

The Great Day of the Lord

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[0 : 00] Please be seated. You might like to open up the Bibles at page 765 to the Old Testament reading from the book of Zephaniah.

This is the second of four weeks looking at this book of the prophet Zephaniah, page 765. And let's pray. God our Father, we pray that your word this morning will take root in our hearts and in our minds so that we may be ready for the Lord's return.

Amen. There are times when silence is the only right option.

A few years ago, I was walking through Sachsenhausen concentration camp on the northern suburbs of Berlin.

And seeing the cells where prisoners were kept, the places where they were executed, you walk around the place in silence.

[1 : 09] It's the same at the Holocaust Memorial Yad Vashem in Jerusalem where I've been a few times. Seeing a pile of children's shoes that were taken from them before they were killed in various concentration camps.

Seeing one of the railway carriages that took people from parts of Germany to Auschwitz or Dachau. It's a place you walk around in silence.

It's the same at the battlefields of the Somme or at Gallipoli. The same when we saw the planes fly into the World Trade Center towers.

You see the horrors, the atrocities, the tragedies. And there's nothing in a sense that you can say. You're stunned into silence. The grief or shock leaves us dumb, literally.

The terror of those sorts of events seems to bite our tongue. Or the despair just takes our voice away. In the face of the warning of the day of the Lord, we're told to be silent.

[2 : 22] Verse 7 of chapter 1. Be silent before the Lord God. Be silent because this is an event of extraordinary grief, destruction, tragedy, horror, terror, fear.

Be silent. Be silent. Be silent in the face of the terror that's described in the verses we saw last week. In verses 2 to 6.

I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth. This is worse than all the concentration camps, all the tsunamis, the earthquakes, the floods, the wars, the rumors of wars.

All put together this final day. Be silent before the Lord God. Be silent also because there's no use protesting.

There's no use pleading innocence. There's no use shaking your fist at God. There's no use pretending that you can avert that day. Be silent before the Lord God.

[3 : 32] Be silent because the Lord's verdict is decided. This day is inevitable. There is no avoiding it.

There's no way of stopping it. There's no change that the people will or can make. It is coming. Be silent.

And this day is near. Indeed, it's very near. The day of the Lord is at hand, we're told. In verse 7. It's about to come. It's not pretty language that we saw last week.

God sweeping away everything off the face of the earth. It's not pretty language that we see again this week either. Verse 7 finishes by saying that the Lord has prepared a sacrifice and he's consecrated his guests.

But this is not one of the three pilgrimage festivals. This is not a joyous occasion. This is not anticipating the streams of pilgrims going up to Jerusalem, singing the Psalms of the Ascent, looking forward to a festival and feast to commemorate God's salvation.

[4 : 39] That's not the sacrifice that the Lord has prepared here. But with some irony and some horror, the sacrifice, in fact, is God's own people.

They're about to be destroyed. God's fierce judgment is about to be executed. He will not stay his hand any longer. And in a sense, they are the sacrifice.

It's an image of almost repugnance, certainly of horror. The punishment will begin with the leaders, verse 8 says. As so often in the Bible, the leaders are held to higher account than God's people in general.

On the day of the Lord's sacrifice, I will punish the officials, the government leaders, the religious leaders, the judges and those who are elders of tribes and clans within tribes.

I will also punish the king's sons. Which is a little bit odd, we might think. Why not punish the king? But if you remember last week, the king is a good king.

[5 : 45] Josiah is the king, a reforming king, who tried to undo all the apostasy and idolatry of his two immediate predecessors, who'd reigned for, between them, close to 50 years.

But Josiah's sons were not like he. And as history would have it, and perhaps after these words, maybe indeed spoken at this time, we're not exactly sure when in this time these words were spoken.

When Josiah died tragically at the age of 39, one son succeeded the throne. He only lasted a few months before he was got rid of by the Egyptians and another son was put on the throne.

And after he was got rid of his son, Josiah's grandson was king for a time. But then the Babylonians got rid of him and put on a third son of Josiah. But all Josiah's sons and his grandson were apostate.

They're idolatrous. They were not like Josiah. They were like Josiah's father and grandfather. Idolatrous, apostate, and rather evil. Political opportunists to an extent.

