

Judgment Day for the People of God

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- [0 : 0 0] Good morning everyone. Now I'm sure this was my mistake, but the first reading I've obviously given the wrong reference. It was actually meant to be 2 Peter and I think it's important for us to hear that.
- So if you want to grab your Bibles, I'll just read it for us. It's on page 988, 988, 2 Peter, chapter 3.
- If you're really thinking, you might have been wondering what does 1 Peter 3 have to do with Zephaniah? But hopefully this will become clearer. Chapter 3, verse 1.
- This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you. In them I'm trying to arouse your sincere intention by reminding you that you should remember the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Saviour spoken through your apostles.
- First of all, you must understand this, that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own lusts and saying, where is the promise of his coming?
- [1 : 0 8] For ever since our ancestors died, all things continuous they were from the beginning of creation. They deliberately ignore this fact that by the word of God, heavens existed long ago and an earth was formed out of water and by means of water, through which the world of that time was deluged with water and perished.
- But by the same word, the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the godless. Okay, we'll come back to that later.
- Now, if you'd like to flick back, please, to Zephaniah, that's page 765. Page 765. And you should have been given an outline that looks like that, that will help you follow along.
- So if outlines help you use it, if not, just listen along and have your Bibles open to Zephaniah 1. Let me pray that God will help us now as we look at his word.
- Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. We pray that even with a difficult topic we're looking at this morning on judgment, that you would help your word sink into our hearts and minds and that you would use your word and that by your spirit, you would help us to believe it, to obey it, and that you would use it to change us, to follow you and to be more like Jesus.
- [2 : 3 2] And we ask this in his name. Amen. Part of my job for the last few years in Melbourne has been teaching at the Bible College of Victoria and last semester at Ridley.
- And what I've been teaching is the Old Testament and particularly for first year students, I give them an overview of the whole Old Testament in one year. And my students have often been amazed as we've gone through the Old Testament that they say the theme of judgment just keeps coming up over and over.
- And in fact, I'd have a running joke with them as we get to a new book of the Old Testament. I'd say, you know, take a wild stab in the dark. What theme do you think this book might have? And they'd say, well, judgment. And yes, they'd usually be right.

One of the reasons they were amazed though was that most of them said that in their churches they never heard the theme of judgment being preached on. And these were students who were coming from all different backgrounds and denominations.

But the one thing they had in common is they said they hardly ever heard the topic of judgment being preached on at their church. Now, if you're thinking, by the way, well, you know, maybe that's because we don't preach much on the Old Testament.

[3 : 43] We preach on the New Testament. New Testament's full of grace. Old Testament's full of judgment. That wouldn't be right either. The New Testament is also full of judgment. In fact, the New Testament speaks about hell and much more so than the Old Testament and in fact, usually from the lips of Jesus himself.

So why is it that Melbourne churches, by and large, don't speak about judgment? I guess there would be many reasons. One reason in particular, I think, is that lots of churches don't preach through books of the Bible.

If you did, it would be very hard to avoid the topic of judgment. But I suspect one of the reasons is that the theme of judgment is seen as inappropriate or out of place.

If you look at it this way, if you go to a celebration, let's say you're going to a celebration for somebody's birthday or a baby's been born, it's a happy time, it's a great occasion, it would be very out of place or inappropriate if you spoke about death or something traumatic in that sort of situation.

It's out of place. Now, if you were in a war zone, famine, floods, as there are in Queensland, if something terrible was happening, then speaking about something like death or something traumatic would not seem out of place.

[4 : 56] And I suppose I wonder whether our churches are, if you like, in constant party mode so that the theme of judgment just seems out of place. And in one sense, being in party mode is not wrong at church.

We should be celebrating. We should be thankful for what God has done. But also, we're called on to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Jesus. And we know the Christian life is often one of suffering.

But if life is good, we have everything we need and church is good and it's like a constant party, then bringing up the theme of judgment will, I think, seem inappropriate and out of place.

And I wonder if that's one of the things going on. The thing is, though, the Old Testament, Jesus, the apostles, speak about judgment over and over.

