host, those who bow down and swear by the Lord, well that sounds promising, and who also swear by Molech. So here we have those who said, no, we were still committed to the Lord. We're still good, God-fearing people, but on the side, as it were, they had their lover. They had another God that they swore by also. And is that not really, though the language is seemingly so alien to us, is that not a picture of so many who seek to balance a loyalty, so they say, to the God of the Bible, and yet in parallel would worship other gods and dedicate their lives to others that they would follow. But then you also have Zephaniah speaking of what we might call the abandonment of true religion. In verse 6, he goes on to say, those who turn back from following the Lord and neither seek the Lord nor inquire of Him. And so here the picture seems to be of those who at one time in their lives did seek to follow the Lord, but now they have turned back from doing so. Other matters have occupied their attention. Other concerns have taken preeminence in their lives, and they've turned back from following the Lord.

All expressions of what we might call a bad religion. But perhaps the most contemporary parallel that we find in Zephaniah's description of those professing to be God's people is to be found in verse 12 and in the second half of the verse. Notice what they say, these people, these people who think that all is well. What do they say? The Lord will do nothing, either good or bad. They're very confident that all is well. They're confident that they will not be the objects of God's wrath and judgment.

Why? Because the Lord will do nothing, either good or bad. Yes, we acknowledge that He exists. We acknowledge that He's the creator of the universe. We acknowledge that He's the Lord of the covenant. But at the end of the day, the Lord will do nothing, either good or bad.

[19 : 10] And I wonder, is this not the God of what many are still wanting to describe as Christian Britain? Is this, I wonder, the God of David Cameron when he speaks of Christian Britain, a God who will do nothing, either good or bad? Yes, in some way, in some vague way, He may exist or He may not.

But you can be sure of one thing, He will do nothing. What we do or what we don't do will have no impact and no response from this God. The Lord will do nothing, either good or bad.

His own people, subject to God's judgment because of these things. But also, there's this second passage that speaks of their, what I'm calling their bad behavior in chapter 3 and verses 1 to 4. Now, of course, sooner or later, bad religion and bad behavior converge necessarily. They are two sides of the same coin. But what about Jerusalem? What are we told of Jerusalem? Well, we're told that the city, corporately, we might say, is rebellious and defiled. There in verse 2 of chapter 3 or verse 1, rebellious and defiled, she obeys no one. She accepts no correction. She does not trust in the Lord.

The whole of the city can be so described. Now, it's clear that there were those within the city of whom that was not true. But it was so much the predominant attitude that the whole city can be so described. But then, of course, others are singled out for particular attention by Zephaniah.

Her officials and rulers are corrupt. Her officials are roaring lions. Her rulers are evening wolves who leave nothing for the morning. The political leaders, you might say, of Jerusalem. But then also the religious leaders, prophets and priests. What is said of them? Her prophets are arrogant. They are treacherous men. Her priests profane the sanctuary and do violence to the law. Bad behavior coupled with their bad religion going together.

[21 : 26] A marriage made in hell. I wonder. I don't know. But I wonder if it's significant that Zephaniah makes no mention of the king, the godly Josiah. And as we maybe just for a moment step back and think about Josiah. As Zephaniah saw what he saw, well, Josiah saw the same. And how Josiah must have wept as he looked out over Jerusalem. Not unlike one who would follow in his line who also wept over Jerusalem.

But notice also that in the midst of such a desperate panorama, God has not departed from the scene, nor does he simply look on in passive inactivity. Even before he executes decisive and visible judgment, God is at work. Notice there in chapter 3, immediately following on from this horrendous description of Jerusalem, we read in verse 5, the Lord within her is righteous. He does no wrong.

Morning by morning he dispenses his justice and every new day he does not fail. And so even in the midst of this desperate circumstance, God is within the city and he is dispensing justice and he is doing that which is right on behalf of his own. Is that not an encouragement for us when we might live in similar times to be reminded that however desperate the circumstance might be, the Lord is with us and he is righteous and he does no wrong. So God judges his own people or certainly those who claim to be his own.

