

Intro

Does God see what's happening in our world? Does God care?

What about Afghanistan?

Mark Morris reports (8/16):

"I listened as an Afghan pastor spoke through tears about his friend, a faithful believer, whose village was taken by the Taliban three days earlier. This dear brother's 14-year-old daughter was ripped from his arms and forced into sexual servitude in what the Taliban would dub as 'marriage' and her 'dutiful Islamic privilege and responsibility.' ... Since this weekend, more disturbing reports are coming in and life for the Afghan church is at the beginning of a new chapter. Young Christian girls are being pursued by the Taliban. The Taliban just raided the home of another church leader and confiscated his Bibles and literature." - [How Afghan Pastors Reflect on God's Sovereignty \(thegospelcoalition.org\)](https://thegospelcoalition.org/news/afghan-pastors-reflect-on-gods-sovereignty)

The New York Times (8/19) reports gunfire and beatings used to disperse protesting crowds. Arrests, property seizures, revenge killings. People hiding in their homes with electricity, sanitation, water, and health care in jeopardy. People fleeing the country and leaving behind homes, possessions, family. People desperate to reach the airport yet no safe passage. The Taliban going door to door to arrest or threaten to kill family members of target individuals they're seeking.

[Taliban Quash Afghanistan Protests, Tightening Grip on Country \(msn.com\)](https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/taliban-quash-afghanistan-protests-tightening-grip-on-country)

A pastor I know with access to firsthand accounts has relayed (8/19) that Afghan Christians are being martyred in the streets and the Taliban's going door to door looking for Christians.

Let's look to Zephaniah for answers.

READ PASSAGE

PRAY

Body

Author

- Zephaniah the prophet, likely a descendant of king Hezekiah (1:1)

History before Josiah

- The kingdom of Israel was divided in 930 BC when Rehoboam took over for Solomon (1 Kgs 12:1-20).
- The Northern kingdom named Israel and consisted of ten tribes (1 Kgs 11:26-40; 12:16-20).
- The Southern kingdom named Judah and consisted of Judah and Benjamin (1 Kgs 12:21-23).
- In 722 BC, Samaria was captured by Assyria (2 Kgs 17:6). Israelites were carried away to Assyria and Samaria was resettled by peoples from other lands (2 Kgs 17:24-41). Hoshea was the last king of Israel, and this was the end of Israel as an independent nation.

- Prior to Josiah, Manasseh (grandfather) reigned 55 years (2 Kgs 21:1) and Amon (father) reigned for two years (2 Kgs 21:19).
- Manasseh erected altars to the Baals, made Asheroth, burned his sons as offerings, used fortune-telling and omens and sorcery, and set a carved image in the temple (2 Chron 33:1-9)
- Manasseh did repent and eliminated some images (2 Chron 33:10-20), but Amon sacrificed to the images (2 Chron 33:21-25).
- My point: During Zephaniah's prophetic ministry, Israel as a nation was no more. The Southern kingdom of Judah was all that was left. Idolatry was rampant when Zephaniah prophesied.

Historical circumstance

- Sometime during the reign of King Josiah (640-609 BC).
- Assyria's the foreign power hovering over Judah (Zeph 2:13-15), but Assyria's strength is declining with Babylon on the rise.
- Zephaniah was written some time before 612 BC when Nineveh, the capitol of Assyria, fell (see Zeph 2:13).
- Josiah's reforms began in 627 BC (12th year; 2 Chron 34:3-7) and intensified in 621 BC (18th year; 2 Kgs 22:3-23:25).
- Zephaniah speaks to a situation where reform was necessary, whether prior to the reforms, in the middle of the reforms, or both. Likely Zephaniah's message served reforms in Judah.

Purpose of the prophet

- 1) For unbelieving Israelites: repent because the day of the Lord is coming (both near and far).
- 2) For believing Israelites: to prepare them for the near day of the Lord and to comfort them with the final day of the Lord.

