

The day of the LORD is near

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[0 : 00] The question is from a chapter like this, will we listen or will we laugh it off? Imagine a person standing up and speaking at a televised news conference maybe or through a megaphone on a street corner. Something terrible is going to happen. It's coming.

It'll affect the whole world. There's no escape. We're in life-threatening danger. The end of the world as we know it. It's one minute to midnight. Time is running out and if you don't act now it will be too late. When you hear something like that the question is do you listen or do you laugh it off?

Over this past year or so we've known what it feels like, do we not, to be warned and to have to decide will I listen or will I laugh it off? Whether it's Neil Ferguson and infectious disease scientists standing up and speaking, Covid cases and deaths will rocket. There's no escape. We must act now.

Or politicians and scientists and activists sounding the climate alarm. There is no planet B. Time is almost gone. Millions will die. We know what it's like, don't we, to be warned.

Well over this next three Sundays through Advent we're going to listen together to one man standing up and speaking a word of warning. His subject is neither Covid nor climate change but rather the coming day of the Lord. That is, there is a future day coming.

[1 : 48] The day is near and coming quickly when the eternal God, our sovereign creator, will come to his world in power as judge of all. The day of the Lord. A day of distress and anguish when he comes. There'll be no escape from it.

This fearsome, fiery, end of the world as we know it, day. Through this next month you will not hear about this day from the Prime Minister.

You won't hear about it from Greta Thunberg. There will be no mention of it on Twitter but you've got to know that the day of the Lord is near and time is running out and the question is for us and our world will we listen or will we laugh it off?

Zephaniah 1 verse 1 introduces this little book to us. Look at it with me. The word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah, son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah, during the reign of Josiah, son of Amon, king of Judah.

Notice firstly, this is the word of the Lord. Not data-driven predictions of possible worst-case scenarios but rather the God who knows all and sees all and acts unstopably and does not lie.

[3 : 17] He has spoken his word of truth. It's the word of the Lord secondly that came to Zephaniah. Zephaniah is just a regular man with a family history stretching back through generations to Hezekiah but Zephaniah is a prophet.

The word of the Lord comes to him so that as Zephaniah stands up and speaks he speaks from God. He is God's mouthpiece. Thirdly, in this verse, the word of the Lord comes to Zephaniah, end of verse 1, during the reign of Josiah, son of Amon, king of Judah.

We haven't heard of him. He's not a today king. Josiah was a king who reigned for about 30 years starting in about 640 BC, 26 centuries ago, a long time ago.

And Josiah was the king of Judah. And 26 centuries ago, Judah was the little Jewish nation of the people of God.

They were centred around Jerusalem in the Middle East. They were the church of their day, if you like. God's people then about to hear God's word to them through Zephaniah.

[4 : 38] You and I should know this morning that in God's goodness, these words of God spoken through Zephaniah so long ago, they are written down for us and for our world today.

These ancient words of truth, we shall see God's living, biting, relevant today word for you and for me. When you hear a word like this, will you listen?

Or will you laugh it off? Three Sundays in Zephaniah. In chapter three, in a couple of Sundays time, we will hear such light-filled and joyful words of hope.

Maybe some of the most beautiful words ever written in the Old Testament from God. There is light to come in Advent, but not quite yet here in chapter one.

Two points this morning from these verses. Here's the first. Be silent, for the day of the Lord is near. Listen to this, verse two.

[5 : 48] Follow along with me. I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth, declares the Lord. I will sweep away both man and beast. I will sweep away the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea and the idols that cause the wicked to stumble.

Like an autumn storm stripping the leaves from trees. Like a wildfire ripping through fields, leaving only smouldering stubble.

Like a flood washing away neighbourhoods. I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth, declares the Lord. Man and beast, birds up there and fish beneath.

I will make an end of it all, along with the idols that cause the wicked to stumble. This is our God speaking words of cosmic judgment.