[6 : 45] But it brought them no long life and no honoring of God. God will punish the king's sons. And certainly that's what he did to in the years that they reigned and thereafter.

And then verse 8 finishes, And all who dress themselves in foreign attire. Now simply we might think that's a little bit strange. Does it mean that we're not allowed to wear things from other countries?

But behind it is something a bit more insidious than that. The wearing of foreign attire, especially in the place of government leadership and religious leadership, was a reflection, and this is an implication of that, of the infiltration of pagan worship and pagan practices, pagan culture into the life of God's people, into the court and into the temple.

In particular, the religious leaders are singled out in the next verse, verse 9. On that day I will punish all who leap over the threshold. Now without knowing a little bit of background, we might think that's an odd expression.

Is this somehow punishing those who get married? Well, not at all. Again, it's probably a reflection of the infiltration of pagan worship and superstition.

[8 : 03] Earlier in the Old Testament, in 1 Samuel 5, the Ark of the Lord had been captured by the Philistines. As it was placed in the temple of Dagon at Ashdod, it brought down the statue of Dagon, crashing onto the threshold.

As a result, the priests of the Philistines would no longer step on the threshold, but would go over it, walk over it, or step right over it, or leap over it.

And so, presumably, this is an implication of that pagan practice and superstition that has somehow come into the Jerusalem temple, infiltrating and corrupting the worship of God.

Verse 9 goes on to say they fill their master's house, and clearly, again, that's a reflection of, really, it's the Lord's house, the Lord's temple, but by saying the master's house is probably a derisory way of saying they don't actually worship the Lord.

They worship other gods. But they're filled with violence and fraud. The Hebrew word for violence is Hamas. You know some Hebrew, you see, from modern Middle East politics.

[9 : 08] And fraud, that is, the infiltration of wrong gods, brings about, in effect, wrong morality, violence, and fraud, infiltrating the very worship of God in the temple.

But not just the government leaders and the religious leaders, also the marketplace will be the object of God's wrath and punishment. So, verses 10 and 11, On that day, says the Lord, a cry will be heard from the fish gate, a wail from the second quarter, a loud crash from the hills, the inhabitants of the mortar wail, for all the traders have perished.

All who weigh out silver are cut off. We're not exactly sure where those places are. The fish gate is probably one of the old gates of Jerusalem, maybe where the trade from the coast came in with fish.

The second quarter or the new quarter is probably a slight extension of Jerusalem, either to the north or further to the west. The mortar seems to be the place of trade, the marketplace.

In a sense, it's, and the hills would be the hills around Jerusalem, the Mount of Olives and others. In a sense, it's saying, there will be no part that will be left, spared, the judgment and the punishment of God.

[10 : 24] All the trade, and all the reliance on trade and wealth, is futile. It'll come to nothing. At that time, I will search Jerusalem with lamps.

We go from the open places, the temple and the marketplace, to the hidden places. I will search Jerusalem with lamps. That is, there will not be anywhere safe to hide.

There is no escape from the judgment of God on the day of the Lord. We think of the stories of people like Anne Frank hiding in virtual closets and cupboards in Amsterdam during the war and the occupation of Holland by the Germans.

And we think of others who've tried to hide, sometimes successfully, sometimes not, from enemies. Here there will be no escape. That's the threat. You cannot escape the day of the Lord.

It will come no matter where you are. And then verse 12 goes on to say that God will punish the religiously complacent.

[11 : 34] Not just those who deliberately and overtly worship other gods with idols and so on and adopt pagan practices, but those who are what we might call practical atheists.

That is, they may say, oh yes, there is a God, but I don't actually believe God does anything. There are people in our society like that. They believe there is a God. It's a deist view, in effect.

That is, God who made everything, wound it up like a watch, sets it on the mantelpiece and sits and watches from a distance. And these are those sorts of people. Practically, they're atheists. That is, there is no real God to worship.

There is no real God to deal with. And see how they're described in verse 12. I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, the Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm.

The expression, they will rest complacently on their dregs is wonderfully evocative. The language is, is those who are thickening in their lees.

