

2. God will be God and the world will know it: A wake up call

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[0 : 00] Now, it would be a help if we could have our Bibles open at Zephaniah, the passage we read. And let's have a moment of prayer as we ask the Lord's help to lead us into this passage.

Let's pray. Come then, with faith and contemplation, see how in Scripture Christ is known.

And indeed, our Father, that is what we pray this evening. We ask that your gracious Holy Spirit, who inspired the prophet Zephaniah to speak these words and to write them down for our learning, may speak to our hearts this evening.

Cause our hearts to burn. Cause our minds to be enlightened. Cause our wills to be subject to yours. And send us out into the world with the message that alone can change and transform human hearts and lives.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. So to our second in this series in the Prophet Zephaniah, which I've called, God Will Be God and the World Will Know It.

[1 : 13] Many of you will be familiar with the great Baptist preacher Spurgeon, who ministered in the heart of London in the 19th century, drawing enormous crowds and preaching the gospel of God's grace.

In Spurgeon's earlier days, he preached often in the Fen country because he came from near Cambridge. And he tells in his memoirs of how one Sunday afternoon he was preaching in a little tin tabernacle out in the Fenlands.

It was a hot day and the roof and the claustrophobic atmosphere didn't make it easy for people to keep awake. And as Spurgeon began to preach, right there in the front row, Spurgeon says, A large red-faced farmer who had dined too well on roast beef fell asleep and began to snore.

Now Spurgeon was not the kind of man to put up with that. And he stopped his sermon and shouted at the top of his voice, Fire! Fire!

The farmer woke up and shouted in panic, Where is the fire? In hell, replied Spurgeon, for sinners whose slumber from the Saviour is presented to them.

[2 : 31] A wake-up call. That's what I'm calling this passage that we've read this evening. A wake-up call. And Spurgeon then, of course, went on to continue his sermon and to preach.

And you can be certain that farmer did not dare to fall asleep again during the sermon. We need a wake-up call in the church and in the world today.

I think that's very obvious. That phrase was used about two years ago by the former Prime Minister, Tony Blair, speaking about 9-11, speaking about the London bombings and other atrocities.

He says these are a wake-up call to the West. And we in the church certainly need a word of Zephaniah here, as he calls us to wake up.

Probably one of the least popular objects in your house is the alarm clock. But the alarm clock is very necessary, isn't it? Zephaniah here is very much the alarm clock.

[3 : 35] It's time to wake up. And indeed, that's the continual word of Scripture. Paul says in Romans 13, the night is far, far gone, and it's time to wake up.

So the first thing I want to say is that this passage is relevant to all of us as we live in the 21st century. We are living in the light of the day of the Lord.

The great day of the Lord, verse 14, is near, near and hastening fast, or as the NIV says, near and coming quickly. 2,600 years sounds a long time for a day to come that is described as near, doesn't it?

Because that day that Zephaniah speaks of has not yet come, the day of judgment, the day of the Lord. It is true that when God's people were taken away into exile, some probably about 50 years after this, that was the foreshadowing of it, as all these events are, these great events of destruction, of devastation, foreshadow the day of the Lord.

But when the prophets, when the apostles speak about the day of the Lord, or the coming of the Lord being near, they are emphasizing that it is certain. Nothing can prevent it.

[4 : 50] There is nothing that lies between us and the day of the Lord. We must remember to Psalm 90, quoted by Peter in his second letter, says, A day with the Lord is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as a day.

Zephaniah spoke these words two and a half millennia ago. In God's calendar, that's as if he had just spoken them last Thursday, so to speak. Let's put it that way. But people don't get it, do they?

And we don't get it, the urgency of this wake-up call. And that's what Peter says in his second letter as well. People say, oh, everything continues. Everything goes on the same. Where is that coming that he promised?

And Peter says, One day he is going to come. One day the world will be destroyed. And Peter says, Since everything will be destroyed. Interesting.

Peter says, Everything is going to be destroyed. What should we do? Go away into a ghetto? Forget about it all? Speculate about the future? No, what Peter says is, Since everything will be destroyed, we ought to live holy and godly lives as we look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.

[6 : 05] And that's what Zephaniah is saying here. It's relevant to everyone. The other thing you've got to remember is that Zephaniah is a poet. He uses extremely vivid language to make his point.

Verse 17, Their blood shall be poured out like dust and their flesh like dung. Not for the faint-hearted, this kind of language. He is determined that we are going to listen.

And then again, in chapter 2, verse 14, the eerie picture of the deserted city with owls hooting with hedgehogs crawling around the deserted buildings.

And there's a continual moving in Zephaniah's thinking between the local and the national and indeed the universal. And both of these are important.

We've got to have a worldwide vision. This is a gospel for the whole world. It's not just for a narrow group of people. On the other hand, we've got to make sure that gospel impacts on us where we are in our local setting.

