

The Judge of All the Earth

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[0 : 00] You may like to have open the Bibles in the pews at page 765 at the second Bible reading from today for Zephaniah chapter 1.

Today we're beginning a four week sermon series on this little book of Zephaniah, a bit hard to find at the back of the Old Testament. And so you may like to have the chapter open, page 765.

And let's pray. God our Father, we pray that you'll speak to us now through your prophet Zephaniah, through these difficult and hard words.

We pray that you may stir up within us a right response of faith and repentance for Jesus' sake.

Amen. If you're like me, the pictures of the bombing in Lebanon is appalling.

And seeing the destruction and the death and the sadness and the grief and in effect on the suburbs of Beirut and other places, the whole blocks virtually entirely swept away to rubble by the bombing.

[1 : 09] Think back a year or less than two years ago and we remember well, vividly, the pictures of the Indian Ocean tsunami where entire villages were swept away to nothing.

We think of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans last year and still the pictures and the image of that is a little bit numbing and shocking. Entire streets and neighbourhoods in effect washed and blown away.

And of course we'll never forget, I suspect, the images and pictures of 9-11. They still numb us and we see those entire skyscrapers collapse into dust and rubble.

And for those with longer memories, we think back to things like Cyclone Tracy and the pictures of Darwin, an entire city almost blown away by the cyclone. Such large-scale disasters still, in a sense, shock us.

They silence us to an extent. They perhaps traumatise us in a way. Whether they're natural or man-made, whether they're natural disasters or because of war or terrorism, they still create within us elements and degrees of fear and shock.

[2 : 31] And the pictures of such devastation and tragedy distress us. They sadden us. And they fill us with panic, tears.

The pictures of suffering and pain and death and grief still numb us. And for many, of course, it's the sort of stuff of nightmares. Well, shocking though all those natural disasters are and were, there's a sense in which they are still relatively local events.

9-11, in one sense, wiped out a block or a couple of building blocks within Manhattan. Even the tsunami of the Indian Ocean, in effect, its effect on land mass compared to the whole world, is relatively small, even though it was spread out over a number of countries.

Now, admittedly, though, the world has seen the footage and the film and heard the stories, and there's a sense in which, indirectly, the whole world is affected by those. But the actual events are relatively local.

And certainly the repercussions are global. Our whole world has changed since 9-11. You only have to go to an airport these days to realise that. But the whole elements of security, etc., around the world have changed because of that day.

[3 : 56] And yet again, that's only an indirect consequence. The event was still relatively local. In the end, all these disasters, no matter how catastrophic they are, are relatively local on a global scale.

You think, could it actually be worse? Well, I guess something like the flood in the early chapters of the Bible, the flood in Noah's day, was worse, if we understand it as a universal flood, and only eight people are saved.

The whole population of the world wiped out, other than eight people, and a number of selected and assorted animals and birds. And the fish seem to survive okay with the added water, I guess.

But even that could be worse. Because what's described in this passage today is a day worse than 9-11, worse than Boxing Day, less than two years ago, a day that's worse than Noah's flood, a day we're told when God will sweep away everything from the face of the earth.

Not just a couple of office blocks in Manhattan, not just the rim of the Indian Ocean, not just a city in New Orleans in south of the United States or whatever.

[5 : 17] Everything off the face of the earth will be swept away. Indeed, these verses say that not only humans will be cut off from the face of the earth, but the animals will, and the birds and the fish.

This is worse than Noah's flood. See what verses 2 and 3 say. I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, says the Lord.

I will sweep away humans and animals. I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. I will make the wicked stumble.

I will cut off humanity from the face of the earth, says the Lord. This is every disaster the world has known rolled into one, in effect.

This is every nightmare come true. And the terror of this is that there is no safe place and there is no safe person. Everybody will be affected directly.

[6 : 23] This is one of the most fierce descriptions of judgment that we find in the scriptures. It reverses the fifth and sixth days of creation back in Genesis chapter 1.

There on days 5 and 6, in order God makes the fish, the birds, the animals, and then humanity as the crowning act of his creation. But here we're told humanity, then the animals, then the birds, and then the fish will all be wiped away.

As though God has begun to wind up the whole creation, in effect. So working from day 6 back into day 5, reversing those two acts of creation from Genesis chapter 1.

