

A Day of Justice

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Preacher: Ricky Njoto

- [0:00] please turn your Bibles back to Zeveniah 2. But we'll jump a bit back and forth between verses so the verses will be on the screen. Well, I remember clearly when I was at preschool there was a kid who bullied everyone in class.
- He will take a plastic sword toy and hit everyone with it. Now the teacher saw that and so she grabbed his plastic sword and gave it to us and told us to hit him back.
- Well, this was in the early 90s in Indonesia. I'm not sure if it will fly today. And looking back, I'm not sure whether what the teacher did was right. But my parents were happy.
- They thought, yes, justice for the persecuted kids. Although I'm not sure if that kid's parents were happy about it. But we all want justice and fairness, don't we?
- Though we might not agree on how to achieve justice and fairness, we all agree that justice is needed. Even little kids demand it.
- [1:21] It's unfair, they might say, when we do something that they think persecutes them. Well, in today's text, we see how God provides justice for his children in Israel.
- So, while in chapter one, last week, the prophecy is largely against his own children, against Israel, here in chapter two, God is against the nations surrounding Israel Israel, because they've been bullying his people.
- So, we see here on the map, it's quite small, but we see the dark blue in the middle and the lighter red, that's the kingdom of Israel.
- So, the blue is kingdom of Israel, northern part, and then kingdom of Judah, the southern part. And we see that the text prophesies against, starting from Philistia, which is the west of Israel, the dark red, that's the states, that's the kingdom of Philistia.
- And then, the prophecy moves to Moab and Ammon, the east of Israel, the orange and the purple, that's Moab and Ammon.
- [2:40] And then, the prophecy will move to Cush, south of Israel. It's not on the map because it's in Africa, Cush. And finally, Zephaniah will prophesy about Assyria, which is north of Israel, on the right-hand side, on the top corner of right-hand side.
- So, Zephaniah prophesies that God, the God of Israel, will come and destroy the surrounding nations and the destruction will be extreme.
- So, it starts with Philistia in verse 4 to 7. Now, before we look at these verses in detail, it's important to clarify whether this prophecy refers to the current war between Israel and Hamas.
- after all, the first city that is mentioned in our text in verse 4 is Gaza. Does this mean that the Bible justifies Israel's attack on Gaza?
- Well, three things can probably be said here. First, the ancient Philistines are different to the modern Palestinians.
- [4:03] So, this prophecy has little to do with the current Palestinians. The current Palestinians are largely Arabs. The ancient Philistines, as a people we will see later, as a people they're extinct.

They're no longer. Now, second, whether or not Israel is justified in their attacks on Hamas, I don't think we can use this biblical prophecy in particular to find the answer.

Because, as we've said last week, the prophecy on this text in particular is against Israel as much as it is against Gaza and Cush and Assyria and other nations.

So, does it justify Israel's attack on Hamas? Well, it could be used as well to justify Hamas' attack on Israel, because it also prophesies against Israel.

Third, more importantly, we will see later that prophecies in the Old Testament cannot be applied straight away to a modern political situation without going through Jesus.

[5:22] There is another step that we need to take, that is Jesus in the New Testament. And we will see that when Jesus is applied, this prophecy refers ultimately to the final day of judgment that pertains not only the Middle East, but also the whole world.

And the destruction will be even more severe. We will see that later. So, with that in mind, let's go back to the text.

Well, it's clear here that the destruction of Philistia will be total. In verse 4 to 5 there, big cities will be abandoned or left in ruins.

think about those disaster movies where big cities like New York City don't have anyone in them. It's similar here. In verse 6, not only that there will be no people, but all the great buildings will be no longer.

Instead, in their place will be pastures for animals. And this destruction will happen so quickly. In verse 4, it says at midday, Ashdod will be emptied.

[6:47] This suggests that the destruction will be completed in half a day. Someone will attack, a nation will attack, and in half a day, Philistia will be no longer.

