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Divine Marching Orders, Part 4

Zephaniah 2:8-15, "I have heard the reproach of Moab, And the insults of the people of Ammon, With which they have reproached My people, And made arrogant threats against their borders. Therefore, as I live," Says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, "Surely Moab shall be like Sodom, And the people of Ammon like Gomorrah— Overrun with weeds and saltpits, And a perpetual desolation. The residue of My people shall plunder them, And the remnant of My people shall possess them."

This they shall have for their pride, Because they have reproached and made arrogant

threats Against the people of the LORD of hosts. The LORD will be awesome to them, For He will reduce to nothing all the gods of the earth; People shall worship Him, Each one from his place, Indeed all the shores of the nations.

“You Ethiopians also, You shall be slain by My sword.”

And He will stretch out His hand against the north, Destroy Assyria, And make Nineveh a desolation, As dry as the wilderness. The herds shall lie down in her midst, Every beast of the nation. Both the pelican and the bittern Shall lodge on the capitals of her pillars; Their voice shall sing in the windows; Desolation shall be at the threshold; For He will lay bare the cedar work. This is the rejoicing city That dwelt securely, That said in her heart, “I am it, and there is none besides me.” How has she become a desolation, A place for beasts to lie down! Everyone who passes by her Shall hiss and shake his fist.

David's Bent in Life

David was not a novice when it came to pain and suffering. Though he enjoyed many victories of the Lord, nevertheless he spent long days and nights struggling at the hands of God's and his enemies. That is why the Psalter is such an incredible treasure (Spurgeon rightly named it, *“The Treasury of David”*¹)! It contains the writings of David as he struggled at the hands of many a foe- including his own sinful heart! And yet by the grace of God, David managed to “finish the course and so keep the faith!” In other words, all the trial and difficulty that he experienced did NOT draw him from the Lord! Throughout his trials and sufferings, he remained a loyal servant of Christ!

Now how is that? How could David suffer so much and yet remain in the fight so well? Was it just that David was a morally superior being... a cut above? NO! It is because of what David had when he was confronted by trial and difficulty.

Psalm 9:9-10, “The Lord also will be a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble, and those who know Thy name will put their trust in Thee; for Thou, O Lord, hast not forsaken those who seek Thee.”

That which enabled David to “fight the good fight of faith” throughout his life was that he knew and therefore trusted the name of His God! He understood God's character! He had insight into what God was doing and why He was doing it! In fact, I would be willing to say that if you could talk to any father or mother of the faith, the one universal characteristic that they will possess is an understanding of and a trust in the Lord their God! That was David's call in Psalm 9! In fact people who walk away from the Lord in trial and difficulty don't know the Lord. They may know of Him, but they don't know His glorious character! Thomas Watson wrote this:

True faith will trust God's heart where it cannot trace his hand.

In contrast, listen to the words that David wrote when he was on the run with his life in danger

at every turn:

Psalm 34:8-9, "O taste and see that the Lord is good; how blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him! O fear the Lord, you His saints; for to those who fear Him, there is no want."

Even though they may not have physical resources or emotional security (as David didn't when he wrote this), for the man who reverences God, who takes delight in God's name/character, "...there is no want!" They are spiritually satisfied, even in the darkest times of life!

We see this in Zephaniah. This book was written around 622 BC, at what would prove to be a temporary lull in the trials and persecutions that faced the nation of Judah. In fact, it wouldn't be but thirteen more years and Judah would face the beginning of their end! As such, Zephaniah came to the Temple Mount and proclaimed a dire warning to the people of God: Judgment was coming! In fact, Zephaniah, verse for verse, is the darkest of the prophets when it comes to the message of judgment. O. Palmer Robertson wrote of this book:

One of the most awesome descriptions of the wrath of God in judgment found anywhere in Scripture appears in the opening verses of Zephaniah. The totality of the cosmos shall be consumed in his burning anger. The very order of creation shall be overturned. (Robertson, 1990 , p. 334)

Truly, almost the entire prophecy of Zephaniah is a pronouncement of judgment! In fact, Zephaniah 2:3-3:8 comes on the heels of an excursus on judgment which Zephaniah entered into following his personal message to the genuine child of God. Zephaniah waxes eloquently about the coming Day of the Lord!

Yet again you must see that God would not and did not abandon His people. Though they were going to go through the horrible days predicted by Zephaniah, nevertheless the Lord gave them instruction and encouragements that they might, in the words of David, "...fear Him and so know no want" (Psalm 34:9)!

