

# A time for silence

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     The first readings from Matthew 25 verses 1 to 13 on page 1001. The first readings from Matthew 25 verses 1 to 13.

And those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterwards, the other virgins came also, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us.

But he answered, Truly I say to you, I do not know you. Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. So we're reading from Zephaniah, which is on page 952 of the Church Bibles.

And we're going to start at chapter 1, verse 1. The word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah, the son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah, the son of Amon, king of Judah.

I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, declares the Lord. I will sweep away man and beast. I will sweep away the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea and the rubble with the wicked.

[ 1 : 5 9 ]     I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth, declares the Lord. I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and I will cut off this place, the remnant of Baal, and the name of the idolatrous priests along with the priests, those who bow down on the roofs to the hosts of the heavens, those who bow down and swear to the Lord, and yet swear by Milcom, those who have turned back from following the Lord, who do not seek the Lord or inquire of him.

Be silent before the Lord God, for the day of the Lord is near. The Lord has prepared a sacrifice and consecrated his guests. And on the day of the Lord's sacrifice, I will punish the officials and the king's sons and all who array themselves in foreign attire.

On that day, I will punish everyone who leaps over the threshold, and those who fill their master's house with violence and fraud. On that day, declares the Lord, a cry will be heard from the fish gate, a wail from the second quarter, a loud crash from the hills.

Wail, O inhabitants of the mortar, for all the traders are no more. All who weigh out silver are cut off. At that time, I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the men who are complacent, those who say in their hearts, the Lord will not do good, nor will he do ill.

Their goods shall be plundered, and their houses laid waste. Though they build houses, they shall not inhabit them. Though they plant vineyards, they shall not drink wine from them. The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast.

[ 3 : 3 8 ]     The sound of the day of the Lord is bitter. The mighty man cries aloud there. A day of wrath is that day, 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, against the fortified cities, and against the lofty battlements.

I will bring distress on mankind, so that they shall walk like the blind, because they have sinned against the Lord. Their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung.

Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them on the day of the wrath of the Lord. In the fire of his jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed. For a full and sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.

Gather together, yes, gather, O shameless nation, before the decree takes effect, before the day passes away like chaff, before there comes upon you the burning anger of the Lord, before there comes upon you the day of the anger of the Lord.

Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, who do his just commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility. Perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the Lord.

[ 5 : 00 ] Thanks so much for reading for us. Please do keep Zephaniah open. It's not an easy book to find, so do keep it open. Let me add my welcome. My name is Simon Dowdy, and I'm the lead pastor of Grace Church, and it's very good to have you with us this morning.

Now, we've spent the last three Sunday mornings in our sermons looking at Lamentations, and Zephaniah is, if you like, the prequel to Lamentations.

So if you're a Star Wars fan or something like that, then you'll know all about prequels, and that Zephaniah is, in a sense, the prequel to Lamentations. I want to begin by asking, what do you have your sights fixed on?

What dominates your horizon? I guess it may be holidays, time to switch off or catch up with friends. It might be the possibility of promotion at work or the potential of a job move.

It may be Wimbledon, of course, just, you know, awaiting those two weeks of the year when, certainly for many, watching daytime TV is entirely justifiable. It may, I guess, be money worries or a relationship that dominates your horizon as you wonder how things will develop and what the future holds.

[ 6 : 18 ] It may be finishing exams, or perhaps if you've just finished some exams, then awaiting your exam results. Well, this is the part of a two-week series in Zephaniah, and if we were to ask the prophet Zephaniah what his sights are fixed on, what dominates his horizon, then his answer is the day of the Lord.

Perhaps more than any other Old Testament prophet, he is, if you like, a man of one message, as he relentlessly focuses our horizons and our sights on this future day at the end of history when he will come both to judge and to save.

Now, all we know about Zephaniah himself is there in verse 1. It dates him around 630 BC. I guess at first reading, and you may slightly have been thinking this, at first reading, you might have thought that Zephaniah comes across as something of a caricature of everything people dislike about the Old Testament.

So a list of names, followed by the judgment that is coming, which I guess is why Zephaniah is so often overlooked. And yet, as we're going to see, and especially next week, it is also a book of great comfort and great encouragement.

And particularly so at the start of the summer, I guess many of us look forward, don't we, to time off over the summer. And Zephaniah, well, I guess the danger over the summer is that we don't simply put our feet up physically, we also put our feet up spiritually as routines change and all that kind of thing.

[ 8 : 03 ] And Zephaniah, I think, is going to be really helpful for us over these two weeks so that we don't lose our focus. So my prayer, really, as we look at this little book, is that it will help us to keep our sense of spiritual purpose and focus and clarity over the summer, whether we regard ourselves as disciples of Jesus Christ already, or whether we're simply here as inquirers, or indeed whether we are here more as skeptics.

