

ANCIENT GUIDANCE FOR MODERN TIMES
Zephaniah 2:3

Intro: At this time of the year those of us who are reading our Bibles through, are finishing the OT books, and so we are spending a great deal of time in the OT prophets. At the same time we have been studying three of the minor prophets in our SS lessons--the prophecies of Jonah, Amos, and Hosea. These men were all prophets to, or of, the northern kingdom of Israel.

We were told in one of our first SS lessons on the book of Jonah that they are not called minor prophets because they are of minor importance, but because they are minor in size. They are shorter prophecies than Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel--the major prophets. However, the minor prophets, although shorter, are of major significance in the Word of God, and especially appropriate even for the day in which we live. God raised up the OT prophets in times of special need. They have been called God's emergency men because they preached in times in the history of Israel and Judah, as well as a several other nations, when God was calling for repentance. They also predicted terrible judgments upon the people of those days if they did not forsake their sins and turn to the Lord. So they were, first, preachers, and then prophets in the sense that they predicted future events of judgment.

If you are acquainted with Bible history, you know that both Israel and Judah were eventually carried away out of their lands, to captivity in other lands. Israel was conquered by the Assyrians, and Judah later by the Babylonians. Both of these captivities took place less than 1,000 years before Christ.

As we read through the OT prophecies we see that the prophets spoke against many of the sins which are prevalent in our nation today, as well as in most of the other nations around the world. They preached against idolatry, against adultery, against divorce, against pleasure-loving, against covetous-ness and greed, against murder, against dishonesty, against formality in their relationship

with God, against pride, against their feeling of security in spite of all that they were doing. Other sins could be added to the list. I am often impressed as I read these books each year that it is like scanning through our newspapers today, or like a written report of a daily newscast. And it seems as though the prophets of the OT are more up-to-date each year that I read them. Doubtless many of you have had the same feeling.

But we might well ask the question, Why do we not have prophets today? Why is not the Lord raising up Amoses and Hoseas and Zephaniahs today?

My answer to that is that we do have prophets today, perhaps not as many as we need, but we do have prophets. They are not prophets in the same sense as these men were who have written books which are in our Bible, but the role of the prophets, or preachers, of our day, is to expound, to teach, to explain the writings of the OT prophets, and apply them to those similar conditions which exist today.

You see, as we learn a number of times in the OT, God has not dealt with any nation on the face of the earth as He has dealt with Israel and Judah. He singled them out from all of the nations of the earth to be examples and object lessons of that which pleases Him, and that which displeases Him. And since God does not change, and His standards of right and wrong do not change, it is not necessary for us to have a bigger Bible with more books being added from year to year. What we need to do is to get as well acquainted with our Bibles as we can, and then to recognize that what displeased God in ancient times, still displeases Him, and that what He judged in ancient times He still judges. What was sin then, is still sin! And so the greatest mistake that any nation, or any individual can make, is to be ignorant of the teaching of the Bible. Those of us who preach the Word do not have the authority to say that on a certain date the Lord is going to judge America by bringing a certain catastrophe upon us, or by bringing some nation against us. But we do have the authority to point out that God most certainly will judge sin. He may be patient for years, but the time comes when His patience with any nation is exhausted. Wars and uncontrollable crime and epidemics and

earthquakes and financial troubles and a high divorce rate and the prevalence of many things that are mentioned in Scripture as sin, are in themselves warnings to tell us that we are on the wrong path, and that we need to get right with the Lord. And yet when we hear our problems being discussed over TV and in newspaper editorials, and, regrettably, often in our churches, it seems that nobody in places of influence is talking about the Lord, and how we are displeasing Him! And yet that is the most crucial issue of all, and, if we don't wake up, we are going to learn to our own grief that God will deal with us as He dealt with Judah and Israel, and other nations, long ago!

So, when you hear someone saying that our old Bibles are out-of-date, don't be afraid to tell them that they don't know what they are talking about. The Bible is just as up-to-date today as the day in which these prophets were raised up to warn the people of coming judgment. One big difference is when we compare the modern world with the ancient world is that the Bible tells us that the world is yet to see the judgments which are worse than any that the world has ever experienced before--judgments so terrible that if the Lord did not shorten them, no one would be left alive on the earth. If that fact ever grips your heart, it will keep you awake at night until you look for and find God's answer to the problem which faces us today. It is not that there are many problems. There is in reality only one--the problem of sin!

Let me point out a feature of the preaching of the OT prophets which I know that many of you have found amazing because you have mentioned it to me. And that is the evidence of God's willingness to forgive sin. We have such dark pictures of human behavior in the prophets that we have to wonder why the Lord didn't strike Israel and Judah from the face of the earth, never to have anything more to do with them. And we get the same impression from what it said about the Gentile nations that are mentioned. But instead we find the prophets pleading with the people to the very last, telling them of God's mercy and God's grace, of His willingness to forgive and forget their sins if they will only repent and turn to Him.

