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Divine Marching Orders, Part 3

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."

1 John 5:4, "For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith."

1 John 5:4, raises a couple of questions. How does faith, the life of faith, overcome the world? In what way does faith gain victory in this life?

Zephaniah addresses these questions when he preaches to the remnant amongst God's wicked people and tells them to prepare for the holocaust that is to come upon them!

In the "fair weather" of 622 B.C., what was the genuine servant of God to do? Thus far we have seen that they were to seek- passionately and fervently (1) the Lord, (2) righteous living, and (3) humility. Living this way brings with it the possibility of blessing.

The Possibility of Blessing

Zephaniah 2:3, "Seek the Lord, all you humble of the earth who have carried out His ordinances; seek righteousness, seek humility. Perhaps you will be hidden in the day of the Lord's anger."

The word for "perhaps" is the adverb. The word is generally used in Scripture in times of personal or national crises to convey the heart's desire for better days, the cessation of violence, or the fulfillment of a longed for hope. And so, for example, it is used in Genesis 16 where Sarah expressed the hope that Hagar would produce a child for her. It is used in Numbers 22 when Balak hoped to curse Israel through Balaam. In Genesis 27:12 it speaks of Jacob when he feared that his father could possibly discover his deceit. Now built into these passages and this word is the recognition of a necessary condition as the precursor to the hoped-for blessing. For example it is found in Genesis 16:2:

Genesis 16:2a, "So Sarai said to Abram, 'Now behold, the Lord has prevented me from bearing *children*. Please go in to my maid; PERHAPS I shall obtain children through her.'"

It is clear that if Abraham did not go to Sarah's maid, there would be no child. His going in did NOT guarantee a child. But without it, there could be no child. You say, "That's obvious!" Yet that is the point behind this word! With this word we are talking about a necessary condition. It is something which if it takes place something else *could* occur. But if the condition is absent, that "something else" won't occur. It is used in Numbers 22:

Numbers 22:6a, Balak said to the prophet Balaam, "Now, therefore, please come, curse this people for me since they are too mighty for me; PERHAPS I may be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land..."

Once again notice that if Balaam cursed Israel, there is no guarantee that God's people would be hindered. But without Balaam's curse, in Balak's mind there could be no hope of defeating them. That is the idea behind the "perhaps."

We live in light of this word in our daily living and we don't even realize it. For example, when

we eat healthy and exercise: such living does not guarantee that we will lose weight and feel good. But if we don't eat healthy and exercise we won't lose weight and feel good. When we read the word of God, the word of God is not a talisman which guarantees growth in one's relationship with the Lord. But if we do NOT read the word we will NOT grow!

Accordingly, when Zephaniah used this word in relation to the possibility of avoiding a very difficult future on the part of the people of God, the implication is that in his mind godly living was a necessary condition to blessing; but it did not guarantee it! Yet without it, there was no basis for hope! So in preparation for that day it behooved the genuine servant of God to "seek" a Person, a Path, and a Position. If they did this, they very well might avoid pain and hardship. But if they did not, they most certainly would be destroyed with the rest of the sinful nation! What we are talking about here is the principle Paul gives in 1 Timothy.

1 Timothy 4:7b-8, "On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and *also* for the *life* to come."

What is the "promise" that godliness holds "for this present life"? What will godly living procure as it relates to this life? Consider 1 John 5:

1 John 5:4b: "...this is the victory that has overcome the world- our faith."

Again, in what way does faith in Christ enable us to overcome the world? What is the victory that accompanies faith? What was behind Zephaniah's frail hope, "*Perhaps* you will be hidden in the day of the Lord's anger" (Zephaniah 2:3)?