It's more severe than Noah's flood. It's universal in its scope. It's a bit like, you know, you see sometimes, or maybe you're guilty of doing it, when you fly into a rage and you're sort of at your desk and you're studying away or writing away and you think, this is a waste of time, I'm not doing anything here, and you sweep your hand across the desk so all your books go flying.

Or a child playing a game and they're losing. And the same sort of thing. And the whole table or bench or whatever it is, is cleared of everything.

[7 : 40] The dissimilarity though, is that this is not God's fit of rage that's sort of capricious and just flying off the handle as though he's got a short temper.

This is deliberate and planned. A righteous act of judgment from God. It's tempting though to confine, these verses are so unsettling I think, it's tempting to confine them to the Old Testament waste paper basket.

So many people have in practice, if not in theory. So they think, oh, I can't live with these verses.

They're superseded by the New Testament. We know that God is a God of love and mercy and this sort of thing surely is just outdated in the Old Testament.

So let's quietly just sort of tear it up and slip it behind us into the Old Testament waste paper basket. Of course, the New Testament reminds us that the Old Testament in its entirety remains scripture, remains God-breathed and God's word to us.

We're not at liberty to pick and choose the bits that we do and don't like. We can't so easily dismiss these verses. It could be that if we pay a little bit more attention to verses two and three, we notice that in verse three, it says, I'll make the wicked stumble.

[8 : 55] And so we find a loophole, perhaps. But yes, this is really about the wicked. So when humans are mentioned, it's wicked humans. And we breathe a sigh of relief and we mop our sweaty brow and we think, phew, I'm safe after all.

But the trouble is that verse three doesn't quite read that way. I will sweep away humans. And that's meant as all. At the end of verse three, admittedly after speaking about the wicked, I'll cut off humanity from the face of the earth.

That is, I'll annihilate them, destroy them, without distinction. It's not such a loophole. Of course, it may be tempting to say, well, humanity is wicked at large.

That's what it's referring to. But outside of verses two and three are the chosen people of God, the elect, the saints, the faithful, the ones who therefore are safe.

So this is not actually about me as a believer. It's about humanity in general because humanity in general is wicked. But the believers are safe. The believers are exempt here.

[10:12] Another loophole. But the trouble is, you keep reading, and verse four addresses the chosen people of God, Judah and Jerusalem, as they were known in the Old Testament. And they're not safe.

They're part of this big picture of the day of judgment and destruction. So what's going on here? What is Zephaniah the prophet addressing? Well, verse one anchors him in time and space. The word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah and then uniquely of all the prophets in the Old Testament, we're given a lengthy genealogy for a prophet. There are many genealogies for kings and descendants of Abraham and Jesus and so on.

But here for a prophet, we're given four generations uniquely. The son of Cushai, the son of Gedali, the son of Amariah, and the son of Hezekiah. Hezekiah was a great king. We're not certain absolutely that this is the same Hezekiah because there could well have been others by that name. But the fact that the genealogy goes back to Hezekiah and the dates would fit suggests that probably he's descended from this good king Hezekiah who was king from about 715 to 685 BC.

[11:25] So probably that's the sense of the genealogy to trace Zephaniah, now in effect not really quite part of the royal family, a few steps removed after four generations, but raised up by God to be a prophet.

He's a prophet, we're then told in verse 1, in the days of King Josiah, the son of Ammon of Judah. Josiah was king from 640 BC to 609 BC for about 31 years.

And it was a very crucial period in Israel's history in the Old Testament. Josiah was a good king. He was only eight years old when he became king, a boy king.

Indeed, in the English Reformation, often similarities were made between Edward VI, the son of Henry VIII, and Josiah, both of whom were, in effect, boy kings. Josiah succeeded his father Ammon, who was assassinated after a very short reign, and his grandfather, who reigned for a long period of time, Manasseh.

Both Manasseh and Ammon were significantly evil kings. Probably the worst Manasseh was of all the kings of Judah. From the first king Saul, before 1000 BC, right through to the time of Josiah in 640.

[12:48] Manasseh and Ammon following him for a short period of time, were apostate kings. They incorporated the worship of other gods, of pagan gods, of Canaanite gods, Assyrian gods, right into the center of the Jerusalem temple, putting in their images, bowing down to their idols, and so on.

Gross apostasy. Not just a sort of tolerance of saying, well, if you don't want to worship another god, you do it, but the actual official incorporation of idolatry right into the temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem.

