

Zephaniah 1:1-18 Sermon: 'God's Judgement, Our Responsibilities'

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Introduction

What do we know about God's characteristics, His attributes?

I'm sure many of us can confidently declare that God is full of mercy and grace, and love. And that is true. God is full of mercy, grace and love. Our salvation through Jesus Christ points to the truth of these things.

How about God's holiness and justice? These characteristics can also be seen through Jesus' sacrifice for our sins, but are sometimes less understood.

For example, people often wonder, 'How can a loving God do that, or allow that to happen?' But in saying that, there's a danger of focusing overly on only one of God's many characteristics. God isn't only a God of love, just as you and I aren't made up of only one single characteristic.

This exact sort of situation may happen now, as we look at the first chapter of the book of Zephaniah. You may read this and think, 'That doesn't seem very loving! Where's the love God shows in the New Testament?'

The fact is, God's love is still there. In fact, you could say that God's declaration of judgement here in today's passage is because of His love for His people. If God didn't love His people, then He probably wouldn't care what they were doing.

But also, other characteristics of God are present here, such as His holiness and His justice too. God is holy. He cannot be in the presence of sin, and where was the one place on earth where God's presence dwelt at that time? In the temple in Jerusalem.

Because of God's justice, He also couldn't simply ignore what His people were doing. They were sinning, and sin required punishment.

So keep in mind God's characteristics as we go through this passage today, and as we go through this book of Zephaniah together in coming weeks. Because there's much we can learn about our God from His Word.

Now then, a bit of brief background for the book of Zephaniah.

As we heard from our first Bible reading in 2 Kings ch.21 earlier, God's people at the time of Zephaniah were behaving pretty poorly. Yes, their kings of the previous 57 years had been bad - Manasseh, one of the worst kings in Israel's history, followed briefly by his son Amon - but the people themselves were hardly complaining or protesting about things.

In fact, 2 Kings 21:9 says, for example, '*But the people did not listen. Manasseh led them astray, so that they did more evil than the nations the LORD had destroyed before the Israelites*'.

Following on from Manasseh and Amon, Israel next had a good king, one of their best kings, Josiah. He led Israel in a time of great reform, after the Book of the Law was rediscovered, found in the Temple. He worked at getting rid of many of the bad things God speaks of in the book of Zephaniah.

But by then, unfortunately, it was too little, too late. Because of all that Israel had done, especially during Manasseh's time, God was tired of being mistreated and neglected by His people. He is a holy God, and requires His people to live in a godly way. Therefore, His judgement was coming upon Israel.

Which is where Zephaniah comes into the picture. Now, Zephaniah served as a prophet of God during the reign of King Josiah, v.1 of ch.1 of Zephaniah tells us. Given what God says in this book, and what's said about Josiah's time in 2 Kings, it's safe to say that Zephaniah prophesied in the early days of Josiah's reign, before Josiah's great reforms.

And God had a clear message to His people through Zephaniah:
The day of the LORD is coming. God's judgement is coming.

Now today, we're going to look at ch.1 of Zephaniah, v.1-18, which focuses on this declaration by God of impending judgement.

In looking at this chapter, I thought we could consider:

1. Firstly, what this passage meant for God's people in Zephaniah's time,
2. And then secondly, what we today can get from this passage.

1. God's people in Zephaniah's time

So then, firstly, our focus is on Old Testament Israel. More specifically, those of the southern kingdom of Judah and of the city of Jerusalem during the time of Zephaniah, as the northern kingdom of Israel had already been wiped out by God's judgement upon them.

Overall, God declares in v.17 of today's passage that people have sinned against Him. That's pretty clear and straightforward. '*...they have sinned against the LORD*' v.17 says. But what exactly were they doing at this time, to cause God's declaration of coming judgement?

Well, within this chapter, three main sins of God's people are mentioned. We have in v.4, 5, and 9: idolatry. In v.5: syncretism. And in v.6 and 12: religious indifference.

