

1. God will be God and the world will know it: Opening our eyes to the real world

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[0 : 00] Well, thank you very much, Willie, for your welcome. Indeed, thank you all for your welcome. We've been made to feel very, very much at home. I often used to say when I visited here in the past, it was like coming home. So it's wonderful, actually, to come home. And we look forward to being with you, particularly at this time of change.

I'm nervous, of course, about these cameras. In training for the ministry, one of the more awful things you have to do is to preach a sermon while you are videoed. I always say to people, if you can do that, and if you can watch yourself, then you're almost certainly called to the ministry.

Blessedly, I don't have to look at myself. That's just your privilege, particularly the problem of the people downstairs. And I've been asked occasionally to glance in the direction of this camera in case people think I'm ignoring you. I'm not.

Now, if you could have our Bibles open, please, at the book of Zephaniah, on page 788. And we'll pray together for a moment as we begin. Let's pray.

Amen. God, our Father, help us to open our hearts and minds to your word, not as an echo of something from a distant past, but as the word you are speaking to us today. We pray that you will take my words and use them faithfully to unfold the written word. And so lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

[1 : 36] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. So, to this passage in Zephaniah. I have a book on my shelf which is called, Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God? And the answer is, almost everybody. And a passage like this appears to encapsulate everything that people dislike about the Old Testament. It begins with a list of names.

It continues with judgment, fire and brimstone, warning and doom. And when people hear that, they think this is not for us. And they want to rush into the New Testament. Big mistake. Open your New Testament in Matthew chapter 1 and what do you begin with? A list of names.

Go on a little bit. Go on a little bit. Jesus pronounces, repent for the kingdom of God is at hand. In other words, we're not going down some by-path here. This is the gospel.

So, as we study this book together, I want us to realise that we are listening to the voice of God. It's not an old text from a forgotten world. This is what God is saying to you and I in the world today.

Let's begin by asking two questions. It's really spring from verse 1. Who was Zephaniah? Who was this man who appears to have so many ancestors?

[3 : 00] Now, if somebody in the Bible is given a fairly long list of ancestors, it usually means they belong to a fairly significant family. I said already, Matthew chapter 1, our New Testaments begin with a long list of names.

And in case you think that's just an introduction to the gospel, I heard about a Chinese gentleman whose journey to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ began through reading these first 18 verses of Matthew.

He said, a man with so many ancestors must be worth taking seriously. God speaks through his word, even if it's only a list of names. This is the living word of God.

And he speaks, we are told, in the days of Josiah, the son of Ammon, king of Judah. Very, very quick summary of how we get there. When God's people were led into the land by Moses, it wasn't very long before they wanted a king.

And first of all, they had Saul, followed by David, and then Solomon. And then the kingdom split into two. There was the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah.

[4 : 10] And at the time of this prophecy, the northern kingdom has gone. People have been taken off to Assyria. The country is no more. And in Judah, things are going from bad to worse.

Instead of listening to the voice of God, instead of obeying the word of God, people are turning to idol worship, they're turning to violence, they're turning to immorality.

And nothing seems to be stopping this. And God raises up prophets in order to call them back to himself. And in the midst of the darkness, some a hundred years before Zephaniah prophesied in the reign of Josiah, a great reforming king had come to the throne.

A king called Hezekiah, who is almost certainly the Hezekiah mentioned here. He had turned the nation back to God. But then he had been followed by his son Manasseh and his grandson Ammon, who had totally reversed it and brought about a dreadful state of affairs where people were no longer worshipping God.

The land was corrupt and violent. And then God raised up this great king Josiah for another reforming movement. So that's the situation. Zephaniah is called to prophesy.

[5 : 28] Now, when you come across a work of God that appears to happen for no reason at all, when you have a great revival, like, for example, the Methodist revival in the 18th century when God laid his hand on the Wesleys and on Whitfield, we know about them.

What we don't know about are the faithful unknown people who throughout the desolate years before that preached the word of God faithfully, called the people of God to prayer, and actually never lived to see the great work of God.

