

Seek the LORD

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[0 : 00] I'm sitting in my room early Friday morning, it came to me that I have actually got to do something.

But digging into Zephaniah, talking about Zephaniah, preaching Zephaniah is good. It's about the day when God comes. That's what Advent's about. It's a bit unusual and adventurous and a bit dark to have these Sundays so far in Zephaniah.

And I like that. It's been good. I've enjoyed it, strangely. It hit me Friday morning that I, Chris Lowe, have actually really got to do something.

As I hear God's word to me. Because chapter 2 verse 3 is so urgent and directed at me and you. Seek the Lord. I'm hearing that the day of the Lord is near. When he comes in judgment and sweeps away everything from the face of this earth.

[1 : 01] If I really believe what God says. If I feel something of how that day will be in all its distress and anguish. How dangerous if I just go, okay, I've got it.

Judgment day won't be good. But I belong to Jesus so I know I'll be fine. So now I'll go and have some lunch and go for a run and get on with my busy life and go back onto Facebook. How dangerous.

Zephaniah speaks to people who are pretty sure they belong to God and will be fine. And they're just happy to keep going as they are in their lives.

And Zephaniah speaks truth in order to shake them and also to shake me into urgent action. I must seek the Lord.

I'm knowing something of the pride in my life. I'm aware of my, you don't see this, but my sometimes violent and deceitful words.

[2 : 06] I'm conscious just of the state of my life, if I'm honest, much of the time. Maybe this word is actually for me. Maybe I actually need to humble myself before my God.

Maybe I need to fall on my face in my room and pray and actually turn from my pride and seek God. If we're listening to Zephaniah, it might mess up our timetable, this.

Might disrupt our emotions. Might unsettle our busy December. Might make us look foolish to people around us. But could it be that maybe I have actually got some honest and serious business to do with God before he comes?

Maybe you do too. Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, verse 3, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness. Seek humility.

Perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord's anger. And what we're doing this morning, this is part two of this little Advent series.

[3 : 17] If you were here last week, you'll remember. Zephaniah, set 26 centuries ago, it's old this, in the days of Josiah, king of Judah, Zephaniah the prophet speaks words of eternal truth from the Lord.

And he's speaking to the people of Judah, the little Jewish nation of the people of God. They were centered around Jerusalem in the Middle East. They were the church of their day. In chapter 1, Zephaniah speaks of the day of the Lord, near and coming quickly.

He speaks of the time when God comes in angry judgment against Judah, against Jerusalem, against his own people who have sinned against him. For then, then, that day was just around the corner.

And 30 or 40 years after Zephaniah spoke, the armies of Babylon, God's instrument of judgment, did indeed rip through the land and leave only smoldering stubble.

For us now, mention of a coming day of the Lord points forward to the final future day of God's universal judgment on all people.

[4 : 26] That day when it comes. That day when it comes. It will be a day of wrath and darkness and distress. And in chapter 1 here, the Lord speaks so shockingly of that day.

And he does it because he wants to persuade us and move us to seek him before the day he comes.

And chapter 2, verse 3 is not the end of what Zephaniah says. In this little prophecy, the Lord isn't done yet.

And so, come to chapter 2, verse 4 onwards this morning, where God says more. And like it or not, he wants to tell us more about the day of his anger.

He wants to reveal to us whom his anger will come upon. And why? In these words, he wants to underline and press on us how that day will be.

[5 : 29] And the reason he says all this, our holy, loving God, is because he really, really wants us to get the message. He really, really wants us, in the light of his coming, to humble ourselves before him and seek him.

And so make it through the day of the Lord to safety. And there's lots and lots in this long passage. We're going to motor through. Here's the message of this morning.

Seek the Lord because no one will escape the day of the Lord's anger. No one will. But a remnant will survive.

Survive. And first of all, know this. Let's move through the passage together. First of all, know that no one, no one will escape the day of the Lord's anger.

Whoever you are and wherever you're from, no one will escape. Having spoken to Judah and Jerusalem in chapter 1, now in chapter 2, God speaks to the nations surrounding Judah and far away.

[6 : 40] It's a message to the world of woe, threats of destruction, woe to you. Do you see how it follows on? First in his sights is Philistia, chapter 2, verse 4 onwards, which is just to the west of Judah back then.

