

Zephaniah 1:1-2:3 Sermon

The Day of the Lord

What is God going to do about sin? It's a simple question, I'll say it again, what is God going to do about sin?

Welcome to Zephaniah, a little book in the Old Testament by a guy with a strange name, it's one of those books that we may struggle to find in our Bibles, and I'm not sure it helps too much to say it's between Habakkuk and Haggai. And last week we had a little introduction to this book and how to read and understand books of prophecy in the Bible in general. I think this question, what is God going to do about sin, is the question that Zephaniah is seeking to answer. Primarily Zephaniah is speaking to the people of Judah, speaking about what God is going to do about the sin and apostasy in their nation, but let's not get too comfortable, because the word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah has relevance for us too. And what is clear in chapter 1 is that God has set a day when He will deal with sin, and that day is coming.

Imagine for a moment with me that you're a teenager, for some of us that will be easy to remember, some it was a bit longer ago. So you're a teenager, and your parents have gone away for the week and they've given you some house rules to follow while they're gone. Lock the doors when you go to bed, feed the cat twice a day, no parties, don't leave the lights on when you leave the house, don't break anything, keep it clean and tidy. And halfway through the week you get a bit bored, and think, why don't I throw a party? They'll never find out! We'll be careful.

And so you invite all your friends round, you're up until 3, and as good as your intentions were, you weren't really very careful, and your friends certainly weren't. Oh well, I'll clean it up in the morning, you say to yourself, and you go to bed. And you're woken up with a start at 7am by the phone ringing – it's your Mum, "Hi darling, we're coming home early. See you in a couple of hours, bye!". Oh dear, now you're in trouble! You're never going to get this mess cleaned up, you know that as soon as your parents walk through the door, you're going to face the full force of their anger. You know what you've done wrong, the clock is ticking, judgment is coming.

And that's what it's like with God, except sin is far worse than disobeying your parents, and his anger is far worse than that of a houseproud middle-aged woman. So let's see what Zephaniah says about the day of the Lord, the day when judgment comes.

1. Complete destruction (1v2-3)

And the first thing is complete destruction, and that's in chapter 1 v2-3. "I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth".. It's somewhat bleak isn't it? Pretty universal, everything swept away. Those words "face of the earth" link back to Genesis 6, where God says pretty much the same thing when He plans to send the great flood, the one with Noah. Back then, it was the natural response of a holy God to the wickedness of humanity. And it's

the same in Zephaniah's day. What's God going to do about sin? He's going to sweep away everything. Just like the flood, God's judgment is going to cover the whole earth.

And "I will sweep away both man and beast; I will sweep away the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea – " As if it wasn't clear enough that God was sweeping everything away, He lists it. And it's quite interesting the order in which he does it – man, beast, birds, fish. On the fifth and sixth days of creation, God made fish, birds, beast and man, now he's sweeping them away in the reverse order. It's almost as if God is doing an act of de-creation, winding the clock back. In his fury He is pressing rewind, getting rid of all that He has made. Scrunching up the paper and throwing it in the bin.

The last bit of this verse is a bit confusing, the word for idols there is literally 'rubble'. The ESV translates it "and the rubble with the wicked". God is not even going to leave city in ruins, He's getting rid of the wicked inhabitants, sweeping them away, reducing the city to rubble, and then sweeping away the rubble too. By the time He's finished, you won't even know there ever was anything there. Complete destruction.

2. Completely Deserved (1v4-9)

And now we move on to verses 4-9 and we focus in on Judah and Jerusalem, as we see how this Day of God's judgment is completely deserved. Completely deserved, v4-9.

Last week we had a bit of a look at some context of this book, verse 1 of the chapter tells us the time period, which kings were ruling, and you can read about it at the end of the book of 2 Kings. To summarise, the Northern Kingdom – Israel, had been conquered by Assyria and dispersed, and the Southern Kingdom – Judah – had had some pretty bad Kings, such as Ahaz who burnt his own son as a sacrifice to foreign gods. So at this point, God tells the people of Judah that exile is coming for them too. So Zephaniah's message is a warning that the judgment is coming, and a call to respond.

