Scripture: Zephaniah 2:1-4.

Topic: Seek the Lord, Ye Humble

Text: Zephaniah 2:3a --"Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, who do his commands; seek righteousness, seek humility."

Proposition: In spite of all our wrong-doings and mistakes, there is always an approach to the forgiveness of God through humility and righteousness.

Date written: June 7, 1957

Dates and places preached:

Grace, Cheyenne, 11 a.m., June 9, '57
Manitou, Colo., July 5, 1964

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Introduction:

1. Two young men brutally murdered a boy. Later they were apprehended by law enforcement officers, their guilt was proven, and they were sentenced to life imprisonment. One of them later was killed in a prison riot, but the other still lives, now, some thirty years later. He has become useful in the prison library, has written books of widespread use in a certain area of education, and otherwise is trying to repay society in some small manner for the crime which he committed. He recently was quoted by a reporter as saying that he had long regretted his inexcusable conduct in committing the murder, and that he was trying his best in some small way to atone for his great wrong of years ago. He is finding a real purpose and satisfaction in life now even tho behind prison bars.

2. The conduct of this murderer, the punishment upon him, and his present experience of life is indicative of the pattern of the message of our Biblical Book of Zephaniah. The scheme of this Old Testament Book is to point out the sins of the people, to assert that God has great punishment in store for them on account of these sins, and to present the thought that sincere and humble repentance, a true turning to

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God and righteousness, will bring forgiveness of God and escape from the worst of His wrath.

3. Before applying this particular thought to our current life, both on social and personal levels, it ~~wxxthx~~ is worth our time to become more familiar with this rather obscure O. T. book of Zephaniah, only 3 short chapters in length, and near the end of our O.T.

I. Familiarization with Zephaniah and its introduction of the day's theme.

1. The man Zephaniah. Only a little is known of him. Zephaniah is almost certainly of royal lineage, a second cousin once removed of Josiah the King who is still in his early twenties.

Zephaniah is known to have been a citizen of Jerusalem (1:4). He shows little knowledge of or sympathy with the poor. However, he does not hesistate to denounce the royal family or royal household, although he spares the King himself. He speaks his mind as he thinks God would have him, to any and all

2. Date. Zephaniah could have done his preaching shortly before 621 B.C.. Probably he learned his lessons as to God's nature out of the recorded and Biblical words of Amos and Isaiah, as his words are often similar to these earlier

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books of God.

3. Relationship to other Scripture. Nowhere better than in Zephaniah appears a pattern common to men who evidently edited several of the prophetic books of the O.T.. The pattern is in three parts, (1) woe to Judah, (2) An extension of judgment to other nations, and (3) comfort to Judah after the great catastrophe. This pattern is present in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, though somewhat hidden by the great amounts of material in those books. When the editors felt that the message of the Lord to their day was not condemnation but comfort, they did not destroy the threats of the early prophets, but supplemented them by adding to the scope of God's wrath and then by promising that a righteous remnant of Judah would escape from the universal destruction. Against the background of this editorial method Zephaniah's work is to be studied.

4. Our present Scripture: The section which is our Scripture probably is composed of both some original material and of some of the later editorial material. The editor has skillfully arranged the material to show that God resists the proud and rewards the humble.

Whether the prophet Zephaniah wrote

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all of our present Scripture selection or whether it is some of his work and some of the material of later editors, the message of these verses, 2:1-4, is a typical one of his whole book, and an example of his work. The fierce anger of the Lord will come upon both Godless foreign nations and Godless people of his own country. There is just one way to escape this wrath, he insists, and here it is: (v.3) "Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, who do his commands; seek righteousness, seek humility."

5. Transition to present-day relevance This message of the ancient prophet Zephaniah has relevance for us of today, particularly for those of us who would try to be christian. It is this message as relevant to us here and now that we want to apply ourselves further.

II. Punishment and destruction does come upon those who are unrighteous and ignore God.

1. We don't want to labor this point much, nor to drive it home too deeply, nor wound sensitive feelings of those who might think the preacher is talking about them. To recall a few famous, recent and often-referred-to illustrations, we would think of Hitler's Germany, Japan of World War II times,

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more recent dictatorships in some South American countries, the present predicatment of some of our highly-placed labor leaders. Punishment, and destruction of that for which they worked and planned have been obvious results of their unrighteousness, whether nations or people.

