

THE



“The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few: pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he would send forth laborers into his harvest” (Luke 10:2)

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A TIME SUCH AS THIS

Shortly into 2020 we were met with unusual circumstances in the coronavirus pandemic. We saw businesses and services around us closed and halted as we would have never expected. Sadly, such recommendations and mandates, in some cases, hit our congregations. During this time I was asked if I was still attending services. I said I was, and I was met with an unusual question worded to the extent of “how could you go to Church at a time like this?” Despite the obvious drift of our nation and its youth further from God, as well as a growing intolerance towards people who hold religious beliefs, this

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question was somewhat surprising. How could we be considering God and our service to Him at a time such as this?

An unfortunate reality is that for many of our congregations, the idea of social distancing is not hard to accommodate. After all, when is the last time we've seen the building full even before we were concerned about viral transmission? In one sense, having a large enough building with a small congregation bodes well for distancing, but in another sense it speaks to the state of God's Church. Is the Church following along with the world surrounding us; being less interested, less faithful, and increasingly doubtful in His existence, works, and glory?

For our past generations who have lived through historical events, including the Great Depression and World Wars among others, this pandemic may have been another highly unfortunate time in a lifetime with no shortage of tough times and hardships. We've heard parents, grandparents, and great grandparents tell us of those times; a near constant anxiety and nervousness, because it seemed like every day mail was coming in reporting the death of another community member overseas. For our younger generations, this may have been the first or only time to see entire nations seemingly held hostage by the fear and reality of an event. My, how different today's generation has handled hardships, real or perceived.

Most of us are familiar with how our recent generation can be described in Revelation 3 with the letter to the Laodiceans. Perhaps the harshest condemnation in this letter is how proud the Laodiceans are, particularly in the Laodiceans' assumption of great achievement noted in Revelation 3:17:

Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked:

Their location among major trade routes contributed to the Laodiceans' wealth. There's little doubt that those of us in the United States are living in history's richest, freest, most prosperous nation, but the criticism towards the Laodiceans' riches

are beyond having material wealth. The Laodiceans thought they needed nothing; they had figured things out. Perhaps they were proud of this. This sounds familiar. In recent decades, our generations have decided they have become smarter, often believing they've become too smart for God. This is how Paul described those who didn't recognize God or His works, instead ascribing the works of God around them as some pagan deity or intangible philosophical mysterious force, such as "divine reason." Ultimately, God has revealed himself to all, but the individual has denied Him or called Him and His works something else:

For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith. For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things. Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves: Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen. (Rom. 1:17-25)

Further complicating the Laodiceans was a tumultuous time in history. To summarize in broad strokes, around the time of the

penning of Revelation the Roman emperor Domitian declared himself a god. To refuse to worship him as a god would be met with persecution. How would the Laodiceans respond to the threat of persecution? They could remain steadfast and refuse such idolatrous behavior, potentially at the risk of their wealth via their trade associations. They could completely turn their backs towards God and become ardent Domitian idolaters. Or, they could do a little of both; walk a fine line, even. What did the Laodiceans eventually do? It sounds as if they chose to go down the middle (Rev. 3:15-16). Maybe they called it being diplomatic or politically correct.

The attitude of the Laodiceans (and today's generation) is perhaps most alarming when compared to the Church in Philadelphia in Revelation 3:8-10:

I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name. Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee. Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth.

We're facing hard times now, but hard times are nothing new in history, especially not to God's people. We're met with uncertainty about the future. This too is nothing new. Unfortunately, today we seem to greet the unknown with fear and anxiety. Just as noted above in Paul's letter to the Romans

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and the description of the Laodiceans above, we turn to many places for comfort - friends, family, self-help books, our great “knowledge,” our riches, our government, etc. Sadly, we wait until we’ve exhausted all other options before we turn to God. We’ve put more trust in ourselves and worldly institutions than we have in God. Despite the personal tragedies we’ve endured, none can come close to the pain and suffering Jesus endured. How frustrating to have lived a sinless life only to be betrayed and denied by those closest to Him and then to suffer a painful torturing death. Knowing this, Jesus turns to God in the prayer in Gethsemane. Even given the power to avoid these sufferings, Jesus shows us the attitude we’re to have throughout our hard times in Matthew 26:39: “...O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.”

