

A time for singing

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[0 : 00] Zephaniah and chapter 2 which can be found on page 953 of the church Bibles. We're going to start at verse 4.

For Gaza shall be deserted and Ashkelon shall become a desolation. Ashdod's people shall be driven out at noon and Ikron shall be uprooted.

Woe to you inhabitants of the seacoast, you nations of the Cherethites. The word of the Lord is against you. O Canaan, land of the Philistines, and I will destroy you until no inhabitant is left. And you, O seacoast, shall be pastures with meadows for shepherds and foals for flocks. The seacoast shall become the possession of the remnant of the house of Judah on which they shall graze.

And in the houses of Ashkelon they shall lie down at evening. For the Lord their God will be mindful of them and restore their fortunes. I have heard the taunts of Moab and the revilings of the Ammonites.

[1 : 12] How they have taunted my people and made boasts against their territory. Therefore, as I live, declares the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Moab shall become like Sodom and the Ammonites like Gomorrah, a land possessed by nettles and salt pits and a waste forever.

The remnant of my people shall plunder them and the survivors of my nations shall possess them. This shall be their lot in return for their pride, because they taunted and boasted against the people of the Lord of hosts.

The Lord will be awesome against them, for he will famish all the gods of the earth, and to him shall bow down each in its place all the lands of the nations.

You also, O Cushites, shall be slain by my sword, and he will stretch out his hand against the north and destroy Assyria, and he will make Nineveh a desolation, a dry waste like the desert. Herds shall lie down in her midst. All kinds of beasts, even the owl and the hedgehog, shall lodge in her capitals. A voice shall hoot in the window.

[2 : 25] Devastation will be on the threshold, for her cedar work will be laid bare. This is the exultant city that lived securely, that said in her heart, I am, and there is no one else.

What a desolation she has become, a lair for wild beasts. Everyone who passes by her hisses and shakes his fist. Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled, the oppressing city.

She listens to no voice. She accepts no correction. She does not trust in the Lord. She does not draw near to her God. Her officials within her are roaring lions.

Her prophets are fickle. Treacherous men. Her priests profane what is holy. They do violence to the law.

The Lord within her is righteous. He does no injustice. Every morning he shows forth his justice. Every dawn he does not fail.

[3 : 33] But the unjust knows no shame. I have cut off nations. Their battlements are in ruins. I have laid waste their streets, so that no one walks in them.

Their cities have been made desolate, without a man, without an inhabitant. I said, surely you will fear me. You will accept correction. Then your dwelling would not be cut off, according to all that I have appointed against you.

But all the more they were eager to make all their deeds corrupt. Therefore, wait for me, declares the Lord, for the day when I rise up to seize the prey.

For my decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out upon them my indignation, all my burning anger, for in the fire of my jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed.

The second reading is taken from Zephaniah chapter 3, verses 9 to 20. So continuing from where we just were.

[4 : 40] For at that time, I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the Lord, and serve him with one accord. From beyond the rivers of Cush, my worshippers, the daughter of my dispersed ones, shall bring my offering.

On that day, you shall not be put to shame, because of the deeds by which you have rebelled against me. For then, I will remove from your midst, your proudly exultant ones, and you shall no longer be haughty, in my holy mountain.

But I will leave in your midst, a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord, those who are left in Israel. They shall do no injustice, and speak no lies.

Nor shall there be found in their mouth, a deceitful tongue. For they shall graze and lie down, and none shall make them afraid. Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion, shout, O Israel, rejoice, and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem.

The Lord has taken away all the judgments against you. He has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst. You shall never again fear evil.

[5 : 50] On that day, it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear not, O Zion, let not your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a mighty one who will save.

He will rejoice over you with gladness. He will quiet you by his love. He will exult over you with loud singing. I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival, so that you will no longer suffer reproach.

Behold, at that time, I will deal with all your oppressors, and I will save the lame, and I will gather the outcast, and I will change their shame to praise and renown in all the earth.

At that time, I will bring you in, at the time when I gather you together. For I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.