A Testimony of Temporal Blessing Secured by Godliness (Robertson, 1990 , pp. 1-17)

The following section is based on O. Palmer Robertson's treatment of Nahum, Zephaniah and Habakkuk. In this regard, O. Palmer Robertson wrote, "It is remarkable to see how faith triumphs (or how non-faith fails to triumph) in a scene involving all the intrigue of international politics. Particularly when the struggle climaxes as it does in the 7th century BC, the faith of the kings of Judah in the covenant promises of God determines the course of individuals and nations more than all the resources of the mightiest of monarchs in their hours of greatest strength." Consider with me what no doubt inspired the hope of Zephaniah when he wrote, "Perhaps..."

The Triumphs of Faith in the Days of Hezekiah

In what was the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah's regency, the Assyrian king, Sennacherib, attacked Judah.

2 Kings 18:17, "Then the king of Assyria sent Tartan and Rab-saris and Rabshakeh from Lachish to King Hezekiah with a large army to Jerusalem. So they went up and came to

Jerusalem. And when they went up, they came and stood by the conduit of the upper pool, which is on the highway of the fuller's field."

Here we read of Rab-saris and Rabshakeh who were commanders in Sennacherib's military ("rab" means head or chief and so could be translated as, "General Saris" or "General Shakeh"). They approached the city of Jerusalem at which time they were greeted by two Jewish officials, Eliakim and Shebna, who spoke on behalf of Hezekiah.

Rabshakeh began with what to Judah would have seemed like the typical "saber rattling" in which was proclaimed the superiority of Assyria over Judah and their God. However, what came out of his mouth was shocking and quite disheartening for the people of God.

2 Kings 18:25, "Have I now come up without the Lord's approval against this place to destroy it? The Lord said to me, 'Go up against this land and destroy it.'"

This hit the people hard. Could the Lord really be with the king of Assyria and so be against Judah? Would Judah be destroyed just as Israel had been? This struck a severe blow against the faith of the people of God living at the time!

Quite understandably, Eliakim and Shebna called out to Rabshakeh and told him that there was no need for him to speak in Hebrew, for they could understand Aramaic. Rabshakeh ignored their request and began shouting even louder in Hebrew.

2 Kings 18:29-30, "Thus says the king, 'Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you from my hand; nor let Hezekiah make you trust in the Lord, saying, "The Lord will surely deliver us, and this city shall not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.'"

With this, Rabshakeh made an offer which would have been very difficult to refuse. He essentially said to the people of Judah, "If you rebel against Hezekiah and come out of Judah, we will take you to a good land flowing with milk and honey. There you will live an easy life!" (cf. 2 Kings 18:31-32) But Rabshakeh went too far at this point, for he blasphemed the name of the Lord which would have been like cold water in the face of God's people.

2 Kings 18:32b-33, "...But do not listen to Hezekiah, when he misleads you, saying, 'The Lord will deliver us.' Has any one of the gods of the nations delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria?"

In essence Rabshakeh said, "*Your God is weak!*" No word was given in response to Rabshakeh's denunciations or offer; Hezekiah ordered as much (2 Kings 18:36). Rather, Eliakim and Shebna approached Hezekiah with the message as the people of Judah remained silent (no doubt contemplating the announcement that God no longer was on the side of Judah).

Recall, this is where living in an estate of sin and misery brought Ahaz years before. Yet when

confronted with the prospect of certain doom, Ahaz, lacking faith, turned to the Assyrians which ironically produced the trouble detailed in this text. So how would Hezekiah respond? What would he do in response to this crisis?

2 Kings 19:1-3, “And when King Hezekiah heard *it*, he tore his clothes, covered himself with sackcloth and entered the house of the Lord. Then he sent Eliakim who was over the household with Shebna the scribe and the elders of the priests, covered with sackcloth, to Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz. And they said to him, ‘Thus says Hezekiah, “This day is a day of distress, rebuke, and rejection...””

