

Sin is Personal to God
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About six hundred and forty years before Christ Israel was in one of its all-time lows. Probably the best way to give you a feel for the situation is to describe the temple at that time, the temple that had been devoted to God, the Lord God of Israel who said that “You shall have no other gods before Me.” Only at this time, six hundred and forty years before Christ, that temple dedicated to Him was full of idols, altars, and images to pagan gods and goddesses. There were priests there, as many priests there for the pagan gods as there were priests there for the Lord God of Israel. In fact these priests, and those altars, and those sacrifices being made, and everything else to the pagan gods, were sponsored by the kings and the princes of the land. There were...there were boarding rooms attached to the temple. Actually, what they had done is they had turned it into a religious brothel; and there were men and women prostitutes, and the proceeds from their trade went to support and finance the worship of the pagan fertility goddess. Probably worse than what was happening at the temple is what was happening in a valley nearby. The people of Israel were sacrificing their oldest sons to a pagan god. This was Israel.

The king at the time was eight years old. His father had been assassinated. The assassins had been dealt with, and the people said, ‘Make his son king.’ The regal, royal bureaucracy could keep things going and he could just be there as kind of a monarch-figurehead.

Something happened with this eight-year-old boy. For some reason, when he was about sixteen years old he decided—as a teenager—he was gonna seek the Lord God of Israel, the God that the great first king [*should be second king*] of Israel, David, had served and followed...this young boy, teenager, decided he was gonna seek that God. And he began to do so. Four years later, when he was twenty years old, he decided it’s enough of just personal seeking—this is gonna be a national thing—and he began to deal with the pagan worship that was in the land at the time. As he was dealing with that, six years later when he was twenty-six years old and they had finally refurbished the temple, they discovered something in the temple—something he had never seen before, something he had never been across before, something that he had heard existed but he’d never found one—he found the scriptures! And for the first time in his life, at twenty-six years of age, he was able to start reading God’s commands and directives.

That young king, Josiah, led the nation of Israel through one of its greatest renewals in all of history. He was helped in that renewal by a young cousin who was about the same age, a young cousin who was of the royal line, a prince. And rare among princes, he was a prophet. In fact, he’s the only prophet we know of who was of royal blood. As a prophet, he had one focused vision, and one simple message. And as he joined with his cousin he proclaimed that vision, and he announced the message. We’re gonna look at that message today, and we’re gonna look at it in a way that I hope will be a stirring to all of us—a renewal within us God-ward. Before we do that, let’s pray.

Our Father in heaven,

We come to Your word, to Your scriptures. And Father, we pray and we ask that as we spend time in this passage, Your message given so long ago, that Your Spirit would quicken our spirits, and in these words, Father, we would hear You, and You would use them to shape our lives.

In Jesus’ name, amen.

Let’s turn to the book of Zephaniah, tiny little book tucked away near the end of the Old Testament among all the other books with funny names like Haggai, and Zechariah, and Habakkuk, and those kind of names...you’re gonna find this little book. It’s very short; it’s only about two and a half pages long. And if you go back there and you’re thumbin’ through fast you may miss it. In fact, the fastest way to find it may be to start with the table of contents and just find the word Zephaniah, look up the page number, and go there. When you get there you’re gonna find the writing of that young prophet who was there beside Josiah during the great revival that took place in the six hundreds AD [*should be BC*], about 629-628 is when the revival really took hold.

The message that is in this particular work, and the vision that is there, is stated right up front. It's given right at the very beginning. It's one of those passages, one of those books that, when you pick it up, you don't have to read the end to figure it out. We're given, right at the start, in the opening verses, verse 2 after the introduction, we have in verse 2 here is the main message, here is the focused vision that Zephaniah brought that helped turn that nation around. The message was this, and it's from God. It's God speaking. He says, "I," God,

"...will completely remove all things from the face of the earth," declares the Lord.

That was the message God gave.

"I will completely remove all things from the face of the earth," declares the Lord.