And what's happening here? Why is it that Josiah, after a period of 60 or 70 years of idolatry, called the nation back to God? And here I think we have the answer.

Zephaniah is probably a cousin of Josiah. If he's descended from Hezekiah, the great reforming king, the great grandfather of Josiah, he's almost certainly a member of the royal household.

And we must believe that the prophet Zephaniah was one of the effects on the king, leading him to reform the nation. That other prophets around, Nahum, Habakkuk, had been prophesying.

[6 : 41] Nahum had prophesied earlier, Habakkuk still to come. And the great prophet Jeremiah was already preaching. So that's the first thing then. Zephaniah called to call the nation back to God, and in particular to call the king to reform the nation.

Secondly, what's this book about? And this book is about the day of the Lord. If you look at verse 7, Zephaniah says, you'd better put things right, because one day God is going to appear, he is going to usher in his own kingdom, and if you do not put things right, you're going to be judged.

That's why I've called this series, God Will Be God, and the world will know it. Now God is God at the moment, whether the world knows it or not. But one day that's going to be obvious.

See, one of the difficulties, isn't it, about the Christian life, is it doesn't seem as if God is God. Now everybody here comes from different backgrounds.

There may be some people here who are not certain whether the Christian life is for them. Not certain whether to believe the gospel and live the life of faith.

[8 : 04] And one of the reasons probably is that you are not sure that God is actually able to keep you. That God is actually able to bring you to heaven, and indeed to bring about the new heaven and the new earth.

There may be others here who are recently Christian, that maybe you're beginning to get a bit tired of the constant struggle, the constant battle. It may be that we're older, and we're actually feeling weary with the Christian life.

Whatever stage we're at, Zephaniah has a message for us. He says, One day, God will be God, and the world will know it. His theme is the day of the Lord, day of wrath, oh day of mourning, as the medieval hymn says, heaven and earth in ashes burning.

See the judge from heaven descendeth, on whose verdict all dependeth. And some of you will know the music from the Requiem Mass, which is by Mozart and Verdi and Balliol.

That hymn which was an expression of repentance and a plea for mercy. And in particular, this section we've looked at, I'm going to call, Opening Our Eyes to the Real World.

[9 : 17] Now you see, many people think we don't live in the real world if we're Christian. They think we live in a fantasy land. People like Richard Dawkins and so on in his new book, The God Delusion. They say to the word delude, we're deluded.

We're living in cloud cuckoo land. Zephaniah says, No. It's Dawkins and others who are deluded. Are we living in the real world? Are we living in the world as God sees it?

And the key verse is verse 12. The Lord said, At that time, I will search Jerusalem with lamps. God will shine his light and that light will expose everything.

Remember the Apostle John says, God is light and in him is no darkness at all. And he calls the Christian life walking in the light.

And when we walk in the light, we see things clearly. When we walk in the darkness, we stumble and we make mistakes and we do things wrong. So, opening our eyes to the real world.

[10 : 19] Who was Zephaniah? This great prophet speaking to the young king probably, probably a young man himself. What's he talking about? He's saying, The day of the Lord is near.

The day of the Lord is coming. God will be God and the world will know it. So, as we look at this passage more closely, I want to ask two questions. First of all, why is this word so important?

Why do we need to consider this prophet? That's really verses 2 and 3. And then the second question I want to ask is, what can we do about it?

How should we react to a message like this? And that's verses 4 to 13. So, first of all then, why is this word so important?

Look at verse 2. I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, declares the Lord. It's important because nothing, no one, no corner of the universe is going to escape when the day of the Lord comes.

[11 : 31] We won't be able to hide. We won't be able to sneak away. We won't be able to evade this. I will sweep away everything. Verse 3, I will sweep away man and beast.

It will be rather like the flood, which you can read about in Genesis 6 to 8. It will affect everything. You often hear people saying, don't you, why doesn't God do something?

Why doesn't he intervene? Why does he allow earthquakes? Why does he allow violence? Why doesn't he do something? Now, the Bible tells us he once did something, and when he did something, the result was devastating.