In Zephaniah 2:3, God called the faithful to "seek!" To this he adds the message of another important calling, "wait!"

Wait

Zephaniah 3:8, "'Therefore, wait for Me,' declares the Lord..."

This is an important calling for each servant of Christ; yet it is not a simple one. It involves three core elements.

1. A trust/reliance upon the Lord, "...wait for Me..."
2. Over a space of time- which usually is a very long time.
3. For a specific act, event, or outcome promised by the Lord.

As such, the spiritual calling of “waiting on the Lord” encompasses the entirety of a person’s being! It is NOT something they do on occasion, BUT that which constitutes the focus and so characteristic of their life. Ironically, God fashioned man for this spiritual activity. Accordingly every image bearer is “waiting” for something. Some are waiting for retirement. Others are waiting to get married. Still others are waiting for their “ship” to come in.

We need only to look at how an individual lives or talks and we will be able to discern that for which they are waiting! The Christian is called to be intentional when it comes for that which they wait.

Zephaniah 3:8, “‘Therefore, wait for Me,’ declares the Lord, ‘For the day when I rise up to the prey...’”

This is shocking! Zephaniah is NOT calling upon God’s people to wait on the Lord for the day of victory! RATHER, he is calling upon God’s people to wait on the Lord for the final Day of Judgment!² The text continues:

Zephaniah 3:8, “...Indeed, My decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out on them My indignation, all My burning anger; for all the earth will be devoured by the fire of My zeal.”

Truly, the nation of Judah was soon going to be overturned (Zephaniah 3:1-7) and with it the Philistine nations (Zephaniah 2:4-7), Moab and Ammon (Zephaniah 2:8-11), Egypt (Zephaniah 2:12), and Syria and all the northern kingdoms (Zephaniah 2:13-15). But all of this was but a foretaste of a greater more horrible day! According to Zephaniah 3:8, awaiting this earth is a day in which the world will be shaken and overturned.

1 Peter 3:10, “...the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.”

According to the exhortation given in Zephaniah it is our calling as Christians to cultivate a life which does more than anticipate this day; we are called to bank on it, to live in light of it, to “wait for the Lord for THAT day!”

As a church we’ve either lost this or we never had it! Look around! The church today is living for all sorts of things:

- For the erection of a building.
- For a mission trip.
- For a bump in church attendance.
- For a more exciting service of worship.
- For the United States to become more Christian.

- For the election of the “right” congressman, senator, or president.

Now while these things may not be bad in themselves, if they become our hope and that for which we live, they are awful! God would have every Christian live for the Second Coming of the Lord, the Day of Judgment!

Ephesians 4:4, “*There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling.*”

Do you understand? In Christ, there is but “one hope” for us all! It is something that non-Christians cannot and do not have. Speaking of that time when the Ephesians weren’t saved, Paul said this:

Ephesians 2:12, “*Remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.*”-

Ah, but when God delivers a person from their sin, He instructs them as to what NOW must be their hope and so that for which they live!

Titus 2:11-13, “*For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus.*”

This, brothers and sisters, is that for which we must live, work, and die on this earth!

God saved us for an existence and a world to come in which His Kingdom has vanquished the kingdoms of this world!

Revelation 11:15, “*And the seventh angel sounded; and there arose loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdom of the world has become *the kingdom* of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever.’*”

It is for this we must live! And so, to a people facing the extermination of their way of living, Zephaniah exhorted the faithful amongst the people of God NOT simply to endure the coming day, BUT to transform their thinking/living so that their whole life is lived in anticipation of that day, the Day of Consummation! This must be how we live!

Now, to encourage the genuine servant of Christ that they might keep their hope in God’s judgment, Zephaniah goes into a relatively lengthy discourse as to what God ultimately has in mind when it comes to the *temporal* difficulties of this life! Notice it is threefold.

The Encouragement

Zephaniah 3:9, “For then I will give to the peoples purified lips, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord³, to serve Him shoulder to shoulder [the idea here is a worship without division- $\text{שְׂכֵם} \text{הָאֲדָמָה}$ (*š^ekem ʿeḥād*)]. From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia My worshipers, My dispersed ones, will bring My offerings.”

Do you understand what God is doing in this life? The sinner encounters a difficult trial and asks of God, “Why? Why the hardship? Why the difficulty? What are you doing? Why” in the words of Jonah, “did you ruin my precious vine?” God’s answer is so that we might come to a saving knowledge of Christ!

