

THE STEALTH PEOPLE WIN

Zephaniah 2-3

Yesterday Laurie and I were on a walk when we encountered a woman I didn't recognize walking her dog. Laurie began talking to the woman like she knew her, but it quickly became apparent that she in fact did not. She had looked more at the dog than at the woman and as a result thought she was someone else. It led to a rather awkward brief conversation. As we walked away I said, "What was that?" She started laughing. She was laughing so hard she could barely breathe, and it went on for some time. All I had to do was make one comment about the encounter to provoke more gales of laughter. If you don't believe me, just say to her today, "your dog has really grown" and watch what happens. I mention this because for most people if they made the mistake she did they would feel chagrined and embarrassed. Laurie just gets a big kick out of it. What a beautiful quality. It makes life far more enjoyable for me and makes her just a lot of fun to be around. There is something that Laurie has grasped at the core of her soul that underlines all she is that enables her to be like that. We're going to think about that truth together this morning.

This truth is the very basis of godliness. We will see it show up in an unexpected place today as we look at Zephaniah 2-3. We are going back more than 2600 years to the time when the good king Josiah ruled over Judah late in the 7th century B.C. when we read the words of Zephaniah. He claimed to be a prophet of God delivering messages directly from God. If that was not true then honestly, studying his words is a rather quixotic exercise in arcane religious history. There just isn't much to be gained from it. But if it were true, if God is speaking to humans through Zephaniah, then nothing could be more important, nor could it be more relevant for our daily lives. In these chapters the prophet thunders away, calling down judgment, as prophets often did, but then there is a sudden and dramatic change. In this section we will encounter that crucial truth I mentioned. Let's see what the prophet has to say to us.

JUDGMENT WAS COMING

In Zephaniah 1 we learned that the prophet had a shocking message for Judah, the remnant of God's people. The message was that judgment was coming for Judah just as it was for all those other terrible nations, like Assyria and Edom. Zephaniah was saying, "Do not ask for whom the bell tolls, Judah. It tolls for you."

This theme continues at the beginning of chapter 2. The prophet refers to Judah as the "shameful nation" in verse 1. He says the fierce anger of the Lord was about to come upon them and calls on them to seek the Lord. Then he proceeded to say that Judah was not alone. In verses 4-7 the Philistines were warned that they too were about to be destroyed. In verses 8-11 it is Moab and Ammon that get the bad news. In verse 12 it is Cush or the northern part of Africa. Finally Assyria gets its death sentence in verses 12-15. The Philistines were to the west of Israel, Moab and Ammon to the east, Cush was to

the south and Assyria was to the north. Everyone in every direction is subject to the judgment of God. Evil people everywhere on earth were going to experience his wrath.

In chapter 3 the prophet makes sure that Judah can't take much satisfaction in the devastation about to hit their neighbors. He turns his guns back on Judah again. Verse 1 says, "Woe to the city of oppressors, rebellious and defiled. She obeys no one, she accepts no correction, she does not trust in the Lord, she does not draw near to her God." He is talking about Jerusalem. So he tells Judah he is going to pour out his anger on them just as he has on the rebellious world. Verse 8 ends with "The whole world will be consumed by the fire of my jealous anger."

THERE WAS HOPE

The whole "judgment is coming" thing of the prophets can get a little old after a while. Eventually there is a sort of "blah, blah, blah," effect to it because you've heard it all before. I had a professor in seminary who said you can hit someone in the head with a sledge hammer all you want but they're not going to feel it after the first couple of blows. It sort of feels like the rookie league prophets needed to hear that because they've been pounding away at the same theme. Everybody's bad, God's going to judge everybody and they're all going to die. They were bands that only knew how to play one song and it gets pretty old fairly quickly. After a while we're not feeling it anymore.

Fortunately Zephaniah had more to say than, "you're all awful and you're all going to die." There is a dramatic change at 3:9. The tone of his message is suddenly completely different. In verse 9 God says, "Then I will purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord." In verse 10 God promises to bring his people home after they have been scattered. In verse 11 he says, "On that day you will not be put to shame for all the wrongs you have done to me." God is promising forgiveness. In verse 15 we read, "The Lord has taken away your punishment." That verse ends with, "The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm."

Instead of talk of sin and judgment the prophet tells Israel in verse 14 to sing and shout aloud to God. He ends the book in verse 20 quoting God saying, "I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes." Israel has not earned this incredible gift, yet the Lord says he will do this amazing thing of changing their hearts so they turn to him and find forgiveness. He will restore all that has been lost.

