

Why Jesus Matters: The Justice of God

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[0 : 00] Good morning, my name is Matt Sheffer. Imagine you're travelling down the eastern freeway at 100 kilometres an hour and about 5 kilometres before the end of the freeway, you see a sign on the end of the road saying, dead end, up ahead, turn around.

Let's say you keep travelling at 100 kilometres an hour for another kilometre or two and you see another big sign saying, road out, up ahead, turn around. What would you do?

And let's say 500 metres further down the track, you see another big sign saying, road out, up ahead, turn back. What would you do? Well, we're in Zephaniah chapter 2.

We're in the middle of this Old Testament book. We started chapter 1 last week, we're in chapter 2 now and we're going to do a bit of background work in Zephaniah to work out where we are kind of historically before we get into the message but we need to keep that image in mind.

Of a warning sign, road up ahead, turn back. What will you do? First what we'll do is we'll look at a bit of the history of Israel and then we're going to meet a very important king.

[1 : 13] Now, after the death of King Solomon, a civil war broke out in the nation of Israel under Solomon's sons and the nation of Israel split into two kingdoms.

Rehoboam took the southern half of the country and called it Judah with the temple and the capital city of Jerusalem. Jeroboam took the northern half and he kept the name Israel and had the capital of Samaria.

Okay, so there's two kingdoms. Basically, every king in the northern kingdom of Israel was evil and as punishment, Israel was eventually conquered by the Assyrians in about 722 BC.

The southern kingdom, Judah, had some kings who served God but predominantly those kings were evil too. The pagan Babylonians attacked Judah repeatedly and eventually under King Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC the Babylonians ransacked Judah, destroyed the temple and Jerusalem and took its people as captives.

At this point in Zephaniah though, the exile to Babylon hasn't happened yet. It is coming but it hasn't happened yet and we're now going to meet a great king, King Josiah.

[2 : 32] Not Shulah, this is a different Josiah. In Zephaniah chapter 1 verse 1, we're told that Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of King Josiah.

Now this is a great story. If you want your sons or grandsons or nephews to love the Bible, read them the story of King Josiah. It's in 2 Kings chapters 22 and 23.

They will love you for it. King Josiah was about the last good thing that happened to Judah before the kingdom was destroyed. He became a king at the age of 8 years old.

Now I don't know many 8 year olds that I would leave in charge of a kitchen, let alone a nation. But King Josiah became king. His father was assassinated when he was 8 and so Josiah became king. Now at age 25, Josiah decided to get some renovation work done, backyard blitz type of thing on the temple because it had been neglected for centuries. And as the workers were cleaning and doing a kind of touch up on it, they found an obscure book that nobody knew what it was.

[3 : 40] And it was the Bible. Actually it was the Hebrew Bible, the first five books of the Old Testament, which are the first five books in our Bibles today. Kings previous to Josiah had actually walked away from God.

They had left God's word up on a shelf to kind of collect dust and get eaten by moths and just be forgotten about. But now, I love the Reformation period of church history and this is the Reformation before the Reformation.

So God's word is being read by his people. It's being heard. It's being declared. Instead, Josiah's secretary reads him the Bible out loud and Josiah is struck with sorrow and repentance because he knows that the people of God have disobeyed God.

They've walked away and he wants everyone to repent. So immediately, Josiah goes around cutting down pagan shrines and destroying the houses of temple prostitutes and burning pagan altars and he's firing all the corrupt priests.

And he threw a massive Passover celebration as well, something that hadn't been done for ages. And he throws on this Passover celebration to worship and thank God. So there's this great spiritual and moral revival under Josiah.

[4 : 59] But Josiah was killed in a battle against the Egyptians and basically everything spiraled downhill from there. His sons after him rebel against God just like the other kings of Judah and eventually the kingdom is conquered and it's destroyed.

So at the time of Zephaniah, what we're reading, Josiah's reforms haven't kicked in yet because he's kind of clearing up all the garbage, exposing all their sins. So it's most likely this prophecy is during the early period of Josiah's reign before the Bible was found because Josiah goes on to kind of clear out all the garbage and fix everything up.

So that's a bit of background into Israel and the kingdom at the time. And as I was saying at the start, the message of Zephaniah chapter 2 is like that warning sign.

Road up ahead, road is out, turn back. It's a warning sign and it can't be ignored. So let's look at this urgent warning in Zephaniah 2. Let's read verses 1 and 2.