The opening words of Hezekiah’s message to Isaiah indicate that Hezekiah believed the claim of Rabshakeh that God was on the side of Assyria! And as we’ve seen he had good cause to believe this! Yet unlike his father, Ahaz, Hezekiah responded in faith and appealed to the covenant promises of God (cf. v. 4)! Isaiah then responded with a message from the Lord (cf. 1 Kings 19:6-7)! The Lord had indeed heard the blasphemies uttered by Rabshakeh. Accordingly the Lord would frighten the king of Assyria by a rumor. In fact, he would return to his own land where he would be killed by the sword. As Hezekiah furtively trusted God, Isaiah’s message was received as a balm to his shaken soul.¹ Accordingly, Rabshakeh received a negative answer from Hezekiah and so took it to Sennacherib.

2 Kings 19:8-11, “Then Rabshakeh returned and found the king of Assyria fighting against Libnah, for he had heard that the king had left Lachish. When he heard *them* say concerning Tirhakah king of Cush [the King of Ethiopia], ‘Behold, he has come out to fight against you,’ he sent messengers again to Hezekiah saying, ‘Thus you shall say to Hezekiah king of Judah, “Do not let your God in whom you trust deceive you saying, ‘Jerusalem shall not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.’ Behold, you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all the lands, destroying them completely. So will you be spared?””

In other words, *now you’ve done it! I’m coming personally to take you out!* At this point we are at the question posed in the movie *A Wonderful Life*, “Do you see what happens when you pray?!” To Hezekiah’s response of faith and trust in God in which he told Rabshakeh that Judah would not yield, the heat was turned up such that the King of Assyria personally vowed to destroy the city.

So what did this man of faith do? *What would you do?* Now did he resort to politics like Ahaz whereby he forged an alliance with another nation? In 2 Kings 19:14 we read that Hezekiah took Sennacherib’s threatening letter to the temple, spread it out before the Lord, and prayed! Hezekiah essentially said to God, “Lord! Take note of this blasphemy and therefore choose the side of Your people!” In response to Hezekiah’s prayer, the Lord sent the king a message by way of Isaiah:

2 Kings 19:20-21a, “Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent to Hezekiah saying, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, “Because you have prayed to Me about Sennacherib king of Assyria [that is, because you have placed your trust in Me//because you have called upon Me-

which ultimately is what prayer is all about!], I have heard *you*.” This is the word that the Lord has spoken against him...”

If you read the answer in full, you will be blessed by the glorious promises and assurances of the Lord on behalf of His covenant people, promises which ultimately resulted in the demise of the Assyrians (cf. 2 Kings 19:21-28).

From this I hope you see the roll that faith played in the outworking of God’s Redemptive plan. While it did not deliver Judah from the Assyrians (it was God who delivered His people), nevertheless without it, this glorious story of redemption would never have taken place. That is an example of the “Perhaps” that accompanies godliness. O. Palmer Robertson wrote of this history:

So in the midst of the marchings of a mighty tyrant, the interceptions of a second world empire, and the internecine intrigues of a royal family, the covenant God of Israel was showing himself faithful to the promises made to David and his sons. Hezekiah’s faith in the sovereign purposes of God was stronger than human armies. God’s purposes to provide a way of redemption from sin proved stronger than the purposeful strivings of human beings.

In contrast, notice when faith is abandoned by the people of God.

2 Chronicles 33:1-2, “Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem. And he did evil in the sight of the Lord according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord dispossessed before the sons of Israel.”

In the midst of Manasseh’s sin and rebellion, God sent prophets to Judah who spoke thus:

2 Kings 21:11, “Because Manasseh king of Judah has done these abominations, having done wickedly more than all the Amorites did who *were* before him, and has also made Judah sin with his idols...”

With these two passages we are introduced to the fourteenth king of Judah, Manasseh. He was the son of Hezekiah. He began his reign in Jerusalem at the age of 12 and reigned 55 years (2 Kings 21:1; 2 Chronicles 33:1).² And yet Manasseh is the poster child for the warning, “Apostasy is only a generation away!” Truly his father’s godly influence appears to have affected Manasseh only negatively, and he reverted to the ways of his wicked grandfather, Ahaz. Accordingly, Manasseh is roundly condemned for his aberrant ways; Manasseh restored everything Hezekiah had abolished:

- He erected altars to Baal.
- He erected an image of Asherah in the Temple.
- He worshiped the sun, moon, and stars.
- He recognized the Ammonite god Molech and sacrificed his son to him (2 Kings 21:6).