I hope it will be helpful for all of us. Now, you'll find there's an outline on the back of the service sheets just to help us get our bearings. And we'll think, first of all, about the dreadful reality of the day of the Lord.

And you'll see I've put on the outline there the structure of chapter one. Just have a look at it. So in verses two to three, we have the judgment which the day of the Lord will bring.

It's described in terms of the destruction of creation. In verses four to 13, we see God's judgment on Judah and Jerusalem. In verses 14 to 16, judgment described again in terms of the destruction of creation.

And then in verses 17 and 18, it is widened to include the entire world. And I've put three questions on the outline, which I think will take us through chapter one.

[ 9 : 29 ] First of all, what? What is the day of the Lord? Well, the day of the Lord is the final day of history when the Lord God will act both in judgment and salvation.

This week in the first part of Zephaniah in judgment. Next week in the final part of Zephaniah in salvation. And in chapter one, verses two and three, the final judgment is described in catastrophic terms as a great undoing of this creation.

Have a look at it. I'll utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, declares the Lord. I'll sweep away man and beast. I'll sweep away the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea and the rubble with the wicked.

I'll cut off mankind from the face of the earth, declares the Lord. It's an echo of the creation account in Genesis. Perhaps those of us who are in our small group Bible studies, our growth groups, you'll remember how in Genesis God filled the earth as he created it.

He filled the earth with fish, birds, land animals, and mankind. But notice all that is now swept away in reverse order. I will utterly sweep it away, God says.

[ 10 : 46 ] So picture the Boxing Day tsunami in Thailand in 2004, captured in the film The Impossible, or the 2011 Japan tsunami.

Everything swept away. Nowhere to hide. Buildings, infrastructure, people simply swept away like matchsticks. Notice this is God's personal action, the repeated words throughout, I will.

So verse 2, I will. Verse 3, I will. I will. I will. Verse 4, I will. I will. In other words, this is no mere natural disaster that is being described.

It's not simply the impersonal consequences of sin in our world. Rather, it is God's settled right judgment on all that is evil. And it's a decreation that is then repeated in verses 14 to 16, as the six days of creation in Genesis are now undone.

Verse 14, the great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast. The sound of the day of the Lord is bitter. The mighty man cries aloud there.

[ 12 : 03 ] And then we have the six days. Verse 15, a day of wrath is that day, 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 against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements.

Well, I guess the obvious question to ask is, can people still believe in this stuff in London in 2019? Surely it portrays God in a way that contradicts his love and compassion.

And yet one of the great truths of the heart of the Bible, and we'll see more of this next week, is that God is both loving and holy. And he is always both loving and holy.

Which means that he always acts both to save and to judge. Because, of course, it's his love that explains his anger, just as a parent is rightly angered when a child is hurt.

So God's wrath reflects his very deep love and care for his creation. And therefore, like two sides of a coin, we can't have one side of God's character without the other side of God's character.

[ 13 : 23 ] In other words, a God who is holy and who judges sin, yet who isn't also a God of love and compassion who offers salvation. He's not the true God. Just as a God of love and compassion who longs to save, and yet who isn't also a holy God who always acts rightly in his world, as he demonstrates his right-settled opposition to human sin, isn't the real God either.

Secondly, who? In verses 4-6, the focus is on Judah and its capital city, Jerusalem. In other words, those who outwardly, at least, were meant to be God's people.

Verse 4, I'll stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And I'll cut off from this place the remnant of Baal and the name of the Ardolachist priests along with the priests, those who bow down on the roofs to the host of the heavens, those who bow down and swear to the Lord and yet swear by Milcom.

Those who have turned back from following the Lord, who do not seek the Lord or inquire of him. They're meant to be God's people and yet rather than acting as a magnet, living distinctively, drawing people to him, actually they are no different from the world around and they worship the same gods as those around them.

In verse 8, he then goes on to focus on their leaders and the kind of upper echelons of society. In verse 9, on everyone else in verses 10 and 11, the city and the business community.

[ 15 : 09 ] Well, we say, what's the reason? Well, have a look at verse 12. Look at what they are saying in their hearts. Verse 12, God says, at that time, I'll search Jerusalem with lamps and I'll punish the men who are complacent.

Those who say in their hearts, the Lord will not do good, nor will he do ill. It's interesting, it's not so much, is it, that the Lord God doesn't exist.

It is simply that he doesn't matter. He is just irrelevant. The Lord will not do good, nor will he do ill. He is completely irrelevant.

Perhaps like some of us here today, we may not say it out loud, but it's precisely, perhaps, what some of us say in our hearts. And what will happen?

Verse 13, everything they trusted in on that day will be destroyed. Possessions, homes, businesses, wealth, pleasure, enjoyment, and so on.

