

Introduction

It has amazed me how much of the progression of our study in the gospel according to Matthew has been so fitting for the days we have been experiencing. But I felt that coming back together after the long absence from one another that we should give attention to a text that speaks directly to the times in which we are living. Never before in our generation have we witnessed a catastrophe so wide-spread and so paralyzing as the current crisis.

Now I know there are many opinions out there and many differing thoughts about what has gone on and what is going on. To me it seems like we were warned of a storm the size of Texas and when it arrived it was more along the lines of Delaware. But nevertheless, there has been a significant loss of life associated with the corona virus. And there has been inestimable damage to both the American and the global economy. Due to the virus and the way it has been handled and the way governments have responded, people are hurting and suffering. We see personal financial loss, worry, fear, and conflict. Many ache within because of the separation we have had to endure over these past months. We have never seen anything like it. And it is not over. How long these protective measures will have to remain in place is yet to be seen. How long it will take the nation to return from a devastated economy is something we can only guess at. “Will we ever get back to normal?” is a question on the minds of many.

And yet there is a concern far deeper than any of these issues which is also far more important than any of them. And thankfully it is a concern about which we do not have to guess. We can be sure of the fact that God is addressing the world in general and his people in particular through this calamity, and we can have a very good idea of what he is saying. In the days of Joel the prophet, the nation of God’s people faced a similar situation and God spoke directly to them. What he said to the Judeans in that day is something we need to give attention to today.

[Read Scripture and Pray]

What we have just read is a word from God. It is not pretty and it is not uplifting, but it is just a word we need for our time. The people of the land

had experienced unprecedented disaster. And the word of God calls out to the people, people of every station in life. It calls to the leaders, the elders, and it calls to all the inhabitants of the land. It calls to the drunkards who generally bide their time in inebriation. It calls to the priests and ministers of the Lord, to the tillers of the soil, and the vinedressers. And there are three directives which the Lord God sets before them; they are three directives that need to be set before us.

The first directive is to . . .

I. Observe.

A. There are a number of imperatives or commands in this text. Several of these directives are poised to direct the people to mark well the situation in which they find themselves. The very first imperative in the text directs the people to listen up. "Hear this, you elders; give ear all inhabitants of the land!" It is like saying, "May I have your attention, please." But it is more direct and more commanding. This is not a request. It is a command that comes from the God who made the heavens and the earth and who brought these people to the promised land. He has shed his grace on these people. And clearly, they have ignored him. Their attention is not requested; it is commanded. They must listen up. It is a directive to take notice. It is like the many times when Jesus would say, "Truly, truly I say to you," or when he would say, "He who has ears, let him hear." It is a call to take special notice, to survey and soak in what they have seen.

B. The next imperative is directed at drunkards. "Wake up!" says the prophet. They are going to have to do so because there is no wine available to keep drinking. They are called to open their eyes from their delusional slumber and take note. Like it or not they are going to be sober because the wine has run out and they can no longer hide from reality.

C. From the drunkards the prophet turns to the priests and ministers of the Lord. He tells them to lament and mourn. He calls for deep sorrow on their part. Imagine a young woman betrothed to a man. He has died before they even came together and now her heart is deeply broken. That's the way the ministers of the Lord feel right now because of the terrible circumstances which have even affected the worship of God.

D. Then the prophet turns attention to the those who work in the fields and those who dress the vines. The tillers of the soil are told to be ashamed. The vinedressers are told to wail. Their livelihood and the pride, the fields and the vines they work are ravaged.

E. Why such arrest? Why such sorrow and mourning? Why shame and lament? Because of the magnitude of the horror of what the people observe as they awaken and sober up. These inhabitants are to observe that an unprecedented, staggering, and epic catastrophe has taken place in their land. Such a thing has taken place that surpasses the devastation anyone alive can recall. They are going to be talking about this devastation for generations to come. Judah has witnessed a cataclysmic swarm of locusts. The damage is complete. Nothing has been left untouched. They are insects, but they have come as though with the fangs of lions, and like a massive army have devoured every green thing there is. Ruined are the vines and the fig trees, the pomegranate, palm, and apple trees. Devastated are the fields where livestock once grazed. Fire has now come and burned off the pasture lands, and even the brooks are dried up. It appears that locusts and drought and fire have combined in a disaster of a lifetime. It is staggering.

Everyone is feeling the effects from one end of society to the other. The drunkards are out of wine. The people are out of food. And the house of the Lord is out of resources to make offerings, and joy and gladness have been removed from that place of worship. People are in distress; they are depressed. Their happiness is gone; it has been dried up. Even the beasts of the field are perplexed and suffer. This is ugly. It is alarming. It is disconcerting. This is a crisis, and the people are appalled.