And if you preach through the Bible, you can't avoid it. This morning and for the next couple of weeks as well, I want us to look through the book of Zephaniah. I've got particular reasons for doing that, and not because I want to preach on judgment, by the way.

[5 : 58] But the theme of judgment is unavoidable and particularly in chapter one, it's unrelenting. But I think that this is written here for our good and hopefully it will help us to focus more on God and following him.

So let's have a look at it together. Zephaniah chapter one, verse one is a brief introduction to really the whole book, where it says, the word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah, son of Cushi, son of Gedalia, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, in the days of King Josiah, son of Ammon of Judah.

Now probably the most important words there are the first ones, that this is the word of the Lord. And we're being reminded here that this is God speaking to us this morning.

As we look at the book of Zephaniah, as we heard it read before, as we consider it now, God himself is speaking this word to us. And as such, we're to take it in to, as we used to say, read, mark, learn, inwardly digest it, to believe and obey this.

It's God speaking to us. But also, it's a human word as well as God's word. It's given through the prophet Zephaniah. So I want to spend just a brief moment now thinking about who he is and the times in which Zephaniah spoke this word of God.

[7 : 18] It's unusual there in verse 1 that his lineage or genealogy is given. In fact, that's unique amongst the prophets. And I think the reason why is you'll see there, if you follow it, that his great, great grandfather is none other than King Hezekiah.

And you might remember, if you know your Bibles well, that King Hezekiah was the king of Judah towards the end of the 8th century, so not long after Amos, whose book we're looking at in the summer series.

And King Hezekiah was the king in 722 BC when the 10 northern tribes were sent into exile and on just into the beginning of the 7th century.

And Zephaniah here is his great, great grandson. And at the end of verse 1, we're told that he's speaking in the days of King Josiah, who's also descended from King Hezekiah.

He's his great grandson. And we know that Josiah was king from 640 to 609 BC. So Zephaniah is speaking here in the 7th century BC.

[8 : 22] He's one of the 7th century prophets, speaking towards the end of the 7th century. And to understand what he says, you need a little bit of background from the 7th century. For the whole first half of that century, King Manasseh was ruling, who was Josiah's grandfather and the son of King Hezekiah.

And Manasseh was known as the worst king ever. He turned his back on God. He introduced immorality and idolatry on a massive scale into Judah.

But Josiah, his grandson, was a good king. In fact, one of the best kings of Judah, by contrast. And in the 620s BC, Josiah began a series of reforms designed to bring the people of God back to God again.

And here, probably in the 620s, then Zephaniah the prophet is speaking. Well, that's Zephaniah in his times. Let's have a look at what he says.

He starts his message with a bang. There's no nice easy start or lead up or welcome. Just straight into this horrific, devastating start in verse 2.

[9 : 28] He says, Three times you see in those two verses, the words sweep away are repeated.

God says there, He will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth. That's a huge statement. God is saying He will bring an end to creation. This is speaking about the final universal day of judgment, the day of judgment.

God will bring an end to this creation and to everyone living in it. He will sweep away, he says, people, animals, birds, fish. He'll sweep away the wicked.

This is judgment day and the end of creation. It's a devastating beginning to what Zephaniah says. But he goes on to say that the people of God will actually be caught up in this judgment of God.

And we'll see this in Amos as well. The people of Judah might have been looking forward to the day of God's judgment, that this would be a time they thought when their enemies would be judged and they would be vindicated.

[10 : 48] But God's saying instead, they will be judged on that day. Have a look at verse 4. God says, I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

As God stretched out His hands to rescue Israel from Egypt, now He says He'll stretch out His hand in judgment against His people. And the reason why is given in the following verses as it outlines their sins that brings God's judgment.

In the second half of verse 4, God speaks about there still being a remnant of Baal worship in Judah, idolatry. And He speaks about the idolatrous priests who would be officiating in this Baal worship.

Now, worship of Baal, of course, is wrong because it's idolatry and that's clear enough. But there's a bit more to it than that. The god Baal in ancient times was a fertility god and the idea was that the nations around Israel were worshipping gods like the god Baal who was thought to bring rain.

