

Why Jesus Matters: The Judgment of God

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[0 : 00] Please be seated. Well, good morning. Keep your Bibles open to Zephaniah chapter 1, page 765.

How about I just pray for us and then we'll get into it. So, let me pray. Gracious God and Father, thank you for speaking to us and revealing yourself to us in the scriptures and in your son, Jesus.

Please help us this morning to think clearly, to hear you speak. Help us respond with faith and obedience. In Jesus' name, amen. During the week, I'm involved in some university student ministry at Deakin Uni Burwood with the Christian Union, a Christian student club on campus.

I'm there to encourage and train students to share their faith with others on campus. I love it. I think it's the best gig in the world. It's a great privilege to be an ambassador for Jesus in the world.

I love it. I think it's great. I get to talk to lots of different people about Jesus, people of all different backgrounds and beliefs. And so, I've heard a lot of objections over the years to the Christian message in one form or another.

[1 : 21] But I have found that, by and large, the most common objection or issue people have with Jesus or the gospel is that they are just indifferent.

The most common response from people is, who cares? So what? So what if the Bible's history? So what if Jesus rose from the dead? Who cares? What difference does it make?

Why does it even matter? For most people, the issue is not the evidence for Jesus, but it's the relevance of Jesus. The issue isn't primarily whether or not the Bible's history or whether Jesus rose from the dead.

It's whether Jesus actually matters at all. Well, over the next couple of weeks, so this Sunday and the next two weeks, we'll be hearing God's word to us through the prophet Zephaniah in the Old Testament.

These talks are subtitled, Why Jesus Matters? Because as we go through Zephaniah together, we're going to see and hear God's answer to the question, Why Jesus Matters?

[2 : 25] So we've had Zephaniah 1 read to us. Verse 1 tells us, date stamps it for us, where we are in Bible history. We're in 620 BC.

The kingdom of Israel is divided. There's the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom of Judah. Capital city is Jerusalem and King Josiah is on the throne. And we have this message, this messenger, Zephaniah.

And so in verses 2 and 3, the first thing that he tells us is that the judgment of God is inescapable. He says, 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.

Zephaniah, speaking on behalf of God Almighty, pronounces judgment on everyone and everything, all creation, the whole earth, all humanity.

[3 : 30] And notice too, that he pronounces judgment in a particular order. Look again at verse 3. Notice the order of creation. He says humans, animals, birds and fish.

Now, can you remember anywhere else in the Old Testament that talks about the order of creation? Can you cast your mind back? Well, if you guessed Genesis 1, you're right.

At the beginning of the Bible, in Genesis chapter 1, God creates the heavens and the earth and the order of creation, of living things, is he creates the fish in the sea, the birds of the air, the wild animals, and then finally the man and the woman, Adam and Eve.

Well, what do you notice about this order of creation in Zephaniah 1? What's different about it? Well, it's the reverse of Genesis 1, isn't it? In other words, God is undoing his creation.

In his great wrath and anger, as God sweeps away everything from the face of the earth, God reverses the work of Genesis 1. And it's total.

[4 : 39] The punishment is inescapable. Notice in verse 3 too, the fish get punished. I mean, it's an easy verse just to kind of look over and not think about, but why is that there? Why does he say the fish of the sea?

Well, last time God destroyed humanity and all living creatures on the earth with a great flood in the book of Genesis. It was absolutely devastating.

It was horrific and it destroyed everything. But presumably, the fish got away with it, right? Because where do fish live? They live in the ocean, right?

Well, not this time. Even the fish will be punished. In other words, this judgment will be worse than the flood. The judgment of God will be total, all humanity, all creation and inescapable.

Not even the fish get away with it. And not even the people of God is safe. Look at verse 4. I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

[5 : 41] The point is that God's judgment is inescapable. The next point is that God's judgment is against sin. In the following verses, God exposes the guilt of his people.

So, he's going to judge them. The question is, does he have a case? God will deal with the surrounding nations. We'll see that next week in chapter 2. But here, God exposes the sin of his people.

Let's look at the second half of verse 4. I will cut off from this place every remnant of Baal and the name of the idolatrous priests, those who bow down on the roofs to the hosts of heaven, those who bow down and swear to the Lord, but also swear by Milcom.

God's people are guilty of worshipping the God of the Bible, but also other gods as well. Baal or Milcom, just to name a few.

God condemns his people for not worshipping him or being devoted to him exclusively. God alone. So, the beginning of verse 5, he says, those who bow down on the roofs to the hosts of heaven, that is, the sun and the moon and the stars, and also those who swear to the Lord.