That's what's called syncretism, where there's a combination or a mixture of different religions put together. The worship of Yahweh plus the worship of other gods all together.

Not one or the other, but bringing them all together. But it's pagan as well. There are all sorts of pagan gods involved, and the temple was desecrated. So at the end of Manasseh and Ammon's reign, a huge clean-up job was needed, and Josiah, the good king, the best king probably since David, began a period of reform.

Not immediately, when he was eight years old. I guess he needed a bit of time to grow up a bit. But in about 627 or 626, so by this stage he's 21, maybe 22, he began a period of reform as the king of Judah.

[14:10] Probably there were two influences for that. One is that the major enemy, Assyria, had become weak.

Their emperor had died in about 627, was followed by weak emperors, and maybe there's a sense of political opportunism. Your strong emperor of the enemy that overshadows you as a little nation, he's gone, and now maybe you want to flex your muscles a bit and gain some independence. And that sort of thing. More spiritually, there's probably the influence of the prophet Jeremiah, whose ministry began in the time of Josiah in 627 BC. And probably, it's in the prompts of Jeremiah that Josiah begins the reforming act as king.

So he abolished all the pagan places of worship, the high places, on tops of hills and under green trees, which were symbols of fertility, where Canaanite worship happened. Archaeologically, there's

one place that's been found.

I've been to it a couple of times at Ararat in the desert, where the evidence was of syncretistic worship modelled on the Jerusalem temple, but abandoned at the end of the 7th century BC, exactly the time of Josiah, the king, and his reforms.

[15:27] In the course of his reform, after a few years, they found in the temple the book of the covenant, the book of the law, notably Deuteronomy, but maybe even the whole of the Pentateuch.

It shows us just how bad the nation was, that in effect their Bible was unknown. It had been gathering dust in some corner cupboard of the temple and was unknown.

And so as a result of finding it, Josiah's reforms spread further. He reinstated Passover, he made sure that the Jerusalem temple was the place for sacrifice alone, and a whole range of other reforms which reflect the laws of Deuteronomy.

And you can read of Josiah's reforms in the Bible in 2 Kings, near the end of the book of 2 Kings.

But in the end, of course, any governmental change is only in a sense external and institutional.

Josiah's reforms, great and widespread though they were, did nothing to change the hearts of the people. Josiah died stupidly and tragically at the age of 39, killed by the Pharaoh of Egypt who was passing through in effect on his way to fight up against Babylon and Assyria.

[16:46] Josiah decided to head him off at the pass at Megiddo, stupid act really, and was killed and his body taken back to Jerusalem and buried. As soon as he died, the nation abandoned the reforms.

God's judgment on King Josiah, let's go back to how it was under his father and grandfather. Now it's in this mix that Zephaniah preaches.

Difficult days, strategic time in Old Testament history. And Zephaniah, as we'll see over the next three weeks as well, backs up the reforms of Josiah.

He acknowledges that they're right things to do. In that sense, Zephaniah, a contemporary of Jeremiah, is pro the reform and the clean-up job of the nation. But like the comments in the book of Two Kings, Zephaniah also knows that good though the reforms of Josiah will be and are and were, they are not enough.

They're not enough to stave off the judgment that is now inevitable on the people of God. Verses 2 and 3, as we've seen, have this universal scope of destruction.

[18:00] And then from verse 4, they zoom in and focus on the people of God. Verses 2 and 3, in that sense, set the universal context. The God that we're dealing with here is not just the God of Israel.

He is the God of the world. But his special people are Judah, the name given to the Israelites at this time. Jerusalem is their capital. And he says in verse 4, For I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

Often in the past, God would stretch out his hand, a mighty hand and an outstretched arm in order to defend his people or to conquer their enemies. That included, for example, God stretching out his hand against Pharaoh in the time of Moses with all the plagues.

Here, God will stretch out his hand against Judah. to destroy them, not to save them. And even Jerusalem, the capital, he will attack that.

Jerusalem was regarded as inviolable, the safe city. So long as it stood, we are safe, we are right, it also would be the object of God's punishment in verse 4.

[19:14] In particular, the temple, it goes on in verse 4 to say, I will cut off from this place. Now, one level, this place could just be Jerusalem, Judah. But in the earliest laws regarding the temple, way back in Deuteronomy 12, well before the temple was ever built, God will choose a place to make his name dwell there.