This is what God is doing in this world today! Truly, what Zephaniah wrote is something to live for; that glorious day when we “serve/worship the Lord shoulder to shoulder” with all peoples! Wow! Notice some of the particulars of this verse:

- Purified lips: contrasts the impure lips and so the confusion of the languages of the nations that occurred at Babel (cf. Genesis 11:1, 6–7, 9). One of the elements of God’s ultimate purpose for this world is the re-uniting of all peoples unto a holy nation who will worship the Lord with one heart, mind, and voice! This won’t happen until the consummation of all things, and so it is for this we live, long, and hope!
- Beyond the river of Ethiopia: has reference to a salvation which encompasses all peoples (at the time, “Cush/Ethiopia” was the southern extremity of the known world). In other words, God’s plan encompasses all mankind, not just the Jews! And what is the end of this salvation?
- My worshipers [a reference to Gentile converts], My dispersed ones [a reference to Jews in the diaspora], will bring My offerings⁴: Do you see it? God’s plan is NOT about saving people from a fiery existence because He can’t bear the thought of their suffering. RATHER, it revolves around the gathering of a people who will worship the Lord with one heart and mind! This is what God will bring about when he unites Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female on that glorious day!

Christian, when you see life through this lens AND when this becomes your greatest passion (that which is encompassed by the call to “wait on the Lord”), your whole world will be turned upside down! A tragedy will NOT be a trial or natural disaster or even the waning of a nation, BUT someone NOT giving due praise and glory to your loving King! And that which will be your glory, even in trial, will be if that trial brings about the obedience of faith! Listen once again to the words of David when he was in the crucible:

Psalm 9:13b-14, “...Thou... dost lift me up from the gates of death; that I may tell of all Thy praises, that in the gates of the daughter of Zion I may rejoice in Thy salvation.”

David’s greatest glory was NOT in the cessation of the trial which pressed heavy upon him at

the time, BUT the effect that the trial had when it came to the people of God. If it made them glory in Christ, David would be satisfied in his suffering! Clearly it was this for which he lived!

Family of God that is what God is doing on this earth! He is orchestrating His providence to bring about the salvation of His people! Now, what impact should the knowledge of this have on your life? It should move you to “wait for the Lord for the day when He rises up to the prey.”

The Intended End of All Trial is Restoration

Consider the following description:

Zephaniah 3:11-12, “In that day you [which is a feminine, plural in reference to “Jerusalem”- thus we are talking here about the corporate people of God, not individuals] will feel no shame because of all your deeds by which you have rebelled against Me [IOW, there is coming a day when all alienation will be gone!]; for then I will remove [the idea here is “roll back”] from your midst your proud, exulting ones, and you will never again be haughty on My holy mountain [the arrogant and proud heart... gone!]. But I will leave among you a humble and lowly people [that is all that will remain of God’s people- the brokenhearted, weak, and spiritually bankrupt], and they will take refuge in the name of the Lord.”

Family of God, what is God doing in this world today? Secondly, He is preparing you, me, US for a gathering of men and women who have been made perfect and whose greatest glory and delight is the “name”/character of the Lord! Now allow me to show you a most wonderful thing.

In Zephaniah 1:2-3 God describes the Last Judgment as a time when He reverses creation order:

Zephaniah 1:2-3, “‘I will completely remove all *things* from the face of the earth,’ declares the Lord. [the phrase “remove from the face of the earth” was used in Genesis 6:7 of the purpose and effects of the flood! Now notice the undoing of the creation order...] 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.”

The idea of God reversing Creation order in His judgment is a major theme of this book! That this language is utilized in 3:11-12 tells us that this “rolling back” is what is in mind here! The end of each and every trial and difficulty that occurs on this earth is a turning back of the clock/the rolling back of time! But the goal as seen here is not destruction for destruction’s sake, BUT for bringing His people back to that time when man enjoyed perfect communion with God in a world without sin! It is in light of this that we are called to “wait upon the Lord to judge this world!”

In our minds, we have as our goal in life success, pleasure, certain dreams and aspirations such

that when trial comes and these things are dashed, we get angry and complain against God. Yet receive the word of Zephaniah today. It is the intention of the Lord in all that He deigns on this earth to restore all things to Himself where the end is as the beginning and ALL MANKIND TAKE REFUGE IN THE NAME OF THE LORD! In the words of Larry L. Walker, "This passage goes beyond the promise of return to the promise of glorious restoration." (Frank E. Gaebelein, 1985, pp. Vol. 7, P 561) This is what God is doing on this earth!

What impact should the knowledge of this have on your life? It should move you to "wait for the Lord for the day when He rises up to the prey."