And rain brought crops, crops brought wealth and comfort. So if you wanted to have the things of the world and be wealthy and comfortable, then Baal was said to give that to you. Now, the people of Israel, of course, knew that that was not right.

[12 : 06] They were told that it's the God of Israel who would bring rain and comfort and wealth and the things that they needed. But I think that they're doing here what I would call, they're having an each way bet.

They're thinking, well, maybe the God of Israel is the one who will bring my rain and comfort and wealth, but maybe the nations around us have it right and the people around us have got it right and in fact, it's not the God of Israel but the God of Baal will bring rain and wealth and comfort.

So, you know, why not go for both? And you see that in the second half of verse 5, this sort of each way bet they're having. It speaks about those who bow down and swear to the Lord but also swear by their king.

That's in the footnote. I think the footnote's right there. Milcom's in the Greek, not the Hebrew. That's the God of the Ammonites. But their king is actually probably the God Baal.

Either way, what it's saying is they're saying, let's follow God. Maybe he's the one who's got it right and he'll give us what we want. But let's also follow the gods of the nations because maybe they'll give us what we want as well.

[13 : 13] Now, even worse than that is verse 6, that there are those who turn back from following the Lord altogether and don't seek God or inquire of him.

So there are some people who just have nothing to do with God and just ignore him and get on with their lives as they are, as if God's not even there. Well, that's the people of Judah but what I want us to do is think a little bit about what that might mean for us now.

Basically, in the original context, Zephaniah is warning the people of Judah of God's judgment. And in fact, it's probably beyond that. If you read two kings and the part about King Josiah, it's saying that they've gone beyond the point of no return.

It's not just that they're warned of judgment and it might be averted, but it's saying they've gone too far and judgment's coming and that's it. This is just an announcement of judgment. God is just saying it is coming and there's nothing that they can do about it.

God hates their sin. He hates their idolatry. He hates their having an each way bed of trying to follow him and following the world and he hates their ignoring him.

[14 : 24] Ignoring God is not neutral. I've got lots of family and friends who aren't Christian who think they're being neutral towards God by ignoring him. They say, I don't hate God.

I'm not sort of shaking my fist at God and opposing him. I'm just not prepared to follow him either. I get on with my life as I am without him. And they think that's being neutral towards God.

But God says here that it's not neutral and that he hates it. Now, I don't know everybody here at all and there might be some of you here this morning who are not yet Christian and don't follow God and trust in Jesus.

And we're very glad that you're here. But what this is saying to you is that ignoring God is not neutral. You may well just get on with your life as you are without God and think that that's neutral.

But this says here that God hates people ignoring him and not following him. And so I want to ask you, I think God is asking you, please don't ignore him.

[15 : 25] Don't turn your back on him. God hates it if you do that. Now, for those of us who are Christian and say we're Christian and trust in Jesus, I think there's a warning here for us as well that this is saying that God hates it if we try and follow him and also follow the ways of the world and that we must not have this sort of each way bet, if you like.

Now, I realise that we won't be having an each way bet by following the God Baal. Baal is no longer around. But in effect, we could be doing the same thing. The God Baal, as I said, was offering wealth and comfort and that's what the world around Israel was offering them.

And I think it's the same now. The world around you and me offers us wealth and comfort and what everyone else has. And I want that and I'm sure you want that as well. But this is saying that we mustn't have an each way bet.

We mustn't live as if we say, well, maybe God and the gospel are true. I think they probably are. But maybe they're not. And just in case, maybe I want to make sure that I have everything the world offers me as well.

I don't want to miss out on what everybody else has around me. And so I think I need to ask myself and you should ask yourself, can you be a Christian and be like the world around you?

[16 : 48] Can you look and live like a 21st century Doncaster non-Christian and also follow Jesus? If you follow Jesus wholeheartedly, would you, should you look very different to the world around us?

In other words, I need to ask myself and you need to ask yourself, are you having an each way bet following God but also having everything that the world offers?

Well, let's come back to Zephaniah. We'll think more about that in a moment. But back to Zephaniah, this theme of God's judgment of his people is unrelenting, I'm afraid, but again, it's for our good, so stick with it.