Regarding idolatry, there were some amongst God's people who were worshipping Baal, v.4 tells us. Now, Baal was a false god, who had been worshipped by the Canaanites - the people living in the Promised Land before Israel conquered it. God had already warned His people not to follow after the gods of the Canaanite people (Deut 6:14-15). Baal worship amongst Israel had already been confronted strongly by God during the time of the prophet Elijah. Yet here they were, at it again, including some of the priests in God's Temple! V.5 also makes mention of those bowing down to the hosts of the heavens, as well as those swearing by Molech, a false god of the Ammonites.

Also then, in v.9, mention is made of '*...all who avoid stepping on the threshold...*'. This too relates to idolatry - to pagan worship, where people would avoid stepping on the threshold of the pagan temple, pointing to the fact that people were worshipping other false gods instead of the one true God.

From these verses, you can see that unfortunately, idolatry at the time was widespread.

Next, syncretism is also mentioned, in v.5. Syncretism basically refers to when different religious practices are merged together. Specific mention is made of those who were bowing down and swearing by the LORD and who were also swearing by Molech. This charge may also include some of the priests, who were involved in worshipping God in the Temple, but who were also happy to have a variety of altars set up in the Temple for worshipping false gods.

Finally then, mention is made of religious indifference. One example of this is given in v.6 - '*...those who turn back from following the LORD and neither seek the LORD nor enquire of him*'. Another example is in v.12, mentioning '*...those who are complacent...who think, 'The LORD will do nothing, either good or bad.'*'.

These sort of people just didn't care about God any longer. They were indifferent towards Him. Some had turned their backs on God altogether, while others saw God as being morally relaxed towards good and evil.

And really, you can see how these three problem areas I've mentioned can all work together. People who are indifferent towards God don't really care what God thinks, or they think that God Himself doesn't care about anything either. So they just do what they want, leading to things like idolatry and syncretism. The only problem for such people, is that God does care about what they're doing.

And so, what does God say as a result of these sins of His people?

V.4: *'I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against the inhabitants of Jerusalem...'* Then, from v.4 to v.13, He states that they will be cut off, they will be punished. He also says twice that the day of the LORD is near. Near and coming quickly.

Now, for those in Judah and Jerusalem, they should have been somewhat familiar with the phrase 'the day of the LORD'. For example, they would have known that the prophet Isaiah used it several times, interestingly against Israel as well as against other nations. They may also have heard of the prophet Amos in the recent past mentioning the day of the LORD, when he spoke God's words of judgement against the northern kingdom of Israel, before it was destroyed.

Regardless of prior knowledge though, the phrase's meaning would have been very clear from within this first chapter of Zephaniah alone. The day of the LORD meant a time of God's judgement. It was not a good phrase to have directed at you.

But that's exactly the situation that God's people find themselves in here.

After beginning by speaking about a time of universal judgement, in v.2-3, God quickly singles out Judah and Jerusalem.

This would have got the attention of God's people, but would not have been received well. Because at this time, God's people hadn't seen any need to change their behaviour. Otherwise they would have changed already. As 2 Kings says, they were led astray, they weren't listening to God's commands. They had seen the northern kingdom of Israel destroyed in the recent past - because of God's judgement against them. Yet the people of Judah and Jerusalem still didn't get it.

And so, God's judgement was coming upon them.

Even though they now had a good king, Josiah, it wasn't enough.

In fact, 2 Kings 23:26-27 speaks about this time of Josiah's reforms, where he worked to turn God's people back to God, saying: *'Nevertheless, the LORD did not turn away from the heat of his fierce anger, which burned against Judah because of all that Manasseh had done to provoke him to anger. So the LORD said, "I will remove Judah also from my presence as I removed Israel, and I will reject Jerusalem, the city I chose, and this temple, about which I said, "There shall my Name be"'*.

Zephaniah goes on to provide a description of what God's judgement would be like, in vivid language from v.14-18. It will be a day of: wrath, of distress and anguish, of trouble and ruin, of darkness and gloom, of clouds and blackness, and of trumpet and battle cry. People will walk like blind men because of their sin. Silver nor gold will be able to save them.