He tells them to gather together. Zephaniah is speaking on behalf of God. He tells them to gather together. Danger is coming. Don't flee to the hills. Don't run away.

[6 : 23] Don't spread out. He says instead, gather together. He calls them to huddle together, to have a prayer meeting. Look at verse 3. Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, you who do his commands.

Seek righteousness. Seek humility. Perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the Lord's wrath. In other words, gather together. Seek God. Why? Well, in verse 4.

Because Gaza shall be deserted. Ashkelon shall become a desolation. Ashdod's people shall be driven out at noon. And Ekron shall be uprooted. He wants them to gather together.

Seek the Lord. Why? Because God is going to burn the surrounding nations. There will be judgment on them. There's no use running to them for help or security.

They are going to be judged. So we're going to see God's judgment on these nations. Verses 4 to 7. We have the Philistines. These Philistine cities.

[7 : 19] He declares that they will be destroyed. Deserted. Even driven out. Look at verse 5. Ah, the inhabitants of the seacoast. You nation of the Kerithites.

The word of the Lord is against you, O Canaan, land of the Philistines. And I will destroy you until no inhabitant is left. Now this coastal region on the west of Judah became, he says in verse 7, possessed by the remnant of the house of Judah on which they shall pasture.

And he says that the Lord their God will be mindful of them and restore their fortunes. There really is here a hint of grace. Some people said on the way out last week that Zephaniah sounds like a prophet of doom and gloom.

And I actually want to stick up for him and say, no, he is a prophet of grace. There is grace in this. Chapter 1, it seems sort of dark and somber. There is grace in Zephaniah.

We just need to look for it and listen. Zephaniah is a prophet of grace. And it's there in this idea of a remnant in verse 7. The remnant of the house of Judah. It's very important to remember that word, a remnant.

[8 : 26] And we'll come back to that in a second. But what God is going to do is judge the Philistines. And now in verses 8 and 9, he's going to judge the Moabites and the Ammonites.

It says in verse 8, I have heard the taunts of Moab and the revilings of the Ammonites, how they have taunted my people and made boasts against their territory. So God is going to punish these Moabites and Ammonites.

What for? Well, he says, I've heard their taunts. I've heard their insults. I've heard their mocking. I've heard their abuse. I've heard the revilings and blasphemies against my people.

Put simply, the message is, if you mess with God's people, you mess with God. We see that in the New Testament, like with the Apostle Paul, who goes around, before he became a Christian, he went around killing Christians and persecuting the church.

And Jesus appears to him and says, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Well, ultimately, if you insult or blaspheme or assault the church or the people of God, you are ultimately insulting or

attacking or assaulting God himself.

[9 : 37] It's a very foolish thing to do to attack the church. It makes God very angry. And verse 9, therefore, as I live, says the Lord of hosts. The word host means armies.

God is this divine warrior, the armies of heaven. As surely as I live, says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Moab shall become like Sodom and the Ammonites like Gomorrah.

There's something ironic in these verses about their judgment in that Sodom and Gomorrah are famously immoral cities back in Genesis. And after Sodom and Gomorrah was basically nuked by God, fire from heaven destroyed them, Abraham's nephew, Lot, he committed this horrible act of incest with his two daughters.

And out of that act came the people of Moab and Ammon. So they're descended from Lot and his relationship with his daughters. You can read that in Genesis 19.

Now he says that they will be like Sodom and Gomorrah. So there was this great judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah. And then these people came into existence basically through this awful act.

[10 : 49] And now they will be punished like Sodom and Gomorrah. Verse 10, this shall be their lot in return for their pride because they have scoffed and boasted against the people of the Lord of hosts.

The Lord will be terrible against them. He will shrivel all the gods of the earth and to him shall bow down. Each in its place, all the coasts and islands of the nations. That is the God of Israel, the God of the Bible.

He will punish these people, but actually he'll actually punish all false gods in the world, all of them, so that all people will bow the knee to worship him. This is a severe warning to the nations and the enemies of God's people.

There's going to be judgment on the Philistines and the Moabites and Ammonites. Now we're going to see verse 12, judgment on the Ethiopians. It's only a short verse.

He says, you also, O Ethiopians, shall be killed by my sword. It's pretty straightforward. This is language of military destruction. In other words, the Ethiopians are going to meet death by sword in battle.