[6 : 58] So, people have kind of feet in both camps, worshipping creation, but also trying to worship the creator. But don't you think that this problem was a way back then problem for those people?

The problem is actually still around today. This is the believer who worships God on a Sunday and sings a song and prays the prayers, but then goes running to the star charts on Monday morning to check their destiny.

This is the believer who believes in God, but also in palm reading or rubbing a rabbit's foot just for good luck. It's not trusting God alone, God exclusively.

It's having a halfway bet each way just to be safe. You know, mixing beliefs as if they're all the same, like having a bit of Jesus and a bit of Buddhism or having a bit of Jesus as well as the Book of Mormon or Jesus and a bit of Muhammad or crystals or the Zodiac or whatever.

God is angry that his people don't worship him alone. And in verse 6, those who have turned back from following the Lord, who have not sought the Lord or inquired of him, they have turned their back on him.

[8 : 10] In other words, they've committed apostasy, they've turned away. They don't bother talking with him about anything. They don't pay him any attention or any notice. So, it's not as though God doesn't exist.

It's just that we're just not into him. That's the attitude. There's a real warning here about the danger of neglect. It's not that for most of us that we would go after kind of dodgy, heretical teachings.

It's not that we would go after it. But for many of us, the danger in our relationship with God is that we will just neglect. We won't seek him. We won't inquire of him.

We don't want to know what he says. So, we'll just neglect listening to his word. We'll neglect praying. We'll neglect talking to our children or grandchildren about God and his works and who he is.

So, there's a real warning here, a real danger of neglect. So, are you regularly listening to God's word? Are you regularly praying to God?

[9 : 18] Are you seeking him? How have you made decisions recently? Have they been hasty decisions off the cuff or have you been seeking God in prayer? The danger is neglect and walking away and the warning is clear, don't do it.

Don't be so foolish as to do that. Let's keep reading verses 7 to 9. God says, Now, this is directed at the officials and king's sons.

King Josiah is not mentioned here. So, this is probably at the beginning of his reign before he brought national and spiritual reform. So, there's all this corruption and spiritual bankruptcy going on.

This is the royal officials and the civil leaders. And in those verses, put simply, God is putting on a spit roast but the language suggests that these invited guests are not coming to eat the meal, they're going to be the meal.

God will devour them because of their paganism, because of their corruption, their violence and their deceit. Now, just standing back from that, verses 4 to 9 don't paint a very pretty picture, do they?

[10 : 57] It's quite clear that from paganism and mixing beliefs and rejecting God, the people of God are guilty sinners and deserve God's punishment.

But let's keep reading, verses 10 to 11. On that day, says the Lord, a cry will be heard from the fish gate, a whale from the second quarter, a loud crash from the hills.

The inhabitants of the mortar whale, for all the traders have perished. All who weigh out silver are cut off. So, on that day, on judgment day, there will be screaming and wailing from everywhere, from the north to the hills to the marketplace area where there's trading in silver and gold.

It says the traders have perished. Imagine that, just dead bodies strung out in the streets, there's crashing and screaming everywhere. Verse 12, at that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, the Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm.

God will search Jerusalem. He's going to act like a ruthless detective, torch in one hand, sniff a hound in the other. He's going to search through the rubble and turn over every stone and put every survivor to death.

[12 : 17] He will punish those who say, the Lord will not do good or evil. I mean, this is the philosophy of John Lennon, isn't it? This is John Lennon's imagine. Imagine there's no heaven.

It's easy if you try. No hell below us. Above us, only sky. That's what John Lennon thinks. God doesn't punish anyone. God doesn't reward anyone. He's just kind of up there doing his thing.

He doesn't send anyone to heaven or hell. He's just there. Well, verse 13. These people, their wealth 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 point is that God's judgment is against sin and despite what John Lennon thinks, what anybody else thinks, God will punish the guilty.

Let's keep reading verses 14 to 16. The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast. The sound of the day of the Lord is bitter.

[13 : 23] The warrior cries aloud there. That day will be a day of wrath. And just listen to these couplets, these pairs of what he says about how he describes the day.

That day will be a day of wrath, 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.

This is a very vivid description, isn't it? This reminds me of like the opening scene of Saving Private Ryan. I'm not sure if you're familiar with that film, but in the opening scenes of Saving Private Ryan, these boatloads of American soldiers try and land on the shores of Omaha Beach in Normandy during World War II.