I will sweep away. I will sweep away. I will sweep away. Would you believe this? What the Lord declares here?

[6 : 56] In verses three to six, keep going with me, this universal declaration of sweeping away judgment, it narrows down and focuses in on, well, see this.

When I destroy all mankind on the face of the earth, declares the Lord, I will stretch out my hand. Such threatening language that. I'll stretch out my hand, ready to strike against, against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem.

These people living in Jerusalem, gathered around the temple and God, that's, that's God's people. The church of the day. Says the Lord, I will stretch out my hand against them.

That is very uncomfortable. I will destroy every remnant of Baal worship in this place. The very names of the idolatrous priests. Amongst God's people, 26 centuries ago, instead of worshipping God alone, trusting, serving, loving him only in their lives, the church was infected with Baal worship.

Baal, the local, so-called other God. God's people, the gods that others in the culture around follow. Scrabbling desperately to be fertile, healthy, secure, powerful.

[8 : 23] Churches who worship Jesus Christ, yet chase after other gods too, in their lives. Power and money and the good life, and everyone who's involved in that, priests and all, I will destroy every remnant, declares the Lord.

Those, verse 5, who bow down on the roofs to worship the starry host. On the roofs, at home, where you live, where you're secretly suspicious, superstitious, following your star signs.

Those who bow down and swear by the Lord, and who also swear by Molech. This is the churchgoer, if you like, adult or teenager, who sings all the songs in church, yet turns to someone or something else, to really feel safe.

Molech, back in the day, was the God who demanded you sacrifice your children, if you want to prosper. Think of so-called Christian parents, so publicly faithful to God, yet ignoring their offspring, treating them as an inconvenience.

Children cowed into silence behind closed doors, because you're getting in the way of my life, and my happiness. Think of newborns neglected, or the unborn aborted. I will destroy those who do that, declares the Lord.

[9 : 54] And, verse 6, those who turn back from following the Lord, and neither seek the Lord, nor inquire of him. That is, you belong to God, you say.

And yet, in your heart, you simply won't obey his clear commands. And by yourself, when you're alone, you do not pray. You will not pray, to him.

Because in reality, you don't follow him. And so, at the start of verse 7, the message of Zephaniah 1, be silent before the sovereign Lord, for the day of the Lord is near.

Hush. Shut your mouth. Be silent. Because we live every moment of our lives before the face of Almighty God, and he sees us, and knows every thought, and word, and deed, and his day, the day of his coming, is near, and he will sweep away, and sweep away, and destroy, and stretch out his hand, and destroy.

I said at the beginning, that Zephaniah is a today word, for you and me. How is that so? In the Bible, the day of the Lord, signifies a fearsome day, when God comes in power, to judge.

[11 : 23] For Zephaniah's first hearers, 26 centuries ago, a day like this, was just around the corner. 30 or 40 years maybe, after Zephaniah spoke these words, the armies of Babylon, swept through this region, in conquest.

The armies of Babylon, were God's instrument of judgment. As through them, God ripped through Judah, and Jerusalem, leaving only smouldering stubble. But that judgment, back then, for them, was not the only, day of the Lord.

Rather, as the Bible story, and history, moves forward, God speaks, so very clearly, of a future, final day, of universal judgment, for all people.

A day, like Zephaniah 1, but for us all. On the sheet, on the handout, if you can see it, in the New Testament, after the resurrection of Jesus, Paul writes to the church in Rome, to people in days like us, and says, Romans 2, verse 5, because of your stubbornness, and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath, against yourself, for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment, will be revealed.

In 1 Thessalonians 5, verse 2, do you see, you know very well, that the day of the Lord, will come, like a thief in the night, in the future. Or Peter, in 2 Peter 3, verse 10, the day of the Lord, will come, like a thief, the heavens, will disappear with a roar, the elements, will be destroyed by fire, and the earth, and everything done in it, will be laid bare.