The result was the flood. That's what happens when God intervenes. See, what we really mean when we say, why doesn't God do something? We mean, why doesn't he do something about this little bit here, or that little bit there?

But when God does something, and when one day he ushers in his own age, it won't just be tinkering with a few problems here and there. It will be remaking the entire heavens and earth.

[12 : 38] It will be finishing the job that he began. In many ways, I've said this before, I used to say this often at Cornhill last year, the whole Bible, in one sense, is an appendix to Genesis 1, verse 1.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Is he going to finish that task? Is he going to remake them? Is he going to create a new world?

And that's what the day of the Lord is about. Now, when you read, I've heard sermons on Genesis 1, verse 1. It should have gone something like this. This verse is saying, if we put God first, then everything else will fall into place.

You know, that's not what that verse is saying at all. That verse is saying, you've no choice. It's not a case of if we put God first. It's a case of God is first, whether we like it or not. And it's certainly true that if we ignore him and his word, our lives will end in disaster.

But it's not a choice. It is a reality. God is God. And the world will know it. And the whole of creation will be involved. Verse 3, I will sweep away the birds of the heavens.

[13 : 51] It's going to be even more devastating than the flood. Presumably during the flood, the fish fended for themselves. But this time, it will be the fish of the sea as well.

Now, many, one of the great issues of today, surely, is global warming, climate change, and so on. We've got to remember that God is in control of all these things.

God is in charge and one day he will create a new heaven and a new earth where there will be righteousness. And because there's righteousness, there will be no more global warming.

There will be no more cancer. There will be no more dust holes. There will be no more earthquakes. There will be no more tsunamis. The world will be a world which has no sin, no suffering, and no death.

And how is he going to do this? Look back at verse 1, the word of the Lord, and then glance ahead at the very last verse of the little prophecy, says the Lord.

[14 : 52] And think back to Genesis 1. How did God create? God said, let there be light, and there was light. God said, let the dry land appear, and it appeared.

It's the word of God which spoke the old creation. It's the word of God which speaks in judgment and in blessing. And it's the word of God which will create the new creation.

So that's the first question. Why do we have to listen to this word? We have to listen to it because it affects us all. There is no way we can escape. One day, every one of us will stand before God.

One day, every one of us will give an account to God. One day, every part of this universe will be open and bare to the light of God. But secondly then, the second part, what can we do about it?

Verses 4 to 13. And verse 12 again, at that time, I will search Jerusalem with lamps. What's Zephaniah doing? Zephaniah is showing us what God hates.

[15 : 56] Zephaniah is showing us what God is angry with. And Zephaniah is doing that not so we can shrug our shoulders and say, well that's just the way we are.

That's the way human beings are. Zephaniah is talking to the people of his time and to us in the 21st century and saying, this is what God hates.

If we are going to be ready for the day when his light will shine into every dark place in the earth and in our hearts, then we've got to repent. We've got to change.

And there are three things that he warns us against. What? Three things that God hates. Three things that God judges. Three things that God will judge. First of all, there is false religion in verses 4 to 7.

I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. People who lived in Jerusalem felt they were special.

[16 : 55] Felt they had a, they had some kind of right for God to look after them. Isn't that the case today? People think because they are associated with a church that that relieves them for any, any need for holy living, any need for walking with God.

Oh, we belong to the church or even we are good members of the church. Always suspicious when people use the word good about themselves. The word good in Scripture, remember, has a very specific meaning coming from the creation story.

Good means something that is fulfilling the purpose for which God made it. God saw what he had made and it was good. It was very good. So, there is false religion, the worship of Baal.

Verse 4, I will cut off from this place the remnant of Baal. What is Baal worship? Notice that I am saying what is, not what was, because what it was, although what it was, gives us a clue to what it is.

Now, Baal was a common name for a variety of gods. It simply means lord or master in Hebrew. And Baalism, Baal worship, was a very, very tempting package.

[18 : 14] There were two things that marked it. First of all, there was the sense of the other. The sense, the kind of sense that you get when you look up at the night sky.