Some think this prophecy has been fulfilled in the church. In a sense it has. Israel was a physical people whose story serves as a picture of the spiritual truth that is fulfilled in the church. The physical promises of abundance, peace and security that were given to Israel if they trusted God are fulfilled in the spiritual abundance believers in Jesus receive. Paul said in Ephesians 1 we get "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realm." So this rejoicing because God has forgiven certainly has direct application to the church.

God has rescued us in Christ. But there is yet a fulfillment of this passage, I believe, that involves the physical nation of Israel. Just as the prophecies of judgment of the physical nation came literally true, so some day will these prophecies be fulfilled for them. Israel will be restored in some yet future day.

GOD WOULD SAVE THE MEEK

What caught my attention in this chapter was verse 12. “But I will leave within you the meek and humble, who trust in the name of the Lord.” The people that God will forgive and save are the meek and humble.

It is possible that this verse loomed large in Jesus’ mind. Early in his ministry he preached perhaps the best, most quoted sermon in the history of the human race. We call it the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:5 Jesus said, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

Meek is not exactly something people in our culture aspire to. It has negative connotations. A meek person is a nonentity. He’s wimpy and mousy and sort of blends into the wallpaper. There’s the story about a guy who dies and goes to heaven. He reaches the pearly gates and finds two openings. One is labeled “henpecked husbands.” The other line is labeled, “Non-henpecked husbands.” There’s an enormously long line of men, longer than any you’ve ever seen at Disneyland, standing in front of the henpecked husband opening waiting to get in. There’s only one man at the other gate. So this guy walks over to that one man and says, “So why do you think you belong here?” The man shrugs and says, “I don’t know. My wife just told me to stand in this line.” That is kind of our image of meek, and it isn’t appealing.

Toby recently claimed some hockey gear that had been in our garage. He is a goalie, but on very rare occasions (they happen less often than leap years), he will take the opportunity to actually skate as a forward. We had a helmet, shin pads, elbow pads, shoulder pads and gloves that a regular position player would use so he took them. This should have been cause for rejoicing, and it was for Laurie, because it meant a little bit of the clutter, a stinky bit of it, was removed from our garage. But it was a little sad for me. It was an undeniable statement that my hockey playing days are over. That should have been obvious because I haven’t played in 9 or 10 years. And I’m old. But hope springs eternal. I had that equipment out there, and you never know. But the reality is, playing hockey is history for me. Even when I last played I probably shouldn’t have. I was never any good, but added to that I was old, fragile and slower than ever. It made me what people might think of as meek as a hockey player. You can’t do that and play hockey well. You have to be aggressive and strong. I recall one time when I was playing left defense and the puck went into the corner of the rink to my left. I should have hustled after it, but there was an opposing player close by and I feared if I went after the puck he would beat me to it. I might be left out of position. Best to stay where I was so I could stay between him and our goal when he got the puck. He did get the puck then

skated right around me with it, walked in on our goalie and scored. Being "meek" like that was a disaster. I am going to clarify right now that the truth is I wasn't meek, I was timid and tentative because I was afraid of making a mistake. Timidity and fear are not the same as meekness.

Lots of Christians react to this meek business because who wants to be meek? If I tell a group of high school boys that God wants them to be meek I can be sure I've lost them. They want to be strong. They want to be heroic. They want their lives to matter. If being a follower of Christ requires being meek they'll pass. And so some Christians try to define meekness as "strength under control." Then they can tell those boys that God wants them to be strong and manly.

There is some truth to that explanation, but I fear it might dodge what God tells us here through Zephaniah as well as what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. The Hebrew word translated meek here often referred to the lower classes in Israel. The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* says it meant the lowest and the poorest. In Judges 6:15 Gideon could not believe that God wanted to use him because he said, "my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." In other words "I'm a nobody from a clan of nobodies. We aren't strong. We aren't powerful and influential." The word translated "weakest" is the same one Zephaniah used.

Have you ever felt like a nobody like Gideon did? Laurie and I know some people that seem unable to see us. Mostly in social settings they ignore us. It's not like they're trying to snub us, they just don't seem to be aware that we exist. We have been introduced to them multiple times, and every time they think they've never met us before. We are stealth people to them because we don't create even a blip on their radar. It's really kind of funny, but if you think about it too much it could be annoying. Essentially though they have no intent to slight us, we're so insignificant to them they don't even see us. We are nobodies.

This is the power of this description of the people whom God would rescue. They were the nobodies, the stealth people who have no status, no power in the world, whom people never even notice. They had nothing to boast about. They are the contrast to the people described in verse 11, "those who rejoice in their pride." These are people who know they have nothing to be proud about.

