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Divine Marching Orders, Part 2

Zephaniah 2:1-3, "Gather yourselves together, yes, gather together, O undesirable nation, Before the decree is issued, Or the day passes like chaff, Before the LORD's fierce anger comes upon you, Before the day of the LORD's anger comes upon you! Seek the LORD, all you meek of the earth, Who have upheld His justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility. It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the LORD's anger."

It seems like that every year people in Miami have the privilege of preparing for a hurricane.

Early in the morning one begins attaching plywood to the windows. At first it seems like a welcomed break from the monotony. But when early morning stretches into afternoon and then dinner and then bed time, one has hung enough plywood to serve a lifetime!

But that isn't the only preparation that goes on for a hurricane. Most folks stock their pantries in preparation for what they believe to be a reasonable amount of time without the ability to resupply. There is the water, batteries, canned foods, propane, chlorine bleach, first aid supplies, battery powered radios, generators, gasoline and other supplies.

Now multiply these preparations by 2.29 million residences preparing for the worst, you know that a travesty is upon you. The irony, however, is that all this work is often done for a storm that might not even hit!

Amazingly the "storm" that was coming to the people of God in Zephaniah's day wasn't simply a possibility; it was a certainty! Truly, the Day of the Lord was upon Israel and the entire nation would be wiped out and destroyed. Accordingly, God sent His prophets to warn the nation to turn from its rebellion.

We've seen the message God sent to the rebellious amongst His people, whom He called "the wicked." And there is the message written to the genuine servant of Christ. And what were they to do? They were not guilty of the sin for which God's wrath was coming. So would the Lord deliver them? Would God remove them to a safe place until the judgment passed?

The answer was that God would not, nor did He remove them from the land. Rather, they would suffer along with the ungodly and wicked of the land! Yet, God did not leave them. Not only did He go with them, BUT He sent them Zephaniah who instructed the genuine servant of Christ as to what they must do in anticipation of this day. Zephaniah exhorted them with a very specific, thrice repeated calling, "Seek!"

Zephaniah 2:3, "...seek the Lord... seek righteousness, seek humility..."

This word "seek" is **בָּקַשׁ** (*bāqāš*) denotes an earnest, life-encompassing pursuit. For example, it is used in Deuteronomy and Jeremiah.

Deuteronomy 4:29, "But from there you will seek the Lord your God, and you will find *Him* if you search for Him with all your heart and all your soul."

Jeremiah 29:13, "And you will seek Me and find *Me*, when you search for Me with all your heart."

This "seeking" includes three characteristics:

- It is Purposed (it is something you set your focus and attention on),

- Systematic (something you work at in part unto the whole), and
- All-Encompassing (a core value- it is a large part of what you are about).

In other words, it should be obvious that responding to this calling would radically alter the focus, goals, and passions of the one “seeking.”

This is the calling that rests upon the child of God in anticipation of any trial, difficulty, or disaster; we need to be “seekers”! Specifically God’s people were to seek a person, “Seek the Lord!” Notice secondly they also were to seek a path.

Zephaniah 3:2, “Seek the Lord, all you humble of the earth who have carried out His ordinances; seek righteousness...”

This is a broad enough expression as to allow for a couple of interpretations. It could reference a call to seek salvation. The Apostle Paul gave this description of the false Jews of his day:

Roman 10:2-4, “For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God’s righteousness [that is, God’s right-standing before the Law which He gives/imputes to the sinner], and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. [To exclude any possibility of confusion, Paul then specifies what he means here. Notice v. 4...] For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.”

If to seek a path is used in this way in Zephaniah, to “seek righteousness” could be an exhortation for a person to seek the salvation which God gives in Christ. However, this begs the question: Is that how Zephaniah intended us to take his exhortation? No.

Recall that Zephaniah is directing his exhortation to, “...all you humble of the earth who have carried out His ordinances...”- which is a description of people who already were saved! In fact, these very ones most likely were “the people of the land” who had acquired key positions in the government which enabled them to influence both king and Nation for the Lord! Recall, it was “the people of the land” who protected Josiah and ensured that he was raised to love the Lord! (Robertson, 1990 , p. 294) Therefore it would seem out of place for Zephaniah to exhort this group to seek salvation in Christ, which leads us to another interpretation: It could reference a call to seek right living.

Recall Christ’s exhortation to His disciples in His *Sermon on the Mount*:

Matthew 6:33, “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you.”

God’s “righteousness” is NOT a reference to His salvation (Christ is speaking to His disciples here), BUT to a life of following after the Lord as He directs in His word. Notice, this was a sacrifice which David exhorted the godly to give.

Psalm 4:5, "Offer the sacrifices of righteousness, and trust in the Lord."

From this perspective, to "seek righteousness" would be an exhortation for a genuine servant of Christ to endeavor to continue to embody the calling and the commands that God has placed on their life. And that is exactly how we understand Zephaniah's second exhortation. To the remnant amongst God's people as they faced Armageddon, God's call was NOT for them to do great things, BUT simply to be faithful doing the small things; specifically following after Christ as He leads and directs in His word! Recall, this was their inheritance. Recall the exhortation of Moses as God's people entered into the Land of Promise:

Deuteronomy 29:29, "The secret things [concerning the future] belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed [God's word] belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law."

