

New Year 2017 - Remember What the Future Holds

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 08 January 2017

Preacher: Martin Ayers

[0 : 00] Father God, we thank you for this new year and this opportunity to gather as your people. We ask that you will open your word to our hearts and open our hearts to your word.

In Jesus' name, amen. Well, I don't know if you've made any New Year's resolutions. I was looking at the most popular ones for 2017. Eating healthy is a very popular one for this year.

Meat-free Mondays is one of the ideas to get you off to a healthy start to this year. Maybe you'll be trying that. Mark Zuckerberg on Facebook, he's quite well known for his New Year's resolutions. He said this year that he wants to greet somebody from every American state this year. That's his New Year's resolution. But more broadly, as we look into this year, you might not have made specific resolutions, but I guess if we think about it, we'd all have ideas of ways that this year could be a good year for us.

That we might get to a year's time and look back and think 2017 was a good year. And what we base those ideas on partly depends on what we think is going to happen in our world.

[1 : 11] If we're optimistic people, perhaps because of the economy or a home improvement project we've got planned, or holiday plans, holidays we've booked, then we might have quite ambitious plans for the new year.

If we're worried because of Brexit or terrorism or Donald Trump, then we might have more conservative plans for what would make this year a good one for us.

What is going to happen this year, it really matters to our goals. And I think that makes January a good time to remind ourselves of what God says is ultimately going to happen to our world.

It might not happen this year, it might do, it might happen today, but it will happen eventually to our world. God tells us in his word where we're heading. And it's important because even if you're already a Christian, you've been a Christian your whole life, all day, every day, we're surrounded by information that has rejected what God says is going to happen in the way that the news is told, in the way that people talk about their lives.

So we need to be reminded about the future. So we're going to look at this book, Zephaniah. He was a prophet in Judah from around 640 BC. So at that time, God's people didn't live all over the world like Christians do today.

[2 : 31] They lived together in one nation state in the region around Jerusalem. And they were called the people of Judah. They were under a king in the line of King David. And they got a good king in charge.

He was a boy, Josiah. But in the time of Zephaniah's ministry, when God gave him a message for the people, they were still reeling from having two bad kings in a row.

Bad kings because they had not been faithful to God. And God brings a message to Judah about the future. But it's also a message that is a foretaste of the future for our whole world.

So it's full of promises that only really find their fulfillment when Jesus comes and when he will come again. So Zephaniah, in this little book, takes us on a journey, a journey to a future that, when you look at it, is more dreadful than we could ever imagine, and at the same time is more glorious than we could ever imagine.

And there are three stages to our journey with Zephaniah. So the first is, there appears to be no hope. Just have a look with me at chapter 1 of Zephaniah, page 944.

[3 : 41] He's introduced in verse 1. Have a look at verse 2. I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth, declares the Lord.

I will sweep away both man and beast. I will sweep away the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea, and the idols that cause the wicked to stumble. When I destroy all mankind on the face of the earth, declares the Lord.

I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem. Well, that is shocking, isn't it? That is one of the most shocking openings to a book that you could ever read. The living God says he's going to sweep away everything. Why? It's because of the way people are treating God. We hear that in verse 5.

Those who bow down on the roofs to worship the starry host, those who bow down and swear by the Lord, and who also swear by Molech, those who turn back from following the Lord and neither seek the Lord nor inquire of him.

[4 : 46] So the problem is not that the people have abandoned God altogether, that they're ignoring God. They had Bibles. They appeared to still be worshipping the Lord. They met to worship God, but they were covering their bases.

They used to worship the gods of the nations around them as well as the God of the Bible, just in case. They became religious pluralists.

The society around them told them to worship the stars, told them to worship this god Molech that had been made up, and so that's what they did. And God is very offended because worshipping God and something else is not worshipping God.

We were made for God. We were made to build our lives on him and trust him with all of our hearts. But these people were just trying to do enough to keep God happy, and they were going after other things instead.

Now today in Glasgow, I take it we're not tempted to worship the stars, most of us. We're not tempted to worship Molech. We know that he's not real. But we live in a culture that says, your Christian faith is acceptable so long as what really matters to you is your personal comfort and the respect of others.

[6 : 08] And that culture infects the church so that even within our Christian culture, we think to ourselves, it's best not to get too into this Christian stuff. Just look at your non-Christian colleagues.