The sense you might have in a great building or in a vast forest. The sense that there is something bigger, greater than ourselves. The sense of otherness.

The kind of thing that makes us tremble, makes us nervous. And also, there was the, in Baalism, there was a great emphasis on enjoying ourselves.

Now, when you put these two things together, that's a very seductive kind of religion. We can have the sense of God, we can enjoy ourselves, there's no inconvenient things like the Ten Commandments.

The Canaanite texts that have been discovered, which tell us a lot about the Baal religion, don't contain any inconvenient commands, any inconvenient definitions of holiness.

[19 : 12] Now, the trouble is that both of these, both of these desires are corruptions of God-given desires. Book of Ecclesiastes says that God has put eternity in our hearts.

God has made us conscious of himself. And therefore, when we look for something other than ourselves, we're really looking for God. But when you go to Borders or Waterstones and look at the mind, body and spirit section, we're looking for tarot cards, we're looking for interpretation of dreams, we're looking for all kinds of, all kinds of strange religions, rather than God himself.

And then, of course, hedonism, enjoying ourselves, is also God-given. God did not make us to be miserable. God made us, says the shorter catechism, created us for his glory and to enjoy him forever.

And the glorifying and the enjoying are the same thing. But we are so deceived, aren't we? We prefer substitutes to God. And we prefer a kind of religion that makes us feel good rather than what is true.

Whenever we're more concerned with what makes us feel good rather than what is true, then that is Baal worship. That's what Baal worship is. It's not an ancient thing, only it's a contemporary thing.

[20 : 40] I mention only these sections in the bookshops because they illustrate this longing and yearning. Great opportunity for evangelism, isn't it?

When we, as Paul did in Athens, Paul says, look, the God you're ignorantly worshipping, I can tell you who he is. He is, he is, he came from outside and he became one of us.

You see, Baal worship is all about me. The gospel tells me I need a saviour who is not me because I'm fallen, I'm sinful, I cannot save myself.

But the gospel also tells me I need a saviour who is me. That is to say someone who is human, someone who understands me, someone who is one of us. And that's what we find in the gospel and that's what we don't find in Baal worship.

So there's Baal worship, there's the worship of creation, verse 5, those who bow down on the roofs to the hosts of the heavens. Worshipping the stars, we read in the books of Kings and Chronicles that Manasseh, Hezekiah's son, who undid all the great reforms of his father, particularly in his reign, was the worship of the starry hosts, the worship of the sun and the moon and the stars.

[21 : 55] And Paul, in Romans 1, says that's the worship of the creation rather than the creator. Do we do that nowadays? Well, probably most people don't go up on their roofs and build an altar to Venus or Mars or Neptune.

But think of the influence of the occult. Think of horoscopes. Think of the whole sense of the idea that our destinies are controlled, not by a living God who knows us and made us, but by the stars.

So there is Baal worship, there's the worship of creation. There's also what I would call practical atheism. verse 5, those who bow down and swear to the Lord and yet swear by Milcom.

Milcom was one of the pagan gods and that's the kind of thing that happens when people have one God, if you like, for Sundays inside church and run their lives by a totally different set of values.

We don't swear by Milcom, but very often we depend on anything other than God himself. Those who have turned back from following the Lord and who do not seek the Lord or inquire of him.

[23 : 09] So we have practical atheism. We don't seek the Lord, we don't pray to him, we don't inquire of him, we don't read the Bible, we don't obey it.

Instead, we are totally governed by our emotions, governed by the stars, governed by all these false gods. That is what happens when a nation, when a church, turns its back on God.

It goes into idolatry, into false religion. And that is the first thing Zephaniah condemns. And Zephaniah, where he here today, will look right into our churches.

And he would say similar things, wouldn't he? Because there is so much of this happening, and so much of it has an echo in our own hearts, doesn't it? So that is the first thing then. There is false religion.

The second thing, in verses 8 to 11, is the breakdown of national pride and national security. On that day, he says, of the Lord's sacrifice, I will punish the officials and the king's sons, and all who array themselves in foreign attire.