Surely they could point to other disasters and other circumstances when times were hard, but the one before them now is epic. The consequences were social, economic, and even religious. And the Lord wants them to take it in. He wants them to observe the devastation. He does not want them to miss the horror. There is a message to be spoken in it that he does not want them to miss.

F. In the last two months, the circumstances have not been quite as dire for us as they were for the Jews in the day, but there are certain parallels, aren't there? Nothing like this in our lifetimes has taken place. Even when 9/11 happened, our attention was gripped but it did not change our everyday routines. Now we have had stay-at-home orders and massive job loss as a result. Multitudes of businesses small and large hang in the balance. Cities that normally bustle and never sleep have literally stood still and silent. Locusts may not have devoured our crops but there has been a lot of loss on the farms. Government has in many cases overstepped and many feel our freedoms have been threatened and trampled. If Jesus does not return soon and there are future generations, they will no doubt be looking back to 2020 the way we have looked back at the great depression.

And I can hear the voice of the Lord saying, "Hear this! Give ear! Listen up! Sober up! Wake up! Lament! Observe! Be ashamed; be appalled and mourn! Do not miss the horror of sickness and death! Do not fail to notice the economic, political, and interpersonal distress. Do not miss that you went into your homes to be with the church rather than to the regular meeting place. Do not miss it! Observe it deeply. Ponder it seriously. Mourn over it genuinely. And don't miss what God is saying.

The first directive is to observe. Now we turn to the second directive . . .

II. Understand.

A. Joel had a message from God for the people which he wanted them to understand. That message was that the devastation they observed all around them had a reason. It was not an accident. There may have been cause and effect explanations from a human standpoint. The scientists of today might have argued that it was all just a matter of science and nature, that God had nothing to do with this. No, wind patterns from the Sudan were the real culprit. That is what brought the hundreds of millions of fast reproducing locusts to Judea. Their outward and surface observations may have been accurate, but any observable factors could not change the fact that the devastation came on the land at the hand of God. This is what they must understand and not overlook.

Look at verse 15. Alas for the day! For the day of the Lord is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes.

Alas for the day! "Alas" is an exclamation of grief. The prophet is ascribing the terrible and mournful situation in which the people find themselves to God. God has done this. He has done it to get people's attention. He has done it to get the attention of the drunkards as well as the priests and the vintressers and tillers of the soil. He is shaking EVERYBODY up.

In fact if you look closely at what the prophet is saying, you will see that this unprecedented and horrific calamity is but a foretaste of an even more ominous day. In the midst of grieving the present circumstance, the prophet grieves the day of the Lord which he says is near. The Day of the Lord is a key theme in the scripture. The Day of the Lord is a day in which God breaks into the seeming normalcy of everyday life in an epic way, in spectacular fashion and shows himself demonstrably. It is a time, an instance in which God demonstrates that He is Holy God in profundity. It is a time of judgment for God's enemies and of blessing for God's people. There is no single day of the Lord but a number of days of the Lord. They all point to the final and consummate day of the Lord when he will judge the wicked and bring his righteous people home to glory and eternal blessing.

The day of devastation in which the prophet and the people were languishing was not the day of the Lord. But as with the day of the Lord, it was destruction from the Almighty. God is sovereign. He does what he pleases. He governs locusts and winds and viruses and mis-handling of viruses in laboratories. He rules over the king, holding the king's heart in his hand, directing it where he will. In Isaiah 45:7, the Lord says, "I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the Lord who does all these things." In Deuteronomy 28, the Lord was preparing the people as they were about to enter the Promised land. He urged them not to forget him. He assured the people that if they would remember the Lord and obey him, they would experience great blessing in the land. But if they would not obey the Lord, he would send curses upon them. The list of curses is incredibly long, but in the midst of that list, he specifies that he will send "confusion and frustration on all [they] undertake to do." He will make pestilence stick to them. He will strike them with wasting disease, with fever, inflammation, with fiery heat, and with drought.

The prophet understands that God has everything to do with the horrific situation which has seized the people. And he wants the people to know that God has everything to do with it. God has done it to get their attention as he had promised he would. And the prophet, considering the situation as bad as it is grieves the thought that the day of Lord is near because that day will be even worse. Looking at this situation, he wails, "Alas for the day of the Lord, which is near, the destruction from the Almighty."

B. We need to understand that Governor Andrew Cuomo is completely wrong when he declares "God had nothing to do with this." When we survey the devastation of everything associated with the coronavirus from its infecting lab workers in Wuhan, China to its spread across the globe, and from our being told masks are pretty much useless to be told by certain stores we can't come in without one; from lock-down orders to court challenges; the hands of God are all over this thing. Observing the havoc, we must understand that nothing happens apart from the sovereign hand of God. And he has his purpose in bringing such pestilence.