[11 : 52] Now there's this judgment against Assyria in the north. 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.

Now Assyria is a world superpower of its day, and its capital city is Nineveh. It's a famous city in the Bible, famous because of the prophet Jonah, who was supposed to go there and tell the wicked people to repent.

But Jonah didn't. He kind of ran away from God. He disobeyed God and ran away. And God put him in, I think, arguably the world's most unique time out corner. God put him in the belly of a great fish. So he was swallowed by a great fish. And so this famous city of Nineveh is linked with this prophet Jonah. And it's the capital city of Assyria, and God will destroy them, he says in those verses.

So this famous city is just going to be ruined. Look at verse 14. Herds shall lie down in it. Every wild animal, the desert owl and the screech owl, shall lodge on its capitals, on its towers.

[13 : 00] The owl shall hoot at the window. The raven croak on the threshold, for its cedar work will be laid bare. This great populated city will become something like an abandoned ghost town, like something out of those Wild West movies.

You know, like those dusty old towns where the windows are broken and there's no human inhabitants. It's this lonely sort of ghost town. No one's there. There's just mangy, feral, wild creatures digging around and vultures flying around in the sky looking for something to pick on. You know, it's sort of like Werribee open range zoo, but without the cages and the park ranges and stuff. So the irony is that this once populated city is going to be this feral kind of wild zoo.

And in verse 15, is this the exultant city that lives secure, that said to itself, I am, and there is no one else. What a desolation it has become.

A lair for wild animals. Everyone who passes by it hisses and shakes their fist. Before the Titanic set sail, it was dubbed as unsinkable.

[14 : 14] It was a trophy of human effort and pride and engineering and architecture. So there's always kind of boasting at the time of when the Titanic set sail that it was a symbol of progress and achievement and power.

And it was famously said, she is unsinkable. Well, of course, the Titanic is perhaps the most famous ship to have ever sank. It sank and many people lost their lives.

Well, this city is a land version of the Titanic. Titanic, this exultant city who says to itself, I am, and there is no other, this arrogant, boasting self-security.

Now, imagine this is Melbourne. I've lived in Melbourne my whole life and ever since I've been a kid, I've been told that Melbourne is the most livable city in the world. And we kind of have this friendly rivalry going with Sydney, you know, Melbourne versus Sydney, who's better?

Like, we know it's Melbourne but, like, we still fight who's better, my city, your city. We do this kind of thing to boast about how good is Melbourne. Well, look at the second half of verse 15.

[15:17] What a desolation it has become, a lair for wild animals. Everyone who passes by it hisses and shakes their fist. It's this object of scorn and people spit at it as they walk past.

It has become nothing. It's just a rubble. It's just desolate. That is what Nineveh will become and Assyria. So, so far, God has proclaimed he will judge the nations.

It's this warning. Now, imagine living in Judah, living under the good king, Josiah, in the 6th century. Imagine listening to this and it might be fair to think that it's good that God is going to judge these people.

They're the enemies. They've run away from God. God's judgment on them is just and fair. Maybe it's easy to think like that, to have this kind of attitude of, yeah, you know, punish those people. Go get them, Lord.

Give them both barrels. Well, in the next verses, God turns the gun on his own people. In chapter 3, verses 1 and 2, soiled, defiled, oppressing city.

[16:25] This is Jerusalem. It has listened to no voice. It has accepted no correction. It has not trusted in the Lord. It has not drawn near to its God.

How do God's people treat God? Well, he says they have not listened. They have not accepted correction, not trusted in the Lord and not drawn near to God. In other words, there is this huge imaginary billboard over the people of God saying, Dear God, get lost.

And it's not just a philosophy. You can see it in the way they live. In verse 3, the officials within it are roaring lions. Its judges are evening wolves that leave nothing until the morning.

Instead of these governing leaders and officials protecting the people, acting like shepherds to kind of uphold justice, they are acting like wild predators, ferocious, biting, picking on their prey, chewing off every last bit of the bone so that, he says, there's nothing left for the morning.

That's the government officials. What's the religious life like? What are the religious leaders like? Look at verse 4. Its prophets are reckless, faithless persons.

[17:37] Its priests have profaned what is sacred. They have done violence to the law. In other words, the religious leaders are no better, violating and perverting the law and commands of God, just outright denying and disobeying God.