In his commentary on this book, Dr. O. Palmer Robertson wrote that this meekness was not a matter of social standing, but a moral quality. "This remnant...regard themselves as no better than a heap of stubble suited for consumption by the fire of God's anger. They find deliverance only because they seek shelter in the name of Yahweh. They are fully cognizant of their danger and seek refuge in him who is their judge."

You see this same thing in Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus addressed a culture with a worldview that believed firmly that God rewards those who are righteous and curses those who are wicked or disobedient to him. They drew some deductions from this principle. If a person had a terrible disease, was crippled or blind, it must be because that individual deserved it. After all, a just and righteous God would not cause such harm to a righteous person. You can see exactly that kind of thinking in Job's three friends who were sure that Job, who was called righteous by God, must have deserved the disasters that befell him, so he clearly was a really wicked guy. The other side of that coin was that a person who was rich and powerful in this world obviously must be blessed by God. He clearly must deserve what he has. Therefore one can know that a rich person is really good and honored by God.

Jesus spoke to a crowd of the nobodies of their world. They were for the most part the who lived from day to day eat. They had little of the had no power, no influence, considered them as worthless day surely, they assumed, God worthless. Jesus told these poor in spirit, the meek, who God and will inherit the land! It was not the respected leaders, the well-to-do, the people of influence who would enter the kingdom. It was the last people you would ever expect whom God will reward. In other words, the people who thought they deserved something before God were going to miss the boat, and those who are meek, those who know they deserve nothing and can only hope in God's mercy, are the ones God will love.

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stealth people. They were Those who followed him common people, the poor hoping for enough food to world's goods and they no notice. The world and in the thinking of that also considered them nobodies that it is the will enter the kingdom of

In just a few weeks the Chargers will open their camp for the upcoming season. Imagine that they do the most unexpected thing and invite a bunch of guys like me, except a lot younger, to their camp. Average sized guys who are happy bench pressing 150 pounds and have average speed at best. Even worse they have zero real football experience. What foolishness! Those guys are going to get killed by the 300 pound linemen and the 240 pound linebackers that run like antelopes. Oh, yeah, I can't wait to see what happens when a Rick Myatt lookalike tries to cover one of those fleet wide receivers or he comes up and tries to tackle Ryan Matthews. It would be a joke if it weren't so dangerous. Being out on the field trying to compete with the real athletes those guys are going to get killed. Everyone assumes this is a weird publicity stunt, but then camp ends and they announce the Chargers' roster for the upcoming season. The astonishment and the anger are immediate. Philip Rivers is gone, Ryan Matthews is gone, Donald Butler is cut along with Melvin Ingram and Eric Weddle. Antonio Gates isn't included, nor are any of last

year's starting offensive linemen. All the real football players have been cut, and all that is left is a bunch of those Rick Myatt types.

Such a thing would be inconceivable, ridiculous, unimaginable. It simply could never happen. In the minds of Jesus' contemporaries such an absurd event would have been more likely than the meek of the earth being the ones who would enter the kingdom of God. They were the marginally religious, clearly unblessed because they were undeserving people, yet Jesus said these nobodies, not the somebodies, were the ones who will enter his kingdom.

Zephaniah said essentially the same thing Jesus did. The people whom God will save are those who have come to the conclusion that they are hopeless, that they have absolutely nothing to boast about, and all they can do is throw themselves on the mercy and kindness of God. This message turns the whole world upside down. Everything in this world, and I mean everything, works on one principle: you should get what you deserve. We went to graduation at UCSD a few weeks ago. The featured speaker's message boiled down to this: work hard. If you want anything in this world you're going to have to work hard to get it. You are going to have to earn it. Jesus comes along and says if you want the best thing possible, eternal life, you can never work hard enough for it. You don't deserve it, so just throw yourself on God's mercy.

But how can God accomplish something so impossible? We get the answer in verse 17. The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. The word "mighty" there is actually a word that meant "a mighty warrior." You stealth people who have nothing to boast about, God will delight in you. The world might cruelly ignore or reject you, but God will quiet you with his love.

IMPLICATIONS

Why does God favor the meek?

Meekness is essential for our rescue

Why does anyone go see a doctor? Other than routine exams, we go to see a physician when we fear something is wrong. We only go seek help when we realize there's a problem that we cannot fix. The first step is admitting that we have a problem and we need help. This is what counselors will always say. The first step is admitting there's a problem and that a person needs help. Until that happens the troubled marriage never gets better, the person with a substance abuse problem never finds freedom from it, the person who has conflict in every relationship never finds a way to have healthier relationships.

