

END OF DAYS, PART 14: THE DAY OF THE LORD

Zephaniah 1 (NASB)

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Someone has well-said that apathy—the absence of concern for something—is not an absolute condition. As a rule, we are all energized for something. But it may be that the something is not visible at the moment, so we look apathetic. And what does it mean for most people to be apathetic about the most important things in life, even God himself?

It was the burden of the prophet Zephaniah, a man of royal lineage, to answer this question for Israel during the reign of King Josiah, around 640-609 B. C. After centuries of loving care for his chosen people, the Lord turned to issuing the sternest of warning that there would come a time when he would tolerate faithlessness and rebellion no longer. And as often happened with the prophets of Israel, God gave a message to Israel which then widened out to include not only their current situation, but also God's dealing with the entire world.

God brings judgment on those who ignore him. That judgment is described here as the day of the Lord. We can summarize the meaning of this term as the time when God intervenes in human life to do what he wants to do. He rescues those who trust in him and he punishes sin. Zephaniah's first chapter of prophecy goes to great pains to describe the details of the judgment side of the day of the Lord in particular. And as we learn of Israel's dire warning to turn back to God we will hear the same warning implicitly given to the church and the whole world.

WHAT IS THE DAY OF THE LORD?

So what exactly is the day of the Lord? While we can gather information from many places in Scripture, Zephaniah's little set of prophecies will be more than enough to get us started. We begin by learning of the resolve of the Lord to punish sin: **"The word of the LORD which came to Zephaniah son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah son of Amon, king of Judah: 'I will completely remove all things /From the face of the earth,' declares the LORD. /I will remove man and beast; /I will remove the birds of the sky /And the fish of the sea, /And the ruins along with the wicked; /And I will cut off man from the face of the earth,' declares the LORD"** (Zephaniah 1:1-3). Note that the term "ruins" in Hebrew may mean "stumbling blocks." God will remove not only evil people, but the spiritual death traps they create.

Here we have the God of Israel granting a prophecy of the future of Israel to a prophet of Israel, and he shoots right past Israel to the fate of the whole world! I am reminded of the time that Daniel asked the Lord about the restoration of Israel from the Babylonian captivity and he answered by giving Daniel a view of the sweep of redemptive history for centuries to come. If we were to make a Venn diagram of this passage it would be a large circle with the fate of unbelieving mankind encompassing a small circle with the fate of unbelieving Israel.

In short, the Lord says: "I am so angry over sin that I decree a total wipeout of the earth. I am so holy that I cannot permit any sinful person or thing to remain." You and I can call out all we like that this does not seem fair to us, but God will not consult you and I regarding this matter. He will not

negotiate with fallen mankind. It is this comprehensive judgment of a fallen world that is the key to the nature of the day of the Lord. The Lord pulls his own people out through a variety of mechanisms, but once the faithful are removed, there is nothing left but total judgment for sin.

Let us do a jet tour of the features of the day of the Lord. We learn that all false human government will come under judgment: **"Then it will come about on the day of the LORD'S sacrifice /That I will punish the princes, the king's sons /And all who clothe themselves with foreign garments. /And I will punish on that day all who leap on the temple threshold, /Who fill the house of their lord with violence and deceit"** (Zephaniah 1:8-9). We must remember that in the theocratic kingdom of Israel there was no strong distinction between government and religion. These false rulers desecrated their governmental offices and the temple as well, and so they will all be judged.

The Lord will shut down all commerce: **"Wail, O inhabitants of the Mortar, /For all the people of Canaan will be silenced; /All who weigh out silver will be cut off. /Moreover, their wealth will become plunder /And their houses desolate; /Yes, they will build houses but not inhabit them, /And plant vineyards but not drink their wine."** (Zephaniah 1:13). This is a clear statement that the Lord is fulfilling his covenant with Israel in the negative. Earthly blessings were part of the covenant, but God has no motive to bless those who hate him. Covenant blessings never attach to a faithless people. Write that hermeneutical principle on the flap of your Bible

Zephaniah begins in :14 and following to shoot attributes of the day of the Lord like bullets. Hebrew scholars call this stacking. **"Near is the great day of the LORD, /Near and coming very quickly; /Listen, the day of the LORD! /In it the warrior cries out bitterly"** (Zephaniah 1:14). We learn that the day of the Lord is impending, that it has a sound, and that it overwhelms the mighty.

"A day of wrath is that day, /A day of trouble and distress, /A day of destruction and desolation, /A day of darkness and gloom, /A day of clouds and thick darkness..." (Zephaniah 1:15). The day of the Lord is the expression of God's wrath, it causes distress and anguish, it brings ruin and devastation, and is marked by darkness and gloom.