So in the ruling, governing leadership and in the religious leadership, those who are supposed to be leading God's people justly and righteously and in holiness, they have absolutely failed.

Note the contrast though in verse 5. It says, the Lord within it is righteous. He does no wrong. Every morning he renders his judgment. Each dawn without fail, but the unjust knows no shame.

God is the perfect judge. Ultimate justice lies with him. He's not like these corrupt officials who pervert the law and don't do justice. No, God is a perfect judge.

And in verse 7, he says, surely the city will fear me. And let's just not have an emotional reaction to me. That actually means be corrected by me. Surely the people will fear me.

[18:45] It will accept correction. It will not lose sight or not be cut off is a better translation of all that I have brought upon it. But they were the more eager to make all their deeds corrupt.

So in other words, there is this great warning. God is going to punish the nations. And will Judah accept correction? Well, the answer is no. Like a drunk driver driving head on into oncoming traffic, they keep ploughing in the wrong direction to their own destruction.

They were the more eager to make all their deeds corrupt, the text says. So in this chapter, in this section of Zephaniah, God has sent an urgent warning.

There will be judgment on the nations. That's why he says in verse 1, gather together, don't run off to those surrounding nations or people for help because they are going to be punished. And at the beginning of chapter 3, there will be judgment on Judah as well.

Now, it's a warning. It's a warning to seek God, take refuge in him. And that same warning applies today because the day of justice, the day of ultimate justice, the day of judgment is coming.

[20 : 00] And the invitation then, in Zephaniah, is the same invitation now, to seek God's mercy, turn back to him. The day of judgment, on the day of judgment, you won't have any more time to sort things out with God.

The time is now. The famous preacher, Charles Spurgeon, sort of had traumatic incidents happen throughout his ministry and his life. And one night, someone during a church meeting pulled a prank and cried out, there's a fire, there's a fire, everybody get out.

And thousands of people rushed to the door and people got trampled and killed. It was very traumatic. And then, sometime afterwards, he continued to have success in his ministry and people became Christians through his preaching and someone asked him, why do you have so much fruit in what you're doing?

And he said, well, I've never given people a chance to put off their salvation. I've never given people a chance to put off their salvation. That day of when all those people got trampled in his church by someone pulling a prank and it was a horrible thing.

Ever since that, the reality of mortality sunk into him and the day of judgment. He didn't want anyone to leave his church without hearing of salvation in Jesus and that they have to come to him and put their trust in him now.

[21 : 22] So Spurgeon knew the warnings of Zephaniah to seek the Lord now. And I would say the same thing today. The day of judgment is closer now than it was back then.

See, we live this side of Jesus' life, death and resurrection and Jesus will be the judge. And so we have all the more reason now, more than ever, to not run from God or hide from God or play games with God.

This is like driving down the freeway and seeing those signs. Road out, dead end ahead, turn back. That's the invitation, that's the warning, to turn back to God now, before that day.

Because remember that word remnant back in verse 7. The word remnant, the remnant of the house of Judah, he says, will be spared. And in verse 9, the remnant of my people shall plunder these enemies.

The survivors of my nation shall possess them. Somehow, on the final day, so this is looking beyond 6th century BC, on the final day, when God judges the whole world, there will be a remnant, a remainder, somehow, even though God is a perfect judge and every sin will be exposed and punished, somehow, there will be a remainder, a remnant, a people preserved by God, a people protected by God, a people that are purified by God.

[22 : 49] Perfect justice will be done on the last day. So the invitation is to seek God and take refuge in him now. And the good news is on the last day there will be a remainder.

How? Well, it's kind of a riddle. We'll look more of that next week. But for now, the message is to take refuge in God now. Observe those warning signs and respond.

Don't just ignore them. Respond. Seek God. Trust him now. On the last day there will be a remnant that are his. So let's pray and thank our God.

God, our gracious Father, thank you for being the God who made and rules the world. Thank you for being a perfect judge. Thank you for sending Jesus to be a wonderful, loving, forgiving saviour. Father, please help us to look to Jesus and trust him so that on the last day we will be with you forever. Please help those of us who don't trust Jesus to put our trust in him now and know him as saviour.

[23 : 51] Father, thank you for your word for speaking to us. Please help us to heed the warning and not put you off or not ignore you, rebel against you.

Please help us to hear the warning of Zephaniah and to turn back and trust you. Amen.