He judges what, and we're not going to enter into the discussion, but he judges those nations that are deemed to be or would claim to be Christian nations. But very particularly if we are to draw the applications, he judges the church. He judges those of us who profess to be his people. But not only does God judge Jerusalem, he also judges the nations in chapter 2 and verses 4 to 15, we have a number of nations described. Now, what was the problem with the nations? Well, the heart of the problem is their hostile attitude to God as reflected or evidenced in their treatment of God's people, opposing God's people, insulting God's people, mocking God's people, threatening God's people. We don't have time to go through all that is said about them. But what we can say is that the nations referred to are representative of all the nations as they relate to Jerusalem from north, south, east, and west, or as it happens in the order that we have them in the prophecy, west, east, south, and north. First of all, we have mention of Philistia to the west, and we all know about the Philistines, don't we? We all know about Goliath of Gath, the arch nemesis of Israel over the centuries. But then to the east, we have

Moab and Ammon. Now, between Moab and Israel, there was a long-standing historic hostility that dated back to the time of the Exodus. You remember how the Moabites had sought to stand in the way of the Israelites taking possession of the promised land, and there had to be this great detour to avoid Moab. But then to the south, we have reference made to Cush, identified not precisely, but in some measure with modern-day Ethiopia, perhaps more broadly North Africa, including Egypt. Indeed, at this time, it was a Cushite empire that held sway in North Africa. And then to the north, Assyria.

[25 : 16] Assyria was, at the time of writing, the superpower, the superpower in Zephaniah's day, the ones who had conquered the northern kingdom. And they would attack from the north. And Assyria represents all nations that glory in their power and wealth and set themselves over and above God. Perhaps, in a nutshell, we can grasp the attitude, the proud attitude of Assyria in what we read in verse 15.

Of chapter 2, she said to herself, I am, and there is none besides me. I am, and there is none besides me.

If that doesn't encapsulate the folly of pride and arrogance, then I don't know what does. I am, and there is none besides me. I am, I do what I please. Nobody tells me what to do.

How many nations operate on that basis? How many individuals operate on that basis? We think of our own land, and the way in which we're going, we think of something that's very topical and current.

The bill that's making its way through, we trust, not through to its conclusion concerning assisted suicide. And it's interesting that the campaign that is seeking to support that bill carries this tagline, my life, my life, my death, my choice. Is that so different to the cry of the Assyrians? I am, I am, I'll decide, I'm in charge.

[26 : 54] And so God's judgment comes upon such folly and such arrogance and such a pride. Every nation will be judged. None are outwith the reach of the Lord's arm. And notice that in the judging of the nations, there is blessing for God's people. We find that in what is said concerning Philistia and also concerning Moab and Ammon. As a consequence of God's judgment of the nations, there is blessing for God's people. I'll leave you to read and to find in what way that pans out.

Right. So in answer to the question, who does God judge? Well, in a word, we can answer that question. Everybody. His own people and all the nations. But moving on to our penultimate question, how does God judge? Or to pose the question in a different manner, how does God deal with sin and rebellion? The sin of His own people, the sin of all peoples. How does God deal with sin and rebellion?

Now, the initial impression, as we read the prophet, it might be that he deals with it in an attack or a spurt of wanton and gratuitous destruction. The language is indeed sobering. In the very beginning, in verse 2 of chapter 1, I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth, declares the Lord.

And of course, those who would criticize and condemn the Bible today, and there are many of them, they would have a field day condemning the capricious actions of a jumped-up deity as they would see it.

But in the description of God's judgment against Jerusalem in particular, we are confronted with judgment that is exercised by means of sacrifice. At the heart of God's judgment, there is this element of sacrifice. Notice in chapter 1 and verse 7, be silent before the sovereign Lord, for the day of the Lord is near. The Lord has prepared a sacrifice.

[29 : 06] He has consecrated those He has invited on the day of the Lord's sacrifice. I will punish the princes and the king's sons, and so on and so forth. How are we to understand this? Well, God has established, as a fundamental spiritual principle that applies through time immemorial, that without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins. Sin cannot be dealt with by any other way. Of course, that expression itself is found in Hebrews in chapter 9, though simply picking up from truths that we find in the Old Testament. And in His covenant with His people, God provided for the forgiveness of sins by means of sacrifice. But, and this is the heart of the problem, the people despised God's gracious provision of a sacrifice for sin. And so, tragically, those who despised the sacrifice that God had provided would become themselves would become themselves the sacrifice that their own sin merits.

God had provided a sacrifice, but they despised the sacrifice. And so, God says, very well, then you will be the sacrifice. You will pay for your own sin. You will die for your own sin. You've despised my provision.

You've despised the sacrifice that I have provided. Very well. But there will be a sacrifice. And so, God's judgment is executed by means of sacrifice. Now, this was true in Zephaniah's day. It's true today.