Tim and Val, thanks very much indeed for reading. Let me add my welcome to Jake's. My name is Simon Dowdy, and I'm the lead pastor of Grace Church.

[6 : 57] Now, we prayed already, so let me begin by asking you whether you can think of a time when you suddenly saw a sort of completely different side to someone's character, perhaps someone who actually, up to that point, you felt you knew quite well.

Perhaps a colleague who, normally speaking, is gentle and quiet, and yet in a meeting where there's an important decision that needs to be made, you suddenly see how insistent they are and how strong they are.

Or perhaps someone who always seems rather cool and distant, and then something happens, and you suddenly see a very different side of them. You suddenly realize, actually, they are empathetic, and they are able to be compassionate.

Or perhaps you've seen someone weep, or perhaps you've suddenly realized how funny someone is, or how resolute they are. It's not, of course, that their personality has changed. It's just that there was actually a whole side of them which you haven't really noticed.

Well, what about God? We all have, don't we, a view, I guess, we might call it, a view of what God is like. Whether you're here this morning and you're looking on the Christian faith, or whether you are a Christian already.

[8 : 18] But is our view of God the whole picture? Might some of us have a one-sided view of God?

Might there be part of God's character that we pay more attention to? Part that we pay less attention to? It's why I think this little book of Zephaniah is so helpful, studying it as we are both last week and this week, because it helps us, if you like, to recalibrate our view of what the true living God is like.

And in particular, that God is a holy God who always acts in justice in his world and will do so on the final day of history.

And also, he is a God of love who always acts for the good and salvation of his people. Hence, last week, we saw, didn't we, back in chapter 1, verse 2, we saw that the book opens with one of the most awesome descriptions of judgment anywhere in the Bible.

Chapter 1, verse 2, as God says, I'll utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, declares the Lord. And yet, this week, we're going to see one of the most extraordinary statements in the Bible of God's love and compassion for his people.

[9 : 46] I guess the fact is that most of us tend towards a view of God either that emphasizes his holiness and his justice at the expense of his love and compassion, or a view of God that does the

opposite, so that emphasizes his love and compassion at the expense of his holiness and justice.

The way to resolve that is not to find a sort of happy medium in the middle, you know, whereby God's justice feels a bit more palatable and God's love has been watered down a bit.

No, rather, it is to grasp that God is always perfectly holy, that he always expresses his settled wrath against human sin and rebellion, and yet he is also always a God of love and compassion. So the answer is not a kind of a fudge in the middle, rather it is to hold on to both sides of God's character at the same time.

Which is why if you turn to the outline on the back of the service sheet, I've used these two headings today as we come to our second of two talks in Zephaniah. Firstly, the awesome judgment of God, and then the extraordinary love of God.

[11:19] Firstly, the awesome judgment of God, and we're going to pick up at chapter 2, verse 4, where we left off last week. And chapter 2, verse 4 onwards describes the judgment day from the point of view of a geography student.

Perhaps one or two are rejoicing that you are a geography student no more, I don't know. But certainly what Zephaniah is doing here is he is showing the judgment of God falling on all four points of the compass.

So just briefly, in verses 4 to 7, he looks to the west, in verses 8 to 11, to the east, in verse 12, to the south, and in verses 13 and 14, north, to Assyria and its capital, Nineveh.

Now, at the time Zephaniah was writing, Ashurbanipal was the king of Assyria. In fact, there was an exhibition all about him in the Museum of London earlier on this year, in the British Museum, rather, not the Museum of London, earlier on this year.

And it was all about him and the mighty empire that he built. It stretched in the west from Cyprus to the east to Iran.

[12:34] He liked to present himself hunting lions to show his great power over the untamed forces of nature. His capital city, Nineveh, was the biggest city in the world.

He describes himself on inscriptions as the king of the world. So, not a humble man, but in many ways it was true.

And yet, what will the Lord God do? Chapter 2, verse 13, he will stretch out his hand against the north and destroy Assyria, and he will make Nineveh a desolation, a dry waste like the desert.