So when it says in verse 4, I will cut off from this place, it's no doubt an allusion specifically to the temple in the heart of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem. And from that temple, God will cut off every remnant of Baal and the name of the idolatrous priests. Baal is the name given to the Canaanite gods, the general name for their main god, a male god.

Literally, the name Baal means lord or master and that's the word that's used for their gods and in the Old Testament referring to them. At the heart, you see, of God's judgment is judgment against false religion by his own people.

Baal worship, the fact that it's a remnant of Baal probably suggests that Josiah has already started his reforms. So he's kicked out some of the Baal worship but there's some still left, the remnant that's left and God will judge and move against that as well.

[20 : 40] Baal worship in particular is a very insidious worship and religion and plagued Israel for centuries in the land. Largely, it was a fertility religion.

It was there for crops, for animals, for children and for rain. It was an enticing and immoral religion and Israel couldn't keep away from it.

At one level, it's just motivated by greed. It's a prosperity sort of religion. We want more crops, we want more animals. That's the basic staple of your wealth in an ancient agrarian economy.

So at that level, it's motivated by greed. We want crops and animals, children as well perhaps, and therefore it fuels people's greed. That's why it's enticing. It's also immoral and therefore also enticing.

So one of the ways, one of the key ways in which you somehow engage the gods to produce what you want was you had sexual activity with temple prostitutes.

[21 : 43] Male or female didn't really seem to matter. And again, there's this sense of immorality that is attractive and enticing to fallen human beings. And as I say, for centuries, Israel just couldn't keep away from Baal worship.

They're idolatrous. The end of verse 4 says the names of the idolatrous priests. That is, even the priests who should be teaching the law of the Old Testament are themselves idolatrous. They're worshipping idols and not the living God.

Verse 5 goes on to describe some of the practices involved in this pagan worship. Some who bow down on the roofs to the host of the heavens. This probably reflects an Assyrian religious practice but maybe not limited to that either.

People would go on to their flat-topped house roofs and they'd bow down to the sun, the moon or the stars. It was in effect a horoscope type of worship.

Just as is so prevalent in our own society today. People who think that somehow the stars, the sun and the moon guide the destiny of humanity. That's in effect what these people are practicing rather than the maker of the sun, the moon and the stars.

[22 : 58] It's a syncretistic religion because it's not just saying throw out Yahweh, bring in these other gods. It's let's bring in the other ones to have a wider range. Each way bets.

So at the end of verse 5, some bow down and swear to the Lord, Yahweh, Lord in capital letters, but they also swear by Milcom, the name given to one of the Ammonite gods, a pagan god.

That is, we'll swear by Yahweh, but we'll also swear as a sort of spiritual each way bet to this god as well, just in case we need another god on our side.

Israel in all of this has completely abandoned its Bible because all of these practices are explicitly forbidden back in the early part of the Old Testament.

By Yahweh alone shall you swear, at least three times in the book of Deuteronomy, for example. Not so here, they swear by him and other gods.

[23 : 58] You shall not worship the stars, the moon, and the sun. Deuteronomy 4 and 17 make that very clear. Not so here, they'll climb up their stairs to their roof and worship the host of heaven.

Deuteronomy 6 in famous verses says, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength. But not so here.

Allegiance to Yahweh is shared and spread amongst all sorts of gods and non-gods and idols. And God will not forever tolerate such wickedness.

Verse 6 describes those who've turned back from following the Lord. Maybe they've given up on all religion, we're not really sure. But they started off and they've abandoned God for whatever reason enticed by other gods or just given up on him.

They're backsliders. They've fallen away. And no longer, as the end of verse 6 says, have they sought the Lord or inquired of him. For failure to seek Yahweh, the Lord, is in fact a sin warranting his judgment.

[25 : 14] Through the Old Testament, Jerusalem is meant to be a magnet that would attract the nations of the world to Yahweh, the God of Israel, the God of the Old Testament and the God of the Bible, the living God.

But instead, Jerusalem and Judah, God's people, have actually flirted with the world and chased the world rather than become the magnet to draw the world to God.

And though, yes, in the Old Testament, as well as the new God is merciful and forgiving, though his steadfast love endures forever, there's a sense in which, true, God's patience eventually runs out. If God's patience just was forever, it's not actually patience. God withholds his hand time and time again, delaying righteous judgment. But in the end, that time runs out.