It's a simple, declarative statement. Now, it raises a lot of questions, and we are gonna deal with those questions from here on out. But that is the message. And the message hasn't changed. God said it, and it's still His message. We're gonna deal with the questions it raises by looking at other things that Zephaniah said to elaborate and build on this. We don't have the time to work through it verse by verse, but we will take key questions that it raises and we will answer them, and we will use Zephaniah's words to answer them, the words that God gave His prophet. We're not gonna run to Revelation, because there's a lot of details we could add, but we're not gonna go there today. We're not gonna just have my opinions on what was goin' on, and we're not gonna try to have a quote of all the latest scholars with respect to the end and what God may do or not do. We're just gonna go with what Zephaniah said, starting with this central idea—"I will completely remove all things from the face of the earth," declares the Lord. That's the message.

The first question it raises in many of our minds is 'Well, what was he seein' when he said that? What was the prophetic vision? What was he looking at?' That's the simple message. 'What was the focused thing that he saw?' And the word that he puts to it, the name he put to it later in the book...Zephaniah said what he saw, what he's speaking about, is the 'day of the Lord.' Zephaniah used that term more than any other of the prophets. It became a term that was used from his time on to refer to the closure of all things, when God would finally bring everything that we know to an end; that timeframe when God would finally bring everything up, bind it together, and deal with it. And the world that we now know will cease to exist. That's the day of the Lord.

Now, we're not talking necessarily about a 24-hour time period. We're talking about the whole timeframe of the end, when God begins to bring closure to the world as we know it. It's not...it's not a sunny picture. In fact, later in Zephaniah, when we get down to the very end of chapter 1 if you wanna glance there, chapter 1 verses 14-16, there's a drumbeat almost of descriptive terms in which Zephaniah, looking at the future and seeing that great day of the Lord when God will finally bring closure to human history, he says this--*it is a day of wrath.*

A day of wrath is that day...

And then he begins a drumbeat of follow-up terms. He says '*It's a day of trouble and a day of distress.*' He says it's

A day of destruction and desolation...

He goes on and says 'it's a day of darkness and a day of gloom, it's...'

A day of clouds and thick darkness...

It's

A day of trumpet and battle cry...

Probably grimmest of all is what he says in verse 18 when he describes it. He says

For God will make a complete end, indeed a terrifying one...

The day of the Lord...Zephaniah sees that and he announces God's message—He's going to remove all things.

Now, when we hear that, the next question that often comes to mind is, 'Well, who all is going to be impacted by this? I mean, for whom is this message really relevant?' Bottom line we're really concerned—'does it really apply to me?'

Response there is to pick up on what I call the repetition that we're gonna see. And as we see it, it's gonna become emphatic that when God says it's gonna be all things, He's talking about *all* things and *all* people. In fact, in the original Hebrew, the word 'things' is not there; it just simply says 'all.' And it's the next verse, the emphatic repetition of verse 3, that fills in the content of that term 'all.' Let's read it together; I'll just read it out loud for you. He says

"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.

Go to the very end of this chapter, that grim verse...verse 18, and you'll find the same repetition that is so emphatic. Not only does He say in verse 3 *"I will cut off man from the face of the earth,"* when you come to verse 18 he says

He will make a complete end, indeed a terrifying end,

And here comes the last phrase of his opening message, verse 18 last line, and he says

...of all the inhabitants of the earth.

This devastation, this destruction, is so absolute that there is no way to escape it, not even the grave. It'll be a final day that deals both with the quick and the dead, the living and those who've passed on.

After that emphatic repetition, there's a specific implication that Zephaniah follows on with his people in Jerusalem, and it's in verse 4. After saying 'He's gonna remove man from the earth,' he goes on and he says this—"So..." And that's an important word right here, link-up in verse 4. He says, 'So, as a consequence, the logical result of that, the conclusion to be drawn...' He says

"So I will stretch out My hand against Judah..."

He has to be emphatic at this point; he has to get specific at this point, because the people of Jerusalem had the prevailing attitude—and it's stated in Zephaniah—that 'God won't do anything to us, good or bad.' And what Zephaniah says—'Listen, He is going to remove everyone from the earth. He is gonna deal with all the inhabitants; so, as a result, understand He is going to deal with you, Jerusalem and Judah. There's no exceptions here.' And if Zephaniah were here today he'd be saying, 'Listen, He is gonna deal with all the inhabitants of the earth. He is gonna strike out His hand against, yes, Wasilla; and Alaska; and the United States of America. There's no exceptions here—there's none. It's all.'

