Searching Jerusalem with candles

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[0:00] If you turn back with me to the passage we read, to Zephaniah and the first chapter, you'll find the words of my text this afternoon in verse 12 of chapter 1.

And it shall come to pass at that time that I will search Jerusalem with candles and punish the men that are settled on their lees, that say in their heart, the Lord will not do good, neither will he do evil. I will search Jerusalem with candles.
What sort of world is it that we live in? Is the world that you live in one where there's room for God? You know how people think nowadays. If I can't see something, if I can't hear something, if I can't touch something, then does it really exist? If people can't put it under the microscope or log it on a computer, then they think it's something that doesn't matter.
And our generation lives in a world where there's no room for God. Our generation is bold enough to claim that God is dead.
[1:33] Their world is a world of natural processes, a world of inevitable scientific laws. It's a closed system. And they've shut God out.

That's the philosophy of our age. The age that's arrived at maturity. The age that's really come. We've stripped aside all the myths, all the fancies of past superstitious ages.
We know what life's really about. And that spirit is militant. It's on the attack.
The spirit of our age is seeking to undermine the Christian faith. The spirit of our age is seeking to undermine the faith of each one of us.
And that's why it's important to check up. Why it's important to ask the question, what sort of world is it that I'm living in?
[2:41] Is it a world where there's room for God? Not just a God way up there, but a God who sees, a God who knows, a God who acts here and now.

Let me put it another way. What sort of world do we pray in? Are we living in a world where we really expect God to be able to answer prayer?
Or has the view, our view of this world and our view of our God been so constricted, been so twisted, by the forces of our age, that though we may utter the words of prayer, we're really denying the possibility that God can answer.
I can remember. It must be a sign of old age creeping up in me. But I can remember the last bad smog in Glasgow.
Not mist, not mist, not fog, not fog, but smog. Thick, yellowish-green, and foul.
[4:10] You were glad to get off the streets. You were glad to get home. But you couldn't shut it out. It would creep in at the sides of the window.

You could smell it in the room. You put the light on, and as you looked across the room, you could see it around the glow of the lamp in the middle of the ceiling.
No matter where you went, you couldn't get away from its foul, pervasive influence.
And it's the same with the thought currents of our own day. Just like that smog, we can't get away from them.
Try as we will, we're affected, we're part of our day and generation. We're inevitably influenced by it.
And the thought pattern of our age is out to smother the vitality of our religion.
[5:18] The prevailing patterns distort our thinking, divert our resources, and deprive us of the immediacy of a life lived in the conscious presence of God.

And so as we take stock spiritually, we've got to be aware of the danger. We've got to be in our guard to avoid the danger.
And we've got to take advantage of this opportunity to do a spiritual check-up, to make sure that the pressures of our age, the thought patterns of our day and generation, haven't been slowly and

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insidiously warping our spiritual vitality, our spiritual heartbeat.
And that's why I've come to this text in Zephaniah. Because it helps us to focus on a number of the features of the situation that we have to be alert to.
But what we have here, firstly, in the text, is the complacency of the spiritually stagnant. The complacency of the spiritually stagnant.
[6:45] Zephaniah was speaking in an age when people were very satisfied with the way they were living. They couldn't see that there was anything very much wrong with the sort of lives they were leading.

and they were certain that God didn't really matter very much when it came to the ordinary living of everyday life.
It wasn't the same as the God is dead philosophy of our day. It was God is far off. He doesn't care. He doesn't count.
But the practical implications are much the same. Their attitude was we can live without God.
We can write God off. The Lord will do nothing. Either good or bad. The Lord will not do good. Neither will he do evil.
[7:47] He is irrelevant. That's no new problem. People in rebellion against God always prefer to live as if he could be sidelined as irrelevant.

It makes it easier to live. So the philosophy of our day is the philosophy of generations in the past tries to wish God away.
And they're no more successful than the little child when it gets a fright and shuts its eyes and screws them up tight and hopes fervently that whatever has given the fright will go away.
We're living amongst a people who've got their eyes screwed up tight spiritually trying to blot God out of their day-to-day living.
The Lord will not do good. Neither will he do evil. And what we have to watch is in case the same sort of thinking is beginning to affect us also.
[9:00] because that attitude is particularly prone to arise in periods of spiritual declension. When there's been a long time since there was an outpouring of the spirit of the Lord in a community it is very easy to begin to write God off.