It's where the Gaza Strip is today, next to the Mediterranean. The Philistines, those people, they're the ancient, tough enemies of God's people. They had Goliath and others fighting for them.

They were a nation dead set against, if you like, the church. Who's that today? Think of the Chinese Communist Party crushing the church.

Or think of intellectuals landing killer blows against the Christian faith and loving it. How will it be for them? Verse 4. Gaza will be abandoned and Ashkelon left in ruins.

At midday Ashdod will be emptied and Ekron uprooted. Uprooted. Devastation. Woe to you who live by the sea, you Kerethite people. The word of the Lord is against you, Canaan, land of the Philistines.

[7 : 47] He says, I will destroy you and none will be left. The land by the sea, their cities, will become pastures, having wells for shepherds and sheepfolds for flocks.

On that day, tough enemies destroyed. In verse 8 onwards, the Lord turns to Moab and Ammon. That's to Judah's east.

The Moabites, the Ammonites, they were descended from Lot, Abraham's nephew. They're relatives of Judah. Close to them, but they don't belong. How will it be for them on the day of the Lord?

I have heard the insults of Moab and the taunts of the Ammonites who insulted my people and made threats against their land. Maybe you have a family relative who is always insulting and taunting you.

What are you doing following Jesus Christ? Your religion is dying. It won't save you, you fool. Therefore, as surely as I live, declares the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, surely Moab will become like Sodom, the Ammonites like Gomorrah, a place of weeds and salt pits, a wasteland forever.

[8 : 59] On that day, the proud oh so wise ones who look down mockingly on God's people, they will get something back. Verse 10, this is what they'll get in return for their pride, for insulting and mocking the people of the Lord Almighty.

The Lord will be awesome to them when he destroys the gods of the earth. Do you start to feel these oracles of woe?

Philistia to the west, Moab and Ammon to the east. Now, Kush, far away to Judah's south, travel up the Nile, down into Africa to distant Kush.

That is today's Sudan. That's as far away as you could imagine back then from Judah, from God. You Kushites too will be slain by my sword.

There's no escape, however far away you are. Or last, to the north and Assyria. The superpower Assyrian Empire, the USA of its day.

[10:06] Massive and powerful, rich and dominant. And its capital Nineveh, once the largest city in the world, well watered and secure. The Lord, verse 13, will stretch out his hand against the north and destroy Assyria.

Leaving Nineveh utterly desolate and dry as the desert. Flocks and herds will lie down there, creatures of every kind. You're meant to picture that.

That now devastated civilisation. The desert owl and the screech owl will roost on her columns. Their hooting will echo through the windows.

Rubble will fill the doorways. The beams of cedar will be exposed. Imagine, stepping through the rubble of central London, say. There's no taxis.

There's no chatter. There's just the sound of crows echoing. Oh look, there's a bit of Big Ben. Isn't that twisted metal part of what was once the London Eye?

[11:10] Verse 15. This is the city of revelry that lived in safety. She said to herself, I am the one and there is none besides me. A party town.

So rich and safe and secure and proud. I am the one. No one can touch us. No other nations. No silly so-called gods.

What a ruin she has become. A lair for wild beasts. All who pass by scoff and shake their fists.

Chapter 2. Woe to the nations.

Says the Lord Almighty. Say you're listening to Zephaniah this morning and you say to yourself, I don't like this Christian God he's telling me about.

I want to get away from the Lord's fierce anger. Where will you go? Are you going to turn into a tough enemy ready to fight the Christian faith at every turn?

[12:12] Are you going to slide away from your family as you get older and become a mocker? Are you going to run away as far as you can? Are you going to move to another city and go party and make money and feel safe and secure because you've got it all now and you've left that Christian faith behind?

You will not be able to escape from the Lord. Philistine, Moabite, Cushite, Assyrian.

No one will. In chapter 3, verses 1 to 8, having spoken to the nations out there, to the west and the east and the south and the north, the Lord turns once more to Jerusalem, to the people of God, to the church, to us.

Not with a message of blessing here, but woe. Woe to the city of oppressors, rebellious and defiled. What an ugly picture these verses paint of the so-called people of God who belong to him. People who firstly won't listen humbly.