In verse 7, Zephaniah says, God says, God calls here for silence before the terrible day of judgment and my guess is that the idea is that we all sin and fall short of the glory of God and when we stand before God in judgment, there's nothing that you or I will be able to say in our defense and that all you can do is put your hands on your mouth and say nothing before God.

And here God's judgment there in verse 7 is called the day of the Lord which is the phrase we'll see used in Amos and that's used throughout the Old Testament and it's repeated over and over. That's the theme here in chapter 1, the day of the Lord.

[18 : 19] So you see in verse 8, the next verse, he says, on the day of the Lord's sacrifice. Verse 9, on that day. Verse 10, on that day. Verse 12, at that time.

Over and over, he'll speak about the day, the day of the Lord. And he says in verse 7 that the day of the Lord is at hand. It's near and it's just around the corner.

It's about to come, Zephaniah is saying. And God in the second half of verse 7 speaks ironically about this day of the Lord, this day of judgment. He speaks about it as a sacrifice.

He says he's prepared a sacrifice and he's invited guests. And verse 8, that it's the day of the Lord's sacrifice. And I think that that's using covenant language there.

That's Israel was in covenant with God and the covenant was ratified by sacrifice. But Israel's broken the covenant and it's as if God's saying here, now they will be the sacrifice.

[19 : 18] And perhaps the guests who are invited are in fact the nations like the Babylonians who will come in judgment against them. And in fact, 40 years or so after Zephaniah said this or less, the Babylonians came and destroyed the temple, raised Jerusalem to the ground and sent the people of Judah into exile.

This judgment indeed came upon the people of Judah. And Zephaniah is saying that's a foretaste of the final universal judgment day to come.

On that day Zephaniah says in verse 8, he will punish the officials and the king's sons. God will punish the leaders of his people.

In verse 9 it speaks about again on that day that he will punish certain people, those who are following the lead of those leaders. Verse 12 again speaks about him punishing the people in the second line there.

Verse 12 I want to focus on a bit now, it's particularly chilling I think. God says at that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps and I will punish the people.

[20 : 34] And the idea of searching Jerusalem with lamps is that this will be a thorough judgment, God will search out every little bit of sin to punish his people for it.

There will be no escape, no stone left unturned, it will be a thorough and complete judgment which is a frightening thought. I know often again my friends who aren't Christian or even for us as Christians we say, you know, you look at the mess the world is in and say, why doesn't God come and do something about it?

Why doesn't he stop that suffering? Why doesn't he fix the mess this world is in? And the Bible's answer all the time is, well he will. One day God will come in judgment and completely fix up the mess of this world but when he does it will be a complete and thorough judgment.

He will judge everyone for everything wrong we have done, not just the Bin Ladens and the Hitlers but everyone like you and me who has ever said anything wrong, done anything wrong or even thought anything wrong.

It will be a thorough judgment and that's a frightening thought. Now here in verse 12, Zephaniah has in particular though people in mind who are complacent and apathetic.

[21 : 50] If you look at verse 12 he says, at that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs or thicken on their dregs. Those who say in their hearts the Lord won't do good nor will he do harm.

God says here he will punish the complacent and the apathetic. People in Judah who thought well God's not particularly intervening in our time so I guess he never will. It's not like he's going to come and save people.

It's not like he's going to come and judge people. He's not going to do anything good or bad. Now a New Testament reading and again sorry I gave the wrong one but the one from 2 Peter chapter 3 talks about people in New Testament times who were just like that.

Who were scoffing at the idea that Jesus would return and bring the final judgment and saying look the world goes on as it always has from the beginning nothing's changed day by day is the same all the time.

There's not going to be this final judgment in the end of the world with Jesus return. What a ridiculous idea. Well God says here in Zephaniah that his judgment is certain and the book of Zephaniah is here in our Bible because what he said came true.

[23 : 01] The Babylonians came and destroyed Judah and Jerusalem. This judgment fell on them not long after Zephaniah said this and that's why it's in our Bibles and just as certainly the final universal day of judgment will come.