Because when it's a long time since there's been a revival the power of God has not been generally known in the changed lives of many.
One of the most potent factors at work in a revival apart from the preaching of the word is seeing the change that the spirit of God makes on the person who's your next door neighbour on the person who's a member of your own family.
the impact of revival comes very largely through seeing God at work on every hand and being unable to deny that the one who was down in the gutter is now a changed person.
Oh I know there are still conversions but when they are few when they happen one here and one there the world can write them off as some piece of religious eccentricity.
[10:30] The witness to God's grace from the evident impact in changed lives is a tremendous force at a time of revival and when revival is a thing in the past that force is stifled and the corruption latent within fallen humanity is given the opportunity to spread unchecked.

That's how it was in Zephaniah's day. There hadn't been a revival in the land for over 70 years in the time of Hezekiah. Rather there'd been the disastrous intervening reign of Manasseh had gone on for 55 years.
Paganism was promoted by the state. True religion was persecuted. Jerusalem ran with the blood of the prophets. Moral standards had fallen right away.
People had been getting away with deceit and violence for so long they no longer thought anything about it. And what's more life continued as usual.
It wasn't a boom time Zephaniah's day but it wasn't a depression either. There was no evident sign of divine displeasure. That's why God describes these people as settled on their lees.
[11:59] They are complacent. They are stagnant. The lees were the dregs at the bottom of the wine jar. When you left good wine on the sediment for a time it became better its quality improved.

But if you left bad wine on its lees it became harsher and thicker. And these people had been left on their lees on the impurity of their sin.
And it had shown up just what they really were because left to themselves things had not become morally and spiritually better but much worse.

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Their sinful arrogance their selfishness had become very evident. And isn't that just the case with our own generation still?
Isn't it just the case we've been commemorating 50 years since the ending of the Second World War? It's been a long period.
[13:16] No evident spiritual life in our nation. And yet things have gone on. We've been left in our lees. There's been no major upheaval, no revolution.

And what's happened to our land? It's gone down and down frighteningly fast. The poor wine left in its lees has become sour and undrinkable.
The complacency of the spiritually stagnant leaves a land in spiritual bankruptcy.
But our text doesn't just speak of that. our text brings to our attention the other side of the matter. Because there is also the searching scrutiny of God.
How many generations have made this mistake? They've treated God's long-suffering as if it meant he was apathetic.
[14:30] He wasn't interested that he'd gone off. That's the policy of spiritual folly.

Though God delays his judgment, let there be no doubt about it. It shall surely come. And that's what's presented to us here under the searching scrutiny of God.
That his judgment will come at that time. At the time of God's appointing. Not when people expect it. Not when we demand it. That's what people so often say, well if there is a God, let him do this now. Let him prove himself now. Let him come when I say and when I want.
And God just smiles. He that in heaven sits just laughs. God will come but he'll come when he decides not when we demand.
[15:37] At that time in the day of the Lord at the time God decides. Day of the Lord is the term used in the Old Testament for the decisive intervention of God to vindicate his name.

The idea of the day of the Lord seems to come from the ancient practice in those lands of calling the day of a certain king the day when he was victorious over his enemies in battle.
The day of Sennacherib was the day when Sennacherib had won a famous victory. And so the day of the Lord speaks of that time when the Lord intervenes to subdue all those who've rebelled against him.
He's done so in the past. How often it is he's shown up human might and human wisdom for what they really are.
And each time he's done so it's been a precursor of of that final and consummating intervention with which God will bring the history of our world to an end.
[16:54] And just as the last day is fixed and certain fixed by God and known to him when he is chosen so too each intervention of God before that comes on his timetable and not on ours.

You see we're talking about God vindicating his name. We're talking about God showing who he really is. And what does that mean? It means that he's going to show himself to be the king of kings and the decision will be his decision and the time will be his time of deciding.
He is the king who must and does govern and so the day of his intervention in the affairs of earth is the day he decides and the day we don't expect.
He also says of that coming day that it will be a time of thorough divine scrutiny. I will search he says with candles.
or rather with lamps. They were probably shaped rather like the old cruisin but were made of pottery with a little nipped fount into which a wick was placed.
[18:27] What's God saying when he says I will search with lamps? He says I am going to expose the futility of human self deception.