This prophecy pretty much came true around the year 600 BC, when the Babylonian Empire destroyed Philistia and ancient Philistines went extinct, as I said, went extinct as a distinct ethnicity.

They were all destroyed and the few people that were left, they fled and they intermarried with other ethnicities and they became, well, the ancient Philistines are no longer, they're extinct.

And then the prophecy moves east to Moab and Ammon. So in verse 9, God declares that Moab and Ammon will become like Sodom and Gomorrah.

You might remember, Sodom and Gomorrah are two countries that were completely destroyed by God, again, very quickly, just one night. And Moab and Ammon will become a place of weeds and salt pits like a wasteland, like Sodom and Gomorrah.

[8:06] So again, the destruction will be total. And then in verse 12, the prophecy moves south to Cush.

Like I said, Cush is in Africa, Cush refers to today's Ethiopia. And in those days, Ethiopia was considered the edge of the known world.

So what Zephaniah is saying here is that God's judgment, when he comes, it will reach the very ends of the world. And lastly, the prophecy turns north to Assyria.

Now, Assyria, that's a picture of Nineveh, ancient Nineveh, which is the capital city of Assyria. Assyria during this time was a superpower.

Nineveh was a big city of cultural and military relevance. But Zephaniah prophesies in verse 13 that Nineveh will be utterly desolate and dry as the desert.

[9:19] In verse 14, there's an imagery of a reversal of creation's order. instead of humans exercising dominion over creation, now, because of the judgment, animals will rule over what once was a great place of human military power.

And about 200 years after this prophecy was written, we have a record. We have a record that says that people went to the site that was Nineveh and could not find a trace of its former existence.

Gone. When the Babylonian empire came and attacked them, Nineveh, as a big cultural and military city, was completely destroyed.

And it literally became a desert. So, God will come and destroy everything.

Now, the question is, why? Why would God come and destroy things? Well, we see a couple of reasons here in this text.

[10:36] First, God will come and destroy these nations because they have bullied and persecuted God's people Israel, or at least threatened them.

So, in verse 8, it states explicitly that Moab and Ammon have threatened and insulted and mocked the people of God.

And verse 10 says a similar thing, insulting and mocking the people of the Lord Almighty. And in addition to that, if we compare this text with other Old Testament prophets, the prophet Amos notes the cruelty of the Ammonites.

He says, this is what the Lord says, for three sins of Ammon, even for four, I will not relent, because he ripped open the pregnant women of Gilead in order to extend his borders.

The Ammonites and the Moabites, they were cruel, violent warmongers. So, throughout the Old Testament, God constantly forbade Israel, his people, to attack Moab and Ammon, because he had given them their own places.

[11:50] He had set the boundaries for Israel and Moab and Ammon. But over and over again, Ammon wanted to extend their borders, and this was done by attacking and killing even the most vulnerable of the society, even the pregnant women.

And, as verse 10 says, this bullying that they did towards God's people came out of pride.

Because they were proud and they were arrogant, perhaps they thought that they were better people, so they insulted and mocked and attacked the people of Israel. And, indeed, just like the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by God because they violently persecuted people, including Lot and his family.

So, too, the people of Moab and Ammon will be destroyed because of their pride and arrogance as they persecute the people of Israel. So, in that sense, God's judgment is just.

Now, there's a second related reason why God will destroy them. the arrogance of the nations did not just manifest in persecution, it also manifested in their acting like gods.

[13:19] In verse 15, Zephaniah says this regarding Assyria. This is the city of revelry that lived in safety. She said to herself, I am the one and there is none besides me.

What a ruin she has become, a lair for wild beasts, all who pass by her scoff and shake their fists. So, these nations were boastful because of their military power and their cultural significance.

Assyria lived in safety and as a result they boasted and they thought that they could protect themselves and made themselves wealthy without God's help.

In fact, their expression there is one that only God could say. I am the one and there is none besides me.

And so, God will come and destroy them because their arrogance and pride don't only make them bullies, it also makes them blasphemers.