[24 : 17] Now, he is not talking about fashions. He is not saying it's wrong to buy clothes made in another country. That's not what he is saying. He is talking about pagan religions.

And that goes back, if you read, if you read the book of Kings, that goes back to Solomon himself. Solomon began the rock. He built the temple. But then we are told that he spent twice as long building his own house.

It's very powerful. Spent seven years on the temple and over 13 years on his own house. And the temple becomes a kind of royal chapel. And as he begins to marry on a mega scale, he builds chapels for his foreign brides.

He builds chapels for the Pharaoh's daughter and for the other people. And that's what's happening here. The idea that Jerusalem, the center of the worship of the Lord, has become a place of pagan worship.

It's become a place where the Lord is no longer one Lord. The devout Jew, as they tumble out of bed every morning, said these words, Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one Lord.

[25 : 23] The Lord your God is only a godlet here among others. But isn't this so true about so much of our modern church life? So much of our modern church life no longer proclaims firmly, unambiguously, that Jesus is the only way to God.

You hear leading churchmen saying Jesus is our way to God. Or even Jesus is the best way to God. That won't do. Jesus is the only way to God. There is no way we can reach God and bypass Jesus.

We cannot build a ring road around Calvary and the empty tomb and still meet with the Lord God. So this is the kind of thing that's being talked about. Verse 9 is rather obscure.

On that day I will punish everyone who leaps over the threshold. That probably refers to some kind of pagan idolatrous worship which believed that certain places were too sacred to step on.

That's very much a feature of pagan religion. That certain places are holy in themselves. Now there were holy places in the Old Testament but only because they were associated with God.

[26 : 35] When Jacob met God at Bethel back in the book of Genesis it was simply called a place. A certain place. It only became a holy place because God revealed himself there.

And when Jesus died outside the sacred enclosure there are no longer any holy places on earth. Churches are not holy places in that sense.

We're not meeting in any less holy a place today than if we were meeting down in St. George's Tron. As the poet Cooper says, where e'er they seek you you are found and every place is holy ground.

So it's this pagan superstition which is really orchestrated from the top. And what does that lead to? Verse 10 It leads to the collapse of economic security.

On that day declares the Lord and these are various regions various districts of Jerusalem the fish gate probably a marketplace the second quarter the mortar and so on.

[27 : 38] Verse 11 For all the trailers are no more all who weigh out silver are cut off. Jerusalem is full of rich people but they are not rich towards God.

Remember Jesus told a parable about the rich foe. Man who said I'll pull down my barns build greater ones and I'll say to my soul you don't need to bother any longer.

There is no there is nothing wrong with riches. The work of God depends very heavily on godly and generous rich people who use their money for the cause of the gospel.

That's absolutely true. And if God gives us riches then God gives us the privilege to use that money for the help of the gospel and the help of human need and so on.

But when riches become a god as it's become in Jerusalem then it becomes deadly. On that day he says verse 10 Now when you come across the phrase on that day in Zephaniah and indeed in the prophets in general this is talking about the day of the Lord.

[28 : 44] Not just any day. And before the day of the Lord there are certain days that foreshadow it. These people are going to go off into bitter exile in Babylon.

These things are going to be fulfilled then fulfilled then on a small scale but fulfilled on a big scale international scale on the day of the Lord. Ultimately either God is in charge of every part of life or he's in charge of no part of life.

Ultimately the big picture of the gospel is true or no part of that picture is true. So when we when the Israelites said the Lord your God is one Lord that's not a fancy statement of high-flown theology.

That's a very practical statement. That's saying when I go to work today I'll have only one God. At home I'll have only one God. In my relationships I'll only have one God.

On my holidays I'll only have one God. We're not dividing our life like a cake cut up into many slices. There is one God and he's in charge of everything.

[29 : 49] So first of all there is false religion. There is breakdown of national pride and national security. And finally in verses 12 to 13 there is something that is actually worse than these.

There is complacent apathy. At that time, verse 12, I will search Jerusalem with lamps and I will punish the men who are complacent.

Why is complacency worse than these other things? Surely because in a state of complacency and in a state of apathy we no longer are capable of hearing the voice of God.