Nature of prophetic books

- 1) Calling the nation (unbelieving majority) back to covenant faithfulness
- 2) Preparing the faithful remnant for impending judgment
- 3) Explaining the basis for judgment
- 4) Explaining God is behind foreign conquest
- 5) Assuring the remnant that God has a glorious future for them

Context

- Mixed audience with this passage directed primarily at unbelieving Jews

Point 1: Judgment announced (1:2-18)

Day of the LORD

The day of the LORD is both near and distant. This day of the LORD is near in time and localized:

"Be silent before the Lord GOD! For the day of the LORD is near" – 1:7

"The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast" – 1:14

Localized at Judah:

"I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem" – 1:4

- In 605 BC, Babylon besieged (surrounded) Jerusalem and took some exiles back to Babylon, Daniel included (Dan 1:1-7).
- In 597 BC, Babylon besieged Jerusalem again. King Jehoiachin was taken prisoner by Nebuchadnezzar, the vessels of gold in the temple were taken away, 10,000 were taken away, and only the poor remained (2 Kgs 24:10-17).
- In 586 BC, Babylon besieged Jerusalem once again. This time King Zedekiah (appointed as king by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BC) was taken to Babylon, the temple was burned down, more were exiled, and the poorest were left (2 Kgs 25:1-12).
- This was the near judgment Zephaniah prophesied. God, who works all things according to the counsel of his will (Eph 1:11) and knows what he's going to do in the future, revealed this beforehand to Zephaniah.

The day of the LORD is distant in time and universal:

"I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth," declares the LORD. ³ "I will sweep away man and beast; I will sweep away the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, and the rubble with the wicked. I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth," declares the LORD. – 1:2-3

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. – 1:18

- Zephaniah weaves between universal and local judgments as he describes the day of the Lord.
- Malachi said that the day of the LORD that wouldn't come until Elijah (= John the Baptist per Matt 17:10-13) came (Mal 4:5-6).
- Paul spoke of the day of the LORD as not coming until the man of lawlessness is revealed (2 Thess 2:1-4).

Summary: the day of the Lord is both near and distant, and thus far portrayed as a time of judgment on the wicked.

Pictures of the day of the LORD

- 1) A sacrifice (1:7-8) = the people of Judah are the sacrifice, and Babylon is the consecrated guest (see Jer 25:9 where God calls Nebuchadnezzar "my servant")
- 2) A cry and a wail (1:10)
- 3) Goods plundered and house laid to waste (1:13)
- 4) Bitter (1:14)
- 5) Distress and anguish (1:15)
- 6) Ruin and devastation (1:15)
- 7) Darkness and gloom (1:15)
- 8) Clouds and darkness (1:15)
- 9) Suffering

their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung. – 1:17

10) No hope of escape

Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them on the day of the wrath of the LORD. – 1:18

Summary: This near day of the LORD is an act of God through the instrument of Babylon. It's an act of punishment on Judah. They failed to keep the Mosaic covenant, so they suffered the covenant's curses. The picture is hopelessness. Fear of an invading army, fear of the impending death and exile, pains of death at the hands of a cruel and sadistic army, sadness and grief over loss of loved ones and property and freedom. Captivity and exile. Knowing there's nothing they could do about it.

The near day of the Lord foreshadows (is a picture of) the final day of the LORD.

God's wrath (1:15, 18)

We shouldn't see God as sadistic or having an out of control temper. We must understand God as perfectly holy and just. God's wrath reflects his holiness and justice. Being holy, God is untainted by sin and therefore opposed to it. Being just, God can't turn a blind eye towards sin. He can't overlook sin. He can't pretend it doesn't happen.

God is both grieved and angered by every thought, word, or deed that doesn't reflect his holy character.

Illustration

God is perfect and other than us, so his intensity against sin outweighs ours. We might be troubled by what is going on in Afghanistan. I may have stirred your emotions a bit. But God is more grieved and angered by these events than we are. Like God's mercy and forgiveness and love exceeds what's in our hearts, so also God's wrath against sin exceeds our distaste for sin.

The cross flows from God's holiness and justice. Being holy, God opposes our sin. Being just, God must punish our sin. Jesus went to the cross to satisfy the Father's wrath against our sin. To allow God to remain just, despite forgiving us (Rom 3:23-26).

God's justice = every sin ever committed will be punished. Either by Jesus in our place, or by the non-Christian in hell. Christ's substitution on the cross is grounded in God's justice.