[12 : 38] Lees are the residue when you have wine. You know, if you drink a glass of red wine, you leave a bit in the bottom and overnight it sort of hardens around the bottom of the glass if you haven't put it in the washing machine already, or dishwasher already.

These are people who, who it uses this language of lees and fermentation in a sense, suggesting maybe these are people who just lull about and perhaps drink a bit too much, who are lazy and lethargic, who just thicken and dry out like the lees at the bottom of a barrel or cask of wine or something to that effect.

That is, they're indifferent, lazy, lethargic spiritually, drying out spiritually, thickening in their lees.

And the words that are attributed to them at the end of verse 12, they say in their hearts. That is, in practice they believe there is, there's some God but he doesn't do anything. But notice that God will punish those who speak such in their hearts.

That is, you don't have to speak outwardly, verbally, for God to know. He knows the secrets of the heart. He knows what people think in their hearts and they too will be punished and judged by God.

[13 : 54] That is, there is no escape. Don't think that because no person sees, we can be safe. For God, of course, knows our hearts.

And that's what verse 12 is saying. There is no escape. These people probably tend to be comfortable in their lifestyle, fairly self-sufficient. Hence their complacency, life's good.

And so verse 13, speaking again about the same group of people, their wealth shall be plundered and their houses laid waste. That is, the people who think, oh yeah, there is a God but he doesn't actually do anything, are people who are more often than not successful in life, comfortable in life, and become complacent and therefore spiritually idle and lethargic, thickening in their lees.

But God says, their wealth will be plundered, an enemy will come and take it. Their houses the same. And then the verse 13 finishes, though they build houses, they shall not inhabit them.

Though they plant vineyards, they shall not drink wine from them. What frustration. All that effort into a house and you don't even live in it, all that effort into a vineyard and you don't live long enough to enjoy its fruit.

[15 : 05] But for those who knew their Old Testaments, these are not new words. These words are exactly what you find in Deuteronomy 28. And in Deuteronomy 28, God is warning what will happen to his people if they disobey the covenant, the curses of the covenant.

And so what Zephaniah is doing is proclaiming God's keeping his word. What he said he'd do if you disobeyed, he will do because you are disobeying. Others will live in your houses or they'll be destroyed.

Others will enjoy the fruit of your vineyard or they will be destroyed. Last week we saw that the opening picture is a picture of universal destruction in verses 2 to 4, or 2 and 3.

I'll utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth and then it hones down and focuses on Judah and Jerusalem. And that's what we've seen thus far. It's Jerusalem that is the focus of all these verses, verse 7 through to verse 13.

But now it expands again to the universal from verse 14. The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast. There is an urgency here for time is not on our side.

[16 : 19] It is coming and coming soon, the day of the Lord. And whereas originally the people of the Old Testament might expect the day of the Lord would be a great day, the day when God would defeat all God's enemies and therefore all of Israel's enemies, the day when God would vindicate his people and overflow them with all his blessings and prosperity and security, a day that they would look forward to eagerly and with anticipation and joy, the sound of that day is bitter, verse 14 says.

It is not what you expect. Because in effect, by your sins and idolatry and apostasy, you've actually moved yourselves from being in the people of God to being amongst the pagans, amongst the enemies of God.

And therefore on the day when he comes to destroy his enemies, you've moved yourself into that camp. And that's what the day of the Lord will be like. It'll be bitter and not sweet.

The warrior cries aloud there. Not a warrior who will come to rescue you, but the warrior who will come to judge and punish you. Do you remember Princess Diana's funeral and the Westminster Abbey bell tolling?

Single tolls. I can't remember how many there were. There were lots. In effect, verses 15 and 16 are a bit like that. The death knell sounding, the rhythm of the two verses suggests that the nails of the coffin are being hammered in.

[17 : 51] That day will be a day of wrath, 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.

A day, a day, a day. The death knell of God's people is tolling. It's the language of Mount Sinai where God met with his people there as an act of mercy and revelation to establish a relationship with them.

The thick darkness, the cloud and so on. But even there, the people of God were terrified that having heard the voice of God, they may not live and asked for a mediator, Moses, to stand between them and God.