Now, as in every period of the church, there have those Christians who speak up stridently to say: "We don't want a God like this!" It is happening right now in liberal, contemporary, and emergent churches—and churches like ours. We will let God answer this question for himself: **"For I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, /O sons of Jacob, are not consumed"** (Malachi 3:6). We are only saved because God has not wavered from his redemptive purposes. There is no logical reason to think that his purpose of judgment has wavered either.

The prophecy continues: **"A day of trumpet and battle cry /Against the fortified cities /And the high corner towers"** (Zephaniah 1:16). This is a warlike picture of a God who comes against his enemies. What more foolish life plan could there be than to live in such a way that the most powerful being in the universe becomes your enemy? This is a plan with no hope.

"I will bring distress on men /So that they will walk like the blind, /Because they have sinned against the LORD; /And their blood will be poured out like dust /And their flesh like dung" (Zephaniah 1:17). The day of the Lord will cause every sinner to walk around blindly, which I take to mean utterly defeated. It will explicitly be retribution for sin, even though most people believe

that such retribution will never come. And it will bring death from the Lord. He is the Author and Giver of life, but if people do not want life in him they can have their wish. C. S. Lewis wrote a play on this subject called *The Great Divorce*. Whatever your view of Calvinism or Arminianism, the human will is responsibly engaged in choosing eternal destiny.

Finally for this chapter, Zephaniah thunders: "**Neither their silver nor their gold /Will be able to deliver them /On the day of the LORD'S wrath; /And all the earth will be devoured /In the fire of His jealousy, /For He will make a complete end, /Indeed a terrifying one, /Of all the inhabitants of the earth**" (Zephaniah 1:18). The day of the Lord shall defeat every human attempt to stave it off with false objects of trust: money, guns, brains, brawn, connections, technology, armies, false gods, and attractive philosophies will fail utterly. The fire of the Lord's judgment on that day is fueled by his jealousy for the glory of his name. He will not abide other gods. We discover that the day of the Lord will be comprehensive—nothing and no one will be overlooked. And finally, as most of the Bible translations say, the day will be speedy or sudden.

Sum it all up and it means: God is God and there is no other. He will tolerate no competitors for his rule and reign. He will permit no sin-tainted person or thing to endure. He does this judgment in his own timing and according to his omnipotent power.

WHY DOES THE DAY OF THE LORD HAPPEN?

Why exactly does the day of the Lord happen? This is a valid question. If the Lord is going to be that tough on mankind, it would be good to see it from his perspective.

We have a list of offenses in verses four and five: "**So I will stretch out My hand against Judah /And against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. /And I will cut off the remnant of Baal from this place, /And the names of the idolatrous priests along with the priests. /And those who bow down on the housetops to the host of heaven, /And those who bow down and swear to the LORD and yet swear by Milcom...**" (Zephaniah 1:4-5).

First of all, there was a remnant—a committed number—of people in Israel worshipping the filthy idol Baal outright. Idol worship is a worldwide universal even today, in spite of all of our so-called enlightenment. An idol is anything you honor above the One True God. Watch for whatever people are willing to kill and die for, and you will have identified an idol. Watch for anything people are willing to serve which is actually killing them, and you will have identified an idol. Islamism, the virulently hateful and murderous subset of Islamic people, is a clear candidate for an idol. In the West the worship of the autonomous self is our favorite idolatry, often seen as hedonism, violence, and abortion, for example.

A second, separate evil in Israel was that the leaders of Baal worship were tolerated right next to the priests of Israel, who perhaps should have been calling down fire from heaven to destroy them! Tolerance is a great virtue when we are talking about interpersonal differences, and it is the greatest of evils when we are talking about the failure of the representatives of a holy God to drive out idolatry from their own midst. The organized church has walked this same road. Many of the churches in the phone book have replaced the worship of God Most High with something else.

Then we see the evil of spiritual double-mindedness, where the Israelites bowed to their own

God and also to Milcom, one of the foulest of pagan gods of the ancient world. Worship of Milcom involved ritual desecration of virgins and child sacrifice. The church of today seems to be walking this road as well, with the most bizarre mixture of purported belief in Christ and immoral behavior. We see this also as the "Jesus plus" gospel. Large churches can be gathered by mixing the gospel with human desires such as health, respectability, financial success, entertainment, etc. This is like the man who wants his wife and his mistress. What did Israel not understand about **"You shall have no other gods before me?"** Jesus said that we cannot serve two masters. No one who sets out to serve God and self will end up serving God truly in the end.

The day of the Lord comes also because of apathy about the things of God: **"It will come about at that time /That I will search Jerusalem with lamps, /And I will punish the men /Who are stagnant in spirit, /Who say in their hearts, 'The LORD will not do good or evil!'"** (Zephaniah 1:12). Other translations say that these people are complacent, or "like wine left on its dregs." If, in the ancient practice of making wine, the vintner did not pour the developing wine off of its dregs, the wine absorbed a bitter flavor from the dregs. It was ruined because of apathy.