You think you can escape my scrutiny? It might be a picture of a watchman in a city of old doing his rounds in the darkness of the night.
He sees a sudden movement. He takes his lamp and goes to see what is in the dark alley way. Nothing will go uninvestigated. Every movement, every sound will be followed up because the watchman is going to be true to the charge that he has.
But the picture needn't be one of night time. Palestinian houses had very small openings, if any opening at all, for windows. They were trying to keep cool.
It was a good way of keeping much of the heat of the sun out of the building to have thick walls but that meant that the typical house was very dark inside.

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[19:40] That's why when the woman in Luke chapter 15 had dropped the coin off her necklace when she was doing the housework, had to light a candle, had to light a lamp to search her house.

It was because the corners of the house, much of the house was so dark she could easily miss something, even in daytime, if you can't have light.
I will search with lamps. God's not just going to give a casual once over. He's not just going to give a quick look. He's searching with lamps, not one but many, to indicate the fullness and the thoroughness of his scrutiny.
There will be no chance of the lamp of God's scrutiny being blown out by the puffing of human self importance. There will be no chance of escaping the light shed when God comes to scrutinize.
All things are naked and open unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do. And notice also the purpose of God's scrutiny.
[20:55] It's not some idle scrutiny. He's not searching just to see what's there as if it were a scientific investigation. It's not mere curiosity as if he were just a tourist wanting to find out all about Jerusalem.

I will search he says and punish. This is a judicial investigation to find evidence. Nothing will be overlooked.
the full consequences will follow. The opulent and the indifferent of Zephaniah's day in the day of the Lord's wrath. And there is a more awesome and complete fulfillment still to come.
Some years on Jerusalem was taken and destroyed. But we wait the day when the Lord gives his final scrutiny.
It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. And that's precisely the point. He is the living God.
[22:09] His majesty, his government, his glory. They're not imaginary splendors. They're not optional extras in the reality of God.

For what God is, is not determined by what we think he should be. He is the ultimate personal creator.
The one who creates and then doesn't stand apart from his creation. The one who preserves and governs all his creatures and all their actions.
And it's a policy of sheer futility, a policy of utter and ultimate woe to suppose otherwise. That's why the advice is given.
Seek righteousness, seek meekness. It may be ye shall be hid in the day of the Lord's anger. You will not be hidden by the policies of human cleverness.
[23:09] You're being called on rather to come and bow before him now in repentance. Being called upon to come now and be given that righteousness, that right standing and acceptance which will alone allow us access into the presence of the king.

So we have here in this passage warning of the of scrutiny that God will give.
But there's something more I must mention and that is the failure of the compromised church because the most startling thing about this passage is not the folly of man.
It's not even the thoroughness of God searching. It is where God is searching. I will search Jerusalem.
Not Gaza or Ashkelon or one of the other cities of the Philistines. Not Moab or Ammon or Ethiopia or Nineveh or Egypt or one of the pagan nations.
[24:30] I will search Jerusalem. And that's not just because Jerusalem was the political capital of the remaining southern kingdom of Judah.

It's because Jerusalem was the chosen city. The privileged city. The city with the temple. The symbol of God's presence with his people.
The city that was the heart and nerve centre of the church on earth. I will search Jerusalem is judgment beginning at the house of God and those to whom much has been given finding out that from them much will be demanded.
And they couldn't stand that scrutiny because they were compromised. Look at Jerusalem and what did you find? You found the remnant of Baal there.
You found there the black garbed pagan priests along with the priests who wore the white linen appointed for Israel's priests but they were none better for that because their hearts were alienated from God.

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[25:47] Later on in the prophecy in chapter 3 the prophet says her priests have polluted the sanctuary they have done violence to the law. It wasn't just the religious officials that were off the rails the people as a whole had departed from the Lord look at the housetops look at the roofs of Jerusalem and what did you see you saw altars to the host of heaven listen to them speak they profess loyalty to the Lord God they swear by his name he is our God and yet the names of pagan gods are forever on their lips they were a compromise people who had turned back from the Lord who had not sought him or inquired for him and when the Lord went searching in Jerusalem that was what he was going to find but oh it's not just back then is it how careful we must be as to where we stand less thinking we're secure we've been surrounded by the smog of our day and generation and our thinking has been warped and our spiritual vitality is gone what folly what futility to live practically as if