[14:28] they don't just persecute God's people, they insult God himself. So, why would God come and destroy these nations?

Well, because of their pride. Their pride has caused them to oppress and bully others. The same pride has made them think and act like their gods.

Now, this is relevant, especially these days, right, when the narrative of the society constantly inflates our ego. They tell us, you know, they tell young people, probably us as well, you can do anything you want.

You can be anything you want to be. Know your worth. That's basically what people keep telling us. And no wonder that there's no place for God anymore in the society.

And religion is seen as a crutch for the weak. because it's not desirable for self inflation. Why would you need God if you can be God?

[15 : 35] Which is the sin that Adam and Eve first fell into. And no wonder that when people are self inflated, they can't handle criticisms or disagreements.

and when they do get criticized and people disagree with them, they cancel each other out.

You know, this cancel culture that is happening right now. They cancel each other out. They bully and oppress each other, at least on social media, if not in real life.

because everyone's pride is inflated. We see here that God doesn't threaten these nations without cause.

He is just. He repays justly. And because their crime is significant, not only violent persecution of God's people, but also even putting themselves in the place of God, then their judgment will be severe.

[16 : 50] This prophecy should have given great encouragement to those people in Israel who suffered the abuse done by their neighboring nations.

For those in Israel who have suffered their insults, their violent attacks, and their threats, and this prophecy should also give great encouragement to those who are suffering today for their faith.

As our New Testament reading from 2 Thessalonians says, God will give trouble to those who give us trouble. God is just.

God will judge those who persecute his people accordingly. God sees everything and he will vindicate them.

Now, for a lot of us who live in Australia and we read these Old Testament passages, this promise of judgment might not sound like encouragement.

[18 : 02] and for some, it might even sound too harsh. Destroying the whole nations? Really? But imagine being one of them.

Imagine being someone in ancient Israel whose pregnant wife was ripped open by these nations. Imagine being someone living in India who faces life threats because of their faith.

Or imagine being the guy from Indonesia that I told you about whose whole family was slaughtered in front of him because of their faith. We, in the West, often struggle with the justice of God because we want the God of peace and love and grace and forgiveness, which is a great thing.

But a lot of those people in those places struggle with the idea of the God who forgives. Really, God, you're forgiving these people? No, they want the good news that God punishes accordingly.

And perhaps they might even wish that God punishes violently, just as those people have violently persecuted his people. people.

[19 : 32] But is there no hope for those nations as well? Well, it does seem that there is hope for them, just as there's hope for Israel when they repent.

Remember from last week? So going back to verse 3 from our text last week, there's a call for Israel to return to God and humble themselves to seek humility, it says, and perhaps you will be sheltered from the coming judgment.

In verse 7, there's hope for the remnant of the people of Judah, that is, those people who are protected and sheltered from the coming judgment because they have humbled themselves and returned to God.

In fact, at the end of verse 7 there, it explicitly depicts their humility. Once they get the land, these remnant people will not rely on their own power or military strength, but the Lord, their God, will care for them.

There's a sense of humility there. And at the end of verse 9, it says that again, the remnant of God's people will inherit the land.

[20:55] But the picture here is not through military conquest, because what's in view is a small number of people, the remnant, the survivors, those who are left behind, probably the weak of the society.

They're the ones who will inherit the land. So again, the humble and the weak will get God's blessing and protection. And we see that this hope is not just for Israel.

There is explicit hope for the nations too, if the requirement is the same, if they humble themselves, be weak, and join the remnant of Israel to turn to God.

So in verse 10 to 11, after saying that this is what the nations will get, destruction, God straight away gives them hope.

The Lord will be awesome to them when he destroys all the gods of the earth. Distant nations will bow down to him, all of them in their own lands.

[22:07] If they recognize God as the one who is awesome, not themselves, and if they bow down to him, not force others to bow down to them, then they will be saved.

It's logical, isn't it? Because of pride, people bully others. Because of pride, they turn away from God and think that they're gods. Then the solution is humility and repentance.