Look at your non-Christian neighbours. Isn't what you really need what they've got? So that we still come to church, but what really matters in our hearts, what we bow down to, if you like, with our time and our talents and our gifts and our energy, are the idols of personal comfort and respect. So that affects our personal choices, and it means that all the time we're robbing God of what we should give him and robbing God of what we should give to his people.

And he is deeply offended when we do that. Back to Judah. What else are they doing? In verse 6, they're rejecting God's word.

Verse 6, those who turn back from following the Lord and neither seek the Lord nor inquire of him. So they turned back. It's as though they'd started out well, but maybe God's word got too challenging for them.

[7 : 20] Maybe it told them to live in a way they didn't really want to live. They disagree with it, so they put it away. They stopped seeking God. And they trivialized God in verse 12.

Verse 12, at that time, I will search Jerusalem with lamps and punish those who are complacent, who are like wine left on its dregs, who think the Lord will do nothing, either good or bad.

You see what's going on? They were complacent, because deep down, they didn't think God would ever do anything about it. Maybe that's the trap we fall into thinking in our culture today. God won't do anything.

And the message of Zephaniah to them and to us is that God is angry and he will do something. In John Bunyan's famous book, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, at the start, you get introduced to a man who is deeply troubled.

And he's deeply troubled because of what he's reading in a book. John Bunyan, who wrote it, says this, I saw a man clothed in rags, standing in a certain place, with his face turned away from his own house, a book in his hand, and a great burden on his back.

[8 : 31] I looked and saw him open the book and read therein. And as he read, he wept and trembled, and not being able to contain himself any longer, he broke out in a lamentable cry, saying, What shall I do?

So he goes home, and his family think he's out of his mind. So they suggest that he goes to bed and has a good night's sleep, and he'll feel better in the morning. And in the morning, he feels far worse. And he says this, Oh, my dear wife, and you, the children of my deepest affections, I, your dear friend, am myself crushed by reason of a burden that weighs heavily upon me.

Moreover, I am certainly informed in this book that this, our city, will be burned with fire from heaven, in which myself, with you, my wife, and sweet babes, shall come to miserable ruin, except some way of escape can be found whereby we may be delivered.

Now in the story, if you've read it, Christian meets Evangelist, and Evangelist points him on the route to be saved. But when you read *The Pilgrim's Progress*, if Christian was living in Glasgow today, and reading a book like that, and being distressed like that, I know what people would say in Glasgow.

They'd say, Christian, stop reading the book. Just put the book down, Christian. It's causing you distress. Just read something else.

[9 : 56] Read a magazine. Read the newspapers. Or take up a new hobby. Play more golf. Do anything. Just stop reading the book if it's causing you distress.

Why would you read a book like that? Well, you'd only read that book if it was really true. And the book Christian is reading in the story, of course, is the Bible.

The book that Jesus lived by and affirmed as true. And he could easily have been reading Zephaniah as he got distressed like that. And if this promise of judgment from God seems far-fetched to us today, we need to remember that it happened in history.

This happened to Judah. The Babylonians came. They took exiles. They went back. They besieged the city of Jerusalem. They destroyed Jerusalem. They destroyed the walls. They destroyed the temple.

It was a horrible thing. Zephaniah probably saw that happen with his own eyes. And it was just a foretaste of what God says is coming to our world.

[10 : 59] The Bible says in Acts 17, God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all people by raising him from the dead.

So by raising Jesus from the dead, there's an empty tomb. People saw him alive again. God demonstrated that his just judgment is coming on our world. And there will be no safety on that day in having wealth or friends or respect from others.

That's clear in verse 18 of Zephaniah 1. Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the Lord's wrath. And the reason for it all is summed up in verse 17.

I will bring such distress on all people that they will grope about like those who are blind because they have sinned against the Lord. Now many of us find this hard to come to terms with.

I find it very hard to come to terms with the judgment of God written as starkly as this. But one of the things we can hold on to about God's promised judgment is that it will bring justice.

[12 : 06] It will be fair. So in chapter 3 verse 5 of Zephaniah, we hear this. Jerusalem is the she here. In Zephaniah 3 verse 5, the Lord within her is righteous.

He does no wrong. So God is just and he does no wrong. He will never do anything wrong. So nobody will be saying on the day of judgment, this isn't fair.

This has gone too far. In fact, it's because God is just and righteous that he has to act in our world. What's happening here is that God's promising he's going to set things right.

And that's what we all want. We'll see what goodness really looks like because we'll see him coming. And all of the rebellion against him of all of mankind will be exposed for what it really is as a horrible thing.

And we shouldn't be surprised if we find it hard to believe day by day that the judgment is going to be this awful because it's denied all around us. It's denied by churches in Glasgow.