And that is precisely what happened. So, within 30 years of Zephaniah writing in 612 BC during the reign of Ashurbanipal's successor, Babylon, the new superpower, invaded and the Assyrian empire was destroyed along with its capital city, Nineveh.

And verse 14 is a terrible description of what that cultured metropolis would become. Herds shall lie down in her midst all kinds of beasts, even the owl and the hedgehog shall lodge in her capitals, a voice shall hoot in the window, devastation will be on the threshold, her cedar work laid bare, as once again nature takes over.

[14:04] Ashurbanipal describes himself as the king of the world, but God's verdict is in verse 15, this is the exultant city that lived securely, that said in her heart, I am and there is no one else.

What a desolation she has become, a lair for wild beasts, everyone who passes by her hisses and shakes her fist. Now the point in chapter 2 verses 4 to 15 is that God alone is sovereign over the nations and he is sovereign over the nations whether or not his rule is recognised.

And that then leads to chapter 3 verses 1 to 8 because at first sight we might think that God is still speaking about Assyria as he says in verse 1, woe to her who is rebellious and defiled the oppressing city and yet it's clear as we read on into verse 2 that he is addressing those who at least have a knowledge of God and know him as their God.

Verse 2, she listens to no voice, she accepts no correction, she does not trust in the Lord, she does not draw near to her God.

What's more they've experienced the goodness of his rule, verse 5, every morning he shows forth his justice, each dawn he does not fail. Surely we come to verse 7 and think they will fear him, they will have a right regard for the Lord but know as we're told at the end of verse 7 all the more they were eager to make their deeds corrupt.

[15:45] In other words you see regardless of where you kind of put yourself on a spectrum so to speak whether you worship the gods of the nations and the idols of the nations in chapter 2 verses 4 to 12 whether you're prosperous and all powerful like Assyria in verses 13 to 15 or whether in chapter 3 verses 1 to 7 you have all the privileges of outwardly at least being part of God's people

and appearing to be part of God's people the judgment of God is a reality and that is how the section finishes verse 8 for my decision is to gather nations to assemble kingdoms to pour upon them my indignation all my burning anger for in the fire of my jealousy all the earth shall be consumed now of course it's obvious isn't it certainly in our culture talk of there being a final day of history a final day when God will act in justice is just dismissed completely out of hand it might be the humour of Mark

Twain who reputedly said go to heaven for the climate and hell for the company or it might be the understated put down of the late poet laureate John Betjeman who said that when the end of the world came he wanted to be in the haberdashery section of the department store Peter Jones because I quote nothing unpleasant could ever happen there either way whether it's Mark Twain or the kind of gentle understated put down of John Betjeman we simply don't take it seriously which is why of course when we come to the New Testament and when we come to the teaching of Jesus Christ Jesus doesn't do what I guess we think he does or at least would love him to do in the popular imagination which is to say don't worry God is no longer serious when he speaks about judgment instead as we saw last week he echoes precisely

Zephaniah's language of this great day when there'll be a gathering of the nations let me remind us of Matthew chapter 25 which we looked at last week as Jesus says when the son of man comes in his glory and all the angels with him then he'll sit on his glorious throne before him will be gathered all the nations and he'll separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats in other words you see when the Bible speaks of the judgment we mustn't imagine it's the kind of Bible equivalence of project fear and Brexit note Jesus says this is serious he is serious about the judgments and we should be too the awesome judgment of God but secondly let's think about the extraordinary love of God chapter 3 verse 9 as God says for at that time

I will change the speech of the peoples literally translated it means I will convert the speech of the nations and as we read on through the rest of chapter 3 the sheer enormity of what the Lord God has in mind becomes clear and I'll try to capture it in those three bullet points there on the outline a renewed people in a new world in whom God delights and we're just going to look at each one in turn first of a renewed people and that is clear by the way in which the section starts in verse 9 this whole idea of changing the speech of peoples to a pure speech that all of them may call upon the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord it's describing a reversal of the tower of Babel in the book of Genesis at the beginning of the Bible you remember how mankind builds a tower it's a power bid as they seek to be the ones who are ruling in God's world to establish human rule and ambition in opposition to the rule of God and in response

