

“REFLECTIONS ON PLAGUE AND PESTILENCE, III.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: I Chronicles 21:18 - 22:1

Prayer: Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the responses of all our hearts glorify you, exalt Jesus, honor your Word and edify your people according to our need. Come, Holy Spirit, help us I pray.

Introduction.

I don't know how many times I have read this story recorded twice in Scripture as I have read through the Bible, but never have I considered how much there is here for us especially in a time like ours.

We have already squeezed a lot of juice out of this story about David and the great pestilence. Today we will pick some more relevant fruit off of this tree.

We have already seen how God is in all that happens. God's anger was kindled against Israel because of her sin and disobedience and idolatry. God incited David through His agent Satan, to take a senseless census. Rather than count on God, David counted his fighting men.

We have seen the result of sin that leads to great suffering and lots of deaths. We have seen the sweeping impact of God's judgment and talked about the solidarity of suffering we are experiencing in this worldwide virus.

That solidarity of suffering really took a huge step forward in our community this week with the cancelation of the fair this August. My heart sank, what a blow to so many kids. Kids have been spared from the virus itself, but not from its effects.

Last week we talked about how sin always has consequences and leaders' sins impact whole nations. But we saw the great blessing and hope that is ours because with our God, mercy wraps around wrath and responds to repentance.

David manned up, he did what men do, he took responsibility. Sure, Israel was guilty, sure God brought this upon David and Israel because of Israel's guilt. But David took all the blame, Lord, lay this all on me. The buck stops here.

This is what Jesus did, He stepped up, took responsibility, was willing for God to lay all our sins on Him, to let the shepherd die for all of the sheep rather than all the sheep die.

This morning we are switching over to the parallel telling of this story in I Chronicles 21. Here the writer gives us a fuller description of what happens with more details. We will see three incredible results that come out of this great crisis.

First lesson, salvation comes by sacrifice.

Last week we reflected on a glimmer of good news in the midst of the crisis.

I Chronicles 21:15 God sent the angel to Jerusalem to destroy it, but as he was about to destroy it, the Lord saw, and he relented from the calamity. And he said to the angel who was working destruction, "It is enough; now stay your hand." And the angel of the Lord was standing by the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite.

But the crisis is not over, the problem is not solved, it is just put on hold. God's wrath was stayed, but it was not satisfied. The pestilence pauses for a moment, but something more must be done.

Through the prophet Gad, God makes clear that sacrifices were necessary to atone for David's and Israel's guilt. This is very clear when David tells Ornan why he must have the threshing floor, that the plague might be averted/held back.

Only after David offers a costly sacrifice, do things change and God answers and accepts the offering and God removes His wrath, the angel of death puts his sword back in its sheath.

Notice, God paused, God sent a prophet, God said what to do, God has directed and commanded an altar and a sacrifice, God provided a means for atonement. God in mercy provides a way for His wrath to be removed. His mercy first restrains and then removes His wrath.

Romans 3:23-26 All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 26 It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

People who think God is a mean, angry hateful God don't know God and haven't understood His whole nature. They don't know His mercy and grace and love and patience and compassion. They don't consider the lengths to which God has gone to show His mercy and grace.

Salvation belongs to God and it comes through sacrifice.

Hebrews 9:22 ... without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

He has given us an altar and a sacrifice. If God was intent on killing us, He would never have offered a way not to be killed. Jesus stops the destroying angel of death.

We are saved ultimately and finally by the costly sacrifice of Jesus. Those who are washed in the blood of Jesus and have all their sins forgiven will not face the ultimate death but receive eternal life.

Those who are not washed in the blood of Jesus will face the terrible wrath of the Judge of all mankind and eternal judgment. Nothing they have done in this life will be sufficient to save them. This world will only be saved from judgment by Jesus.

Second lesson, worship must not cost us nothing.

I Chronicles 21:24 “No, but I will buy them for the full price. I will not take for the Lord what is yours, nor offer burnt offerings [to the Lord my God] that cost me nothing.”

David is king. He could have just taken it. David could have taken it because God told him to build an altar and sacrifice there.

These are two generous and honorable men, each willing to give, to sacrifice, but if David had accepted Ornan's/Araunah's offer, it would have been Ornan's sacrifice.

David shows his heart here. Remember the saying, where your treasure is there your heart will be also. David's worship shows us his heart and his attitude toward God. And what he does exposes our own hearts and how a consumer mentality has crept into our worship.

What we give says something about the value we ascribe to our King. The investment we make says something about the value we place on our relationship with God. If I value Him little, I will give little, and do little, I will be causal, even careless in my worship.

This is a flesh vs. faith battle. Our flesh always wants to do less, to do as little as possible.

Our flesh always wants to be like Judas who criticized the woman who poured expensive perfume on Jesus' feet. Our flesh wants to hold back, but by faith we want to give. Our faith will lead us to not just do more, but even do the most. Like Abraham offering his son Isaac.

People who don't know what true faith and religion is, try to make it cheap and easy for themselves, thinking whatever is the least they can do is the best they can do.

What does our worship cost us? What does our worship show about our hearts? What does our worship say about the value and worth we give to God?

David was cut to the heart in that great pestilence and he responded with a changed heart. David was a man after God's own heart, and he resolved that we would never offer to God worship that cost him nothing. Are we after God's own heart? Does it show in our worship?

In this crisis we are under the heavy hand of God. This is a season for reflection, for changing, for reevaluating, for examining priorities and values, for looking at our spiritual fruit.

Are we asking new questions and resolving to do things differently?

Are we feeling the sting of God's rebuke, is He pricking our conscience?