But he also points beyond the judgment on Judah. 2 Peter says "Prophecy never had its origins in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit". So we don't know how much Zephaniah was aware of it, but we can be sure that God used his words to speak beyond his immediate context. This is I think why verses 2 and 3 seem so universal. Zephaniah is using hyperbole, and apocalyptic language to talk about the exile, but God uses His words to project forward beyond Zephaniah's generation, to the ultimate judgment day, the day of complete destruction on all the earth when Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead.

The rest of the chapter is quite specific to Judah, but I think we can uncover a bit of our own hearts here, and see how the problem of sin is just the same today. Look with me at verses 4 and 5 "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 Molek". The inhabitants of Judah have turned away from God to idols, Baal and Molek – Molek being the detestable pagan God who demanded child sacrifice. They hadn't stopped worshipping God, they did bow down to the Lord, but they had added other gods to their worship. "Yahweh's good,

but he's not quite enough, I want to be like the nations around me, so I'll worship these other gods too". Or even worshipping the stars and planets. We can't mix up our religion, you can't worship Jesus and follow Buddhism, you can't seek God in the Bible and the Qu'ran. Our God, Yahweh, demands wholehearted devotion. And that means we can't put any other created things on a pedestal with Him either! Is God our god? Or is money, comfort or status our ultimate desire?

Look at verse 6 "Those who turn back from following the LORD, and neither seek the Lord nor inquire of Him". This is not looking to God for guidance, going through life our own way, maybe striving after those things that compete with Him for our ultimate desires, making decisions based on how we can get those things, rather than looking to Him in prayer. What a tragedy it is that so many committed Christians, after long periods of serving God, slowly turn their backs on the gospel. Don't let it be you! Don't be led astray by the gods of this world, don't turn back! Keep seeking the Lord, keep inquiring of Him!

And when God levies this charge against His people, all they can do is v7 "Be silent before the Sovereign Lord" – in the dock, we have no leg to stand on. No defence, nothing to say, because we know all the accusations are true! God has prepared a sacrifice, He's sacrificing the disobedient to appease His wrath, and He calls the nations, those he has invited to come and watch.

The people of Judah are turning away from Him, worshipping other gods, cladding themselves in foreign clothes, mixing with the surrounding nations, filling the temple with violence and deceit. The sin in their hearts is all too relatable to me. When Jesus comes again, God will see what's in our hearts and our lives, all will be revealed, and on that day we will be silent – we will have nothing to say for ourselves. The judgment is completely deserved.

3. Completely unavoidable (1v10-18)

And the third thing – this day is completely unavoidable, verses 10-18. In v10-11 we see a few more specifics on the judgment on Judah – this is first and foremost a prophecy to them after all – the fish gate, the new quarter, the market district, all places in Jerusalem. And what are they told to do? Wail! Don't try and avoid this judgment, it's coming no matter what! So what can you do but wail! Woe is me, we will be wiped out!

Let me read verse 12 – "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." They have done a big swap, they've put God in the place of the idols. *Idols* are the powerless, inactive ones, and yet they think that the Lord is going to sit back and not act. No, in fact God is going to do something, His judgment is certain.

I love, or rather, hate, the image of God searching Jerusalem with lamps. Old Jewish houses wouldn't have been lit so well, and as such they would have been dim in the middle of the day. So picture this, God busts down the door, lamp in hand, searching every corner. You can't hide anything from Him. You've thrown the big party, and you may have tidied up the house a bit, but there's a broken vase behind the sofa, a pile of bottles in the corner of the

kitchen, crisp packets shoved under the rug. But your parents are going through the house with a bright torch, uncovering everything.

The banter you have with your work mates when no other Christians are around, the things you mutter under your breath when your husband or children are driving you up the wall, or shout in the car when nobody else is there, the websites you go on when you're tired and lonely. Nobody knows about that right? Well God does. He sees. And it makes Him angry.

