

If you were with us last week, you'll recall that we're back in one of the Minor Prophets, this time it's a chap called Zephaniah and I won't repeat too much of the introduction but basically he was busy during the 7th century BC, about the same time as another prophet called Jeremiah, he was part of the royal family, his key soundbite is "the day of the Lord", and chapter one was relentless warning of judgement... so I's amazing you came back... no seriously, whilst it was warning about God showing up and dealing with what He finds, we considered too why so often He gives the likes of good old Zephaniah here and many others in both the old and the new testament, the task of saying to the world around them, wake up and smell the coffee, wake up before it's too late, wake up because God loves you so much He doesn't want you to choose hell instead of heaven, God loves you so much that He came himself to pay the price that you and I owe, so that we can have life and freedom and love and hope eternally... that's why there is so much warning... in chapter 1 the warning is for God's people, Israel, these days it will apply to all of His church, The Jewish believers in Mesiah Yeshua (or you might know Him as Jesus), and all us other non-Jewish lot who have been invited in to join them and have given our lives to Him too...

And then right at the beginning of chapter 2 we read, well let's read it, please pick up your bibles and join me at chapter 2 of **Zephaniah**

Gather together—yes, gather together, you shameless nation.

² Gather before judgment begins, before your time to repent is blown away like chaff.

Act now, before the fierce fury of the Lord falls and the terrible day of the Lord's anger begins.

³ Seek the Lord, all who are humble, and follow his commands.

Seek to do what is right and to live humbly.

Perhaps even yet the Lord will protect you—protect you from his anger on that day of destruction.

We'll give these verses a proper once over as we come to the end, but can't you almost hear the longing of God in those words? Seek the Lord, Seek to do what is right and Seek to live humbly...

This is God speaking to His people, those who called themselves believers in Zephaniah's day and as well as that, those who call themselves believers today... if you take nothing else away this morning I urge you to let God encourage you His way through these words: Seek Him and Seek His path for your life serving Him humbly...

You know, in a few week's we'll be starting on a summer Journey through the book of Colossians, to give ourselves a spiritual growth check, and the reason we'll be doing that is because as Elders we're convinced that our God is calling us to be effective for Him, and we're convinced that the way He will be able to use us effectively is if we wholeheartedly Seek Him First, wholeheartedly Live For Him First and wholeheartedly and humbly Serve Him First... so that's something to look forward to but Zephaniah has something to say to us on this subject as well.

You see whenever God does any shaking up and sorting out He starts with His Church... Next He moves on to the rest of the world, and that's what we've seen through Zephaniah, chapter one and the beginning of chapter two was, as we saw, addressed to His people, but God has something to say to everyone, to the whole of creation, whether they take Him seriously enough or not...

⁴ Gaza and Ashkelon will be abandoned, Ashdod and Ekron torn down.

⁵ And what sorrow awaits you Philistines who live along the coast and in the land of Canaan, for this judgment is against you, too!

The Lord will destroy you until not one of you is left. ⁶ The Philistine coast will become a wilderness pasture, a place of shepherd camps and enclosures for sheep and goats.

⁷ The remnant of the tribe of Judah will pasture there. They will rest at night in the abandoned houses in Ashkelon. For the Lord their God will visit his people in kindness and restore their prosperity again.

So that was the world to the west of Israel, to the people living in the Gaza strip, the philistines were originally from the island of Crete and settled a few years before and you bible students out there will know that the philistines had long been an enemy of the Jews. Interestingly what Zephaniah prophesied happened, they got trounced, and after centuries, eventually in 1948 God gave the remnant of the Jews that land – sadly in order to try for peace (which failed) they later gave it away again to a new set of Philistines and their leaders Hamas.

⁸ “I have heard the taunts of the Moabites and the insults of the Ammonites, mocking my people and invading their borders. ⁹ Now, as surely as I live,” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies, the God of Israel, “Moab and Ammon will be destroyed— destroyed as completely as Sodom and Gomorrah. Their land will become a place of stinging nettles, salt pits, and eternal desolation. The remnant of my people will plunder them and take their land.”

¹⁰ They will receive the wages of their pride, for they have scoffed at the people of the Lord of Heaven’s Armies.

¹¹ The Lord will terrify them as he destroys all the gods in the land. Then nations around the world will worship the Lord, each in their own land.

As the Philistines are to the West the Moabites and the Ammonites are to the east, but what about that comparison of Moab and Ammon to Sodom and Gomorrah, what's going on there, well actually, if you think about it's not surprising because: Moab and Ammon were the descendants of Lot's daughters.

Do you remember Lot, some of you are old enough I guess... anyhow lot was the man who was rescued from Sodom and Gomorrah before God destroyed it because of it's incredible godlessness, Lot and his family ran for their lives led by an Angel, all except Mrs Lot who was ready salted as she turned and became a permanent pillar of the society. So Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed, if you want to visit them today you'll have to check under the Dead Sea, Lot and his daughters get away and then what happens next? Well you can read the whole lurid story in Genesis 19, but in a nutshell Lot's daughters got their dad drunk and had sex with him. The result was Moab and Ben-ammi, the Moabites and the Ammonites...