The Intended End of All Trial is our Ultimate Security

Zephaniah 3:13, "The remnant of Israel will do no wrong and tell no lies, nor will a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths; for they shall feed and lie down with no one to make them tremble."

It is the latter expression that gets the emphasis here! Consider with me a couple of important questions:

- Why did God remove the nation of Judah in 586 BC?
- Why did the Lord destroy the nation of Israel in 722 BC?
- Why is it that God removes people from His sight?
- Why ultimately did God drive Adam and Eve from His presence?

In answering this, let's approach it from the opposite direction, "*Who only is allowed in God's presence?*"

Psalm 24:3-5, "Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord? And who may stand in His holy place? [notice the parallels to our text] He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood, and has not sworn deceitfully. He shall receive a blessing from the Lord and righteousness from the God of his salvation."

In other words, he only who can enter and so stay in the presence of the Lord is the one who manifests the very characteristics for which God is moving all things.

Zephaniah 3:13a, "The remnant of Israel will do no wrong and tell no lies, nor will a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths..."

Thus when we read here that behind everything that God is doing in this life is the creation of a people who will possess NONE of the things for which man was banished from the presence of the Lord, there is in this a glorious statement of security! In fact, notice how the text ends:

Zephaniah 3:13b, "...for [a purpose clause explaining what God is after here] they shall feed

and lie down with no one to make them tremble.”

The idea is ultimate security! This is where God is bringing us in and through all things; when...

- Our wishes are crossed and the way is rough!
- Things don't turn out the way we would like!
- When in our lives we are met again and again with failure!

All of it is to bring us to Christ and so that place of Ultimate Security!

This is homeopathic medicine at its finest. The word “homeopathic” comes from two Greek words:

- “Homoios-” means “like.”
- “Pathos” is the Greek word for “suffer”- πάθος.

In its purest form, the idea behind “homeopathic medicine” is using an agent of suffering to avoid greater suffering. And so for example an inoculation is when a weakened form of an illness is given so that our bodies might develop a defense against a stronger form of the ailment. It is found when we subject our bodies to strain and hardship to make them stronger. We call this working out!

This is what God is doing in and through all things in this life! He gives us a weakened form of the Last Judgment, mini-days of the Lord, that we might avoid the Last Judgment altogether! This is the idea of “trembling” (v 13). Because of the “trembling” we have in this life, through Christ we eventually will be brought to a world where “...no one or thing will make us tremble again!”

With this final encouragement we are brought to the second calling of Zephaniah/God to a people who are about to suffer a baptism of fire! And what is the call? To wait on the Lord for this judgment! Truly, “...the bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower.”⁵ What is the “flower” that grows in the trials and difficulties of this life? Salvation, Restoration, and Eternal Security!

In light of this, how ought we to live? We must cultivate a heart and life which “waits upon the Lord for the day when He rises up to the prey!” And what does that mean? We must stop living for the things which perish!

Knowing that the good is the enemy of great, we must stop allowing ourselves to be consumed as a church by the many good things of this life; things that may be good things:

- The erection of a building.
- Mission trips.

- The United States to become more Christian.
- The election of the “right” congressman, senator, or president.

These things are not bad in themselves. But when they substitute or distract us from waiting on the Lord to judge this earth, they are distractions we must not allow in our lives! Truly, our refuge and hope must NOT be the labor of our hands, BUT the name and so the purpose of the Lord! Once again, heed the words of David:

Psalm 9:9-10, “The Lord also will be a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble, and those who know Thy name will put their trust in Thee; for Thou, O Lord, hast not forsaken those who seek Thee.”

Christian, having learned this morning from our text another facet of the “name of our Lord,” let us put our trust in God!

Bibliography

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End Notes:

¹ Think of the title. In many respects, David was a wealthy king. He enjoyed wealth in many forms- whether it be in the form of physical resources, national security, an effective army. And yet, his greatest treasure was not what he possessed physically, but what he had in his relationship with God. After all, he was a man after God's own heart!

² A fitting observation made by Masoretes noted that this is the only verse in the Old Testament that contains all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet (except for ם [ś]), including final forms. In the Hebrew way of "showing it" it is striking that Zephaniah's statement describing the consummation of all things utilizes the entire Hebrew alphabet!

³ This clearly refers back to the pre-Flood period (cf. Genesis 4:26).

⁴ This is in reference to "cereal offerings" (מִנְחָה [minḥâ]) which were peace offerings!

⁵ *Red Trinity Hymnal* #128, "God Moves in a Mysterious Way"

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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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