Well, on this day when God will come to judge, how much more terrifying will it be? It's the language of the book of Revelation as well. The language of the final day when God will punish all his enemies and vindicate his people.

It's the language of the conquest of Jericho. In verse 16, the day of the trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and the lofty battlements.

[19 : 04] And on that day of the conquest of Jericho as the first city that the people of Israel conquered over the Jordan River, they blew the trumpet, went around the walls and down they came. God was victorious.

But what this is saying is that on this day your own walls and fortifications will not protect you. They will come down like it happened at Jericho.

For God is fighting to conquer you. You see, the presence of a holy God is intimidating and frightening. And too often we presume upon God.

We think that he's like a benign grandfather in a rocking chair. Just someone that we can cuddle up close to on a warm Sunday afternoon with the football on. But it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

And on that final day it will be a shocking, fearful, terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God. The description goes on.

[20 : 04] Verse 17, I'll bring such distress upon people that they shall walk like the blind. Again an expression that comes out of Deuteronomy 28, the covenant curses. And again something that was literally fulfilled as one of Josiah's sons Zedekiah had his eyes plucked out as he was taken off.

And then the rest of verse 17, because they've sinned against the Lord their blood shall be poured out like dust and their flesh like dung. It's a sense in which the punishment fits the crime because King Manasseh, Josiah's grandfather, had poured out innocent blood.

Now God will pour out the blood like dust. 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 passion, the whole earth shall be consumed for a full and terrible end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.

Wealth will bring no safety. In particular, the image there is of where a nation being threatened by another nation will pay it money, substantial money, treasures from its temples and palaces.

That's what Israel had done to Assyria and what it had done to Egypt and Babylon at different times when those countries were the superpowers. There's even an ancient column steel, if I remember rightly, it's in the British Museum that shows King Jehu paying money to the Assyrian emperor to keep him away, to say, yes, we're on your side, we're subservient to you but don't destroy us.

[21 : 31] God is saying, you can't bribe me. You can't pay me your wealth of silver and stay my hand. I am coming and judgment is coming and you cannot stop it.

There is no escape. As we saw last week, there is an imminent fulfillment to an extent of these words. 587 BC.

Within 20 years, maybe 30 years of these words being spoken by Zephaniah, Jerusalem was destroyed, razed to the ground. Only the foundations left of the city and the temple.

The Babylonians had come and conquered and Jerusalem was no more, derelict and desolate. But the universal part of Zephaniah's picture didn't happen then.

All the rest of the world kept on living. What we saw last week and we see again this week is that those events, the destruction of Jerusalem then, is the forewarning, a warning sign to remind us of what the day of the Lord is like and it's coming and it's closer.

[22 : 35] Jesus used the same idea when he spoke in Mark 13 and other passages, saying about the day of the Lord and the destruction of Jerusalem after Jesus' life on earth in 70 AD was just a small foretaste of what that final day of the Lord will be like.

So 587 BC, Jerusalem destroyed, warning. 70 AD, Jerusalem destroyed, warning. And 2,000 years later, the day of the Lord is closer than ever and hastening fast.

We see in chapter 1 there is no escape. One of the bleakest chapters in the scriptures, actually. We are meant to feel the terror. We're meant to feel the horror. We're meant to be shocked and grieved into silence.

We're meant to sense utter hopelessness. We're meant to feel devastated and despondent. We're meant to recognize that we stand under the judgment of God.

There is no escape. We're meant to see the ferocity of God's anger and be scared of it. At the end of chapter 1, we are meant to be afraid.

[23 : 43] Rightly so. What can we do? The opening verses of Zephaniah 2 provide just a skerrick of hope.

It's a final, desperate, urgent invitation. A plea, really. Gather together. Gather, O shameless nation. Shameless because they commit their sins without shame.

They're not embarrassed by their idolatry, their apostasy, and their immorality. They probably boast in it and revel in it. Shameless nation, gather, not for a celebration, but at your last, final chance.

Before you're driven away like the drifting chaff. Before there comes upon you the fierce anger of the Lord. Before there comes upon you the day of the Lord's wrath. Three times before. For emphatic urgency of the judgment that is imminent.