[13:31] Look, verse 2. She obeys no one. She accepts no correction. She does not trust in the Lord. She does not draw near to her God.

Do you know, it says in the New Testament, all Scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching and rebuking and correcting and training in righteousness. And Christians are people who listen to God's voice and accept his correction.

And trust in him. But, well, if we will not listen to his voice, if we won't allow God through his word to correct what we think or do in our lives today, there can be no blessing for us from him.

Do you know this? I can be baptised. I can be from a Christian family, a Christian country. I can feel really safe because I belong to Jesus and I have done for so many years.

But if I will not accept his correcting of my life, then woe to you, you proud rebel. Those who won't listen to him.

[14:48] Those who won't listen humbly. In verses three to five next, those who don't lead righteously. Her officials within her are roaring lions.

Her rulers are evening wolves who leave nothing for the morning. Church leaders are meant to care for God's people. Instead here, they are predatory animals.

Do you know what that's talking about? Think of Catholic priests. Think of Anglican priests abusing the weak and the vulnerable.

Think of mega church and mini church leaders exerting power and enforcing obedience. Think of pastors getting rich off the people's giving.

It says here, her prophets are unprincipled. Think of ministers in the church saying, peace, peace, all will be well.

[15 : 46] You can live as you like. They are treacherous people. Her priests profane the sanctuary and do violence to the law. They refuse to teach what God says.

Imagine. Imagine if God just turned a blind eye to abusive church leaders and ignored the cries of those who've been ravaged.

He won't. Which is good. Woe to you leaders. In Jerusalem, verse five, the Lord within her is righteous.

He doesn't do wrong. He's a faithful and good king, our God. And morning by morning, he dispenses his justice. And every new day, he doesn't fail. Yet the unrighteous know no shame. In the church, woe to those who will not listen humbly or lead righteously. And then finally, verses six and seven, woe to those who will not learn and so fear him.

[16 : 53] We're meant to learn and know that God cannot be mocked and he will do something to the proud and that should change us. I've destroyed nations, says the Lord.

Their strongholds are demolished. I've left their streets deserted with no one passing through. The cities are laid waste. They're deserted and empty. Of Jerusalem, I thought, surely you will fear me and accept correction.

Knowing that he brings the proud down, surely we will fear him and change our lives. Then her place of refuge would not be destroyed, nor all my punishments come upon her.

But no, they were still eager to act corruptly in all they did. I will keep doing my own thing. I will only listen to God when I like it.

And I'll be safe and he will never do anything bad to me. He won't. Chapter 3, verse 8, draws this large section together.

[17 : 52] Therefore, wait for me. Just wait and see what I will do, declares the Lord. For the day I will stand up to testify. I've decided to assemble the nations, gather the kingdoms, and to pour out my wrath on them, all my fierce anger.

The whole world will be consumed by the fire of my jealous anger. Do you see the message of the scriptures to us?

No one will escape on that day. The whole world will be consumed. Every city and nation, whoever you are and wherever you're from, however safe you feel you might be, on the future final day of the Lord, which is coming and no one else will tell you about, when he rises up, no one will escape. And the whole world will be consumed by the fire of his jealous anger. But, we have to make it through one and three quarter sermons to get to the but.

If the word of the Lord ended here in 3, verse 8, then really and truly we are utterly doomed and there is no hope whatsoever. But, says the Lord, even as the world is consumed, know this this morning, a remnant will survive.

[19 : 36] somehow, in his stunning mercy and kindness, there will be some who make it through.

We hear of them first, back in chapter 2 and verse 7. The land will belong to the remnant of the people of Judah. There they'll find pasture.

In the evening, they'll lie down in the houses of Ashkelon. The Lord, their God, will care for them. He'll restore their fortunes. Again, 2, verse 9, the remnant of my people.

What is a remnant? The remnant is the bit that's left over after devastation has come. Think of a wildfire whipping through a wood and days later, just the charred stumps of trees left.

The remnant. The bit left over. From which one day new life might sprout. In chapter 3, verse 9 onwards, just listen, just listen to these words of hope and life sprouting again.

[20 : 49] And would you imagine it with me? The whole world, verse 8, will be consumed by the fire of my jealous anger. Then I will purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him shoulder to shoulder.