Then that raises a question—well, when? When?

Twenty-six hundred years ago, as Zephaniah first delivered this message from God, God's statement was this. He said

Near is the great day of the Lord, near and coming quickly;

That's twenty-six hundred years ago. Now, there's a lot of things that happened in the immediate history after Zephaniah preached. There was a revival, Jerusalem responded, and then they turned right back away from it and they went down to the pit once again. And they were brought under the heavy hand of the Babylonians. In fact, for a period of seventy years the nation of Israel ceased to exist, living in exile. And it was a judgment that God brought upon them. The nations around them that Zephaniah speaks to later in his letter, he speaks to the countries along the coast and to the north and to the south—those countries all also suffered under judgment.

But this total judgment, this total closure, the great and final day of the Lord? It hasn't happened. Zephaniah said it was near, it was coming quickly; but twenty-six hundred years...we still haven't seen it. And so we wonder...did Zephaniah get it wrong? And we adopt the same attitude the people in Jerusalem did in Zephaniah's day—'God's not gonna do anything, good or bad.'

The Apostle Peter, just before he died, spoke to this question. He spoke to it very directly; it was just before he died. And as he wrote in his final letter he said, 'You know, as time goes on people are gonna be questioning whether God's ever going to bring the great and final day, His promise of closure. People are gonna question it, they're gonna wonder about it, they're gonna say that it's never gonna happen.' And the Apostle Peter responds to that, and what he says, 'Listen, the Lord's not slow about His promise, the promise of bringing closure, the great and final day, as some count slowness.'

The first thing that Peter indicates is he says, 'Listen, you gotta think about time differently when you think about God.' We treat it almost as a cliché; we throw it around—'With God one day is like a thousand years; a thousand years is as one day.' The Apostle Peter says *that is not a cliché*. That's the way it is. And twenty-six hundred years is like two-and-a-half days to God—it means nothing, time-wise.

And then he goes on and he indicates it's not because He's tardy, it's not because He's slow, it's not because He's forgetful; it's because *this is something He does not want to do*. He will eventually do it, and it is near, anytime. And the only reason He delays is because it's not something He wants to do.

That leads to another question, and that's the question 'why?' And as we read through Zephaniah's prophecy, the question is always there—why would God do such a thing? And the answer Zephaniah gives, in one word at one point, is very simply...sin, mankind's rebellions against God. But what I've chosen to do is isolate one particular verse in here where Zephaniah, through God, describes sin in a way that I think we need to pick up on because it's kind of a summary of things that surface throughout the book. There's one verse that kind of gives us a sense of sin and why sin is such a horrible thing that God would do this. It's found in chapter 3 verse 2. And at that point Zephaniah has already been through two different rounds of kind of content, and he's coming back for a third part of the message. And he starts off by speaking about the city of Jerusalem and its condition, its apostic condition at that time. And as he speaks of the city, he says

She...

...speaking of Jerusalem...

...heeded no voice;

No matter what prophet, no matter what priest, no matter what king God spoke through, the people didn't pay attention. And then he goes on and says

She accepted no instruction.

God could give them instructions about how to worship, about how to treat each other, how to treat their wives, how to speak of Him, how to speak the truth, how to deal with their nation, how to run their country; He could give them instruction about anything and everything, and they did their own thing.

And even more foundational than that, he goes on and says

She...

...Jerusalem...

...did not trust in the Lord;

Now, he's not talking about here that they didn't have a conceptual belief that God existed. You ask anyone in Jerusalem at that day, they would have said, 'Yeah, Yahweh, the Lord God, He exists.' What they did not have is any confidence in His character and His competency. They did not believe that this God really had the character that they could trust. And they did not believe He was competent enough to handle the major issues they were facing both nationally and internationally, and personally. And that's why they wouldn't respond to His instruction and they wouldn't listen to His voice. They lacked confidence in His character and His ability.

There's a fourth thing.

She...

...Jerusalem...

...did not draw near to her God.

They drew near to other gods; they drew near to other nations and kings and powers; drew near to each other. But they did not draw near to their God. They didn't get up close enough to Him and work with Him personally enough that they could come to discover His character personally, and they could come to know His ability personally. They didn't bother to get to know Him.