God doesn't exist and yet that's what's happening in much of the professing church in our land today if God came and searched the modern equivalent of Jerusalem if God came and searched his professing church those who swore by the name of God we're his we're followers of his we're Christian what would God find what would be there oh just listen to the spokesman of the professing church as they're asked about the moral problems of our day and they come to answer not with the moral standard of scripture not with the word of God sharper than a two-edged sword to say that is wrong they come and they answer on the basis of the majority view of our society and then they wonder why no one listens they wonder why the church is so ineffective they wonder why our land is in the mess that it is

I don't think God would need lamps to see how violence is being done to his law in the professing church of today prophet Isaiah had a word that applies chapter five he says woe unto them that call evil good and good evil that put darkness for light and light for darkness that put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter how many there are who are prepared to call Christian practices that are an abomination condemned in the word of God and that is prevalent in the larger denominations of the Christian church in our land and let's not look askance at them as if the problem is theirs alone let us mourn over what that attitude does for the impact of the whole testimony for Christ in our land and let us not think that we are immune when evil is unchecked it spreads far and wide let us who think we stand take heed lest we fall but if

God comes and searches Jerusalem with candles it won't just be the larger denominations that he'll be looking at he'll be looking at the smaller ones too and what will he find there because the problem at the opposite end of the spiritual spectrum arises in the smaller denominations if in the larger all-inclusive denominations the problem is that of license the problem of that of abandoning the law of God of taking the standards of our day and making them the standards that are proclaimed from the pulpit in the smaller denominations problem is the spirit of legalism the one do away with the standards of Christ the other have the more insidious problem of standing for the standards of Christ but doing so without the spirit of Christ and destroying the very thing they stand for we have to be on our guard even when we uphold the moral standards of scripture that we do so with love because if we do so with lovelessness we will kill the very thing that we espouse let us ask ourselves what will the Lord find if he searches us with candles will it be a spirit of censorious or will he find a spirit of genuine concern and for the welfare of another if he searches us with candles oh will he find the corrosive influence of envy there's nothing so tears apart the oneness that should exist in the body of

Christ than envy envy of another's gift envy of another's property envy of another's health of another's occupation of another's success Paul wasn't talking idly when he said let us not be desirous of vainglory provoking one another envying one another how much harm has been wrought for the cause of the cause of Christ through ministerial envy how many a Kirk session has been rendered ineffective by one elder out to get the rank out to get the importance over another how many a congregation has been rendered ineffective because each was looking to make sure that they were getting their right respect in the pecking order and they all forgot about the commission that Christ had given his church oh it's easy to see the faults of others but we've been called on to do a spiritual check up on ourselves we're being called to examine ourselves and see where it is that we are and where it is that we're living before

[33:05] God and isn't it so often the case isn't it so tragically often the case that though we know what is right we are being deflected from carrying it through and God says I will search I'll search Jerusalem and I'll do it thoroughly what is it that God will find when he searches us individually as a

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congregation as a denomination will he find those who are seeking to come ever closer to the likeness of the savior or those who have been deflected from the task by the pressure of this world by the allure of this world's rewards by the insidious influences of Satan by the corruption of our own hearts we cannot go away indifferent we dare not go away saying it's got nothing for me

God is coming and he is going to search now is the time when we have to look when we have to take stock when we have to see where we are and having identified that which is abhorrent to our God to turn from it in repentance let us seek his help in prayer Lord thou dost know how easy it is for us to hide from ourselves how easy it is for us to have an image of ourselves that doesn't correspond to reality we ask that at this time thou wouldst give to us the insight into our own condition the insight into our own responses and into our own acting and into our own motivation that would enable us to see something of what we are and to put us in the dust before thee oh Lord our God we pray that thou wouldst not let us be deceived by ourselves that thou wouldst not let us remain with a view of ourselves that is at variance with the truth we pray that thou wouldst give to us a vision an understanding of what we are but oh Lord we ask also that thou wouldst not leave us there for if all that thou dost give us is a vision of what we are we are crushed under it give us also we pray thee this day and coming days a vision of the sufficiency of Jesus thy son of his arm outstretched to help of his ability to take us from what we are and to render us acceptable in thy presence cast us down oh Lord that thou mightest raise us up teach us who we are and who he is that we might be found coming before thee clothed in his righteousness rendered acceptable by his completed work and rejoicing in all that he is make us ready for the day of his coming that it might be a day when we shall see our king in his glory and be found rejoicing with him hear us we pray and receive us in thy mercy in jesus name amen

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