From beyond the rivers of Kush, down beyond Sudan, my worshippers, my scattered people, will bring me offerings. On that day, you, Jerusalem, will not be put to shame for all the wrongs you've done to me, because I'll remove from you your arrogant boasters.

Never again will you be haughty on my holy hill, but I will leave within you the meek and humble.

The remnant of Israel will trust in the name of the Lord.

They will do no wrong. They will tell no lies. A deceitful tongue will not be found in their mouths.

They will eat and lie down and no one will make them afraid.

It's a promise. It's a bright promise of a people who make it through the day of the Lord. Somehow, a worldwide, purified, humble people who trust in the name of the Lord and who no longer do wrong or tell lies and they're safe and they've got nothing to fear.

[22 : 09] Do you not want to be a part of that? It's not make-believe that. 30 or 40 years after Zephaniah spoke in 587 BC, the armies of Babylon did come and having destroyed Assyria, they swept through Judah as God's instrument of judgment.

Such distress and anguish and trouble and ruin for God's people back then. But there was a small remnant who survived. And eventually, within the ruins, they started again and waited and waited for God to restore their fortunes.

He's promised. Will he do it? Why are we looking at Zephaniah right now, three weeks before Christmas? Because 500 years later, in a little town of Bethlehem in ancient Judah, a boy was born to a humble woman called Mary.

And he said of himself, I am meek and humble in heart. And he was this remnant of Israel. He lived every day in humble dependence on his father.

He did no wrong. He told no lies. There was no pride in him. And having gathered the low and the poor and the oppressed around him, he died for sins and he was raised from the dead and on the day of Pentecost he sent his Holy Spirit and the wonderful new life-giving message of this humble king has spread beyond the rivers of Cush and to all nations and down through history and all of that through Jesus Christ born in a manger so that today we who seek the Lord, we who today come in genuine broken humility to the Lord Jesus Christ, we will discover God's mercy to us because joined to the meek and humble one we are part of the remnant and we can and will survive the day of the Lord and we can and will serve our God shoulder to shoulder for all eternity.

[24 : 39] The hard-hitting, wonderful, preparing for Jesus' message of Zephaniah, no one will escape the day of the Lord's anger and no one will but a remnant will survive and so this Advent this is what God wants to do, wants us to do.

He wants you and me to seek the Lord as you stick your tree up, as you get ready, as you rush around over the coming few weeks or as you sit there, seek the Lord, do business with him before he comes.

You know, that might mess up your timetable, might disrupt your emotions and unsettle your busy December and make you look foolish but there is nothing, nothing more important.

If this morning you have not yet done so, come to Jesus Christ. I repent of the pride in my life.

Lord Jesus Christ, I turn and come to you, would you shelter me and save me? And he will. Well, if this morning you sit here and you say, I already belong to Jesus, I know I'm a Christian, I'm fine, well maybe you are.

[26 : 10] Or might it be that even you have serious business to do with your God this week and now? Don't treat him casually. if you know of ongoing pride in your life, if you're aware of deceitful and violent words coming out of here, if you say, I know right now I'm so independent and prayerless, if you're sitting pretty with your house and your cash neglecting God's commands, if you know in truth that actually through your life 20 years ago you loved him but now you've fallen away from following him, if that's you right now, would you let Zephaniah shake you into doing something?

Will you turn from your sins now and humble yourself before your Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ? Will you seek the Lord?

Lord? I'm going to lead us in some words of prayer. Let's pray together.

Let's I will remove from you your arrogant boasters, but I will leave within you the meek and humble. The remnant of Israel will trust in the name of the Lord. Amen. Almighty God, your word to us, so sharp.

[27 : 57] We are not used to being spoken to like this, but your word is truth and you are good. We hear that Jesus will come in glory to judge the living and the dead.

we believe you. We fear and understand that it will be a day of wrath and anger.

Almighty God, we seek you. Thank you that in your kindness and mercy your Son came to us.

Thank you for his meekness and humility. thank you that today you are gathering a people from all around the world who come to him, your Son, for salvation.

Please save us from thinking we are fine when we are not. Please save us from complacency and pride and violence.

[29 : 09] help us to seek you and know the safety that comes from being in the Lord Jesus Christ.
We pray in Jesus' name.

Amen.