Now note by the way before we move on to the next section in verse 13 it talks about the wealth of these people who are complacent and apathetic and I presume it's because of their wealth and all that they have that they are apathetic and complacent.

They're living like the nations around them. They're following God but have everything the world has to offer. That's made them apathetic about God. They think the world will just go on us. It always has. But God says in verse 13 that in judgment they'll lose everything.

Their wealth shall be plundered and their houses laid waste. And so I think we're being warned here as the people of God. Warned that we need to live in light of God's certain coming judgment.

We're being warned that we need to trust God completely and follow him. Not have an each way bet. Not have a foot in two camps. One in the kingdom of God and one in the world being just like the world around us.

[24 : 14] Not to think that the world will just go on us. It always has. Not to be complacent and apathetic. God's judgment is certain. And I think it should really focus our minds.

Not to live with a foot in each camp but to live now wholeheartedly for God in light of a certain judgment to come. To finish off this passage verses 14 to 18 go on in this unrelenting manner returning to the theme of the day of the Lord.

Verse 14 basically repeats verse 7 saying that the day of the Lord is just around the corner. The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast. It's about to come Zephaniah says.

And in the second half of verse 14 he says the sound on that day will be bitter. And bitter because it's a day of battle. He speaks there about the warrior crying aloud.

The warrior of Judah will face the warriors of Babylon in battle and be defeated and they will cry out in distress and anguish. In verse 15 Zephaniah has this repetition, there's often repetition in this chapter where over and over he repeats the day of the Lord and he says that that day, verse 15, 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.

[25 : 47] On that day he's saying the internal emotions of people will be of distress and anguish, they'll be in terror at God's judgment. Externally there will be ruin and destruction because it's a day of war.

He says, verse 16, it's a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities of Judah. And indeed as I said, the Babylonians came and destroyed everything not long after Zephaniah said this.

But he's saying it's not just the Babylonians who were against the people of Judah, it's God himself. Verse 15 says it's a day of wrath and if you look down at verse 18 at the third line there, it's made clear it's a day of the Lord's wrath.

And if you go back to verse 17 before it, God speaks about bringing his wrath or distress upon people because they have sinned against the Lord. The Bible here and elsewhere is saying sin really is that bad.

It really is that horrific in God's sight. He really is angry with our sin. He really is angry with people ignoring him or angry with people who are apathetic and complacent or have an each way bet, living for him yet living like the world does.

[27 : 06] And the day will come, Zephaniah is saying, when God's wrath will be poured out on this earth. Verse 18, on the day of the Lord's wrath he says, the whole earth shall be consumed for a full, a terrible end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.

I have a Christian friend who went through a very hard time last year and some of you on the prayer chain have been praying for this situation. He has four little girls and just over a year ago his fourth and youngest daughter was born with Down syndrome.

And part of that apparently is that you often get leukaemia and so not long after she was born she was diagnosed with leukaemia and she spent half a year last year being treated with chemotherapy in hospital.

And I can't imagine the stress and pressure that my friend would have had to go through with that. And now that I can look back on it in hindsight I guess it's not surprising that under that stress and pressure he finally cracked.

But sadly what he's done is he's walked out on his wife and four little girls. Now he still insists that he's a Christian and all of the Christians who know him including me we've all said to him well you can't say you trust in Jesus and then refuse to repent.

[28 : 30] If you really repented you go back to your wife and four children. But he sees that as too hard and he's refusing to do it. So he still wants to say that he's a Christian but he refuses to live as one.

Now it's made me think I'm not often tested in a big way like that but I'm often tested in a small way. Certainly when people are tested in a big way often thank goodness as Christians they pass the test but again and again Jenny and I in ministry have seen people not pass the test and walk away from obeying God.

But for me as I think about it even in the small things day by day I'm tested and then comes the decision will I trust God when I'm tested or will I disobey him? Will I give in to that temptation or will I obey God?

Will I continue to want and hang on to the things the world offers me? I love the things the world offers me, I want them. Will I keep hanging on to those things or will I give them up in order to better serve God?

Will I follow God even when it hurts? In other words will I really trust God that his way is the best? Now I think it's obvious for my friend that when he walks out on his wife and four children that he's having himself on to say that he's Christian because he's disobeying God.