Judgment is a reality in both Old and New Testaments. It's a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. God's wrath is revealed against all unwickedness, Paul writes in Romans 1.

[26 : 27] Well, Zephaniah's warnings in these verses, and this is just the overture to the whole of the book, Zephaniah's warnings here found glimpses of fulfillment in 597, about a dozen years after Josiah was killed.

We're not quite sure exactly when these words were spoken, but probably 20 years or so before 597, when Nebuchadnezzar, the leader of the Babylonian army, came, besieged Jerusalem. It capitulated, in a sense, peacefully, and he took away the leaders, some priests, the prophet Ezekiel, the king, etc. But Jerusalem still stood.

A puppet king of Babylon was put in place. The people didn't heed the warning. Within 10 years, they'd rebelled against Babylon, and in 587, he came back, besieged Jerusalem, and this time, was not going to let the city stand.

And it was destroyed absolutely and totally, down to the foundations, rubble and ruin. And again, significant numbers were taken off to Babylon into exile.

[27 : 33] Others fled to Egypt and other places. And Jerusalem was left virtually the haunt of jackals, relatively uninhabitable. In one sense, Zephaniah's words found fulfillment in those events.

It fell, God judged it, because of all its religious syncretism, idolatry, and pagan practice. But what about verses 2 and 3?

The destruction of Jerusalem in 587 was probably, if we'd had photos, worse than what we see in Beirut today. But it's still local.

What about verses 2 and 3? Is that just sort of a hyperbolic statement, a bit of rhetoric or poetic license, a little bit of embellishment on the side of Zephaniah, perhaps?

Or maybe God had got it wrong. Maybe God's overstated it or called their bluff in verses 2 and 3. Now there's a connection. Verses 2 and 3 remain yet to occur.

[28 : 41] The destruction of Jerusalem in 587, just within 20 years or so of Zephaniah's words, was not actually the final act, the final day. It was a severe warning, a shocking warning.

But it's not the final product. Indeed, later on, 70 years later, God allowed Jerusalem and a temple to be rebuilt and again it was destroyed after Jesus' day in 70 AD.

And as Jesus made clear, the destruction in 70 AD is not the final day but the warning, the foretaste of what the final day will be like. See, God says universal wickedness will not go unpunished.

Here is a warning. Jerusalem's destroyed in 587. Jesus says the same in effect. Here is a warning. Jerusalem's destroyed in 70 AD.

See, the day of the Lord is still coming. Zephaniah's words of verses 2 and 3 are still coming. And woe on that day to this earth.

[29 : 45] In effect, you see, the Bible warns us that not just the destruction of Jerusalem but in effect every natural disaster, earthquakes and tsunamis and hurricanes and cyclones as well as all the wars and rumours of wars that we know so well in our world today.

Iraq and Lebanon and Sri Lanka and Bosnia and the Congo and other places. Shocking and tragic though they are, numbing and sickening when we see the pictures.

They're warnings of the final day before it comes. The final day is still coming. A day that will be worse than anything this world has ever seen.

And so every sickening shot we see of Beirut and Lebanon is to prod our spiritual minds into action. Every remembrance of the tsunami around the Indian Ocean nearly two years ago should stir up our faith in the day to come.

Every reverberation that we keep feeling of 9-11 should unblock our ears to God's warnings. For the Lord has spoken.

[31 : 00] Zephaniah makes that clear. Says the Lord. Says the Lord. Says the Lord. There's more to come of course in this book and we'll see that over the three weeks ahead of us.

In many respects this is the overture to the book. There are clearer imperatives and commands for the readers that we'll see over the next three weeks.

But a day is coming. A day worse than any that we've seen glimpses of. But not unrelated. In a sense we are being given warning after warning after warning on this earth. that God will judge the universal wickedness of humanity on the final day. It will not be a day that will make us comfortable.

These verses ought not to make us comfortable. There is more to come. Let's pray. Let's pray. God our Father the judge of this universe we're unsettled by these words and we know your holiness and we know our own failures but unblock our ears we pray and help us to respond aright to your words to us through this prophet Zephaniah this week and the weeks to come so that on that final day we may be found acceptable in your sight through Jesus Christ our Lord.

[32 : 46] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.