

God and the Nations

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“Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh: is there anything too hard for me?” — *Jeremiah 32:27*.

The world is at its extremity, seemingly a hopeless extremity. We have international strife; there is corruption in the body politic; personal morality drags in the gutter; confusion if not treachery is exhibited by world leaders. The ominous rhythm of marching hosts is the insistent undertone of daily events. The fires of Moloch glow red for the sacrifice of the world's finest youth. Men's hearts are failing them for fear, and even Christians despair of the noble experiment called civilization.

The world's sin-sickness seems past remedy. The world is done! — burnt out at the center by the raging fire of sin, and soon to be burnt up by the judgment of an angry God. Can God prevail against the sweeping tides of sin without utterly destroying the earth in cataclysmic judgment?

THE BLIGHT OF SIN

I have seen the blight of sin on the nations of Europe. I have seen the destruction that an unholy war has wrought on great cities such as London—a destruction that swept homes as well as munitions factories, that snuffed out the lives of babes and helpless children along with criminals, that wrecked churches along with brothels.

And I have seen the wreckage of Berlin, so vast that decades and generations will be required to remove the rubble and rebuild; and scars will remain for the duration of time. Great areas of Berlin have been pounded to powder. Proud monuments that once vaunted German conquests have been laid low. This great city, built upon sandy, marshy flats, is to have its mountain, built of non-salvable rubble. The vast base of that mountain has already been laid and trucks carry the city's debris up a serpentine road to the mountain's

growing summit. Yes, Berlin is building a mountain of its ruins, a costly monument to sin's madness.

I have seen Dachau, utterly depressing, where multiplied thousands of Hitler's victims died by horrible violence. I have seen Dachau's death chamber, its gas chamber, its crematory furnaces, the place of execution by pistol fire, the base of the old gallows, and the "hanging tree" now itself dead — a stark, somber ghost. I have read the Dachau motto over the door, "Never again!" But I cannot escape the haunting lesson that Dachau teaches concerning the corruption of unregenerate human nature, nor its warning that wickedness "on the loose" is capable of future multiplied Dachaus.

Drop down the map of Europe to Rome. In the suburbs of this ancient city I have seen the cave to which hundreds of Rome's residents disappeared mysteriously from the city's streets during World War II, their mangled and decomposed bodies later to be discovered where Hitler's machine-guns had poured a stream of lead into the cavern's mass of humanity in wholesale murder.

And near this modern cave of horrors I have groped my way along the subterranean galleries of the catacombs where early Christians gathered in the presence of thousands of their dead to worship God in secret with a measure of uncertain safety.

I have looked across the Circus Maximus to the Palace of the Caesars on the Palatine Hill. From the balconies of that Palace, royalty cheered as Christians in the circus below were torn apart by the lions.

Below the Palace of the Caesars on the opposite side of the Palatine Hill I have seen the ruins of the Roman Forum with its remnants of the Basilica Julian where the Apostle Paul was tried and condemned to death. And I have followed portions of the course by which Paul was led from the city through a gate now named in his honor; and outside the city walls I have looked upon the spot where his head rolled from his body as his neck was cleft asunder by the executioner's ax.

The evidences of brutality, of bestiality, of lust and violence are many in this sin-fevered world.

GOD'S JUDGMENT UPON SIN

There are evidences also of God's judgment upon sin. The glory that was Rome has faded. The empire of the Caesars has

been brought to judgment in history, and the Caesars themselves now suffer the judgments of eternity. Mussolini, who would be successor to the Caesars, has been judged, and the balcony from which he loved to address Italy in the presence of the great monuments of history is today just another balcony, silent and ordinary.

Distant rumblings of judgment against the Church that has so betrayed the tender and compassionate Christ, and has perverted the simple faith of Rome's early martyrs, can now be heard before that judgment strikes in fury. Humanly, there is no hope for Italy's oppressed masses, and revolution can be averted only by a reforming revival of religion.

God's judgment was visited upon the wicked city of Pompeii nearly nineteen centuries ago. This ancient city of great wealth and culture was overtaken at the height of its prosperity by a strange doom which preserved it for exploration in our day. I have walked the streets of this excavated city, and have viewed its baths, and have seen its temple ruins, and have looked through its houses. The elaborateness of domestic arrangements, the magnificence and elegance of the city's dwellings, and the advanced development even of its plumbing amaze and humble the modern traveler.

But coupled with luxury and advanced civilization in Pompeii was a moral corruption, the evidences of which was sealed by the city's doom to be opened in modern times — such evidence of corruption that guides may not disclose it to mixed groups even in this sophisticated age. Yes, judgment for its vileness came upon Pompeii, even as upon Sodom in the days of Lot.