I picked this verse because it gets to the very essence of the nature of sin. Sin is deeply and profoundly personal. It's not simply 'I didn't keep this rule, and I didn't keep that rule. I blew it on the seventh command. I'll make it up on the eighth.' Sin is saying, 'I'm not going to listen to the voice of God.' And there's nothin' more personal than sayin' 'I don't want to hear You.' Sin is saying 'I want to do it my way;' and there's nothin' more personal than saying 'I don't trust Your way.' Sin is saying 'I don't have any confidence in You, God, to handle my situation, my circumstance, given what I'm dealing with. You are not competent enough and You do not know the situation well enough.' And there is nothing more personal than saying that to God. And that's what you say every time you sin. And there's nothing more personal than saying 'I really don't have time for You.'

So, how...how's God going to do this? It's gonna be by His intense anger. People, I'm being very careful to just quote Zephaniah as he quoted God. Near the end of the book, chapter 3 verse 8, there's this description. God says

"Indeed, it's My decision to gather the nations,"

This isn't impulse; this isn't just reactive. It's a deliberate decision on God's part. And He says '*It's My decision to gather the nations, to bring them together...*'

"...to assemble kingdoms..."

And He says

"...to pour out on them My indignation, to pour out on them all My burning anger;"

And then He says, finally,

"For all the earth..."

...all the earth...

"...will be devoured..."

...will be burned up...

"...by the fire of My zeal."

...the intensity of My heart.

This is so, so personal with God. What He's going to do is simply release His heart. I don't know what it is about us with respect to sin. But we kinda have that attitude—'It's just sin; it's not personal.' It's 'Ok God, it's my bad. I'll make up for it. It's not personal. Nothin' personal, God.'

You need to understand—sin is personal. And God takes it profoundly and deeply personally.

Let me give you an analogy. You have a relationship, a friendship. And in that friendship and in that relationship you get together. And it seems that every time you get together, you're chronically late. You're just never...you have a hard time keepin' track of time; you were raised that way. You're a very busy person. There's a lot of people demanding your attention. There's appointments you gotta keep, and they tend to go long. And so every time you get with this person you're late. And they don't take it personally. They bring a good book to read while they wait. They understand that's the way you are. They just kinda wait. And there's no big deal.

You know how the relationship changes when the person does take it personally, and they realize that you can and do make your other appointments on time? And that every time you're late you're sayin' to the person, 'My schedule's more important than yours, and I don't care what you did to get here on time. That's ok.' You're sayin' to that person, 'My time's more valuable than your time; you can waste it, but I can't.' You know how the tone of the relationship changes, and now it's personal, and you don't know how to make up for that?

I'm belaboring this. I'm belaboring it, because we, as a people, in our culture and our time, are almost clueless with respect to God's heart. We are so absorbed in responding to the demands of our unruly emotions that we are totally clueless about what's going on in God's heart. We know when we're happy. We know when we're disappointed. We know when we're grumpy. We know when we're upset. We know when we're angry. We know when we're satisfied. We know when we're content.

Do we ever know when God is at any given moment?

Let me take the one time of the week when we really come together—we ought to be most sensitive to it. Take a church service, a Sunday morning when you walk out of here. One of the first things we wrestle with is, 'Did I...did that feel good today? Am I feeling better? Am I feeling encouraged? Am I feeling strengthened?' How often do you get into the car, you look at the family and say, 'How do you think God feels about what we did today?' Not what my neighbor did, not what the people sitting in front of me did. Not what the people who looked so weird today did. 'How do you think God feels about what I did today?' It is deeply, profoundly personal, and God's emotions and God's heart runs far deeper and far stronger than any of us can ever imagine. And it's the last thing you want to play with, is God's heart.

Well, what then? And I'm going to have to pick up my pace a bit. What then? After that, after that day—what happens? And what we're gonna have is two things that...near the end of the chapter there's a focus. One is renewal, and one is restoration. The renewal spoken of comes in verse 9 of Zephaniah chapter 3, where God says

"For then..."

...after that day...

"...I will give to the peoples purified lips, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord."

The promise is that some day there will be people of every tongue and every tribe who will acknowledge God as God. And, it goes on, they will

"...serve Him shoulder to shoulder."