2. We may not think, as perhaps the ancient Hebrews would have, that God is directing the punishment and destruction wreaked upon these nations and peoples, but certainly the courses of action they pursued were responsible for the evil results they did achieve.

3. We know, too, that often the righteous suffer along with those who ignore God, their suffering being from no fault of their own. In this respect, we think of Jesus' words, "the rain falls alike on the just and the unjust." We would remember that the wicked who cause some of the great catastrophes of life are besieged in their inward selves by guilt and mental torment, the worst kind of illness there is. Those who sincerely try to live Godly, righteous and humble lives are spared the mental torture of the wicked. God's laws, ordained long ago, operate to the end that wickedness brings suffering and unhappiness on both the

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wrongdoers and others. But the innocent are spared the everlastingly after-efects of inward guilt.

4. Sometimes those with an outward show of righteousness are actually deceiving no one as they attempt to use the cloak of religion without delving into the mental and spiritual mines from which true righteousness comes. A humorous story I heard recently illustrates how we church people may sometimes appear to others. According to this story, a not-too-propperous man was visiting New York City, and was taking a trip on one of the sight-seeing buses. As they passed one large but not exceptionally pretentious home the guide said "that's the residence of the heiress of the Woolworth millions." In surprise our hero said, "she surely doesn't live in that place, does she?" "O, yes indeed,". the guide said. Later the guide pointed out a large but old-fashioned mansion, saying that John D. Rockefeller, Jr., lived there. "Surely he doesn't live in such a place," said the tourist. "O yes, he does," the guide said. Later the home of J.C. Penney, as small as the home of any person of average moderate income, was pointed out. "You can't tell me Mr. Penny lives in that small place,"

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the man said. "O, but he does," said the guide. Still further in the trip the guide pointed out an imposing and towering structure, and told the passengers that this was the famous Christ Church. This time our doubtful passenger opened his mouth, but then decided to remain silent. A fellow passenger reached across the aisle and said, "Try again, fellow. You can't be wrong four times in a row."

Sometimes our action belies our claim that we are christian, and causes people to wonder about us, and about our churche The doubt and wonder is but the destruction of confidence in us brought about in result of our betrayal of our standards.

III. <u>In spite of all our wrong doings and mistakes, God's forgiveness is available for you and for me.</u>

1. Zephaniah, many of the other O.T. prophets, Jesus Himself, and the bulk of the New Testament are full of this testimony that God's forgiveness is available to people. This is the common theme of thought that binds the Bible together as the Book, even though actuall 66 Books.

2. The O.T. differs from the New in many ways as to how the forgiveness of

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God is obtained. In the O.T., for the most part, man has to do specific things like making certain sacrifices, has in effect to pay a price for his sins. In the N.T. the picture is of Jesus by his crucifixion paying the price for our sins. The total N.T. picture does away with the thought that we can pay for our wrong doings. Forgiveness is a gift from God to the believing and willing individual.

3. Protestants believe that the Roman Catholic system of penance in effect is placing a price on deeds, is more of an O.T. system than a Christian doctrine. Christ offers free salvation to those who will accept.

4. The O.T. prophets often came awfully close to the insights of the N.T. Although they did not break away from their sacrifices of bloody animals on an altar, they sometimes came near the insights of Jesus' disciples. Zephaniah's words of 3:2, our text, are "Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land who do his commands; seek righteousness, seek humility." And he goes on, "perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the wrath of the Lord." Certainly it is that to be able inwardly to accept the free grace of God we must "Seek the Lord," be humble, and do his commands.

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These things do not earn any gifts or save us from His wrath, as Zephaniah thought. Humility, righteousness and seeking God are attitudes we choose freely. Without them we can not recognize God's grace and forgiveness even when it is available.

5. Jesus gave a place in paradise to a man hanging on a cross by Him, because the man would accept it in humility. For no greater a price than humbly seeking him paradise is ours too.

Conclusion:

1. Zephaniah, the O.T. book, teaches that God severely punishes the wicked, but that this punishment can be escaped by those who humbly seek God and do His commandments.

2. Zephaniah is right, we believe, in that punishment and destruction come upon those who are unrighteous and ignore God.

3. We as Christians believe that not just Zephaniah's righteous remnant, but anyone and everyone has available to him God's forgiveness, in spite of all wrongs and mistakes.

4. There is always an approach to the freely-given forgiveness of God through humility and righteousness.

5. "Seek the Lord, all you humble of

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