[7 : 08] So let's look then at these verses, remembering this is a wake-up call, or perhaps more exactly, three wake-up calls. First of all, verses 14 to 18 of chapter 1, a wake-up call about the whole world, about the whole universe.

Zephaniah is saying, wake up. I'm going to show you what's going to happen to the world, to this universe of ours. Secondly, in chapter 2, verses 1 to 3, a wake-up call to the community and the individual.

What does this mean for us? What does it mean for you and me? What does it mean for our church fellowships, for our communities in which we live? And thirdly, verses 4 to 15 of chapter 2, to the nations.

So first of all then, Zephaniah is saying, this word matters because it affects the whole world. The great day of the Lord is near.

The sound of the day of the Lord is bitter. The mighty man. The NIV says warrior, and perhaps here, this is echoing Exodus 15, where the Lord is described as a warrior.

[8 : 15] This is God the warrior about to judge evil and to destroy it. That's what will happen on the last day. When the kingdom comes, evil will be destroyed.

But it's very interesting to see the word that keeps on repeating a day, a day, a day, a day of distress, anguish, ruin, devastation, darkness, and gloom.

Six times, the word day is mentioned. And obviously, I think, that's meant to remind us of the opening chapter of the Bible. In six days, God created the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh, he rested.

What's happening here? The creator is, as it were, rewinding the tape. This is going to be in very far from, like in Genesis 1, where we go from, where we go to order, beauty, life, and vigor.

We go here to darkness and destruction. The creator is going to cleanse his world of the evil that's in it. And that's why it echoes the days of creation, if you like, in reverse.

[9 : 25] He's going to, instead of light, there will be darkness. Instead of peace, there will be trumpet blast and battle cry. In other words, the practicality of this is we need to trust in the creator, not in the creation.

What Psalm 46 says, even though the earth removes, even though there's earthquakes which destroy the planet, we trust in God, the Lord of hosts is with us.

Because the point is, since the Lord is creator, he can remake what he destroys. And that's what he's going to do. He's going to create a new heaven and a new earth. But in order to do this, he's going to get rid of the darkness and destroy the evil.

Verse 17, I will bring distress on mankind because they have sinned against the Lord. Back in Genesis 3, when human beings sinned, the whole created order was affected.

A curse ran through creation. We know that creation is beautiful and glorious. On a day of early autumn like this, as the trees begin to turn, turn into the autumn colors, it's beautiful.

[10 : 36] But this world is also a disastrous and tragic place, isn't it? We know only too well. A place of violence, a place of bloodshed, which affects both the humans and the created order.

We talk about global warming, about encroaching deserts, about acid rain. And we've got to remember that unless God intervenes decisively to remove all these things, this endless cycle of good and evil is going to continue.

That's why Zephaniah says, the great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast. God is going to intervene decisively. And when he intervenes, it's going to, it's going to be devastating.

It's going to be overwhelming. It's going to be terrible. You see, in Romans 1, Paul says that one of the things, one of the most terrible things that God does is he leaves people to their own devices.

God gave them over. Terrible divine hands off. If God says, well, if that's the way you're going to treat the world, get on with it and make a mess of it. He's not going to do that forever.

[11 : 49] One day he's going to intervene. And there is a reminder of who this God is. verse 18, second part of the verse. In the fire of his jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed.

For a full and sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth. This image of fire is an image of God himself.

The first place it appears in the Bible is at the end of Genesis 3. At the gates of Eden, a flaming sword prevents humanity returning to the tree of life. And throughout Scripture, that fire appears again.

When Moses confronts God, he confronts God in a bush that is blazing with fire. When God speaks to Moses at Sinai, he comes down in fire. When Elijah calls upon the Lord, the God of Israel, to show he is more powerful than Baal, the false god, God sends fire from heaven.

And then again at Pentecost, the Spirit descends in tongues of fire. So you see, it's not that there are two gods. One God of judgment and one God of love.

[12 : 57] It is that God, in his blazing holiness, of which fire is the symbol, confronts the world. And depending on how the world responds, they experience that fire as cleansing or as destruction.

God whose flame burns up sin, God whose holiness we cannot approach. Indeed, it will shrivel us up. And before we realize that, we cannot appreciate the wonder of the gospel.

Because the gospel is about the one son who did not fail, who did not sin, and who took in himself that flaming sword of God's anger so that all those who believe in him would be saved from their sins and would find the way back to God.

That's the first thing then. The wake-up call as it affects the universe. All these things are going to be destroyed. There's going to be a new heaven and a new earth. It's going to be righteous. And only the righteous are going to live there.

And only the righteous. The righteous are not those who do good works. The righteous are those whose sins are forgiven. The righteous are those who have come to Christ and accepted his forgiveness.

[14 : 13] And that's why Zephaniah, having talked about, if you like, this cosmic perspective, this big canvas, now comes right back into Jerusalem.