Apathy ruins just as well as rebellion. In fact, it adds the sin of dismissiveness to the rebellion against God. At least the rebellious recognize that they are rebelling against something or someone important! And so we have about a third of Americans who say that they are born again—around a hundred million people. And yet only about four to five percent of the population show up in church, read their Bibles, pray, and give to the Lord.

Finally, the day of the Lord comes because God's own people fail to do the fundamental things believers must do, as is revealed in verse six: **"And those who have turned back from following the LORD, /And those who have not sought the LORD or inquired of Him"** (Zephaniah 1:6). What kind of believers fail to follow the Lord, fail to seek him personally, and fail to pray? The Lord's judgment is that these are not believers at all. Blankness in the face of the majesty of God is a sign of spiritual death.

WHEN DOES THE DAY OF THE LORD HAPPEN?

If the day of the Lord is so terrifying, when does it happen? That depends on your understanding of the timing of the events of the last days. If you think in terms of a pre-tribulational rapture at the beginning of a seven-year period, you will place the day of the Lord at the beginning of that period. The mid-trib, pre-wrath, and post-trib views tend to think that the events of the first part of the seven-year period don't match up well with the profile of the day of the Lord, and so they place it part-way into the seven-year period or near the end.

On the other hand, there is a significant sense in which the Lord has his way in judgment and salvation throughout history. The overwhelming destruction and dispersion of the nation of Israel under Roman rulers forces one to see the hand of the Lord. And yet nothing in recorded history compares with the universal, comprehensive judgment of the day of the Lord described by Zephaniah.

HOW CAN WE AVOID THE DAY OF THE LORD?

There is no doubt that the reason the Lord spoke these things through Zephaniah and wrote them into the word of God is so that we would see the seriousness of sin and of failure to worship the One True God. We do not need to attend the day of the Lord—it is a choice. So choose otherwise!

The prophecy tells us how to begin a proper response to a grievous indictment such as we have just read: **"Be silent before the Lord GOD! /For the day of the LORD is near, /For the LORD has prepared a sacrifice, /He has consecrated His guests"** (Zephaniah 1:7). This is not the kind of silence which is enjoined upon the moviegoer so that all of the patrons can hear the dialogue. This is the silence of radical spiritual change, as exemplified by Job: **"Then Job answered the LORD and said, /Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to You? /I lay my hand on my mouth. /Once I have spoken, and I will not answer; /Even twice, and I will add nothing more"** (Job 40:3-5). This is the silence of deep repentance, as Job also said: **"I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; /But now my eye sees You; /Therefore I retract, /And I repent in dust and ashes"** (Job 42:5-6).

Repentance begins the steady state of the believer which is characterized by the three fundamental endeavors which the people of Israel lacked: following the Lord in obedience, seeking his person in worship, and praying to him in humble dependence. It is easy to list these. The concepts are not hard. Faithfulness in them—not perfection—is possible for anyone.

Those who follow, seek, and pray are the reverse of complacent. They are energized about God and the things of the Lord. They are motivated by his mission to seek and save those who are lost. They are heartbroken over their own sins and those of others. They avail themselves of the perpetual washing of the word of God, of confession, and of the restoring work of the Holy Spirit.

That's how we avoid being on the "guest list" for the day of the Lord. There is nothing tricky about this! We simply start where we are and let the Lord bring growth in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

HOW WE CAN HELP OTHERS AVOID THE DAY OF THE LORD

We can help others avoid the day of the Lord as well. We need to teach and preach this doctrine in our churches. We must not assume that our brothers and sisters already know about this plan of God.

I think we also commission the people of God to tell others. This is God's method. He gives Christian leaders whose job it is to equip the entire body of Christ and send us all out to speak the truth to a world which is willfully oblivious to the coming judgment and what to do about it.

Thirdly, I God is going to judge the world in this way, we have a responsibility to speak prophetically to our society. Do we really think that God wants us to be silent in the face of adultery, fornication, abortion, wars of aggrandizement, abuse of citizens, enslavements to substances, sex, and gambling? Make your own list of things which represent the wholesale ignoring of God, and then ask God for ways to speak the truth about those things into a dark world.

Nothing bring health to the human soul like the truth. It is a blinding shaft of light in a dark room, by which we see everything else. And there is no hope for anyone without it.

I advise you to make sure your name is not on the guest list for the day of the Lord, and help everyone you know to RSVP with the reply: "Sorry! Can't make it. I have another engagement to attend: the marriage supper of the Lamb."