And it's just chaos. There's bombs going off. There's bullets flying everywhere. Dead bodies being flung everywhere, right and centre. There's alarms going off. And there's the crashing of the wind and the waves of the ocean.

It's this violent, dark battle zone. Well, these verses sound very much like a war zone. That's what the day of judgment will be like.

[14 : 39] Finally, verses 17 to 18. I will bring such distress upon people 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 dun.

Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the Lord's wrath. In the fire of his passion, the whole earth shall be consumed. For a full, a terrible end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.

So we're back where we started from. This is the language of verses 2 and 3. Again, God's promise to judge the whole earth. And God's judgment is personal.

You notice that throughout this chapter, God says, I will, I will, I will. God's not going to send this impersonal third party to do his judgment for him.

This will be God himself carrying out his own judgment. Friends, Zephaniah 1 is heavy going. Eventually, Zephaniah does tell us about God's forgiving grace.

[15 : 44] We do get there in chapter 3. So just stay with us for that. But we're not there yet. For the moment, Zephaniah 1 leaves us with a very dark, sober picture.

One of the most famous sermons in all of church history is called Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. It's by a great evangelist and theologian, Jonathan Edwards. Zephaniah 1 feels like that, doesn't it?

Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. It is shocking and it's sobering. Now, at the start I said that the issue for most people in this day and age, the issue for most people with Jesus and Christianity is whether or not he's relevant.

It's not about history. It's not about evidence. It's whether or not Jesus matters. Well, I think there are two things that Zephaniah points out to us, two significant realities about why Jesus matters.

The first one is that Jesus is the judge. In Acts 17, Paul tells the Athenians around him, listening to him, he says that God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed.

[16 : 59] And he's given proof of this to everyone by raising Jesus from the dead. So Jesus is the man God has appointed to be the judge of the world, to carry out the judgment of Zephaniah 1.

And he's proven this by raising Jesus from the dead. And in Revelation 6, the Apostle John says this. This is Revelation 6, verses 15 and 17.

Listen and see if you can hear Zephaniah 1 in this passage. Notice who it is who's pouring out God's wrath.

On judgment day. It's both him who sits on the throne and the lamb. And the lamb is Jesus. The sacrificial lamb represents Jesus. So Jesus is the judge.

He's the one who will pour out God's anger at humanity's rebellion on judgment day. That's the first point. Jesus is the judge. And the second point is that Jesus is the rescuer from his judgment.

[18 : 25] Friends, there is hope. In this passage, there is hope. Jesus is the judge, but he's also the rescuer from his own judgment.

Notice that this worldwide judgment promised here, it wasn't fulfilled in 6th century BC because we're still standing here. There's still fish in the ocean.

The day of the Lord in Zephaniah 1 hasn't come yet. It's still coming. We're much closer to it now than in the 6th century BC, but it's coming, but it hasn't come yet.

There is still hope. There is still time. There is still time to get right with God, receive his forgiveness and pardon now before that day. And the good news of the Bible is that Jesus died in our place.

That's how he's our rescuer, because he died bearing all of our sin and our guilt and rebellion. And on the cross, he took the punishment that we deserve. The judgment on the last day fell on him on the cross.

[19 : 29] In effect, the judge became the judge to acquit the guilty, you and me. John Stott calls this the self-substitution of God.

And friends, that's why Jesus matters. That's the good news of Zephaniah. Jesus is the judge we will all face. Men, women, children, black or white, young or old, rich or poor, we will all meet Jesus as our judge, but he is also the rescuer we desperately need.

And I think there is this great temptation sometimes, I think, for Christians in general to try and make Jesus seem more relevant to the rest of the world and try and package him in some way that will kind of appeal to whatever social trend happens, whatever happens to be the kind of important social thing at the time.

Let's try and make Jesus relevant. Well, we don't need to do that. Jesus is relevant already. He is the judge we will all meet and he's the rescuer we all need. He already is relevant.

Don't need to try and make him relevant. He already is. He's the judge and he's the rescuer from his own judgment. So friends, let's pray to him and thank him and worship him.

[20 : 47] Lord Jesus, thank you for coming to our world and thank you for dying on the cross. Thank you for bearing the judgment we deserve so that by calling upon you and trusting you, we are forgiven.

Thank you for being so kind and patient and for putting off the final judgment day so that people can repent and be forgiven. We pray that you would be merciful to us and we ask for your mercy and continued kindness for those who still have not put their trust in you.

Please call them to yourself and save them. Thank you for being so very good and so very kind to us. Thank you for dying and rising again. We pray that all that we think and say and do would glorify and honour and thank you.