[ 16 : 23 ] And then in verses 17 and 18, the focus moves away from Judah and Jerusalem. it becomes universal. Verse 17, I'll bring distress on mankind so that they shall walk like the blind because they have sinned against the Lord.

Verse 18, neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them on the day of the wrath of the Lord. In the fire of his jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed for a full and sudden end he'll make of all the inhabitants of the earth.

Two weeks ago, we witnessed, didn't we, the 75th anniversary commemorations of the Normandy landings. And on Radio 4, it prompted a discussion on the moral maze hosted by Michael Burke about our national character and our moral character as a nation.

And the question essentially was, is our moral character as a nation now so completely different from what it was 75 years ago, kind of lack of moral fibre and so on, that actually we simply wouldn't be able to pull something like that off again.

And yet, however much national characteristics may change over time, in one vital respect, human nature does not change. And that is our sin.

[ 17 : 50 ] As all of us by nature live our way rather than God's way. Third question, when? The destruction of Judah and its capital Jerusalem took place in 586 BC, so just 35 years after Zephaniah is speaking.

as Babylon, the new superpower, invaded and took God's people into captivity. And I guess the point is that if God's word about judgment coming on Judah and Jerusalem was fulfilled, then we should be in no doubt either that his judgment on the whole world will also be fulfilled.

And yet, I guess that begs the question, doesn't it? Well, when? Why the delay? Well, perhaps an illustration may help. So often, the Old Testament prophets, they see events as they look to the future as you and I might perhaps see a mountain range from a distance.

And, you know, you see the kind of peaks of this mountain range from a distance. And from a distance, everything looks very bunched up, doesn't it? And yet, the closer you get to the first mountain peaks, actually, you suddenly realize they're not bunched up at all.

And there are significant distances, far more than you might have imagined from far away. There are significant distances between them. Just so, as Zephaniah looks into the distance, so to speak, he squashes events together, which actually we can see looking on two and a half thousand years later, that actually subsequently were much, much further apart.

[ 19 : 38 ] So, for example, the destruction, obviously, of the whole world, which he speaks about, did not happen at the same time that Judah and Jerusalem were destroyed. And yet, I take it, it would be a mistake to think that the day of the Lord, therefore, will not take place.

Perhaps as foolish as someone who moves to the UK from a warmer country and in November, when there's the first of hard frost or the first flurries of snow, you say to them, have you got enough warm clothes?

If you haven't bought your warm coat yet, then go out and buy your warm coat. It's going to get cold. But perhaps then it warms up for a couple of weeks as often it does at that time of year.

And yet, what a fool our visitor would be to think, oh, well, it's a bit warmer now. Perhaps winter isn't going to happen this year. So, how do we know the day of the Lord is still to come?

Well, because Jesus Christ himself tells us. So, keep a finger in Zephaniah and just turn on to page 1000, I think it is, to Matthew's Gospel, Matthew chapter 24.

[ 20 : 52 ] Page 1000, Matthew chapter 24. First of all, notice in verse 29, the same language that Zephaniah uses of decreation, the undoing of creation, verse 29, immediately after the tribulation of those days, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light and the stars will fall from heaven and the powers of heaven will be shaken.

And then in verse 30, great sadness because Jesus is the son of man with all authority over all people for all time will come to judge. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the son of man and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn and they will see the son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

When will it happen? We're not told. Instead, we're to be ready. Verse 44, therefore you must also be ready for the son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

We then have a whole chapter of warnings, including the parable of the ten virgins which Philippa read for us, concluding verse 13, watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

and then over the page chapter 25 verses 31 to 32 describe the judgment and again in terms Zephaniah would have been so familiar with in universal terms.

[ 22 : 28 ] Verse 31, when the son of man comes in his glory and all the angels with him then he will 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 gates.

And then verse 46, the reality of eternal punishment and eternal life. These will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life.

In other words, you see, you and I mustn't fall for the lie that we needn't take the warnings of the Old Testament seriously. That in a sense God is no longer serious about the judgments.

If anything, Jesus' language is stronger, isn't it, than Zephaniah's language. So then how should we respond?

Well, responding with reality to the day of the Lord because of course it's possible to respond with unreality, merely to give a sense to it or perhaps just to brush it aside altogether.

[ 23 : 38 ] So we need to know what it looks like to respond with reality in a way that is appropriate. Well, firstly, back in Zephaniah chapter 1, be silent.

Verse 7, be silent before the Lord God for the day of the Lord is near. Verse 14, the great day of the Lord is near.

It's as if Zephaniah wants us to hear this day coming, to feel its imminence so close that we can almost touch it and feel it and see it and hear it.

Be silent. silence. Perhaps the silence of the courtroom as everyone stands in silence in preparation for the judge to enter.