The day is coming, let me just read verses 14-16, so we can feel the rhythm of these verses. "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."

It's not going to be a good day, is it! Like a train hurtling down the tracks, this day of the Lord is coming – we can't do anything to stop it.

Your parents are on their way back, they'll see what you've done to the house, and they will be furious. And God is so much more furious at His people's sin – v17 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." God is going to gut and dismember the disobedient.

"Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the 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." Here Zephaniah widens it again, talking about the whole world, not just Judah. God's wrath is like a consuming fire. When Jesus comes again, it will come suddenly, like a thief in the night, and everyone has sinned, everyone is under His judgment. The Day of the Lord- complete destruction, completely unavoidable, completely deserved.

4. But perhaps... (2v1-3)

But that's not the end of the story! We could expect the book to end there, but it doesn't. And this is our last point, "But perhaps" and that's in 2v1-3. That's taken from verse 3 "Seek righteousness, seek humility, perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord's anger."

There's something Judah can do *before* this happens, before the decree takes effect. Maybe it's not so unavoidable. What do they do? Seek righteousness and humility, in the hope that they may be protected. That 'perhaps' isn't doubt, it's hope. There may just be a chance. And it's not presumption, not "Oh if we seek righteousness, we'll be protected." It's hoping against hope that maybe, just maybe, God will be merciful. It's similar what the people of Nineveh said when Jonah came to them and preached judgment, "God may yet relent".

And through the rest of Zephaniah, the prophet shows us how God's people may be sheltered on the day of His wrath, how we may be protected, so come back next week and the week after to hear more about that, but for now, let's see what this means for us, as new

testament believers, as those who live on the other side of Jesus' death and resurrection. Because as we've said this warning of judgment is not just about exile, but about eternal judgment on our sin.

And the way that we can be sheltered from the day of God's wrath, is that for us who trust in Jesus, that day has already come. Because on the cross, Jesus experienced "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" This was the day when Jesus faced God's anger for us.

This anger, this judgment is unavoidable yes, a price has to be paid. But if we trust in Jesus, well it's already been done! Payment received in full. God has no more wrath to pour out on us because it's all been taken by His son at Calvary. Jesus bore the anger of the day of the Lord. The man jumped in front of the train to protect us, the older brother takes the wrath of the parent who returns to find the house trashed. He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree.

If you're not a Christian here today, I hope you see how serious this is. There is no way we can avoid God's judgment on our own. The only chance we have is Jesus. If we don't accept His sacrifice for us, one day, we will have to face God's anger ourselves. No matter how good we think we are – the judgment is deserved, and unavoidable. If you have friends who aren't Christians, we need to warn them! It's not enough to show God's love to our friends and family if we don't tell them about this coming judgment. We need to warn people to run to Jesus and hide with him.

And for us who trust in Jesus, should we take the warning of Zephaniah 1 less seriously? Well, yes and no. Yes, we don't need to wail, living in fear that God will punish us for our sins. The punishment has already fallen on Jesus.

But in another way we do need to fear God. Is our picture of Him too soft and cuddly? When we think of God, do we see him as one who will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, as one whose anger is like a consuming fire? If we don't see Him like that, then I hope Zephaniah shows us that we've got Him all wrong. Do not take the warning of this chapter lightly, as if we've got Jesus as a little "Get out of Jail Free" card. We very much still need to seek righteousness and humility, not because those are the things that save us, but because it's only in humility and an understanding of how sinful we are that we will flee to Jesus for forgiveness.

We need to see how angry our sin makes God, understand the reality of the judgment that is coming, and flee to Jesus, shelter under His blood, under His sacrifice, and from then on seek to live righteous, humble lives, turning away from even the slightest hint of sin. How can we continue to be proud when we see how much we have done wrong? Be humbled under the mighty hand of God.

The Day of the Lord – complete, deserved, unavoidable destruction. But perhaps, if we come to Jesus, we may be sheltered on the day of His wrath. Let's pray.

This the power of the cross, Christ became sin for us, took the blame, bore the wrath, we stand forgiven at the cross.