[13 : 12] There is then, for us, and our world, a future day, the day of the Lord. And on that day, God says, he will sweep away everything, and all mankind, and he will destroy those, who say, that they belong to him, yet will not worship God alone, and those whose homes, and hearts, betray their faithlessness.

Be silent before the sovereign Lord, for the day of the Lord is near. Now from verse 7 onwards, let me read through, would you see and feel with me, how this day will be, according to God?

the Lord has prepared a sacrifice, the Lord has prepared a sacrifice, he's consecrated those, he's invited, who is the sacrifice? On the day of the Lord's sacrifice, I will punish the officials, and the king's sons, back then the royals, the influencers, the Christian elite, and all those clad in foreign clothes, those trying to fit in with the world around them, and look like their friends.

On that day, I will punish all who avoid stepping on the threshold, who fill the temple of their gods with violence, and deceit. Those who publicly claim to belong to God, for sure, yet they turn to false gods, and their lives are marked by violence, and deceit.

Think of church leaders, Catholic priests, Anglican ministers, abusing other Christians, and covering it up. Think of so-called Christians, violent in the home, towards their wives.

[15 : 06] I wonder if you think that God coming in judgment, is a good thing. It is. It really is. For there will be no evil left uncovered in our world.

He will punish the violent, rightly. On that day, declares the Lord, verse 10, a cry will go up from the fish gate, wailing from the new quarter, and a loud crash from the hills.

Those are actual places in Jerusalem. Listen and hear this. It's like a cry will go up from the King's Hedges Road, wailing from Orchard Park, a loud crash from beyond the A14.

Wail, you who live in the market district. All your merchants will be wiped out. All who trade with silver will be destroyed. The rich traders, self-satisfied, arrogant, holding on to their money, may be destroyed.

At that time, I will search Jerusalem with lamps. We won't be able to hide from him on that day. He will hunt us down and shine his light on us and punish those who are complacent, who are like wine left on its dregs, who think the Lord will do nothing, either good or bad.

[16 : 23] It is possible, isn't it, Christian or not, to live our lives thinking, do you know what? He's not actually ever really going to do anything to shake my life.

I've got nothing to fear. I'm safe with my money and my house. Their wealth will be plundered, their houses demolished.

Though they build houses, they will not live in them. Though they plant vineyards, they will not drink the wine. In verses 14 to 18, this word from God comes to a climax.

The great day of the Lord is near, near and coming quickly. The cry on the day of the Lord is bitter. The mighty warrior shouts his battle cry.

That line has shocked me the most this week. Literally, fiercely screams the warrior then. Who's the warrior? It's the Lord, our God.

[17 : 23] And his loud and bitter battle cry as he comes in devastating judgment. That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress, anguish, a day of trouble, ruin, a day of darkness, gloom, a day of clouds and blackness, a day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the corner towers.

I will bring such distress on all people that they will grope about like those who are blind. Why? Because they have sinned against the Lord.

It is such an offence against the Lord God, such an affront to his honour when we disobey him and refuse to love him only, when our lives are marked with prayerlessness, violence, complacency. He must and he will come in wrath and quickly. Their blood will be poured out like dust and their entrails like dung.

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 jealousy, his zeal, for the honour of his name, the whole earth will be consumed for he will make a sudden end of all who live on the earth.

[18 : 55] I'm asked at the beginning, would you listen to that? Or will we laugh it off? He'll do nothing like that.

Of course he won't. We live in a culture now that has broadly in Britain done away with Christianity. And any mention of a final terrible day of divine judgment marks you out as a religious nutter, a swivel-eyed loon.

How laughable that you could believe or think about anything like that. This is the word of the Lord through Zephaniah to us today.

Be silent before the sovereign Lord for the day of the Lord is near. So what must we do?

If we're listening this morning, in chapter 2 and verses 1 to 3, Zephaniah tells us what we must do. if Zephaniah 1 scares you, because it should, if you know that you have sinned against the Lord, if you see and feel something of how that day will be, what must you do?