When God's word is against you because of your pride, the only appropriate response is to abandon that pride and turn to God for forgiveness.

Now, as I've said before, these prophecies were already fulfilled thousands of years ago. So, Philistia, Moab and Ammon, Assyria, they no longer exist.

They were violently destroyed when the Babylonian empire came and attacked. So, do these prophecies have anything to do with us?

[23:22] Well, yes. Several years ago, Hannah and I went to a mountain in Indonesia called Mount Bromo. We would like to see the sunrise from the peak of the mountain.

So, we woke up at around 3 a.m. and started driving up the mountain. And from below, we could see the peak of the mountain mountain, and we got excited. Yes, we're going to be there before the sunrise.

But when we got to the top, this is what we saw. Next slide. That's what we saw.

It was actually not the top. We were just halfway up. There was a big field of sand, and we had to walk across that field and hiked all the way to the top of the mountain.

But we could not see the real peak from below because of that sand field. That's basically what prophecies, Old Testament prophecies are like.

[24:32] From the perspective of the Old Testament, this prophecy was fulfilled during the expansion of the Babylonian Empire. But then, when that happened, they got there, they saw, oh, it's actually not this, the peak, there's another peak of the mountain, there's another day of judgment.

And this time, the judgment threatens the whole earth. So, at the end of the Bible, in the book of Revelation, this judgment is described in chapter 6.

I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair. The whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth.

As figs dropped from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind, the heavens receded like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else, both slave and free, hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains.

[25 : 45] They called to the mountains and the rocks, Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne, that is God, and from the wrath of the Lamb, that is Jesus. For the great day of the wrath has come, and who can withstand it?

No one can withstand it. And at the end of the book of Revelation, in chapter 20, the destruction will be even more total than what is described here in the book of Zeppaniah, as earth and heaven and hell will be destroyed.

So what is our hope when that happens? When the great day of judgment comes? God is well, just as Zeppaniah says here, our hope is the same.

It is only in humbling ourselves and returning to God. And this is where Jesus comes into the picture.

He is the God to turn to. In him, in his death on the cross, the violent and just judgment and the forgiveness for those who repent collide.

[27 : 09] So that we don't have to endure the judgment anymore, as he has endured it on the cross for us, violently. Because as he says, he himself says, he is the only one whose heart is truly gentle and humble.

Verse 3 in our text says, seek the Lord. Well, there he is, the Lord who chased us down to the pit of death to save us.

The Lord who has shielded us from judgment with his own body. And the Lord who will shield us from the coming judgment on the last day.

verse 3 of our text also says, seek righteousness, seek humility. Well, there he is, the only one who is truly righteous and truly humble.

And yet, this only righteous and humble God man faced the violent punishment that was reserved for the nations upon himself.

[28 : 27] God is so, come to him. Come to him, you victims, you who have endured oppression, insults, and unjust treatment.

Come to him and he will give you justice. And come to him, you proud people, you mockers, you bullies, you who have violently oppressed people, humble yourself, repent, and come to him and he will shield you from the coming judgment.

Come to Jesus because he has promised both forgiveness and vindication. he has promised in Matthew 5, blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, the humble, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The same promise as what Zephaniah here in this text promises, that the humble will inherit the land. especially now when we are so close to Advent, as we are waiting for the second return of Jesus, let's humble ourselves in front of the throne of God and return to Jesus, both for forgiveness and for hope of justice.

[30 : 14] So let's pray. Father, we do thank you for this reminder of your coming judgment, that it will be great.

It will be a source of comfort if we've been wronged, if we've been persecuted, insulted, if we've endured insults and threats, but it also acts as a source of warning, if we have oppressed others, if we have threatened and insulted others.

So help us with your spirit to seek Jesus and to turn to him and to humble ourselves and to ask for your forgiveness, but also to turn to him for the hope of justice when he returns and vindicates us.

In the name of Jesus, our Lord, we pray. Amen.