I have wondered why God has been so patient with

me. And many times I have wondered that the Lord continues to put up with the USA. But He does. How long He will, nobody knows. He will not do it forever. But the hope which the prophets of Israel and Judah held out to them is the hope that is held out to us today. Let us now turn to Zephaniah's prophecy, and hopefully we will learn from what he was called by God to tell the people of Judah in his day.

Let us look first at chapter 1.

Nobody likes to preach using the words that Zephaniah had to use in chapter 1. In fact, when Jeremiah preached the message which the Lord gave to him, the people of Judah considered him to be a traitor. Zephaniah's mission was no better.

Look at the I will's of God in Zephaniah 1. (Read the chapter.)

The thing that we must not miss about chapter 1 is that the predictions that were made here described exactly what happened. These were not empty words of a misguided prophet. This was the Word of God, and it all came to pass. But let me say by way of encouragement for ourselves who are facing a most certain judgment of God upon our own country, that what happened did not have to be! I want you to see today that the judgment came because the people did not listen to what Zephaniah told them to do. And I am here to say today that judgment faces us if we do not listen to the preaching of Zephaniah. There is no need for another prophet; we just need to listen to what the OT prophets said.

What is the answer? What is it that the Lord wants us to do?

Please look with me at the first three verses of chapter 2. (Read.)

What did Zephaniah tell the people of Judah to do?

Three things: "Seek the Lord." "Seek righteousness." "Seek meekness." Here is perfect ANCIENT GUIDANCE FOR MODERN TIMES. It is the message of all of the prophets even though it may be expressed in different ways. Now when have heard something like this from our political

leaders? Or when have you heard them from the members of the media who want us to think that they are experts on what needs to be done? Have you read any editorials in the Oregonian or in any of our news magazine that say what Zephaniah said? I will let you answer those questions. Let us find out what Zephaniah meant.

I want you to notice, first:

I. ZEPHANIAH'S INTRODUCTION (Zeph. 1:1-2:2).

His introduction to his message actually includes all of chapter 1, and the first two verses of chapter 2. He told them in chapter 1 what God was going to do. Then he told them in chapter 2 verse one that they needed to be united as a nation in doing what God was telling them to do.

Notice the expression, "O nation not desired."

It has been translated various ways. The NIV renders it, "O shameful nation." The NASB, "O nation without shame." The marginal reading is "without longing." This means that they showed no shame that they had no longing for the Lord. Keil, in his commentary on Zephaniah, translates it as meaning that they were a nation which did not turn pale with shame because of their sins. On the other hand it would picture Judah as a nation that would not blush because of their sins. You see, we can get so accustomed to sin that it does not bother us any more. However, their greatest sin was not something that they did; their greatest sin was in what they had failed to do, and that is the reason they were doing so much that was displeasing to God. Their root sin was that they were not seeking the Lord; the fruit of that was idolatry, adultery, lying, covetousness, and on and on.

Now let us consider:

II. ZEPHANIAH'S COUNSEL (Zeph. 2:3).

Look at the first:

A. "Seek ye the Lord."

Our problem solvers are not talking about the Lord, and how we have ignored Him. We are not being told

that we need to seek the Lord. Every other kind of solution is being suggested, but we are not told to seek the Lord. We still think that we can solve our own problems. A new suggestion I heard last night was that different colors are being suggested for clothing as a solution for the problem we have with gangs. Listen to the solutions that are being suggested, but notice also the lack of any mention of the Lord.

What did Zephaniah have in mind when he said, "Seek ye the Lord"?

I want you to notice that he addressed himself to "all ye meek of the earth." Who are they? They are the Lord's people. Any change in society has to start in the lives of the Lord's people. Tragically it is usually true that when society is down morally, the professing church is too. And maybe the trend starts in the church.

Anyway, this is a message to us. This is a message for us in 1993. If we want the Lord's blessing upon our lives, and if we are concerned about conditions in our country, then we must take the lead in seeking the Lord.

Now let me ask again, What does it mean to seek the Lord?

We have learned in our studies in the book of Romans that "there is none that seeketh after God" (Rom. 3:11). So we are called upon to do something that the people of the world will never do unless they are prompted by the Lord to do so. But we must "seek" Him. Seek Him in the Word. Seek Him by prayer. This is what David did when his young son became very sick. We read in 2 Sam. 12:16,
 David therefore **besought** God for the child;
 and David fasted, and went in,
 and lay all night upon the earth.

