



DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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Majoring in the Minors

ZEPHANIAH

By Dr. Matthew J. Hook

Have you noticed how much judges are in the news lately? It's a season of judges and judgments. Sandra Day O'Connor, the first woman on the Supreme Court is stepping down from the bench of the Supreme Court. John Roberts hearings are going to dominate the news of the commentators for the next few weeks as he appears before the senate. The question of justice, and the news of injustice looms in the press and in our minds.

And it's nothing new. We humans keep looking for a religion that will give us access to God without having to bother with people. We want to go to God for comfort and inspiration when we're fed up with the men and women and children around us. We want God to give us an edge in the dog-eat-dog competition of daily life. Here's what we want: an inside track with God that leaves us free to deal with people however we like. It's nothing new. It's the sort of religion that has been promoted and swallowed by loads of people throughout history. It's also the sort of religion that these biblical prophets are determined to root out. They are dead set against it!

Because the root of the solid spiritual life is embedded in a relationship between people and God, it's easy to develop the misunderstanding that my spiritual life is something personal between God and me—a private thing to be nurtured by prayers and singing, spiritual readings that comfort and inspire, and worship with like-minded friends. If we think this way for very long, we will assume that the way we treat the people we don't like or who don't like us has nothing to do with God.

That's when the prophets step in and interrupt us, insisting "*Everything* you do or think or feel has to do with God. Every person you meet has to do with God." We live in a vast world of interconnectedness, and the connections have consequences. This is the underlying message proclaimed by the minor prophets we've studied this summer. We *are* interconnected, and the connections have consequences—and all the consequences come together in God—that's justice, and the biblical phrase for the coming together of the consequences is Judgment Day.

Zephaniah names the problems in Judah: No longer giving God a thought or a prayer. He heard God's cry in this. It will lead to a day of darkness at noon. So, he says, eek God, because it's going to be sewer city: every nation on the face of the earth will face it: They will each have their day in the sun, then they will decay and be destroyed by their own sin. Zephaniah says the natural consequences of living apart from God, replacing the Lord with other things as the center of their universe will lead to exile, devour, and destruction, because God is in charge, and He is present among you. That's what Zephaniah prophesies.

Judgment is coming. After years and years of prophets calling people to repent and remember God's covenant, God sends his servant Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians to destroy His children and drag off the survivors. This is the exile. They lost their family, friends, wealth, heritage, history, faith. It compares to the modern holocaust.

Why was this happening to God's children? Yahweh promised them that this land is their gift. He would keep them safe. They were given houses they didn't build, vineyards they didn't grow, land they didn't tend. But they were given these things dependent on the covenant relationship. The conditions were not numerous, but they were important. The Israelites chose popularity over integrity, self-indulgence over self-sacrifice. They removed God from their center. So, Yahweh judged his people, because his people were guilty. But judgment is never the entirety of his plan. Zephaniah 1-3:8 focuses on the former things: What Judah and the other nations are: in all their sin and disobedience. But then Zephaniah's prophecy shifts. Verses 3:9 till the end focus on the latter things. What Israel will be, and the new thing God intends to do that will transform not only Israel, but the entire earth. He speaks through Zephaniah not only judgment, but the message of restoration.

9 *"Then will I purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him shoulder to shoulder. 10 From beyond the rivers of Cush my worshipers, my scattered people, will bring me offerings. 11 On that day you will not be put to shame for all the wrongs you have done to me, because I will remove from this city those who rejoice in their pride. Never again will you be haughty on my holy hill. 12 But I will leave within you the meek and humble, who trust in the name of the LORD. 13 The remnant of Israel will do no wrong; they will speak no lies, nor will deceit be found in their mouths. They will eat and lie down and no one will make them afraid." ...20 At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home. I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes," says the LORD.*

What will it look like? Return from the exile. Look at 9. This restoration begins with God "*purifying the lips of the people*". We've studied this close connection: the lips represent what you say, which in turn reflects your inner spirit, your inner life, your heart. The exiles' lips will be cleansed by God for true worship. There will be trust in God once again, and utter dependence upon God will result in united service. (shoulder to shoulder).

10. *From beyond the rivers of Cush, that's Ethiopia, God's worshippers, scattered will bring offerings to God.* Interesting that when I was in Brazil last month my prayer for our church became that God would give us generous hearts, that we would use our time and talents and treasure for his service. Zephaniah proclaimed God is gathering His worshippers will come from the farthest ends of the earth in spiritual service to God.

11. *"You'll no longer have to be ashamed of all those acts of rebellion."* God will redeem (or buy back) the remnant of his people. This is the Gospel. Throughout Scripture God says "I will buy them back, so that they will return to me." Remember the first prophet this summer, Hosea? His wife Gomez chose to prostitute herself with other men, and yet Hosea bids on her in the public square. Even in the midst of Israel's wretchedness and rebellion, God claims them as His own. This is what God promises his people. He will pay to ransom the wayward child. He will buy back Israel. He will bring them home. And He showed us through Jesus that He was willing to pay the ultimate price.