- He approved divination.
- And he killed all who protested his evil actions.

In fact, it is possible that he killed the prophet Isaiah; rabbinical tradition states that Manasseh gave the command that Isaiah be sawn in two (see also Hebrews 11:37).

His reign was a time of religious retrogression, caused by terror over Assyria and a fascination for her cults. This resulted in a syncretism of Baalism, a cult of Astarte at the “high places”, astral worship, and the growth and proliferation of spiritism and divination. If all of this wasn’t bad enough, Manasseh’s abandonment of God’s law was not limited to the royal court; through the king’s example, idolatry spread to the people of Judah and Jerusalem (2 Kings 21:9). Furthermore his long reign was bloody and reactionary, and notorious for the introduction of illegal altars into the Temple courts, and “the passing of his sons through the fire” in the valley of the son of Hinnom .

Scripture summarizes Manasseh’s reign by saying he “seduced them [Judah] to do evil more than the nations whom the Lord destroyed before the sons of Israel” (2 Kings 21:9). On account of his wickedness and rebellion, Manasseh was directly to blame for the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of Judah (2 Kings 21:12-15; 22:16-17).

As for the political history of Manasseh, during his regency Judah lost all sovereignty and would suffer under the whims of the foreign, evil kings of Assyria. Through manipulation, bribes, and compromise- everything but faith- Manasseh navigated the treacherous waters of the 7th century B.C. In fact, it was during this time that Assyria entered into its “Golden Age” in which it expanded its power and influence all the way to Egypt with the help and upon the backs of God’s people!

O. Palmer Robertson made the following observation regarding era of Manasseh, “Quite intriguing is the fact that Assyrian presence in Israel reaches its zenith at the time when the monarch of Israel shows little or no faith in the one true living God. From a purely secular perspective, Assyria had to invade and subdue Egypt if they intended to maintain control of Syro-Palestine. As impossible as the task might have seemed, the effort had to be made. Otherwise Assyrian aspirations for world domination had to be surrendered. But one can hardly overlook the fact that the time of Assyrian expansionism corresponded with the dark days of unbelief under Manasseh. The God of all nations would not allow the people bearing his name to deny him with impunity.”

“Perhaps” said Zephaniah! There would be no guarantee. But without faith, without (1) a passionate longing for God, (2) right living, and (3) humility there would be no hope for the genuine servant of God as they faced a horrible future! And that brings us to the era of Josiah and the “perhaps” of faith.

2 Kings 23:25, “...before him there was no king like him who turned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did

any like him arise after him.”

As Josiah was the son of Amon and grandson of Manasseh, the “people of the land” enthroned him at the age of 8 upon the assassination of his father, Amon. He reigned 31 years. His regency was characterized by peace and reform. Hence, the years of his reign were among the most tranquil that Judah experienced under a king. In fact, the Bible focuses almost exclusively on Josiah’s spiritual reforms, which, as you know, occurred in three stages:

- The First Stage (632-628) involved Josiah’s personal growth in grace! At the age of 16, Josiah personally “began to seek the God of his father David” (2 Chronicles 34:3). This no doubt marked the time he came to saving faith- when God regenerated him and opened his eyes to behold the Savior!
- The Second Stage occurred from 628-622 B.C. and involved the cleansing of the land. At the age of 20, Josiah initiated drastic reforms and so began to cleanse Jerusalem and the land of Judah of idolatrous objects (2 Chronicles 34:3–7). In fact, Josiah extended his cleansing of the land into the territory of Israel (now under Assyrian control). The precise timing of this cleansing is significant for three reasons. This early purge occurred in the twelfth year of his reign (628 BC). The significance of this date is that the Assyrian King, Ashurbanipal, was still on the throne! This mighty tyrant who had cowed, humiliated, and subjugated Manasseh and the nation still ruled the territory! *Yet Josiah presumed to move into the northern part of Palestine and exercise his prerogative as Israel’s messianic-king figure!*

Josiah’s attempt at reformation preceded the call and ministry of Jeremiah and Zephaniah. In other words, as a young lad without prophetic backing Josiah had the courage, faith, and strength of will to overthrow a religious, social, and political tradition that had regulated the whole life of his populace for the previous sixty years! Furthermore, this early purge preceded the discovery of the “law book” in the temple by six or seven years! Even without this authoritative justification for his actions, the king introduced his radical program of reform.