The area these nations inhabited is now known as Jordon, and so this part of the prophecy has yet to be fulfilled, the city still bearing the name Amman, Jordan has a population of over 1 million, and they worship the false god of Islam. If you look again at verse 11 we can see that God's longing for humanity isn't to wipe us out but for all who would choose Him to be saved. After the time this prophecy speaks about, when Jesus returns, everyone remaining will have chosen the only one true God.

¹² "You Ethiopians will also be slaughtered by my sword," says the Lord.

So we've done East and West Now God looks to the south, announcing judgment against the nations living around the Nile delta and back into Africa, including of course the old enemy of Egypt... this has been fulfilled, the area was conquered by Babylon in 586 BC.

¹³ And the Lord will strike the lands of the north with his fist, destroying the land of Assyria. He will make its great capital, Nineveh, a desolate wasteland, parched like a desert.

¹⁴ The proud city will become a pasture for flocks and herds, and all sorts of wild animals will settle there. The desert owl and screech owl will roost on its ruined columns, their calls echoing through the gaping windows. Rubble will block all the doorways, and the cedar panelling will be exposed to the weather.

¹⁵ This is the boisterous city, once so secure. "I am the greatest!" it boasted. "No other city can compare with me!" But now, look how it has become an utter ruin, a haven for wild animals. Everyone passing by will laugh in derision and shake a defiant fist.

Well after East West and South you'll have guessed we might be heading north next and so we are to Assyria, and at the time of Zephaniah Assyria was the super power. It's capital was Nineveh, but as Zephaniah prophesied, it happened that in 612 BC Nineveh was conquered by the Babylonians, and the rest of the Assyrian empire was history within 3 years.

So there we go there isn't a point on the compass, there isn't a country in the world there isn't any individual who the Lord isn't interested in, there is no body and no thing in His Creation that God doesn't love that much that He would warn us, and call us, and plead with us to head the right way, before we hit the dead end...

literally...

- **If you're not going His way, if you've taken a bye way or a highway or if you've been busy singing my way... Jesus says to you today, please, come on, come here, come my way because it's the only way**
- **If for some reason you think God isn't interested, if you think God doesn't care, if you hardly ever give God any thought, if you think you can head off in any direction to do your own thing with no consequences... if that's where you're at then God, through Zephaniah, and in fact the whole of the bible, says North, South East or West God will have you on His radar, God will have you in His sights, God will pursue you, that's right God will hunt you down... He will hunt you down not as an aggressive enemy, but as the one who loves you so completely, as the one who wants you to have so much more, as the one who would and did give everything that you could be safe for eternity...**

Let's close now with a final look at verse 3

Seek the Lord, all who are humble, and follow his commands.

Seek to do what is right and to live humbly.

Perhaps even yet the Lord will protect you—protect you from his anger on that day of destruction.

So here we are again at the heart of matter – God is in the rescue business, that's just what we've been seeing isn't it, this is the heart of the matter, God will hunt you down and keep warning and keep loving and keep providing, but at no point will God make you, or force you or bully you into accepting His heart.

Now maybe you know all this and are thinking once again, for goodness sake Pastor give it a rest I know and I'm saved... and if you are I say hallelujah, thank God for His grace and

mercy and I say these verses still apply to you, because this side of Jesus return, this side of glory... you and me are works in progress... you know I love that verse in Paul's letter to the Ephesians chapter 2 verse 10 which describes us as God's handiwork, His creation, His masterpiece...

Don't you love that? Better than Leonardo or Monet or Constable, though some of us maybe feel more like a Picasso or Damien Hurst... But whatever masterpiece it is that we are there are two things I think Zephaniah's picking up on here that later Paul will say: – yes I might be a great oil painting, but I'm not finished yet, some parts of my canvas are still in need of some serious work, and so my friends will yours be, so we need to stay close to our God, we need to humbly let Him finish his perfect recreation, because we're not done yet... and then there is the last point and I'll finish with this – Christians, we must never think that the great work that's being done in our lives has the slightest thing to do with us... If God is painting on your tatty old canvas, creating a likeness that is more like Him every day, then you'd better remember that you're not the creator, you're the canvas, and that through God's incredible work, you are with each brush stroke, with each movement becoming an incredible beautiful eternal masterpiece. If God is sculpting you out of a rough old bit of stone, then you'd better remember that you're the rough stone, that through God's incredible work is becoming an incredible beautiful eternal masterpiece.

So whether it's for the first time or the nth time, let's say to God – thank you for saving me, thank you for remaking me, please Lord – keep me trusting and obeying and please keep remaking me more and more in your image... Thank you Lord Amen