There is gonna be a purified people of every nation, every tongue. In fact, included among them in restoration is gonna be a group of people; God says

"I'm going to leave among you a humble and a lowly people, and they will take refuge in the name of the Lord."

And then He identifies them; they're the remnant of Israel. 'Even My people, Israel, are gonna be among those who stand shoulder to shoulder, calling upon My name.' And there's gonna be rejoicing.

Granted, there's gonna be rejoicing among those that emerge from that as a purified people, but there's gonna be rejoicing emphatically on God's part. It says

“The Lord your God...”

...in that day, after that great and final day...

“The Lord God is in your midst,”

And He'll be in your midst as

“...a victorious warrior. And He will exult over you with joy,”

He will be excited over you with joy. And then He has this other beautiful picture; and

“He will be quiet in His love,”

He'll just look at you, and His heart will be filled with 'I just love this people.' And then it has this statement. It's one of the most profound pictures we have of our God. It says this. It says

“He will be quiet in His love, and He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy.”

Can you imagine the God of the universe shouting joyfully over you? That's what it'll be after that day with those who emerge, the remnant, the restored, the renewed.

So that leads to our final question, and boy, I gotta deal with this one. What do we do? What do we do? Well, there's one thing *not* to do. Let's put it in a positive way, though. Zephaniah put it this way. In the book he says, in chapter 1 verse 7, after he gives his first announcement of judgment, he looks at the people of Israel and says, 'Be silent. Don't argue this point. Don't deny it. Don't try to come up with excuses. Just be silent. This is not a point to debate, to argue.'

And he goes on later, and he'll give them a positive thing to do, a direction to head. He says in chapter 2 verse 3, he says, *“Seek the Lord.”* And it intrigues me. He says

Seek the Lord, all you humble of the earth who have carried out His ordinances.

He's speaking very specifically to people who have said, 'You know what? We got the Bible. We're doin' what the Bible says.' And he prods them a step further and he says, 'Listen. Seek the Lord.'

You see, you can be keeping the rules and never, ever seek the Rule-giver. You can be compiling the lists and putting it right there and saying, 'You know, I'm going to do everything God says to do. Ten Commandments? I'm keepin' 'em,' and never, ever seek God.

The Lord says, 'Make it personal. Seek Me.'

Now, he'll go on and he'll say 'Seek righteousness. Do it in the right way. Do it My way. And seek humility at the same time. In other words, don't you try to tell Me the way it should be. Approach Me in appropriate humility, and respond to others with that same humility. With this instruction seek me rightly; seek me humbly.' He says, 'Seek Me,' and then He says this; 'Perhaps you'll be hidden on the day of the Lord's anger.'

And with that phrase we come up to the limits of the Old Testament, with the word 'perhaps.' And now I have to lose Zephaniah, 'cause I wanna give you somethin' better than 'perhaps.' Starting point would be to move to the New Testament and work, and look, at Jesus. Jesus is the one who said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No man comes to the Father but through Me." So you start with Jesus, 'cause He's the only one. If you're gonna seek the Lord, He's the only one to seek the Lord through; so you seek Him.

That's the starting point. The promise, the confidence that comes with that, goes far beyond a 'perhaps'; the promise is this—"For God so loved the world..."

You say, 'Wait a minute. His anger...'

Yes. There's anger with God. He takes sin personal. But there is something that answers to that anger, and that's His love. And it's a love that, we're told, not only does He love the world—"*He loved the world so much that He gave His only begotten Son.*" He put His Son there and said, 'You take the anger for them.' And with that promise is "*Whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.*" No 'perhaps' there. It's simply sayin' "I'm gonna seek the Lord, starting with Jesus, responding with faith.' That's what you do, given the reality of the day of the Lord.

What's your next steps? What we've talked about today...what we've talked about today is one of the most defining things in the Christian worldview. It's at this one point of teaching that you'll probably decide whether you'll accept Christianity or reject it, whether you'll take it seriously or not. If there is no great final day of the Lord there's really no reason to take Jesus seriously. If there is such a day and God has taken your sin very personally, then it's absolutely essential that you take Jesus seriously. This is the issue you gotta respond to. If you choose to respond you make it personal. You call out to Jesus and you simply say, "Save me. Save me."

Let's stand.

[*Service concludes with congregational singing of the blessing.*]