12. *God's exiles who return will be the meek and humble, who trust His name.* I'll leave a core of people among you who are poor in spirit—What's left of Israel that's really Israel. Meek and humble does not necessarily mean "doormat." It means being willing to ask for help. It means knowing how poor in spirit you really are. It means knowing that apart from the grace of God, you too could wind up flat on your face. So instead you get flat on your face before God. It means 2 words: "I need..." As a leader of this church, I look around and I say to you "I need help." There are so many needs and ways to serve. I need help!... Would you be willing? Willing to teach children this fall... willing to learn the computer and sound board for worship... willing to help greet... willing to pull weeds around the buildings... willing to pray for others... willing to lead a small group this fall... willing to train to be a Stephen Minister or leader." We all need people willing to humble themselves to serve, just like the God we worship.

But it begins with trust in the Lord, because you will pay a price. Doubts about doing God's work will creep in. Difficult times will come, from without and within, as God calls these exiles home! You have to trust in His

name. The stakes are high: when we get it right here in the local church, everybody wins. Forever! There are no higher stakes—it's not just life and death, but eternal life and eternal death for people.

13. *Remnant of Israel: no wrong, no lies, no deceit, no fear. They'll make their home in God.* This core holy people will do no wrong. They won't lie, won't use words to flatter or seduce. Content with who they are and where they are, un-anxious, they'll live at peace. As this remnant returns to Israel, they'll be torn. They'll be investing in things others simply won't understand. We all get shaky. That's why when God calls them, there will be no wronging of each other; no lies, deceit, or fear. They'll be others-centered. They'll have each other's backs. They'll show up, work together, block, move forward, and wait for new orders from God. And look how Zephaniah concludes his prophecy in verse 20:

20. *God will gather you home! God will give honor and praise and restore, before your very eyes!* The remnant becomes a witness!

What about this new thing? Some people would say it's already occurred. They would say Zephaniah was prophesying the rescue of the Judeans from the Babylonians. 10s of 1000s were dragged off. For 70 years they lived in Babylon. (This Babylonian captivity is when Ezekiel prophesied, Daniel witnessed to God in the lion's den, and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego witnessed in the fiery furnace, but most of the people tried to blend in, forgetting God). Imagine if it were you. Maybe you remarried. Maybe you got so comfortable and assimilated so well, that you forgot you had another home. Most of the people did. There are only records of one nation coming back. The fact that they came back at all was a miracle. Their temple was restored, which was huge. The wall around Jerusalem was also restored.

Only 1/10th of the people of Jerusalem came back (20,000). Judah was a province, nothing more. The returnees were not unaware of the embarrassment of this. There was no great temple like Solomon, or David. The others remained Jews in Babylon.

Nehemiah is still praying for the restoration and the regathering... "If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the people. But if you are faithful, I will gather them from all over." Every post-exilic prophet we have is still preaching about the regathering and restoration. Gather them together!!! Deliver them that are still serving among the heathen!

All the Gospels introduce the ministry of Jesus the same way: they talk about John the Baptist: the same way. "This is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet. A voice crying in the wilderness, 'Make the way of the Lord straight.'" These verses in Zephaniah move us from the sinful nation to the restored Israel. Make ready the way of the Lord. Bring those exiles home!!! The new thing that the prophets were talking about, the restoration is about to begin. That is why it is critical that Jesus be King of the Jews. The 12 disciples reflect the 12 restored tribes. 12 new representatives of the restored Israel.

God had a much bigger plan than getting 20,000 Judeans out of Babylon. Not just them, but the exiles of Eden will come home. John 3:16. We sit here today as testimony that the lost daughters and sons were not all Jews, but that every tongue, every tribe, every nation would know that God is Lord. Our Creator, who formed us, cries out "don't be afraid. I've redeemed you. You can come home now."

For some of us, the journey home took so long we're only just arriving. For some of us, we had gone so far, that we had to hear it over and over and over that we've been redeemed. Some may be struggling to think that they have done something that leaves them beyond the message. Zephaniah 3:11 *On that day you will not be put to shame for all the wrongs you have done to me,* We simply are humble before God and say "I need you..." Zechariah says "Don't recall the things of the past. You and I are the new Israel. We have experienced God's amazing grace." Like them, OUR actions have driven us into exile. We have been saved for a reason. We've experienced God's grace for our salvation. But it's not about us, folks. It's about him. Zephaniah 3:14-19 *"Shout for joy, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O Israel! Rejoice and exult...the Lord has taken away His*

judgments against you...the King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst...I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will turn their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.” So that we could serve as witnesses. There are still many sheep who are not a part of this fold. 1000s upon 1000s are still in Babylon, still under judgment. Just like the 10 lost tribes. They haven’t heard the message of the prophet. They don’t know it’s safe to come home. They don’t know he’s given His own Son in their place. The new thing is ongoing, folks. You’ve seen it SO THAT you may be witnesses. The exiles are everywhere. Tell them. Go tell them that it’s safe to come home.

Let us pray: What are you doing? What are you doing to change it? Are you satisfied? I want to challenge you—what are you doing with your time? What are you doing with your talents? What are you doing with your treasures? If you’re already doing it, great. If not, then just maybe God wants to use you as a witness to the exiles. Maybe it’s time for you and me to step it up! For such a time as this, our church exists. II Cor. 4:18 “We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”