See, God's word truly is a light which God gave to direct our feet when it comes to our service in His Kingdom:

Psalm 119:105-106, "Thy word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path. [Recall when this was written there were no street lights to guide the way. Accordingly on moonless nights, it would have been treacherous to walk outside... unless you attached to your person a light which illumined your path- which is what is referenced here! That is what God's word was to the Psalmist: (1) a light that directed his steps, (2) the answer to the question, "Now that I love the Lord, what should I do?" In light of this, the Psalmist made a commitment...] I have sworn, and I will confirm it, that I will keep Thy righteous ordinances."

Sadly today many in Christianity view the word of God (which is synonymous with the Law of God) as a burden! Though they have been saved and no longer are condemned by the Law, nevertheless they have been taught to view the Law/Word as a bad thing. What a contrast to how the Apostle John viewed it.

1 John 5:3, "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome."

As a child of God, isn't it our greatest desire to serve the Lord? To love Him? Honor Him? Bring glory to His name? Yet, how do we do this? Well, how do you do it in any relationship where you want to honor another person? You find out what they like/desire and you do it! So it is with God. He has given us a record of what Kingdom Living is all about. This [God's word] is how God wants us to live! This [God's word] fleshes out what it means to love the Lord!

John 14:15, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments."

So to the remnant amongst the people of God, those who loved the Lord and longed to serve

Him, what ought we to do as we face the trials and difficulties of life? Seek righteousness; seek to follow God according to His word! AGAIN, do NOT seek to do great things! RATHER, seek to be faithful in the small things unto the upholding of the word of God!

This is an important exhortation! For so many Christians today, the pressure exists to do great things for God. Most will never do attain to this. As such, there inevitably will be a disappointment and discouragement when it is realized that their life has been lived in the humdrum. That nothing great will ever be done by them. This is both very sad and unnecessary! Again, God has not called us to do great things, but to be faithful doing the small!

We are also called to seek a position.

Zephaniah 2:3, “Seek the Lord, all you humble of the earth who have carried out His ordinances; seek righteousness, seek humility...”

The word choice is striking. The primary word we would use in reference to “humility” in the Bible is שָׁפֵל (šāpēl)- from which we get the term for “Shephelah” in the Bible. It speaks of “being low” and so is used figuratively in the sense of “abasement” and “humbling.” That is NOT the word used here. The word used here is אָנָוָה (‘ānāwâ) which speaks of a forced humiliation as in being conquered (cf. Exodus 1:11-12; Numbers 24:24) or being raped (Genesis 34:2)! The emphasis is on the degradation and so the humiliation that is experienced on the part of the one humbled. In this context notice that the focus of this term is NOT necessarily on external, humbling conditions (like becoming impoverished). RATHER, the focus is on the inner attitude of brokenness and humility (of being shamed and humiliated). And so, for example, it describes the discomfort Sarah inflicted upon Hagar (Genesis 16:6). Hagar wasn’t debased physically (at least not at first), just emotionally! That is the focus of this term. It also describes what the lawless do to the defenseless (Exodus 22:22). The focus is on the torment that is inflicted upon the weak. It is also shown in the pain inflicted on Joseph’s ankles by the chains (Psalm 105:18).

This no doubt is why this is the term that Zephaniah uses. See whether we like it or not God uses affliction to prompt brokenness and repentance of heart.

James 1:2-4, “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have *its* perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

That no doubt is why the godly thank the Lord for affliction in the Bible (cf. Psalm 88:7; 90:15; 119:75; Lamentations 3:33). See as children of God we want NOT pain and suffering, BUT the character qualities that pain and suffering can produce when it comes to being dead to the world, our fleshly lusts, sin AND being alive to Christ, His Kingdom, and so His service. That is what is behind this word! To “seek humility” therefore is NOT to seek pain or suffering, BUT the spiritual maturation typically brought on by the pain, sufferings, and difficulties of life. That

is why we read such passages as these:

Romans 5:3-5, “And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.”

Hebrews 12:11, “All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.”

Now if we “seek humility” (the spiritual qualities of a broken and contrite heart), that will have a definite impact upon how we live and what we expect or want from the Lord in this life. This is important! Usually when the righteous live through difficult days (as the godly were doing and going to do in Zephaniah’s day), the inclination is to be taken out of the trial or in some way removed from its effects. In contrast to this desire, Zephaniah exhorted the righteous in our passage to set as their greatest desire the spiritual benefits which come from suffering: “humility,” “trust,” “dependence,” and “suspicion of self.” This is where our focus must be prior to the trial or it won’t be our focus in the trial!

In light of this we note that, just as with “seeking the Lord”, “Seeking Humility” will impact how we live and what we expect from this life. For example, to “seek humility” is to expect a hard go of it in this life.

1 Peter 4:1-2, “Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin [if you get seriously burned or hurt by a sin, it is normal to forsake that sin, right? That is what Peter is talking about here!], so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.”