[13 : 15] Not all of them, but you can find churches where this would be denied. But we shouldn't be surprised by that. If you think, what's the very first truth about God that gets denied in the whole Bible? What's the very first truth that gets denied?

You will not surely die. That's what mankind believes about God. There's no judgment coming. We can live as we want. So it's vital that we remind ourselves of this.

If we don't feel this, then we'll just think to ourselves this year, stop reading the book. Ignore the book. Distract yourself with leisure instead.

So we need step one on Zephaniah's journey. It's in the Bible for a reason. God could bring judgment without warning. He could have done that. But he warns us so that we'll move forward and we'll act.

So here's the second step on our journey with Zephaniah. Secondly, there appears a glimmer of hope. It comes in chapter 2. Just look at that with me. Chapter 2, verse 1.

[14:15] Gather together. Gather yourselves together, you shameful nation. And then look at the repetition here. before the decree takes effect and that day passes like windblown chaff.

Before the Lord's fierce anger comes upon you. Before the day of the Lord's wrath comes upon you. 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. Did you notice the uncertainty there? Perhaps it's just a glimmer of hope.

And as if to emphasize how tenuous this chance of survival is, it's surrounded by words of judgment. So chapter 2 lists the nations around Judah and God condemns them.

If you glance down, verse 4 is all about Philistia, the Philistines, Gaza and Ashkelon. Verse 8, Moab and Ammon. Verse 12 there, Cush.

[15:15] Verse 13, Assyria. The big empire. It's as though God is saying to his people, there is no other escape for you. You can't go and live in one of these other nations and be free from God because my judgment is coming on them as well.

Now why is God telling them that? Because Judah needs to realize there is only one place to go when you hear about the coming judgment of God. There is only one place to turn and that is to God himself.

chapter 2 verse 3, seek the Lord. He is our only hope. It's one of the most important facts in our universe. The one from whom we need to be saved is the very one who saves us.

Running away from God won't help. Trying to make it up to God doesn't help. But turning to Christ, that's the answer. God has promised that when we turn to Jesus, God looks on us as though we've lived the perfect life.

He has made a way so that in Jesus, in his death for our sins, there is hope. So if you have a look at chapter 3 verse 12, we see that promised hope.

[16:30] Chapter 3 verse 12, he says, There's that glimmer of hope.

There is going to be a remnant who are saved and any of us can be found in that remnant by turning to Christ. So what happens to those people who put their trust in him?

At the return of Jesus Christ, what happens to the people who have trusted him and are waiting for him? Well, we've heard there appears to be no hope. Then there appears a glimmer of hope.

And step 3 with Zephaniah is the glimmer bursts into an explosion of joy. Let's read from verse 14 of chapter 3.

Sing, daughter Zion. Shout aloud, Israel. Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, daughter Jerusalem. The Lord has taken away your punishment.

[17:33] He has turned back your enemy. The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you. Never again will you fear any harm. On that day they will say to Jerusalem, Do not fear, Zion.

Do not let your hands hang limp. The Lord, your God, is with you. The mighty warrior who saves. And what we see next is absolutely astounding.

It's that our salvation is not just an escape from the wrath of God, it's an entry into, a sharing in the joy of God himself. Verse 17, He will take great delight in you.

In his love, he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing. So everyone who's put their trust in Christ is called not to be afraid, but to sing.

Verse 14, sing, shout aloud, be glad and rejoice with all your heart. Why? We will fully realize there is no judgment for us.

[18:35] Did you see that in verse 15? It says, the Lord has taken away your punishment. What a great little picture in the Old Testament of what Jesus came to do.

That when Jesus drank the cup of the wrath of God by dying on the cross for his people, he drank it dry. There is nothing left for his people. God will not punish the same sins twice.

so that we as his people can sing, my sin, oh the bliss of this glorious thought, my sin, not in part but the whole, is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more.

We can sing, no condemnation, now I dread. Jesus, and all in him is mine, alive in him, my living head, and clothed in righteousness divine. No judgment.

We'll also realize the joy, the glory of being in the very presence of God. Verse 17, the Lord your God is with you, the mighty warrior who saves.

[19:36] What we were made for, to stand in the presence of God and know him close to us, that's what we will have. What else? Well, Zephaniah tells us there will never again be anything to fear.

So the end of verse 13, they will eat and lie down and no one will make them afraid. So no fear of judgment, but no fear of anything, anything at all.