How is it that Josiah without the support of prophet or priest, at the young age of 20, attempted so much? Simply stated, he was a man of faith, a man of God, a servant of Christ!

And herein, once again we behold the “Perhaps” of Zephaniah. When Josiah stepped out in faith to reclaim the territory of Israel from the Assyrians which was lost in the exile that occurred 100 years before, do you know what Ashurbanipal, the Assyrian the Assyrian King, did? He died! And with his death so also died the dominance of Assyria over Palestine! From here on out, Assyria diminished as a nation until their destruction in 609 BC! Of this O. Palmer Robertson wrote this:

“If the weakness of Manasseh’s faith had corresponded to the time of Assyrian strength under Ashurbanipal, the strength of Josiah’s faith corresponded with a time of unprecedented weakness for Assyria.”

Do you see the glorious possibilities that accompany the pursuit of God, righteousness, and humility? While this passion, this “godliness” does not secure physical blessing on this side of the grave, nevertheless it is a necessary precursor of it! That is the idea behind the word, “perhaps!”

And so Zephaniah held out to the genuine servant of God a glorious hope which redemptive history confirms over and over again:

- Godly living is a necessary precursor to enjoying covenant blessing.
- Faith many times triumphs over monarchs and nations (1 John 5:4b)!
- Godliness truly does “...hold promise for the present life.” (1 Timothy 4:8)

Accordingly, Zephaniah sought to console a sobered people who loved the Lord and yet were facing a most difficult future.

Zephaniah 2:3, “Seek the Lord, all you humble of the earth who have carried out His ordinances; seek righteousness, seek humility. Perhaps you will be hidden in the day of the Lord’s anger.”

You say, “That’s it?! Only a ‘Perhaps’? I want/need more than just a ‘perhaps.’” Be not dismayed or discouraged, for this brings us to the closing words of Zephaniah in chapter 3 where he details the glorious future that awaits us all in Christ, the hope of the Christian! We’ll begin that series next time. For now, be content with “perhaps.” This world is not our home! We have been saved for a higher calling than the best this world has to offer. Accordingly, we must live for that time when

- “The kingdoms of the world become the kingdom of the Lord and of His Christ” (Revelation 11:15)!
- Death, sorrow, sadness, sickness, separation and the like are no more (cf. Revelation 21:3-4)!
- We shall behold the Lord face to face (1 John 3:2)!

And if through our godliness and faith the boundaries of Kingdoms are set or the mouth of lions shut, praise be to the Lord! Yet such ought not to be our expectation in the here and now! Truly, we are pilgrims in this life whose hope and anticipation revolve NOT around temporal blessing, BUT the Second Coming of our Lord- this truly is our hope (1 Timothy 1:1). Speaking of the patriarchs:

Hebrews 11:13-16, “All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that *country* from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a

better *country*, that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them.”

Such a glorious example! In light of this, what did the Hebrew writer call us to?

Hebrews 10:23, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.”

Bibliography

Robertson, O. P. (1990). *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah (New International Commentary on the Old Testament)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Company.

End Note(s)

¹ God’s promises aren’t always received by God’s people with joy. From this we see that the promises of the Lord will not minister to the soul not relying upon God. Kingdom promises will only be prized by men and women whose hope rests solely in the Kingdom of God.

² He probably reigned as coregent with his father from 696 B.C. to 686 B.C. and as sole ruler 686-642 B.C.

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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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