We need to seek the Lord in our fellowship together. That is the foundation Zephaniah laid in verse 1 of this chapter. It is not that we seek Him just when we have a special need, but we seek the Lord for Himself, and for ourselves. We need to be trusting Him, seeking His blessing and His guidance, recognizing that He is our only hope and our only help. Whether or not it is possibly for

us to neglect the Lord even when we read His Word and pray, or when we are engaged in some ministry.

Have you sought the Lord this morning? He does not draw near to us immediately. Job cried out in the bitterness of his heart,

Oh that I knew where I might find him!
that I might come even to his seat! (Job 23:2).

The Lord said through Hosea concerning Israel,
I will go and return to my place,
till they acknowledge their offences,
and seek my face: in their afflictions
they will seek me early (Hosea 5:15).

And through Jeremiah the Lord said,
And ye shall seek me, and find me,
when ye shall search for me
with all your heart (Jer. 29:13).

Cf. also Isa. 55:6-9, "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near..."

So this is the first thing that we need to do, **WE** need to do!

However, seeking the Lord involves two things, and this is pointed out by the second and third points.

II. "SEEK RIGHTEOUSNESS."

Many times when people seek the Lord they seek the Lord because they want things to go their way. To seek right-eousness for ourselves means that we make a deliberate attempt to find out what the Lord wants us to be, and what He wants us to do, and that is what we make our purpose in life. People often want the Lord to help them, but they are not willing to give up their sin. They want the Lord to do what they want Him to do, but they are not interested in doing what the Lord wants them to do. Oftentimes we as Christian are like that. Seeking the Lord means forsaking our sin. It means asking the Lord what Paul asked Him right after the Lord met him on the road to Damascus. Paul said, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" (Acts 9:6). This became the question that Paul sought to answer throughout the rest of his life. Cf. 2 Cor. 5:9.

So we are to "seek righteousness," righteousness of character and righteousness of life. The most

important matter we face in every decision of our lives is the question of what the Lord wants us to do. What a difference it would make in our lives today if this were the main concern of our hearts. "Seek righteousness." And remember that you and I cannot really seek the Lord without seeking righteousness."

The third point is this:

III. "SEEK MEEKNESS."

This word can be translated humility, or even gentleness.

The Lord addressed His people in the early part of this verse as the "meek of the earth." That is, of all of the people on the earth, the Lord's people should be characterized by meekness, by humility. But the repetition in the words, "Seek meekness," means that we are never so humble but what we need to be more humble. We are never so lowly, but what we need to be more lowly; never so meek, but what we need to be more meek than we are.

Have you noticed how many times in the prophets that the main reason the Lord brought His judgments upon the nations was because of their pride? It was pride which led to the downfall of Satan. Pride has been called the root sin because it is from our pride that other sins grow.

There are not many of us as the Lord's people who really "seek" to be humble. Even the things that we may do to humble ourselves often produce pride in us--like reading our Bibles through in 1992. Illus: Dr. Ironside in his days with the Salvation Army.

Our Lord is our great Example of humility. The Psalmist was expressing the meekness of his heart when he wrote in Psa. 115:1,

Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us,
but unto thy name give glory,
for thy mercy, and for thy truth's sake.

After all, what do we have to be proud of? We are only sinners saved by the grace of God. As Paul said, we are what we are only by the grace of God. We didn't do anything to deserve our salvation, and

many times we have done things which should have caused us to forfeit our salvation. Does it bother you if you aren't recognized for what you do? Do you like for people to know who you are? "Seek meekness." But let it be just between you and the Lord. A humble heart is content to remain unknown, and concerned only that God is pleased and that God is glorified.

Concl: We live in a needy world, in a needy country and in

needy states and in needy cities. If we are to make

an impact for good upon the lives of others in these terrible days, we must turn our attention first of all to our needs in our relationship with the Lord. We need to seek Him, but we need to know that seeking the Lord means seeking righteousness, and seeking humility. Righteousness has to do with our relationship toward the Lord; meekness has to do with our attitude toward ourselves.

You will never be given any better guidance than Zephaniah gave to the people of Judah over 2600 years ago. Our country is calling for change. But very few are interested in a change in our relationship with God. They don't realize that it is because we have left God out of our lives what we are reaping the whirlwind of troubles which face us as a nation. One of God's main ways of waking people up to their true needs is through the transformed lives of His people. The church has been following the pattern of the world for many years, and so the church is just about as needy as the world is. What we need is to get right with the Lord ourselves. Then the Lord may see fit to use us to awaken others to their need of the Lord God, and of His Son, our Savior. Only through Christ can we be cleansed from our sin, and only through daily fellowship with Him can our lives be clean and honoring to the Lord.

May the Lord make 1993 a different and better year for all of us as we spend our days seeking the Lord, seeking to be righteousness, and seeking to be the humble people that He wants us to be, and that we need to be.