Read the letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation in chapters 2 and 3. You read pretty blood curdling accounts of how awful many of the churches were. Some of them were idolatrous, some of them were immoral, false teaching had torn some of them apart.

And then you come to the church in Laodicea which has given the greatest condemnation of all. And you feel, well, in Laodicea surely the false doctrine must be awful. In Laodicea surely the immorality must be beyond belief.

[31 : 03] And in Laodicea surely damaging personality splits. Not a word of it. And not a word of it because there wasn't enough life in Laodicea for these weeds to take root.

This is the tragedy of so much of our national church living. There are many churches which are too dead even to preach false doctrine. You see, if you preach false doctrine, if somebody is preaching heresy, you can disagree with them, you can argue with them.

You may not convince them, but at least you can do something about it. Complacent apathy is the most difficult thing to face. One of the commentators on Zephaniah, a very great commentator who wrote a long, long time ago at the end of the 19th century but whose books are still worth reading.

George Adam Smith, he was called, one time principal of Aberdeen University. This is what he writes commenting on this verse. The great causes, he says, of God and humanity are not so often defeated by angry assaults, but by the slow, crushing, glacier-like indifference of thousands and thousands of indifferent nobodies.

the slow, crushing, glacier-like indifference of thousands and thousands of indifferent nobodies. Most people in the experience of ministry knows how heartbreaking that is.

[32 : 36] Apathy is a black hole that sucks everything into it. When you minister in places like that, it is deadening. Sometimes you feel, I've sometimes preached in churches where I felt I should open my eyes when I was praying to see if there was anyone still there.

So, desolating was the atmosphere, like speaking into cotton wool. That's what Zephaniah is speaking about. That is why many people find church boring and irrelevant.

Because their God is an idle bystander. The Lord will not do good, verse 12, nor will he do ill. This is not the God of the Bible.

This is an unconcerned and helpless bystander. He doesn't relate to people's lives. He has no influence on them. They find him boring and irrelevant.

And that is the tragedy of many of our churches. Like what Peter says in his second letter, in the last days mockers will come who will say, where is this coming that he promised?

[33 : 45] Now, is Zephaniah simply being gloomy? He's not. He's being realistic. Zephaniah is saying, if you continue this way, there is only one terminus, and that is judgment.

God hates false religion, God hates economic pride, and God hates complacent apathy, and he will judge it. I think the second thing to remember is that Zephaniah's words were actually fulfilled.

There were many, many people called prophets in the Old Testament, and the book of Deuteronomy, Moses, who of course is himself the great prophet, gives certain tests of prophecy, and one of them is, does what the prophets say actually happen?

Well, Zephaniah's words were terrifyingly fulfilled when God judged his people, and they will be fulfilled again in the day when the God will be God, and the world will know it.

So as we finish, Zephaniah is saying to us surely, don't just believe in a God, don't just say I believe there's someone out there, believe in the real God, the God who is the creator, the God who made heaven and earth, the God who is the God of the present, the God who cares for every detail of your lives, not the God who will do nothing, either he will not do good or he will not do ill, but the God to whom you can go, the God who will listen to you, the God who will answer your prayers, and also he's the God of the future, one day he will judge the world, that's what Paul says in Acts chapter 17, God has appointed a day in which he will judge the world, and that really is what evangelism is about, not do you want to come to Jesus and he'll make you happy, but you're going to meet Jesus whether you want to or not, he's going to be your judge, but the good news is, before that happened, he came to die for you and rise again for you, so that when you meet him, you will meet him ready, you will meet him forgiven, ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, God will be God, says

[36 : 02] Zephaniah, and the world will know it, let's pray, God our Father, we recognize uncomfortably so much of ourselves in these words of the prophet, we recognize that we have so often followed Baal rather than the Lord, we have so often depended on our economic or personal or other kinds of security, we have so often been caught up in complacent apathy, forgive us Lord, help us indeed to walk in the light as he is in the light, that we may have fellowship with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ, we ask this in his name, Amen.