At the heart of the issue in Zephaniah is finding a way to have God accept us and love us. Though we may not always recognize it, this is the fundamental problem for human

beings. It is every human's biggest spiritual and psychological need. In the end there are only two approaches, two possible ways to have God love us. The first is for us to make ourselves lovable enough, pure enough, holy enough for God to accept us and love us. The second is to admit that we have a problem. We must acknowledge that we have no hope of cleaning up our act well enough for God to accept and love us and to throw ourselves on God's mercy and grace, trusting him to give us something that we are totally unworthy of.

That second approach is at the heart of meekness. The meek start with the premise, "I've got a problem I can't solve even with my best efforts." Until we are meek we will ever be trying to get a little better and somehow prove to God, to ourselves and to others that we are deserving of acceptance and love. In Zephaniah 3:11 God warned the proud people, the ones who were sure there was nothing wrong with them. They were the ones who would be judged. Meekness is admitting the problem and acknowledging we cannot solve it, that only God can.

This is why Jesus started off his Sermon on the Mount with this radical message. In a culture that was utterly immersed in the idea that you gain God's acceptance the old fashioned way, by earning it, Jesus said the real answer is plan B, be meek and trust.

Meekness cures a demanding spirit

Let's suppose that we are not meek. That means whether consciously or not we have taken plan A. We believe that somehow we must earn God's acceptance and everyone else's. We must deserve God's love by being good enough to earn it. When we choose that plan we are either going to think we're doing it and are good enough, or we're going to fear that we're not measuring up.

If we think we're good enough then we earn something from God. We deserve to be treated a certain way. Hey if I've earned God's love I should expect him to reward me and treat me as I deserve. This makes us proud before God. I deserve something. If I don't get what I deserve what is going to happen? I'm going to feel cheated and I'm going to complain.

A few years ago I was at the reception desk of a lovely hotel dealing with a problem we had with our room. The staff of the hotel were terrifically helpful. We were staying at this hotel at a ridiculously low price. I was happy to be there at all and knew we really couldn't afford the hotel at its normal rates. We had been given a deal because we had a connection. So I was thrilled. But while I was there I could not help overhearing the man near me who apparently was quite wealthy. I don't know what he paid to stay there but it was more than we did. As a result he felt he deserved a lot. He wasn't happy with the room he had been given. They found him another one with a better view. That was fine, but he'd have to move his stuff. He was upset he wasn't given the other room in the first place. They needed to do something for him. The staff bent over backwards to give this

guy perks, trying to mollify him, but nothing was good enough. I was astounded at what they did for him, but he was still complaining when the hotel employee finally said, “I’m sorry, but this is the best we can do.” It was all I could do to stop from saying, “Hey, buddy, you’re a jerk. Why don’t you show a little gratitude?” As he left I said to the person helping me, “that was kind of pathetic.” She just rolled her eyes and shook her head. He was an extreme case, but when human nature thinks it has earned something, look out if what it gets doesn’t measure up to expectation. It leans toward being demanding and entitled.

The effect of that is we’ll tend to expect certain things in life and if what we get doesn’t measure up we’re going to complain. We’re going to accuse God of not loving us and not caring for us. But let’s suppose that I am meek, that I recognize as Robertson said, that what I *deserve* is the fire of God’s anger. If I get anything other than that I will be grateful, knowing that I in fact have been given much more than I deserve.

Imagine that you are driving beautiful day. You are feeling having fun, right up until you with flashing lights. You look see that you are 20 miles per You are resigned to your fate. the CHP takes mercy, gives go. Do you go away feeling your way, feeling offended stop you at all? No, you are you’ve been given. You don’t You’re just thankful.

“When you are meek, believing and acknowledging that you are not only deserving of nothing, but actually of deserving much worse than nothing, then everything you get will be seen as a gift.”

along in a great car on a great and tooling along see the CHP in your mirror down and to your horror hour over the speed limit. You have no excuse. But you a warning and lets you annoyed that he got in that he had the temerity to just grateful for what deserve what you got.

When you are meek, believing and acknowledging that you are not only deserving of nothing, but actually of deserving much worse than nothing, then everything you get will be seen as a gift. You won’t be demanding and complaining, you will be grateful continually.

Meekness is necessary for peace

This speaks to the other possibility when we take plan A, thinking we must deserve God’s love. That possibility is that we might fear that we are not measuring up. We’re never going to be completely sure if we’ve done enough. Some days we’ll think we have and we’ll start to become demanding. But more often we’ll be right on that cut line, afraid that we’re not quite there and we’re going to miss the cut.