Especially when people have forsaken God, he has a message: Remember me! He is calling people whom he has created in his image to acknowledge that he has everything to do with this. Leaders need to perk their ears up. Drunkards need to sober up. Workers need to wake up. God's servants need to lead the way in acknowledging that God is issuing a wake up call to the world. You are not in control. You do not control your destiny. A strong one bigger than you is in charge and you better be ready to answer to him! And furthermore, understand that this situation is just a slight, little foreshadowing a far worse day to come.

C. The imperatives to listen and weep and mourn and be ashamed all point to the fact that sin is the reason for the trouble. Ultimately the sin of the people is to blame. God is a judge. He takes no pleasure in wickedness. Ultimately he destroys those who forsake him. That is all of us by nature. All human beings deserve nothing less than the unmitigated wrath of the Almighty and Holy God. We need to understand this. God's law aids us. You shall not have any other gods. Honor you father and your mother. You shall not murder, commit adultery, steal, lie, or covet. All of us are guilty.

To God be glory for sending his only Son to take our blame and pay our debt and reconcile with God all who will come to him in Jesus. All the curses of this present time cry out to us to prepare for the awful, awful day when humans give account and the fury of God is unleashed with unprecedented but righteous destruction. The only way to withstand that day is to be in the fortress of protection which is where you are if you are one with Jesus through faith.

Observe was the first directive. Understand was the second. The third is ...

III. Respond.

A. Some imperatives in the text direct folks to observe the devastation. Other imperatives direct them how to respond in light of it. These that focus on how to respond are concentrated in verse 14. Consecrate a fast. Call a solemn assembly. And cry out to the Lord. Each of these imperatives point to one basic thing: give your attention to God. He is the one who has done this and he is the only one who can help. The reason why he has brought the devastation is that people have turned away from him and forsaken him. And the only hope they have for restoration of any kind is to turn back to him.

They need to consecrate a fast. They need to replace even something so basic in their lives as eating food to instead seek God.

They need to call a solemn assembly. The people need to come together en masse to acknowledge that they bear responsibility for the situation. They have turned from God. They have abandoned and forsaken him for false gods, for the things of the world. They have ceased serving God and have been serving themselves. A solemn assembly recognizes that God is holy, that he is our creator and master and that we tried to set ourselves in his place. This is an assembly of repentant-hearted people. Their grief over their worldly losses is eclipsed by their grief over having forsaken God.

They need to cry out to the Lord. They need to stake their lives on his help. They need to demonstrate complete and utter dependence on him with sorrow over the lie of their own self sufficiency and dependency.

B. This is exactly what the present generation needs to do. God is being merciful in this pandemic and all the trappings of it. It is his mercy to shake people up. They need not to harden their hearts but soften their hearts toward God. This generation needs to repent. We live in evil days in the midst of evil people. It is no wonder that this horrific catastrophe has come upon the world and upon this land. It is no wonder that the destruction has been especially apparent in the United States of America—murder of the unborn, homosexuality, people marrying who are not supposed to and those who are supposed to marry refusing to marry, murder in general, deceit, covetousness, a refusal to acknowledge God let alone worship him, and all this in a country whose past privilege in the gospel is unsurpassed. The voice of God is crying out in these days. Turn to me. Leave your worldliness. Leave your drunkenness. Leave your immorality. Leave your idolatry. Turn in humility and solemnity to me, and cry out.

C. And it needs to begin with us. The turning needs to begin with the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. The solemn assembly is to be called for the purpose of prayer. Cry out to God. If anyone ought to lead the way in crying out to God, it ought to be the people of God. Prayer is the evidence that we depend on God. If I asked you if you depend upon God, you would probably say yes. But let me ask you this, “what is your prayer life like?” Is it sincere? Heartfelt? Earnest? Regular? Do you cry out to God? Do you acknowledge your absolute and utter dependence on God?

Many of us have spoken of how ready we are to get back to normal. But I would say to myself and to each us this morning that getting back to normal is the last thing Christians should want. If normal is a prosperity where we easily forget God and we live in a society that shuts God out, why would we want that? Let us get back to God. Let us be solemn. Let us humble ourselves and seek God’s face and turn from our wicked ways. Let us cry out to God. I heard a pastor say earlier this week, “The real need is not to get back to where we were 6 or 8 weeks ago; our real need is turn back to God.”

Conclusion

John Piper several years ago wrote a book entitled Don’t Waste Your Life. Later when he contracted cancer, he wrote an article bearing the title,

"Don't Waste your Cancer." In that same vein I would challenge each of us
"Don't waste the pandemic." Have you seen these last few months as
nuisance you just have to get past? Let me encourage you not to. If God
has not gotten your attention through the circumstances of this pandemic,
what is it going to take? You can't afford to wait because truth be told, this
is just the calm before the real storm.