Gather together. Yes, gather. O shameless nation. We've no idea where Zephaniah was or how long he took to deliver these prophecies. But it's not at all unlikely that Zephaniah would be preaching at one of the great festivals when people from all over the country would come to Jerusalem, say, to the Passover or so on.

Certainly, once Josiah had renewed the Passover. And it's very probable he is speaking to a large crowd of people in the Seagate.

So, Zephaniah says, now, I've told you about the day of the Lord. But I want you to be ready for it. So, he calls to the individual. He calls to the community.

He calls to the nation as a whole. And he says two things. First of all, he says, seek the Lord. Verse 3.

[15 : 19] Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land. Now, back in 1 verse 6, he had criticized, he had condemned the nation as those who do not seek the Lord.

What does it mean to seek the Lord? There isn't any magic formula, you know. Sometimes people, sometimes people swear by a particular, particular method of praying, a particular, particular series of spiritual exercises.

But really, seeking the Lord is actively cultivating a relationship with the Lord. There is no right way of praying in the sense that there's a particular technique that will bring you more into the presence of the Lord than any other.

What is important is that we actively do this. See, some of us think we'll become spiritual by a kind of osmosis. We go to gatherings, we enjoy the worship, we enjoy the singing, we even enjoy the sermons, who knows.

And we feel that if we go there often enough, it will rub off. That's not true. We have to seek the Lord. It's so easy, isn't it, in a crowd of people to sing fine, stirring songs.

[16 : 38] I love music. I love singing. I feel utterly deprived about it. But we know very well how easy it is to sing songs of commitment, songs of praise, and then go out unchanged, totally unaltered in our thinking, seeking the Lord is something deliberate.

Of course, gathering with his people is part of that, an important part of it. Reading our Bible is an important part of it. Praying is an important part of it. But deliberately, every day, as we wake up, and as all our desires, all our fears, rush at us to say no to them and yes to Jesus.

You know exactly what I mean. When we wake up, particularly on a Monday morning, we're not rejoicing, usually, unless it's the Monday morning of a holiday, but we're troubled.

We're often resentful. We're often, our thoughts are often bitter and lustful rather than holy and just and true. We need to seek the Lord deliberately.

That's what Zephaniah is saying. And the other prophets, I mean, Isaiah had already criticized those who knew all the right words. If you're brought up in church, particularly in evangelical circles, it's awfully easy to get the right words, to talk the talk.

[18 : 03] Long ago, Billy Graham said, if you don't walk the walk, don't talk the talk. And it's so easy to talk, isn't it? It's so easy to say what we don't really mean because we know it will be acceptable in the circles that we're in.

It is a strong word. We'll be as holy as we want to be. We'll be as humble as we want to be. That's what Zephaniah is saying. Seek the Lord.

Do it actively. And also he says, still in verse 3, perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the Lord. He says, don't take God for granted.

That's the point of the perhaps. Perhaps God, perhaps you may be hidden, sorry, on the day of the anger of the Lord. There isn't any doubt about God. There's no doubt about God's mercy, no doubt about God's graciousness, no doubt about God's willingness to accept us.

There's a great doubt, isn't there, about our willingness. And that's so often the problem, isn't it? Not that God doesn't want to forgive us, not that God doesn't want to bless us, but we don't want to be blessed.

[19 : 12] Remember that story in the Gospels, how Jesus said to this man who had been lying for 38 years at the pool, do you want to be healed? Silly question, you might think, but it was a very, very real question.

Perhaps, perhaps the man had become fond of being the center of attention. Perhaps he had that kind of attitude which so often comes to us where we like being in difficulty so that people can sympathize with us.

Do you want to be healed? Do you want to be holy? Do you want to know the Lord? Zephaniah is saying, perhaps, perhaps as always on our side, God is gracious.

Who are you willing to receive that graciousness? So that's the second wake-up call, community and the individual. And finally, to the nations, verses 4 to 15.

I don't intend to go through this verse by verse. You'll be glad to know. Many of the commentators, because they have no idea what to say about theology, fill their comments with facts and figures about ancient Gaza and ancient Nineveh.

[20 : 18] I think you will not thank me for that sort of thing. But this is a hugely important message to us. Many, many of the prophets have these sections which are called the oracles against the nations, where the spotlight moves away from God's people to the world around them.

Because this message is for the whole world. Abraham was called long before this so that all the nations of the world would be blessed. And this is what the Great Commission says in what Jesus says in Matthew 28.

Go and make disciples of all nations. As we look to the future in the book of Revelation, I saw a great crowd whom no one could count from every nation, tribe, people and language around the throne of God.

And here, we have the nations surrounding Israel. Now these are not household names to us. We don't think every day of the Cherithites and the Moabites and the Ammonites.