This will cause us to feel like we must work even harder. Every mistake, every failure will be full of ominous threat. We will irrationally try to cover up our shortcomings as

though we can hide them from God. There will never be a moment's peace in a life like that. The person who lives like that will constantly be wondering if he or she has done enough. He or she will see how much better they need to be or do, so there is never a time when one can just be at rest.

Meekness makes us gentle with other people

In Colossians 3:12-13 Paul wrote about what meek people will be like, which is what followers of Christ should be like. He says we should relate to one another with gentleness and patience. Then in verse 13 he said, "Bear with each other and forgiven whatever grievances you may have against one another."

When I have started with the premise that I am hopeless and in need of rescue that I don't deserve, when I believe that God has done a miraculous thing in forgiving and accepting me, that is naturally going to cause me to be a lot more patient and accepting of other people.

A couple of weeks ago I went to the grocery store to pick up just 4 items. We had people coming for dinner and these were some last minute necessary things that we were missing, so I was in a bit of a hurry. There was a definite time crunch. I found my items, but when I went to check out I saw to my dismay that the store only had two checkout lanes open. One was a regular checkout lane and it had a very long line. Bad news. But there was good news. The other lane was the express lane. It had a sign on it that clearly proclaimed it was for people with 15 items or less, perfect for me. And to make it even better there were only 2 people already at that lane. Great, I'd be out of there in no time. That's what I thought until I got in line and saw that the people in front of me had a shopping cart loaded to the brim with stuff. I felt pity for them because it was obvious one of two things was true of them. Either they couldn't read and therefore did not know what the sign over the checkout lane said, or they couldn't count to 15. Either way I felt sad for people so clearly ill-equipped to function in a modern world. Reading and counting at least as high as 15 would seem absolutely essential for survival in our world. Actually what I really thought was, "these people are such churls. They didn't want to wait in the other long line where they belong so they just decided the 15 or less restriction didn't apply to them. They're too important for that." I thought the clerk would tell them they were in the wrong lane and they would have to take all their groceries off the counter and put them back in their cart, thus delaying me some more. But I was surprised. When their turn came he just started checking them out. As he did so he calmly said, "Obviously you didn't notice, but this is the express lane, so next time you're here, please be aware of that." They said, "Oh, gee, we're sorry. We didn't realize. We didn't see the sign."

I was fuming. When they got done their bill was \$250. They had \$250 worth of groceries in the express lane. "Oh, sorry, we didn't see the sign." Of course not. After all it's just plastered up there where it's impossible to miss. Who can see that? And besides,

who ever heard of a store having an express lane? Who would expect such a thing since they only have them in EVERY GROCERY STORE IN THE WORLD! I personally am an express lane Pharisee. I never, ever break the 15 item law. Laurie lives by grace. She's kind of in the "it's close enough" frame of mind, but I am particularly rigorous about this law, so these people really chapped my hide. Then I had that curious thought. Why am I so intent on this law? Why does it matter so much to me? Yes, part of it was that I was in a hurry. But I had that brief flash of insight. I remembered why I'm so religious about express lanes. It is because there was a time when I made the exact same mistake that those people did. I didn't notice I was in the express lane with a cart full of groceries and when the clerk graciously checked me out there were about 5 people in line behind me each with 1 or 2 items, looking at me like I was the village idiot. I determined I would never do that again. As soon as I remembered my personal past faux pas my attitude toward those people totally changed. How can I be upset with them for doing the same thing I have done myself? I became meek.

Being meek doesn't mean you are weak and wimpy. What it means is you have a large heart. In truth, being meek, being really meek as the Bible describes it, means that you are incredibly strong. Not because of your own power, but because of God's power and grace. A world full of biblically meek people will be a beautiful place where peace, love and unity reign, because people will relate to one another with gentleness, patience, forbearance, acceptance and forgiveness.

CONCLUSION

Zephaniah 3:17 is one of the best verses in the Old Testament. God is with you and he is mighty to save. How can a just God forgive us all of our sins? He is with us and he is mighty to save. He is more than up to the task. How can we face a holy God, given our failings? God delights in you; he will quiet you with his singing. This is what makes us able to be meek, to admit the truth. It is his love and his power that is the basis for all of it. This is what sets us free to be meek. The meek will inherit the earth. We don't have to rely on our power, our cleverness, our goodness our holiness, or ability to force our way on others or on God himself. We admit the truth, we rest, we trust in God who is mighty to save and he will see to it that we, the invisible, the nobodies, the stealth people, win in the end.