God's jealousy (1:18)

We shouldn't see God as insecure or jealous of what others have. Everything belongs to God. God's jealous for his own honor (Exod 20:5). And God's jealous for our affections like a wife longs for her husband to be satisfied in her, not lusting after other women and using pornography. Like a husband doesn't want his wife going to dinner with other men or confiding in them. God doesn't want his people worshipping idols, whether they be false ideologies or material possessions. God wants our hearts to be satisfied in him.

Point 2: Sin exposed

Explanation

Punishment is coming because of Judah's sin:

I will bring distress on mankind, so that they shall walk like the blind, because they have sinned against the LORD; – 1:17

1) Syncretism

those who bow down on the roofs to the host of the heavens, those who bow down and swear to the LORD and yet swear by Milcom, – 1:5

Syncretism is when the Christian faith is combined with incompatible belief and practice. The people of Judah thought it was acceptable to worship false gods and the LORD at the same time. Think combining Christianity with Islam. Or combining Christianity with the New Age. This is a challenge to missionaries on the field. Natives want to embrace Christ while keeping their superstitions. It's the missionary's task to show them why their customs are at odds with God's will. We practice syncretism when we make Christianity compatible with false ideologies and sinful behavior.

2) Foreign attire

"I will punish the officials and the king's sons and all who array themselves in foreign attire." – 1:8

Foreign attire's portrayed negatively. Possibly a reference to embracing foreign culture to the neglect of God. Or maybe a sign of wealth, whether gained through immoral means or the basis of their pride.

3) Violence and fraud

those who fill their master's house with violence and fraud. – 1:9

That's people in power taking advantage of their neighbor. Habakkuk, a contemporary of Zephaniah, offered this complaint about the state of Judah in his day:

Habakkuk 1:2-4 *O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? ³ Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. ⁴ So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.*

The near day of the LORD is God's answer to Habakkuk's cry. God does care when people are taken advantage of. The day of the LORD is our proof.

4) Indifference to God

and I will punish the men who are complacent, those who say in their hearts, 'The LORD will not do good, nor will he do ill.' – 1:12 (see also 1:6)

This is our culture. A culture indifferent to God. A culture where God is irrelevant to our values and laws. A culture where we live as if God doesn't take notice or God doesn't care or God doesn't act. A culture where God's word has no place of authority or influence.

Application: how should this affect our hearts?

How should the day of the LORD, God's wrath and jealousy, and God's punishment on Judah's sin affect our hearts today? Is this neat eschatology to chart out? Some good knowledge about God to file away? What should we feel when reading this?

We should say, "this is our day!" Grieve and be angry. We should grieve over human suffering. When we hear of people in Afghanistan being hunted down and martyred, and girls being ripped from their father we should cry and seethe in anger.

We should say to ourselves, God's wrath is good. It's good that God isn't indifferent to evil. It's good that God stopped the violence and fraud. It's good that God will one day put an end to evil.

We should tremble before the holy and powerful one and revere his name. We should be in awe of his power. God is sending Babylon as his servant (Jer 25:9) to punish Judah without being tainted by sin himself!

How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! – Romans 11:33

And we should plead with people to escape God's wrath. We should feel the truth of hell. There's a day of the LORD to come.

Point 3: Repentance commanded (2:1-3)

Explanation

There's something to do before God's decree takes place. Note "before" is stated three times. Repent now before it's too late! Seek the Lord by seeking righteousness and humility.

Application

Seek righteousness = turn from your wickedness and be godly. Eliminate pagan elements from your beliefs and conduct. Don't embrace the customs of the world. Don't put your hope in your wealth. Replace violence and fraud with care for the widow, orphan, foreigner, and poor.

Seek humility = make yourself low, understand yourself to be lowly before God. Don't take pride in your wealth. View your place of power as a stewardship from God. Understand God acts and he's our judge.

Zephaniah connects punishment with repentance.

Acts 17:30-31 The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

The day of the LORD requires repentance. We have hints of mercy. Despite his anger, God sends his prophet to offer mercy. God is more merciful than us.

Conclusion

Judgment announced. Feel the truth of hell. **Sin exposed.** Beware of syncretism and mistreating your neighbor. **Repentance commanded.** God wants a lowly people who live righteously.