I guess it may be that some of us, our lives are simply so busy that we've never really stopped to be silent, so to speak, before the Lord God and given much thought to this day.

[ 24 : 49 ] Or perhaps we've simply lost sight of it but actually other things have dominated our horizon and our sights have drifted away from it. Because the fact is that responding today is far more urgent than it was even in Zephaniah's day.

The New Testament tells us that the day of judgment is set, that the judge has been appointed. Perhaps some of us have had to face a court case for one reason or another and you'll know won't you that actually it's one thing kind of to know that at some stage in the future there's going to be a court case.

But things become very different once you actually know the date, once the date is in the diary. So I've put Acts chapter 17 verses 30 to 31 on the outline where the apostle Paul preaching in Athens, the intellectual heart of the first century world declares this.

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

It may be that you are not persuaded. It may be that you are a skeptic regarding the day of the Lord, the day of judgment. at which point you see we are to look at the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead never to die again.

[ 26 : 23 ] We are to consider the evidence because not only does Jesus' identity stand or fall on the resurrection, was he really God in the flesh or not, but so does the reality of the judgment.

If Jesus was indeed raised from the dead never to die again, then he is Lord of all now. He will indeed return at the end of history, the appointed judge on the appointed day.

But it may be, I guess, that perhaps many of us, we are persuaded about the judgments. Although I wonder if it's a persuasion that is kind of partial.

I wonder if you can relate to the person who said to me some time ago, I believed in it in theory, but I stopped believing in it in practice. In other words, no longer a reality that really had an impact on their lives.

In which case, I guess it would be good to pray for a sense of spiritual seriousness, to pray for a sense of spiritual reality, reality.

[ 27 : 38 ] And then perhaps to reread Zephaniah, again, it doesn't take long to read, and to consider the implications of the resurrection of Jesus. So respond, firstly, be silent.

Secondly, seek the Lord. Chapter 2, verses 1 and 2. Gather together, yes, gather, O shameless nation, before the decree takes effect, before the day passes away like chaff, before there comes upon you the burning anger of the Lord, before there comes upon you the day of the anger of the Lord.

I wonder if you can feel the urgency. Take action. Do so before it's too late. Notice, really, the action isn't to run, because, of course, there's nowhere we can run from God on that day, just as the action isn't to hide, because there's nowhere we can hide from God on that day.

Instead, verse 3, we are to seek him. Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, who do his just commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility.

Perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the Lord. Here's the extraordinary truth, that the only way to flee from the anger of God is to flee to God himself.

[ 29 : 04 ] Is that not an extraordinary thing? The only way to flee from the anger of God is to flee to God himself. Only God can save us from himself.

Notice there's no presumption. Verse 3, perhaps, perhaps you may be hidden. There's no cheap grace that we can simply take for granted. And yet, wonderfully, that perhaps becomes a resounding certainty in the New Testament, in death of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross for our sins.

It's no wonder, is it, that the night of his arrest we're told that Jesus was filled with sorrow as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. In other words, if ever we're in any doubt that God takes sin seriously, if ever we are in any doubt about the reality of the judgment to come, we are to look at the cross.

We are to look at the Lord Jesus bearing the full force of God's wrath in himself, in our place, literally forsaken by God, so that you and I need not be.

Seek the Lord. It may be, of course, that you've never done that, that you've never sought his forgiveness. I'd love to chat to you afterwards about how you might do that if you've never done that.

[ 30 : 34 ] It may be that you have at some stage in the past, that at some stage in the past, yes, you rejoiced and delighted in the forgiveness of your sins. But actually, over time, you've become cold, or at best lukewarm, towards the Lord Jesus Christ.

In which case, now would be a good time to seek the Lord again, and to reorientate your lives, your life, and your horizon to him.

Well, next week, we have a look at the second half of the book, and we'll see wonderfully not only that we need not fear God's anger, but we can also know his delight, and his delighting in us.

Well, I don't think we'll have a question time today, especially given Zephaniah's application for us of being silent and seeking the Lord, and I think we'll do that instead.

So why don't we have a couple of minutes just on our own? It might be an opportunity to do that, to be silent, to reflect, perhaps to read through these verses again.

[ 31 : 46 ] It might be an opportunity to pray and to seek the Lord ourselves. Let's spend some time in quiet, and then I shall lead us in prayer. I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, declares the Lord.

Heavenly Father, thank you that in your very great kindness you warn us of the judgment to come. Thank you for the way in which the Lord Jesus so clearly echoes the language of Zephaniah.

We confess how easily we simply live for this world, for what we can see immediately with our own eyes. And we pray, Heavenly Father, for your mercy on us, please would you help us to live in the light of this day to come, to seek you where we need to seek you again, to be silent before you where we need to be silent before you as we consider this great and terrible day.

and we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.