And it will be true on the last great day of the Lord. But then we have one final question. When does God judge? Now, we touched on this at the beginning when we recognized that the day of the Lord ought not to be understood as only a single day. It is rather any and every day when God's hand is extended in just judgment upon unrepentant rebels. Now, it's certainly true that within that very broad scope of God's judgment in human history, there will be particular occasions or days, if you wish, that are powerfully and visibly days of God's wrath and judgment. If we think of the context in which Zephaniah was writing, well, within perhaps three decades of Zephaniah penning these words and announcing judgment upon Jerusalem, the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar would have raised the unholy city to the ground in 586 B.C. And indeed, Babylon would also serve as God's instrument of judgment upon Assyria and upon Cush. So, in those times, there was a recognizable, a discernible day when these announced prophecies would indeed be fulfilled or this announcement of judgment would be realized. And so, we can say that God has judged in the past and we can say that God does judge in the present. The Bible speaks of all men and women in the absence of grace as presently under the wrath of God. But also, we can say that God will judge in the future and He will do so on that great and terrifying and ultimate day of the Lord. But we must conclude or draw things to a close by asking one further question. And it is a question addressed to you.

How do you respond to this picture that is painted, to this reality that is before us of God as a God of judgment? How do you respond to this sobering picture of the day of the Lord, that day so vividly described for us in Zephaniah's prophecy? 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. And might I suggest that you would do well to respond with the words of the Philippian jailer who witnessed something of the awesome power of God and cried out, what must I do to be saved? What must I do to be saved? What indeed? What must you do to find protection from the wrath and judgment of God? Well, Zephaniah also points us in the right direction. Indeed, he points us in the only direction. Then in chapter 2, at the very heart of his prophecy, we have these words of opportunity and hope, gather together, gather together, O shameful nation, before the appointed time arrives and that day sweeps on like chaff, before the fierce anger of the Lord comes upon you, before the day of the Lord's wrath comes upon you.

[34 : 13] There's something you can do, says Zephaniah. Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, you who do what commands, seek righteousness, seek humility, perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord's anger.

Seek the Lord, seek righteousness, seek shelter from the wrath of God. But where? Where is the Lord that you must seek? Where is this righteousness that you do not possess? Where is the shelter that you so desperately need? In Zephaniah's day, I wonder if a serious inquirer would have found shelter in godly Josiah? Could Josiah have helped? He was a godly king. Well, Josiah, godly though he was, would have been powerless to help. But he can point us today in the right direction. Where, I wonder, is the only place in the New Testament where we meet Josiah? Well, we only need to turn a few pages to Matthew chapter 1 and the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew chapter 1. And let's just read two verses from that. In verse 10, reading in verse 1 to locate ourselves, a record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. In verse 10, Hezekiah, the father of Manasseh, Manasseh, the father of Ammon, Ammon, the father of Josiah. And then we come to the end in verse 16, and Jacob, the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.

The one who is called Christ from the line of godly Josiah, and indeed from the line of ungodly Manasseh, comes the Christ, the promised Messiah, the one the godliest of kings were but a shadow of.

And so when we ask, where is this one that we must seek? Where is this righteousness that we must find? Where is shelter to be sought? Well, we find that Josiah points us to Jesus. Seek the Lord. Seek and find the Lord Jesus Christ. Put your trust in Him. Repent of your sins and know for the forgiveness that He is ready and able to grant you. Seek righteousness. Seek and find righteousness in the Lord Jesus Christ.

As Paul reminds us in the first chapter of Romans, for in the gospel, a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last. Just as it is written, the righteous will live by faith.

[36 : 51] And seek shelter. Seek and find shelter united to the Lord Jesus Christ, the one who bore the wrath of God by offering Himself as the ultimate sacrifice for sin on that great day of the Lord. And so Paul can say also as he writes to the Romans, since we have now been justified by His blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through Him? And notice that unlike with Zephaniah, there is no perhaps for those justified by the blood of Jesus. Zephaniah, perhaps overcome by all that he witnessed, speaks in those terms. Perhaps you will be sheltered. Well, there is no perhaps in the gospel. If you come and look to Jesus and seek shelter in Jesus and seek shelter in Jesus, you will find the shelter that you need.

And I would urge you to seek shelter in Jesus. We all need shelter in Jesus. Whatever your background or circumstances, you need the shelter that is to be found only in Him. Did you know that the meaning of Zephaniah, the name Zephaniah, is the Lord protects or the Lord hides? Or we could translate it, the Lord shelters. And so Zephaniah, this morning, in his very name and urgently in his message, pleads with you from ages past, seek the Lord. Seek righteousness. Seek shelter from the day of the Lord's anger.

Seek and find in Jesus. Let's pray.