Modern history speaks of judgment as well. In those long years of the early 'forties the judgment of Hitler seemed to tarry, but now in the sweeping perspective of history how brief was Hitler's day of dominance. Near the Austrian border in southeastern Bavaria, I was taken by Chaplain R. C. Hayes and military car up a lovely mountain-side of the Bavarian Alps — lovely until we reached a scene of weird desolation and destruction. We came first upon a great hotel in ruins; this had been Hitler's mountain guest-house. Above these ruins we saw the shattered barracks of Hitler's proud storm-troopers. Then we drove to the back yard of Hermann Goering's once lovely mountain home, now desolate in stark ruins. Nearby we explored the massive wreckage of Hitler's palatial villa.

A few days later in Berlin, three or four hundred miles to the north, I looked from an American army bus in the Communist

sector upon the site of the Chancellery and saw, lifted above the debris, the concrete bunkers Hitler had built for his last-ditch safety and that of his intimates. Here Hitler met his death. He has been judged in history; he is being judged in eternity!

But there is the irony of Paris: proud Paris; gay Paris; wicked Paris; seemingly untouched by war and maintaining yet her beauty. There sin, unblushing, walks abroad. Why a wrecked London, a ruined Liverpool, a blasted Naples, a shattered Munich, a pulverized Berlin, when sinful Paris swaggers still in impudent freedom from judgment?

When I recall Paris, I share the Psalmist's complaint against the wicked whom he saw "in great power and spreading himself like a green bay tree." But judgment, although delayed, is certain, and one day the Psalmist's further words concerning the wicked will be applied to Paris: "Yet he passed away, and, lo, he was not: the end of the wicked shall be cut off."

In the face of all the evil of the world, can God establish righteousness? Can He save our civilization from destruction and mankind from collapse into savagery?

THE LESSON FROM JEREMIAH

More and more I am convinced that we find answers to the world's great problems in the revealed Word, not by blind chance which opens the Bible to particular passages to be taken out of their context and literally applied, but by intelligent and reverent study of the Word to discover and apply its great underlying truths, its sweeping compelling convictions.

On my home ward voyage I was forcibly struck by a passage from Jeremiah, and as later I reflected thereon my European experiences assumed the perspective I now attempt to convey to others.

In Jeremiah's day affairs in Judah were in an exceedingly sad state. Following a period of reform under the good king, Josiah, the nation quickly and completely backslid into idolatry and rebellion against the law. Josiah's reforms had not been spiritual revival; he had imposed and enforced outward righteousness upon a people whose hearts had not been changed, and after his death the reaction was extreme.

By nature Jeremiah was timid and retiring, but the call of God was upon him and with unswerving loyalty he carried out God's

commission, "thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatever I command thee thou shalt speak." Jeremiah's devotion to God and God's people led him to say hard things, declaring the judgments of God against sin and rebellion. For this he was rejected by his nation, his village, his family. Having prophesied that Jerusalem would fall under the siege that had been laid against it by the Chaldeans, Jeremiah was imprisoned for alleged treason.

Under such circumstances God instructed him to purchase a piece of land in his family village of Anathoth near Jerusalem. Ever obedient, Jeremiah complied, notwithstanding the impending fall of the city following which, no doubt, property would be confiscated by the conquerors and the inhabitants of the city would be carried away captive.

The record as given in the thirty-second chapter tells how Jeremiah bought the land from a kinsman, weighed out to him the silver, and executed "the evidence of the purchase" in duplicate before witnesses. He then instructed Baruch, his scribe, to deposit these documents in an earthen vessel for preservation according to the practice of those times. "For thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; houses and fields and vineyards shall be possessed again in this land."

What a meaningless transaction: a prisoner for treason, buying land in a doomed city with all the legal technicalities and formalities that would be proper if Judah and Jerusalem were to stand forever! It seems that after the transaction Jeremiah himself was tested in his faith, and went to the Lord in prayer. His opening declaration, even by its strong assertion, suggests the temptation to doubt that assailed him. He exercised his "will to believe," as did the man who once said to Jesus, "Lord, I believe: help thou mine unbelief." Here are Jeremiah's words:

"Oh, Lord God! behold, thou hast made the heaven and the earth by thy great power and stretched out arm, and there is nothing too hard for thee." (v. 17)

The prophet proceeded to review the cause of God's gracious dealings with Judah, Judah's miserable backsliding, and the judgment that was about to fall upon Jerusalem. He concludes:

"And thou hast said unto me, O Lord God, 'Buy thee the field for money, and take witnesses;' for (whereas) the city is given into the hand of the Chaldeans." (v. 25)

And God answered in the words that prefaced our opening and which we now repeat:

“Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh: is there anything too hard for me? (v. 27)

Then the Lord reviewed the backslidings of Judah, but added:

Men shall buy fields for money, and subscribe evidences, and seal them, and take witnesses in the land of Benjamin, and in the places about Jerusalem, and in the cities of Judah, and in the cities of the mountains, and in the cities of the valley, and in the cities of the south: for I will cause their captivity to return, saith the Lord. (v. 44) . . . Again there shall be heard in this place which ye say shall be desolate without man and without beast, even in the cities of Judah, and in the streets of Jerusalem . . . the voice of joy, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voice of them that shall say, “Praise the Lord of hosts: for the Lord is good; for his mercy endureth forever . . .” (33:10-11 in part)

Thus Jeremiah preached and prophesied not only God’s judgments, but likewise His love and mercy. From the sad aftermath of Josiah’s reforms, Jeremiah well knew the futility of moral reform without spiritual rebirth, and through him God already had declared the New Covenant:

“I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.” (31:33)

Jeremiah’s obedience in purchasing the field under the very shadow of judgment on Judah’s violation of the Old Covenant was a dramatic assertion of his faith in the New Covenant. God has never abrogated the New Covenant, but rather has reaffirmed it in the record of the New Testament again and again.