But remember, these are household names to Zephaniah's people. These are the nations whom they knew about and whom they interacted with. The city-states of the Philistines, the minor kingdoms of Moab and Ammon, distant Cush or Ethiopia, and the great superpower of Assyria.

[21 : 41] It's a kind of comprehensive sweep of all the nations. So what is this section saying then? First of all, it's saying that God is the Lord of the whole earth.

And that was the conviction that sent people into all the world to preach the gospel. In the 19th century, people went out into the world inspired by him such as the whole wide world for Jesus.

This shall our anthem be. Jesus shall reign where'er the sun. Now if that's true, then everyone needs to hear about Jesus. So we sang a minute or to go, tell all the world of Jesus.

It's such a practical, relevant truth. There is no nation, no community, no type of government, no type of state, which he does not rule, nor is there any which is permanent.

Because all these nations are going to be destroyed. All these nations are going to disappear. Now very often we talk today about empowering the people, of giving power to the people.

[22 : 47] And on the whole, I'm sure you'll agree, it's better to live in a democracy than a dictatorship. As Churchill said, democracy is the worst form of government that's ever been invented, apart from all the others.

because the alternative to government by democratic means is government by the army after all. So, we talk about giving power to the people.

The prophets and the apostles want to give real power to the people. The power to live lives of holiness and godliness. That's real power to the people as we give the message of Jesus, the message that will liberate, the message that will free, the message that will establish.

So, God is Lord of the whole earth. Secondly, God will judge swiftly. In verse 4, for example, Ashdod's people shall be driven out at noon.

And then in verse 7, in the houses of Ashkelon and other Philistine city, they shall lie down at evening. When God judges, it's swift. But another thing that comes out of these verses is that God is the enemy of pride.

[23 : 55] especially the words about Moab and Ammon. Petty kingdoms bordering on the kingdom of Judah. I've heard the taunts of Moab and the revilings of the Ammonites.

And verse 10, this shall be the lot because they have taunted and boasted against the people of the Lord of hosts. Boasting is a sign of the unforgiven heart, the unregenerate heart.

The sign of the heart that does not know God. But particularly the great superpower of Assyria. Look at verse 15. What did Assyria say?

What did the Assyrian king say? I am and there is none else. I am the name of Israel's God. I am who I am says God to Moses.

The Assyrian kings were claiming to be lords of the whole world. In two kings and two chronicles. When his tomb was discovered in Nineveh, he described himself, here is the last resting place of Sennacherib, king of the world.

[25 : 02] This is how the Assyrian kings boasted. But what is going to happen? It is going to disappear. He will make Nineveh, verse 13, a desolation, a dry waste like the desert.

If any of you have visited the British museum and gone to the Assyrian rooms of a modern museum, how that must have terrified those who were brought captive to Assyria.

The Lord is going to destroy them. Yes, but that is a message for us as well, doesn't it? One thing that so often marks our national and communal life is pride, isn't it?

They are terribly vain. Over a hundred years ago, the poet Kipling at Queen Victoria's gold diamond jubilee wrote his hymn, God of our fathers known of old, and he includes in this the verse, far called our navies melt away, he writes, on dune and headland sinks the fire.

Lo, all our pomp of yesterday is one with Nineveh and Tyre, as he looked at the gradual demise of the British Empire, and so on. There is no regime that lasts forever, because so many human regimes become proud.

[26 : 16] Lord Acton says, all power corrupts, and absolute power, corrupts, absolutely. And Kipling goes on to say, judge of the nations, spare us yet, lest we forget.

And surely we have forgotten in the West, surely we have forgotten in this country, surely we have forgotten who God is, surely we have forgotten that he is the judge. And one final point in this section though, there is hope beyond the judgment.

Look at verse 7, the sea coast shall become the possession of the remnant of the house of Judah, on which they shall graze, and in the houses of Eshcolon they shall lie down at evening, for the Lord their God will be mindful of them and restore their fortunes.

God is committed to his people. God's people are going to be taken away into Babylon, the temple and the city are going to be destroyed, God's purposes seem as if they are going to fail, but he will restore their fortunes.

Read about this in Psalm 126, when the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, it was like a dream. Our mouth was filled with laughter, our hearts with joy.

[27 : 29] Remember this in time of pressure, the Lord will be mindful of them and restore their fortunes. And not only that, it's going to be people of every land.

Look at verse 11, the Lord will be awesome against them who will famish all the gods of the earth. All the gods of the earth will be exposed as nothing and to him shall bow down each in its place all the lands of the nations.

In a moment or two we are going to be singing I cannot tell how he will win the nations, how he will claim his earthly heritage. But this I know all flesh will see his glory and he will reap the harvest he has sown.

We don't know how it will happen. We don't know how the Lord Christ will win the allegiance of the whole world but we do know that every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that he is Lord.

We do know that God will be God and the world and the world