Are we talking with our spouse or friends about how God might be trying to get our attention?

What is truly important, what matters more than anything else, what does all of this have to say about what is eternal, truly lasting? What is our impulse and motive in worship? Love for God or love for self?

Have we been offering worship to God that costs us nothing or very little? Has God totally disrupted our worship to open your eyes to how we have been worshiping? Have we grown casual, careless, more consumer minded, taking rather than giving? When God allows us to gather back together what will be different?

Will we spend any time during the week in worship, reading, praying? Will we spend any time on Saturday or Saturday evening preparing our hearts for worship? Will we change what we are doing or watching Saturday night? How late are we going to bed?

And when we are in worship, will we be more engaged? Will we sing our praises to the Lord in a heartfelt manner? Will we ask God to speak to our minds and change our hearts?

Will we come to fellowship with God's people before and after worship, even come downstairs to encourage one another? Will we be fine if the worship goes longer?

Will we no longer offer worship that has cost us nothing but tangibly show our love for Him and show our love for His church?

A gift which costs nothing reveals a lack of faith in Jesus and a lack of love for Jesus and a lack of value for the majesty and glory of God and the salvation He has given you, that He has held back the sword of death from your soul. Don't be a person who worships God in a way that costs you nothing. Don't be a person whose worship looks like you love money more than God. Don't be a person who pretends to give an offering when the offering bag passes by.

Will we remind ourselves and our family we are not going to church, we are going to worship the living God and hear the Word of God, and make a sacrifice pleasing to Him?

Third lesson, God brings good out of evil.

If God is good, and He is, and if God is all powerful, and He is, then He is able to bring good out of all things. Whatever is evil, He ultimately must use for good.

This judgment from God and David's repentance and obedience leads to a great discovery in the purposes of God. This very place where God stopped the angel, this threshing floor where a sacrifice was made, this is the place God ordained to be the site of His Temple.

This is Mt. Moriah where God stayed Abraham's hand from slaying his son. As Abraham lifted the sword against his son, so the angel lifted the sword against Jerusalem. In both cases God provided a sacrifice to spare life.

We started this series of sermons saying the invisible hand and plan of God is behind everything and we end with another demonstration of this powerful reality.

Brothers and sisters, God never wastes anything. God never wastes an opportunity, a crisis, a pain, a suffering, a life-changing or world-changing event. God uses everything and He turns it toward His redemptive purposes.

Can you testify to seeing the good hand of God? Can you see blessings arising out of all of this?

"Cultivate the holy habit of seeing the hand of God in everything that happens to you" (Pink). This is how you improve your sufferings, improve your heartaches. Parents talk to your kids about the things they are suffering because of this virus, schools closed, graduations missed, time with friends gone, no fair, vacations changed. Talk about where God is in this, pray and ask God to show you what He is doing. God never wastes anything, let us not waste this.

What has God been showing you in the past weeks? Are you looking, asking, paying attention?

More family time. Less busy, more meals together.

Less TV, less obsession with sports.

Fewer distractions, more focused on priorities.

More appreciation for what teachers do.

More appreciation for those who put themselves in harm's way for us in hospitals and care facilities.

More appreciation for the challenges that face our elected leaders and how glad we don't have to make all those decisions under so much scrutiny and criticism.

Much more appreciation for cooperate worship and our church family whom we miss.

More sympathy for those who are shut in all the time.

More empathy for those in other countries who live like this all the time.

More sober contemplation of death and our eternal future.

God is behind the virus and the response, behind Covid-19 and all the government reactions, stimulus, bailouts, lockdowns, executive orders and everything that ripples out from them.

God is doing what He wants to do, the way He wants to do it, and on His terms and according to His timetable.

What God brings out of evil always glorifies Him. And what glorifies God becomes a blessing and benefit to us. All the glory of God seen on the cross comes to us in profoundly generous blessing and everlasting benefit.

Out of a pestilence that struck down 70,000 men in Israel God raised up a meeting place between Him and His people.

The crowning conclusion to the story is when the angel puts his sword back into its sheath. What a glory to God moment. What grace, what kindness and mercy.

This is the experience every human being needs to experience. This is the Gospel. When God accepts the sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf and the sword of death and God's justice and wrath that hung over our heads is removed and the sting and victory of death is overcome by the redemptive and atoning sacrifice of Jesus.

When God wants to do something new, He always starts the same, with the Gospel, with the conviction of sin, and the revelation of Jesus Christ as our only hope for forgiveness and life.

Implications and application.

Wow, what a story! It has so much to say to all of us in our day. God anticipated this.

God is God and He is Lord over pestilences.

God has purposes and plans for pestilences even when they come about by sin.

God is a God of both wrath and mercy, and His mercy controls and limits His wrath.

God provides a way of deliverance and atonement, a way to satisfy His wrath.

God is all powerful and all good, and by His power He overrules evil to work for good.

God brings lasting good out of this pestilence, the Temple, the meeting place of God with man.

When the angel of death sheaths his sword, that is a glorious thing.

When God's just and righteous and justly deserved wrath against us is averted, appeased, propitiated, taken away, put on another, paid in full, that is a most glorious day.

That is cause for worship, for excessive, expensive, costly worship. Worship that shows what our hearts really feel toward to great and glorious and good a God. Worship that shows He is worthy, worship that says, "I love you, God."

Worship that shouts triumphantly:

"Unto God Almighty, sitting on the throne,
And the Lamb, victorious, be the praise alone."
God has wrought salvation; He did wondrous things.
Who shall not extol thee, holy King of kings!