[29 : 55] But I guess for me and maybe for you our situation is more subtle and it reminds me of how easily I can deceive myself and rationalise my sin and I'm being warned here from Zephaniah not to have an each way bet, not to say I'm trusting Jesus but to go on living like everyone around me.

I think that this passage really focuses our mind to think about this theme of judgement, it's for our good. And Zephaniah is reminding us this morning that God's judgement is certain and will certainly come.

I don't know when Jesus will return, you don't know but he will certainly return and bring God's judgement on this world. It won't just go on as it always has and God will judge the world in his wrath.

And sin really is that bad. God really does hate sin, hate people ignoring him, hate our apathy and hate us following him but also living like the world.

And for my part I very much doubt that you can be a Christian and live like the world around us. I certainly know for me that if I want to wholeheartedly follow God it will mean that I have to give up some time, give up money, give up the things that I would want.

[31 : 15] I think God's judgement should really focus our mind that we need to wholeheartedly follow God and not have a foot in both camps.

Do you know three times in the New Testament as well Christians are warned of God's judgement in 1 Corinthians 6, Galatians 5 and Ephesians 5, we're warned that if we live like the world around us we will not inherit the kingdom of God.

I've put some verses there on your outline, the first one from Ephesians 5, Paul says, Let no one deceive you with empty words for because of these things the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient.

The next one, 1 Corinthians 6, he says, Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Don't be deceived. Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers, none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.

Paul warns us as Christians of God's judgement. And again, I hope this morning that the theme of God's judgement will help me and you focus our minds on what's important, to make us wake up and take following God seriously, that this world will not just go on as it always has and that we must live now in light of the coming of God's judgement.

[32 : 40] But I don't want to finish there, I want to finish with what the Bible says is good news, which is the encouraging and good news of Jesus' death in our place. What Zephaniah is saying is that that judgement that came on Judah at the hands of the Babylonians was a foretaste of the great day of final judgement to come.

And it's not the only time that's happened, there's many little judgements in the Bible if you like, many foretastes of the great judgement day to come. So Jesus, for example, prophesied the second destruction of the second temple and Jerusalem which occurred in 70 AD after his death and resurrection and that was another foretaste of the great day of judgement to come.

But the biggest foretaste of the final day of judgement is of course Jesus' death on the cross. Because on that day the wrath of God that should fall on you and me for our sins fell on Jesus in full instead of on us.

And so there is no need for any of us here this morning to fear God's wrath or the day of God's wrath because Jesus has already taken that punishment on himself, paid the penalty for our sins and taken God's wrath on himself in your place and mine.

Paul goes on from that 1 Corinthians 6 quote Paul is saying if you trust in Jesus you are washed clean of your sins and when the final day of God's judgement comes and his wrath is poured out on earth you will be spared God's wrath and we will be spared God's wrath not because we are good of course or not because we have lived a good Christian life but because Jesus has paid the penalty for our sins and taken God's wrath on himself already in our place.

[34 : 44] We are no longer under God's wrath, the gates of Hades will not prevail against us the church because we are washed clean of our sins. So let the word of God encourage you this morning.

Jesus has paid for your sins, you will be spared God's wrath at the judgement but he will return and that judgement is certain and it is terrible and awful in its finality and ferocity.

Zephaniah says the whole world will be consumed, a full and terrible end God will make of the inhabitants of the earth and so I hope this focuses our minds this morning to live in the light of God's certain coming judgement, not to have an each way bet but to follow God wholeheartedly and live in the light of that judgement.

Let me pray that God will help us to do that. Heavenly Father as we hear of your coming judgement, we pray that you would give us a right fear of you.

We pray that you would help us each one to trust in what you have done for us through Jesus. We thank you so much that Jesus took on himself your wrath at our sin and has paid for it in full.

[36 : 04] We thank you for this forgiveness of our sins and your love for us. Heavenly Father we pray that you would help us not to have a foot in each camp but to follow Jesus wholeheartedly and completely.

We pray that you would help us to live in the light of your final judgement and we ask this in Jesus name. Amen.