No fear of sickness or death, it's been taken away forever. No fear of sin or failure, it's gone for good. No anxiety. Friends, can you imagine waking up in the morning and having absolutely nothing to be afraid of, knowing that nothing can go wrong today?

That's what will happen. And yet, as amazing as those things are, more amazing even than all of that is the extraordinary prospect of God rejoicing in love over us on that day.

Just think, after God has declared his judgment and he looks down on the people who were left, those who were redeemed in Christ, do you think he'll look over us and think, well this is a bit disappointing.

[20 : 51] With the fruit of my redeeming work, I wish there'd been something a bit better. Oh well, it is what it is. No, he tells us, he's put it in here, he wants us to know this morning, he will rejoice over you with gladness.

He will delight over you with loud singing. He will present us to himself without stain or blemish and he will rejoice with passionate intensity in his heart.

As Isaiah promised, as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so shall your God rejoice over you. I don't know whether you've ever been to a wedding where the bridegroom looks particularly thrilled with his bride.

I was a big fan of a TV series that ran for a few years, finished a few years ago called Chuck. I don't know whether you know Chuck or watched any of that but it was five seasons long, American seasons of TV, lots and lots of episodes and all through the show you had Chuck Bartowski, bit of a geek and you longed for him to get the girl, Sarah Walker.

You felt like they needed each other in the way that American TV sitcoms do to you and they were on and off and on and off and on and off and at times you thought this is never going to work, they're never going to get together and at the end they got together, they were on a beach and Chuck was deeply, deeply happy and all of Chuck's fans were deeply happy for him.

[22 : 17] I asked Gordon Chung the assistant minister before this whether he'd seen Chuck he said yeah, the first thing he said about Chuck, yeah I saw Chuck, I cried at the end. It was amazing because Chuck was deeply happy because he had Sarah.

Zephaniah is saying to us this redeeming work of God it's not a chore to God. This project of saving us broken people like you and me he is thrilled to do it.

His heart is filled with a great gladness so that when Jesus comes in glory you will rejoice if you're a Christian you will rejoice but greater than your joy will be God's joy.

This is what the preacher Spurgeon said about it. We are happy when God blesses us but not so happy as God is. We are glad when we are pardoned but he that pardons us is more glad still.

The prodigal son going back to his home was very, very happy but not so delighted as his father who could say this my son was dead and is alive again.

[23 : 24] He was lost and is found. The father's heart was the fullest of delight and it was by far the larger heart so that it could hold more joy. His heart is bigger than ours and God's heart will be full of delight in us.

He will be beaming as he says you are mine at last you are mine and we will be radiant and overwhelmed with joy as we see the fullness of his love for us like that.

Let me finish with a couple of implications a couple of New Year's resolutions. The first one is this from Zephaniah. Let me ask you will you go to the word of God this year?

Will you let God tell you the truth about the future? Truth about his judgment that you won't hear anywhere else? And will you seek him and seek his will for your life and for the church?

Second implication could we reach out this year to others? Could we warn them of the truth about the future?

[24 : 34] That without taking shelter from God they are in terrible danger and with Christ we have hope beyond our greatest imaginings of God taking great delight in us one day.

We want to be Christians who reach out with that vital news. Thirdly could we make it our ambition this year to grow more like Jesus Christ to let God's will be done for our lives so that we change and do his will.

God cares more about our character than our comfort. He urges us to strive for holiness to grow in faith and hope and love to put to death our old selves and to get rid of lust and gluttony and pride

and put on a new self of sacrificial love for others and doing that is very painful for us. It's very hard work. It's costly. So let me ask you if this is the future that God has planned for us is he not worth trusting for the present?

If God's agenda for our growth is that he will transform us into something so wonderful that one day he promises he will burst into song over us shouldn't our biggest ambition be to let him work in us as he pleases?

[25 : 54] Could we make it our resolution for this year to press into these promises of Zephaniah and edge closer in our character and service to the person God made us to be?

All for the glory of Christ. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father we are grateful for your word of clarity about your holiness and of your coming judgment.

we thank you for showing us Christ the beauty of his character his matchless life his atoning death his coming with justice to put things right and we thank you that through him you Lord have made a way for us who are wayward and far from you to be in your remnant by faith in him alone so that one day you will quiet us with your love and rejoice over us with singing.

So Heavenly Father we entrust ourselves to you we pledge that our desire is to let you transform us to be more like Jesus Christ may this greater vision of you and of what it means to be your people be a vision that guides our every step this year in Jesus name we pray Amen san upbringing to him