These words describe a terrible day, of destruction and suffering. And from our position today looking back at history, we can see that what God said here was true. His judgement fell on God's people not long after this time of Zephaniah. The remaining southern nation of Judah, and the city of Jerusalem, were conquered by the Babylonians, and God's people taken off into exile, with only a remnant to return some 70 years later. Jerusalem and God's temple were burned and destroyed. God's wrath was poured out because of the sins of His people.

2. God's people today

Which then brings us to us, living today. How do God's words in this chapter speak to us?

Well firstly, we need to understand that the phrase 'the day of the LORD' doesn't just refer to events that occurred in the past. While it's true that this phrase was used many times in the Old Testament, referring to judgement against Israel or their neighbours at that time, it also has great significance for Christians today. Because all those times of 'the day of the LORD' in the past were mere shadows, pointing forward to a final great 'day of the LORD' that is still to come.

God's words in v.2-3 of ch.1 of Zephaniah here actually relate to that future event. A time when everything will be swept away from the face of the earth. Men and animals, birds and fish. Man will be cut off from the face of the earth, God declares.

The second half of v.18 also speaks of that time: *'In the fire of his jealousy the whole world will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth'*.

The New Testament writers also spoke of this coming day. For example, consider the Apostle Peter's words, in 2 Peter ch.3. v.1-10. Let me read them to you:

'Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking. I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Saviour through your apostles.

First of all, you must understand that in the last days, scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgement and destruction of ungodly men.

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

But 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 in it will be laid bare.'

Peter wants us to recall what was said in the past by God's prophets - by people such as Zephaniah. The prophets spoke of what was to come. Peter then mentions about a day of judgement that is coming - the day of the Lord, he says in v.10.

This 'day of the Lord' is the day of final judgement upon the earth. The day of Jesus Christ's second Coming, when He returns to earth in judgement. When the earth and everything in it will be laid bare - as Zephaniah prophesied in v.2-3 of the main passage we're looking at today (Zephaniah ch.1).

That is what lies ahead in the future. THE day of the Lord is coming. Only God knows when, but it is coming soon. His judgement declared against Old Testament Israel came true soon enough, and so we can be sure that His declaration of final judgement is also going to come true.

And as we consider Zephaniah's words in today's passage, we can learn more about why God's final judgement is coming on the whole earth. Because people today, sadly, are behaving in a similar way to God's people in Zephaniah's time.

Remember the three main problem areas mentioned in this passage? Idolatry; syncretism; religious indifference. And the overall charge against humanity? V.17: They have sinned against the Lord.

As it was then, it unfortunately is now.

For example, in today's world, idolatry - the worshipping of something other than God, as if it were God - has been developed into something of an art form, as people seem to come up with increasingly new ways of forming idols.

Of course, that long-time favourite idol to worship - money - is still high up there.

But we also now have people who increasingly worship themselves, particularly through the use of social media. Pets also have become idols for some. Careers, achievements, popularity, fame. Anything and everything other than God is worshipped.

Next, consider syncretism.

When we think of syncretism today, we can often think of examples from tribal cultures, such as in some parts of Africa, where elements of tribal religion are joined with Christianity. But it's also happening in Western countries too.

For example, churches that take out the gospel and replace it with general positive thinking - where you can try hard to be a better person in your own strength. That's a form of syncretism. As with churches that advocate for same-sex marriage or gay ministers. They're joining and mixing Christianity with aspects of modern culture that the Bible clearly condemns.

And also, religious indifference.

This is the big one, I think.

For many people in today's world, they don't care what God thinks. They don't even believe He exists! Others are like as God says in Zephaniah: They have turned back from following the LORD, they neither seek the LORD nor inquire of Him. Others too think that God will do nothing, either good or bad. They view God as an absent Creator - who created everything and now just ignores us all.

Peter speaks of such people in his second letter, in 2 Peter 3:3-4, which I recently read out: *'First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation".'*

Complacent, religious indifference.

Today's world has taken to extremes these things mentioned here in Zephaniah. And people do many other things as well that God disapproves of - these are all sins against God.