God comes down and you'll remember how he confuses their languages so they're no longer able to understand each other and they are dispersed as a result across the whole world but you see Zephaniah is now looking forward to a day when that confused speech will be changed and rather than establishing themselves as rivals to God wanting to run their lives without him instead they'll call upon him and they will serve him and notice verse 10 are people not simply made up from those who were within the borders of geographical Old Testament Israel but from far beyond verse 10 from beyond the rivers of Cush my worshippers the daughter of my dispersed ones shall bring my offering looking forward to the day when God will draw people from many nations from all nations as Jake was reminding us at the start of our service this morning to himself and what kind of people well clearly a renewed people verse 11 people who will no longer live in rebellion against God proudly exalting themselves people who verse 12 will be humble lowly who will seek him who verse 13 will do no injustice who will speak no lies in whom there will be no deceit wouldn't it be great to be somewhere to live somewhere where actually that describes everyone so different from what we currently experience what's more notice they are full of rejoicing verse 14 sing aloud o daughter of Zion shout o Israel rejoice and exult with all your hearts o daughter of Jerusalem what are they rejoicing in well that they have nothing to fear verse 15 the Lord has taken away the judgments against you he has cleared away your enemies the King of Israel the Lord is in your midst you shall never again fear evil

[22 : 35] I take it you and I are troubled aren't we by fears all the time perhaps fears for the future perhaps fear of failure fear of illness fear of death itself and yet of course above and overall all of those fears is rightly the fear of judgment that's what's been at the very heart of Zephaniah's message and yet wonderfully here is a people who no longer face the judgment God himself will dwell with them a renewed people but secondly in a new world and we can see that in verse 13 let

me read it verse 13 just that little phrase at the end for they shall graze and lie down and none shall make them afraid it's an echo of the security and perfection at the garden of Eden it's shorthand for what the prophet Isaiah describes in chapter 11 and it's so shorthand

I think it's just worth turning back to Isaiah chapter 11 so on page 695 Isaiah chapter 11 page 695 now I don't know how you would describe a perfect new creation but this is how Isaiah describes it Isaiah 11 verses 6 to 9 a renewed creation the wolf shall dwell with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together and a little child shall lead them the cow and the bear shall graze their young shall lie down together and the lion shall eat straw like the ox the nursing child shall play over the whole of the cobra and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den they shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain for the earth shall be full of knowledge of the

Lord as the waters cover the sea so back in Zephaniah chapter 3 verse 10 this is Zephaniah's shorthand for that new creation don't you long for a world like that perhaps for some of us the problem some of the time is that life in this world is too good or at least good enough to keep our focus off that future day and yet of course in those shafts of reality where life is less good don't we long for a new world for God's new creation thirdly a renewed people in a new world in whom God delights because I wonder if you noticed as Tim was reading this passage for us it's not just the people who are singing it's not just the people who are rejoicing God is rejoicing as well verse 17 the Lord

God is in your midst a mighty one who will save he will rejoice over you with gladness he will quiet you by his love he will exult over you with loud singing I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival so that you will no longer suffer reproach it's almost the wrong way around isn't it you sort of think to yourself well surely it should be God's people who rejoice in God but actually this is the other way around this is God who is thrilled with his people as he reveals his passionate heart for his people just think for a moment what gives you joy and delight I guess it may be another person perhaps a husband or wife or a child or a friend it might be a particular place and you can just picture it now and as you picture yourself in that special place then it sends your spirit soaring or perhaps it's an activity or a sport that really makes you feel alive and yet what does

God delight in God delights in his people you see just have a think about this question if you're someone who has put your trust in Jesus Christ how does God think of you now how does God think of you now we start with thinking about or certainly being conscious of how other people think of us whether it's likes on social media or whether it's a performance appraisal at work whatever it is and the fact is the way other people think of us has a very powerful impact doesn't it on us and the way in which we think of ourselves and actually the way in which we go about our lives does God think of you well yes if you put your trust in Jesus Christ you are a forgiven person Jesus has died on the cross for your sin but does that mean that God now simply tolerates you you know and actually that he'd really rather just keep you at arm's length