Family of God, to “seek humility” is to identify with Christ in His sufferings. It is to understand that, as Christ our King came to suffer in the flesh, *such a calling cannot be and is not beneath us*. Therefore, far from seeking an easy life, what we want is a humble life of devotion and service to Christ. If that means trial and difficulty, so be it! All we want is to do the will of God!

Secondly, to seek humility is to be wise when it comes to our weaknesses.

Hebrews 12:12-13, “Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that *the limb* which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.”

In Christ it is easy to portray a life that is put together and perfect. Typically accompanying this is the belief that we in ourselves have the ability to do or be what we want. Accordingly, pride adheres to us, deludes us, and so fouls our most sincere desires. This passage warns against this pride. It calls us to recognize that (1) we are weak, and (2) we do not have the ability in

ourselves to endure. Rather, we must attend to our weakness in Christ which will mean these three things:

- Assessing our spiritual maturity and those areas where we are weak (Assess).
- Proactively endeavoring to address these weakness in the Spirit as He grows and strengthens us by His word (Address).
- Removing ourselves not simply from temptations, but any and all terrain which increases the risk of re-injury and so relapsing into sin (Remove)!

This is summarized with these words, “Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet...”

Thirdly, to seek humility is to be wise when it comes to our self-assessment.

Romans 12:3, “For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of [lit., ‘beyond’ or ‘above’] himself than he ought to think...”

Paul’s exhortation is the same as what he wrote in Galatians:

Galatians 6:3, “For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.”

Truly, on account of a spiritual gift or calling (which is the substance of Romans 12), we must not allow ourselves to think that we have importance and/or superiority in the kingdom of God. Rather, we must think soberly:

Romans 12:3, “...think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.”

The idea behind “sound judgment” here is “sober-mindedness.” It is to think accurately about ourselves. Yet to do this we must have a reference against which to judge. Now in our sinfulness, that “reference” typically comes from our fellow worms! And so we can be found throughout our lives comparing ourselves to others. This obviously is looking in the wrong direction, and the passage before us bears this out, with this final assessment, “...as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.” The word for “measure” comes from *metron* from which we get the word “metric.” Thus, it does not refer to a measurement, BUT a measuring instrument (like a scale). The word for “faith” is used primarily throughout Paul’s writings in reference to the act of belief, trust, or confidence in God. By metonymy, it stands for the salvation we receive from God on account of Christ. Placed together, “a measure of faith” references the standard of faith, the scale of faith, or more clearly, the standard of salvation all have in Christ.

Thus, when it comes to being “sober minded” or having “sound judgment” when it references how or what we think about ourselves, the standard against which we must evaluate ourselves

is NOT derived from man, BUT the standard of faith/salvation. These are the facts that we should measure against:

- In Christ I am justified- without sin.
- Through the cross I am forgiven.
- By God's grace I am His child.

Cranfield put it this way:

When Christians measure themselves by themselves or their neighbors, they... are sure to have too high (or else too low) an opinion of themselves; but when they measure themselves by the standard which God has given them in their faith, they then- and only then- achieve a sober and true estimate of themselves as... sinners revealed in their true colors by the judgment of the Cross and also the objects of God's undeserved and triumphant mercy in Jesus Christ (Cranfield, 2000, p. Vol 2. 616)

To "seek humility" therefore is to seek an accurate answer to the question, "What is God's assessment of me?" It doesn't matter what man may think. What matters is our standing before God. If God approves of us in Christ, then circumstances be cursed, I am the beloved of God! And I am called to live my life in light of this assessment.

So Christian, how do you prepare for or endure the trials of this life?

- Seek the Lord.
- Seek righteous living.
- Seek the heart and mind of humility.

Now the effect of this passage will be minimal if we simply listen to this sermon passively- which is a grave temptation!

Ezekiel 33:32, "And behold, you are to them like a sensual song by one who has a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument; for they hear your words, but they do not practice them."

This occurred during the exile. Ezekiel obviously was a powerful preacher to whom many of the Jews in the land of Babylon flocked to hear. Evidently Ezekiel possessed that rare combination of passion, skill, and talent that made his sermons taste like honey! As such, God's people loved listening to him! The power... the inspiration... the exhilaration was unmatched! Yet, it was all for naught! For "...they heard his words, but they did not practice them." Did you get that? It is NOT enough to be moved by a passage of Scripture. RATHER what God wants and what we must be after is embodying the passage! That is counter-intuitive to a people used to being entertained. Yet that must be our passion and goal for every sermon. The example that Ezra set must be our own:

Ezra 7:10, “For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to practice *it*, and to teach *His* statutes and ordinances in Israel.”

What sticks out here is that Ezra “set his heart” on a particular approach toward God’s word (ironically it is what is embodied by the word “seek” in our text). Ezra cultivated a heart and so a life which did three things with God’s word: (1) He was all about studying it. (2) He was all about submitting to it. (3) He was all about imparting it to others. This must be our approach to this and every sermon we hear. For most of us today, it is “fair weather.” May God give us the grace to set our hearts on “mending our sails” and so cultivating a life which “seeks the Lord... righteousness... and humility!”

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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About the Preacher

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