So then, if in Old Testament times, God's judgement and wrath came upon His own people because of their poor behaviour, what do you think is in store for today's world that has rejected God? A world that is actively sinning against God, that is living in open rebellion against God?

Well, even way back in Old Testament times, God warned us what was coming - the day of the LORD. In the New Testament too, God warned us - the day of the LORD is coming, the final judgement is coming, where God will judge the world and many will face His wrath. And here we are now, living in the last days. Jesus' second Coming is just around the corner.

Yet all is not without hope for the world.

Yes, God's judgement is coming and will come against all the wickedness and ungodliness of humanity.

But there is still hope. There is still good news to be told.

Because there is a way for people to avoid God's wrath.

As God's people today, we know that way - through faith in Jesus Christ.

Because of our faith in Jesus Christ, we have no fear from God's coming final judgement. We know, as Romans 8:1 says, that *'...there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus'*.

Jesus, in His death and resurrection, paid the price for our sins. He took on our punishment Himself. He took on God's wrath and judgement that should have been against us. So that now, instead of wrath and judgement, we now face eternal life together with God.

We can read a passage like this one today, and know that it doesn't apply to us.

Application

But, in this though, we also have a responsibility. A couple of responsibilities actually.

1. Firstly, we have a responsibility to behave well as God's people.

Peter speaks of this, following on from what I read out earlier. He says in 2 Peter 3:11-13: *'Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will*

bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness'.

We ought to live holy and godly lives. That is the kind of people we ought to be, as we look forward to eternity with God. Not being like God's people mentioned here in Zephaniah. Not being like the world today. Instead, a people who live for God. Who put God first and who obey His commands.

We can do this, for example, by reading and studying the Bible, which is God's revelation for us. Because, if we don't know the Bible well, if we don't bother reading or studying it, then how can we expect to live well for God? God's people in Zephaniah's time didn't seem to know God well, leading to sin and disobedience.

However, if we know and understand the Bible well, through reading and studying it, then we can know how God is wanting us to live, and can live holy and godly lives.

2. Which then brings us to a second responsibility we have, which is to tell others the good news about Jesus Christ - the forgiveness of sins!

If you read on from Zephaniah ch.1, into the beginning of ch.2, v.3 of ch.2 says, *'Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the LORD's anger'.*

There is a way to avoid God's wrath and judgement! God even said so in Zephaniah's time. How? By repenting and living for God, in righteousness and humility. By believing that Jesus Christ died for your sins and turning, repenting from those sins.

No longer living lives containing idolatry, syncretism, religious indifference, or any other sins against God.

However, for people to be able to turn away from sin and turn to God, they first need to hear about Jesus. They need to hear about how they should be living.

We Christians are commanded to go and declare the good news of Jesus Christ to the world. Are we doing this? Are we doing as Peter says in the verses I just mentioned, and looking forward to the day of God and speeding its coming?

Because if we aren't carrying out these responsibilities, then are we really living any better than God's people in Zephaniah's time? We know they faced God's wrath and judgement because of their behaviour. Passages like today's from Zephaniah should cause us to evaluate our own lives as God's people living today, and recommit to all that God commands of us.

For history tells us that what God said here was true. His judgement soon came on His people living in Judah and Jerusalem, because of their sin.

May we be thankful that such a fate has been spared us, through God's great mercy and grace. And may that mercy and grace spur us on to share God's good news throughout the world.

Conclusion

So then, Zephaniah ch.1. A chapter that speaks of God's judgement upon His people of that time. And a chapter that speaks to us now too.

Reminding us that while our God is a merciful, gracious and loving God, He is also holy and just. Sin cannot go on unpunished. A final judgement upon the world is coming - the day of the LORD.

And reminding us too of the responsibilities we have as God's people today.

Let's make sure we're living holy and godly lives, as we carry out God's commands, including proclaiming a message of hope - the good news of Jesus to the world: Repent of your sins, believe in Jesus, be saved from God's wrath and judgement and from hell, and instead have the promise of eternal life together with God.