[28 : 10] I mean you know we said a confession this morning does that mean God doesn't really want to have much to do with us because we continue to sin or perhaps that he's constantly disapproving of us we'll look instead at verse 17 he will quiet you by his love now very strikingly this is not the normal word that is used in the Old Testament for love for God's love instead it's the word that's used to describe the passionate love of Jacob for his wife Rachel Jacob's love for his son Joseph and David's deep friendship with Jonathan this is the way the Lord loves his people a love that delights him a love that makes him contemplate those he love loves with wordless adoration a love that cannot be contained but just bursts into song it's the love of a lover the joy of a lover it's the warm gladness of a deep friendship it's the passion that a father might have for a child have you ever thought of God singing have you ever thought of what might be on God's playlist songs in which he delights in his people do you think of

God like that or do you simply think that God just tolerates us the extraordinary love of God this then is what God is working towards in his world a renewed people in a new creation those in whom God delights I guess the obvious question to ask is well when when is all this going to happen because God did indeed restore the fortunes of his people 70 years after they were exiled to Babylon they returned the city of Jerusalem its temple they were rebuilt and yet what a disappointment it all was so much so that people wept and yet of course you and I can see what Zephaniah couldn't see how this new people so clearly points forward 600 years to the birth of Jesus Christ to his death on the cross taking the punishment for our sin bearing the wrath of God and himself so that we needn't

fear the judgment on the final day to his promise that he would send his Holy Spirit so that God might indeed dwell in the midst of his people and that he would gather to himself people from the nations as indeed he is doing across the world today which means that if we do belong to Jesus in 2019 we may still feel like those in verse 19 as God says behold at that time I will deal with all your oppressors and I will save the lame and gather the outcast and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth Christians so often today are oppressed marginalized in many countries literally facing opposition and persecution in the New Testament the apostle Peter describes every follower of Jesus as a stranger and alien in this world it may be that as we look at verse 19 some of us spiritually speaking feel very lame and very weak indeed very much limping so to speak on our way to the new creation but we can be confident in verse 20 at that time I'll bring you in at the time when I gather you together for I'll make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your eyes says the Lord and wonderfully at the end of the New Testament we are given a glimpse of that renewed people in God's new creation heaven itself let me read those words from Revelation chapter 7 that I put on the outline after this I looked and behold a great multitude that no one could number from every nation from all tribes and peoples and languages standing before the throne and before the lamb clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands and crying out with a loud voice salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb the awesome judgment of God the extraordinary love of God I wonder how you need to recalibrate your view of what God is like because of course we see God's character above all in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross it shows us that God is serious about judgments he punishes sin he is a holy God yet also it shows us his great love for sinners I take it that means that if we are spiritual realists this morning I take it means we'll take the final return of Jesus at the end of history seriously a day of great joy a glorious day as the Lord Jesus returns as he takes his people to be with him in the new creation and yet also a terrible day a day of great regret the judgments the reality of hell and yet also the reality of heaven and as always of course the issue is not do

[34 : 38] I like it least of all does it fit with my world view but is it true is it reality well as last week I think it would be good to spend some time reflecting together perhaps in quiet perhaps in prayer so I'm going to give us a couple of minutes to do that just for quiet reflection and prayer and then I will lead us together in prayer let's spend some time in quiet reflection the Lord your God is in your midst a mighty one who will save he will rejoice over you with gladness he will quiet you by his love he will exult over you with loud singing heavenly father we praise you for showing us your passionate heart for your people we praise you for the death of the

Lord Jesus on the cross for the full forgiveness of sins for his great love we praise you for your spirit who dwells within such that you live in the midst of your people we're sorry heavenly father when we have an unbalanced and unbiblical view of what you're like please would you help us to be those who can rejoice that you are indeed a God of justice and who rejoice that you are also a God of deep love and compassion and we ask it in Jesus name Amen