[20 : 19] Chapter 2 and verses 1 to 3, look at this with me together. Gather together and seek the Lord. Gather together, gather yourselves together, you shameful nation, before the decree takes effect.

And that day passes like windblown chaff, before the Lord's fierce anger comes upon you, before the day of the Lord's wrath comes upon you, before, before, before.

The point is, there is still time. whoever we are today, whatever we've done, whatever is in our lives that's hidden away that should be judged by him, the final day of the Lord has not yet come.

And in his kindness, the reason God speaks to us so truthfully and shockingly of that day in Zephaniah 1 is to warn us and so move us to act rightly now before the future day comes on us.

And so, says Zephaniah, gather together, gather yourselves together. It's kind of rougher than that. Scrape yourselves together and, verse 3, seek the Lord.

[21 : 38] When you know in your bones that the day of the Lord is near, when you realise it will be a day of fierce anger, don't try to hide from the Lord and don't try to run from the Lord.

Rather, in sorrow for your sins, turn back to him. Run to him. Seek the Lord.

Verse 3, seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility.

That is, fall on your face before the Lord and pray to him and call on his name. Father, we've sinned against heaven and against you. We turn from our sins, we turn back to you.

We would humbly obey you and live righteously. Have mercy on us. Seek the Lord. Seek righteousness, seek humility.

[22 : 39] Turn to the Lord Jesus Christ. For, look at this finally, perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord's anger.

The word sheltered is hidden. A chink of light and hope just at the end here. Could it be possible that on the day of the Lord when he sweeps away everything, like an autumn storm stripping the leaves from trees, like a wildfire ripping through fields leaving only smouldering stubble, like a flood washing away everything, could it be possible that we who seek the Lord might be sheltered, might be hidden and so survive and make it through?

Says Zephaniah to his first hearers, perhaps. For you and me today, with the day of the Lord coming quickly, we should know this morning that this chink of light, perhaps, Zephaniah 2, verse 3,

has now opened up for us into a bright and glorious promise.

And that is because now today, in his stunning mercy, God has provided for those who seek him a certain place of shelter from his anger.

And that place of shelter is his son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who was crucified for us. The one whom the New Testament says in 1 Thessalonians 1, verse 9, rescues us from the coming wrath.

[24 : 34] I tell the story from time to time of the farmer who drives off to market on a hot and dusty day. And on his return home, he sees flames in the distance, an accident, a spark, the whole farm is ablaze, fiercely.

He can't get anywhere near it. And a day later, he picks through the smouldering stubble of his livelihood. There's a deathly silence, no sign of life, nothing.

Till he approaches the blackened remains of a mother hen. And then in the quiet, he hears the faint sound of cheeping. He gently lifts up her charred and consumed body.

And out from their hiding place pop three small chicks. they've been sheltered from destruction. They're alive. They're well.

On the day that Jesus Christ was crucified in Jerusalem, the fiery day of the Lord, anger of God, that you and I rightly deserve, came on him. On that day, as we heard read in Luke's Gospel, darkness came over the whole land.

[25 : 46] And the Lord Jesus Christ willingly endured the day of wrath in all its anguish. On that day, God the Father stretched out his hand against his Son.

And the blood of Christ was poured out like dust as he gave his life in sacrifice for us. for all who humble themselves before the Lord and run to Jesus Christ and take shelter in him.

The end day, day of wrath that rightly should come on us fell on him. He was consumed for us so that we, hidden in him, will be sheltered.

not perhaps. We can, we will be sheltered on the day of God's anger. And we will make it through alive and well by God's mercy to us.

It's Advent Sunday. God is coming. hear the word of Zephaniah 1. Be silent before the Sovereign Lord for the day of the Lord is near.

[27 : 11] Now, before that day, turn from your sins and seek the Lord. Amen.