GOD CAN!

Men once claimed the support of Scripture for a doctrine of personal determinism according to which many were elected to damnation. Reaction followed this harsh doctrine, giving dominance to a doctrine of inevitable progress consummating in a millenium of righteousness. But under this delusion of beneficent determinism the social order rapidly descended into paganism until explosive eruptions of savagery dispelled this blind faith in inevitable progress.

Let us not stumble into yet a third fatalistic error toward which the prevailing mood of theological reaction tends. I refer to that dispensational determinism which paralyzes Christian faith by its despair of the gospel’s power in our age to meet human need

through spiritual revival and social reform born of revival, and which admits no alternative to early destruction of the present world-order by God's inexorable judgment against sin.

God is not yet done with man on this earth if only man will accept God's claim upon him. Let it again be said — God has not abrogated the New Covenant. He awaits man's response to proffered mercy that He may validate that covenant in this desperate day. God's judgments do no violence to His mercy, for those judgments may be averted by man's repentance, even as the promises of God are contingent upon man's obedience. If we but listen, we shall hear with Jeremiah the Lord's promise, "I will cause their captivity to return", and "Again there shall be heard the voice of joy, and the voice of gladness, the voice of them that shall say, Praise the Lord of hosts: for the Lord is good; for his mercy endureth forever"

Christians have no business closing shop and yielding to the paralysis of despair because sin abounds, for where sin abounds there may grace much more abound. Rather than submerging me in pessimism, my experiences and observations in Europe have challenged my faith, and my courage was inspired by tokens of God's grace bestowed even in the midst of wretchedness and sin.

In Germany Pastor Scholz is carrying on a great work even in the Russian Zone where he superintends Methodist churches. During the war he was bombed out of his church and home in the heart of Berlin, but from the rubble and ruin of the former church has arisen a greater church as the center of German Methodism.

In Berlin also I visited Bible institutes or seminars which train young women for child evangelism. Many of the students are war orphans from the Russian Zone who courageously return to their own people to serve in kindergartens, recreation centers and in home evangelism.

I have expressed my perplexity that Paris seemingly has escaped judgment. Is it because of the "ten righteous"? For in Paris I found the "City of Refuge" — a great Salvation Army center where the gospel of redemption is preached. There I heard radiant testimonies and a gospel message under which seekers knelt at an old-fashioned penitent form. This in wicked Paris!

In poor, priest-ridden Italy, under the shadow of Vesuvius and near the beautiful Bay of Naples, I was guest in a one-time fashionable villa where now a school is conducted for former

priests and seminarians of Catholicism who are seeking to become Protestant preachers. And I have preached to an eager and responsive mission audience gathered from a wretched boat-building suburb of Naples where courageous workers challenge the Church of Rome with the gospel.

In Methodism's Central Hall, London, I attended sessions of the city-wide evangelistic campaign, organized to give a spiritual emphasis to the Festival of Britain. There I heard searching gospel messages, one of them by the Anglican Bishop of Barking.

The program of the World Conference of Methodism in Oxford commemorated in large measure the man whose heart-warming thawed England from the icy chill of the religious formalism of the 18th century, and sparked a revival to produce radical moral and social reforms that swung the entire course of English history from its former road to revolution. A high point of the Oxford conference was the sermon by Dr. Sangster which held spell-bound a crowded house as he gave in clear outline the essentials of the Methodist message. A second mountain-peak was reached in a morning session on evangelism when Professor Pawson brought the most spiritually stirring message of the ten days. In the holy hush that followed the climaxing conclusion, the chairman with great discernment called on the speaker to lead in prayer. And we were lifted to the very throne of God!

I have seen the pulpits, outdoor and indoor, of Wesley and Whitefield; the market-cross and the tomb of Wesley's father at Epworth where John Wesley preached; City Road Chapel in London and the site of the Foundery which preceded it as Methodism's center; the New Room at Bristol; Whitefield's chapel in Bristol and another he built in the Kingswood suburb; the site of the brick-fields in Bristol where John Wesley yielded his high-church prejudices and first preached in the fields — O so many places have I trod where the early saints of Methodism walked and labored and preached and suffered — and proved that God could deliver from evil and corruption in the eighteenth century, and will stay His judgments when men repent!

How then can I doubt that all this will happen again in the twentieth century if God can find yielded human channels and if men will respond with repentance to the offer of grace! As in Paul's day, and again in Wesley's, the gospel in our day is the power of God unto salvation.