Time is against us and the clock is ticking down. These are desperate times. It's now or never. You can't wait. Because when that day comes it's too late. There's no second chances then.

[24 : 52] Now or never. Three times before for the urgency and in verse 3 three times seek. Seek the Lord all you humble of the land who do his commands.

Seek righteousness. Seek humility. But God's people don't seek him. We saw that in verse 6 of chapter 1 last week. Now's the final plea.

Seek him. This is a critical verse to understand what's going on here. We cannot save ourselves from judgment. We have nothing to bargain with God or to offer God by way of getting ourselves out of this predicament.

We're not in control of the time and the time is running out to get our lives in order that somehow we may merit rescue.

Seek the Lord. He's our only chance. Our only hope. Seek him. As you are in all your filthy sinful rags is in effect what's being said in chapter 2 verses 1 to 3.

[25 : 59] Throw yourself out in for mercy. Flee to him. It's your only hope. Nothing you can do will save you. Seek the Lord. Notice how verse 3 finishes.

Perhaps, perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the Lord's wrath. Perhaps. Doesn't sound very promising.

It's not actually meant to be. It's teaching us a very serious lesson. Mercy is not our right. We have no claim on God for forgiveness salvation and mercy.

We can't demand it of him. We don't deserve it. Mercy is not our right. We have no right to have in one sense here an expectation that God will forgive.

People say God will forgive. It's his job. No. Perhaps he will. It's not our right to receive mercy. See, God is free to show mercy to whom he will.

[27 : 09] God is sovereign in dispensing mercy. He's our only hope. There is no other hope. Throw yourself at him. Seek the Lord. See, it's easy for us to take mercy for granted, to presume upon grace.

It's easy for us as Christians to know that Jesus has come to give us mercy and to say, well, that's God's business. There's mercy there. I know I can tap into it. And we presume complacently upon us.

Well, that complacency is what's being attacked here in verse 12 as we saw. People who are thickening in their lees, sitting back thinking, oh, well, God's given me mercy in Christ and I'm just luxuriating here like a bit of red wine, drying out and fermenting.

We are saved by the skin of our teeth. Mercy's not our right. Seek the Lord. Perhaps we'll be hidden on the day of the Lord.

Throwing ourselves at God's mercy is an act of utter humility. And those who are proud in heart can't do it. See, pride thinks, I've got something to offer God.

[28 : 18] I can bargain with God here. God, look at my religious record. Look at my giving. Look at my wealth. I'll give it all to you. I'll plead with you. Come on, God. Have mercy on me if I do this or this or this.

That's pride. That's self-sufficiency. Pride in our hearts is an insidious sin. And pride to think that somehow we can save ourselves or contribute to it or bargain with God for mercy is utter folly.

One of my favourite writers is Scott Fitzgerald and in one of his great short stories *The Diamond As Big As A Ritz* he has a man who is wealthy beyond measure but his life is falling apart standing on top of a hill with, I think if I remember rightly a gold ingot or certainly a stack of money and shaking his fist trying to plead with God to have mercy in effect.

God will have none of that. nothing in my hand I bring but simply to thy cross I cling naked come to you for dress helpless look to you for grace foul eye to the fountain fly wash me Saviour or I die a day is surely coming the New Testament reinforces it and it is near and nearer every day we're not to presume upon God's grace we're not to think that it's our right that we deserve it or merit it or that we've got something that God wants that we can bargain with for mercy with fear and trembling we're to fling ourselves at God's feet to fling ourselves on Jesus before it's too late before the day comes because as soon as the day comes the final siren is gone and you can't kick goals then before it comes we're to fling ourselves on God for mercy it's an enormous thing for God to rescue someone from judgment it's no light thing none of us deserves to be rescued and it cost

God his son's life to rescue any of us and in flinging ourselves at the feet of the holy God we're to ask ourselves have I really got the temerity to ask this holy God for the blood of his son so that I may be rescued so that I may receive mercy but it's our only hope seek the Lord all you humble of the land who do his commands seek righteousness seek humility perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the Lord's wrath woman teammate saw the widen would act you