An author once posited that hard times can create good people, good people can create good times, but the good times can weaken people, and weakened people create hard times. Where do you think we are in this vicious cycle? It’s been attributed to Julius Caesar to have said that it’s less difficult to find men willing to die than it is to find men willing to endure pain patiently. Peter notes similarly, when we suffer despite “not deserving it,” God would have us to do so patiently (1 Pet. 2:19-20):

For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God.

What does this have to do with us? Let’s take an honest look around us in the Church. We’re losing the Philadelphians. Are the Laodiceans ready to pick up the mantle? Our congregations are shrinking, our zeal is disappearing, our knowledge is decreasing, and our resolve is weakening. Right now our biggest problem is a pandemic. It’s a real problem and one with real ramifications. I’m making no suggestion to take it lightly.

However, we would be foolish to think it gets easier. More hard times are coming in the future. Are we, as Christians, ready to face these trials as individuals; as a congregation? Whether we believe we're prospering or suffering, our service to God should never waver. In times of uncertainty and great fear, lukewarmness, doubt, and fear are not acceptable to God. As Mordecai told Esther, perhaps God put us here "*for such a time as this*" (Est. 4:14). So, answering the question originally posed to me months ago, how could we consider the Church at a time like this - how can we afford not to?

BEN

JOSEPH

We all know the story of Joseph. He was the son of Jacob (also known as Israel) and had ten older brothers and one younger one.

Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of many colours. And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him. And Joseph dreamed a dream, and he told it his brethren: and they hated him yet the more. And he said unto them, Hear, I pray you, this dream which I have dreamed: For, behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and, lo, my sheaf arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your sheaves stood round about, and made obeisance to my sheaf. And his brethren said to him, Shalt thou indeed reign over us? or shalt thou indeed have dominion over us? And they hated him yet the more for his dreams, and for his words. And he dreamed yet another dream, and told it his brethren, and said, Behold, I have dreamed a dream more; and, behold, the sun and the moon and the eleven stars made obeisance to me. And he told it to his father, and to his brethren: and his father rebuked him,

and said unto him, What is this dream that thou hast dreamed? Shall I and thy mother and thy brethren indeed come to bow down ourselves to thee to the earth? And his brethren envied him; but his father observed the saying. (Gen. 37:3-11)

And when they saw [Joseph] afar off, even before he came near unto them, they conspired against him to slay him. And they said one to another, Behold, this dreamer cometh. Come now therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into some pit, and we will say, Some evil beast hath devoured him: and we shall see what will become of his dreams. And Reuben heard it, and he delivered him out of their hands; and said, Let us not kill him. And Reuben said unto them, Shed no blood, but cast him into this pit that is in the wilderness, and lay no hand upon him; that he might rid him out of their hands, to deliver him to his father again. And it came to pass, when Joseph was come unto his brethren, that they stript Joseph out of his coat, his coat of many colours that was on him; And they took him, and cast him into a pit: and the pit was empty, there was no water in it. (Gen. 37:18-24)

And they sat down to eat bread: and they lifted up their eyes and looked, and, behold, a company of Ishmeelites came from Gilead with their camels bearing spicery and balm and myrrh, going to carry it down to Egypt. And Judah said unto his brethren, What profit is it if we slay our brother, and conceal his blood? Come, and let us sell him to the Ishmeelites, and let not our hand be upon him; for he is our brother and our flesh. And his brethren were content. Then there passed by Midianites merchantmen; and they drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the Ishmeelites for twenty pieces of silver: and they brought Joseph into Egypt. (Gen. 37:25-28)

But do you know the rest of the story? Joseph was sold into slavery but rose into power by gaining trust with the Pharaoh after interpreting his dreams.

And the patriarchs, moved with envy, sold Joseph into Egypt: but God was with him, And delivered him out of all his afflictions, and gave him favour and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house. Now there came a dearth over all the land of Egypt and Chanaan, and great affliction: and our fathers found no sustenance. But when Jacob heard that there was corn in Egypt, he sent out our fathers first. And at the second time Joseph was made known to his brethren; and Joseph's kindred was made known unto Pharaoh. Then sent Joseph, and called his father Jacob to him, and all his kindred, threescore and fifteen souls. So Jacob went down into Egypt, and died, he, and our fathers, And were carried over into Sychem, and laid in the sepulchre that Abraham bought for a sum of money of the sons of Emmor the father of Sychem. (Acts 7:9-16)

Joseph's brothers were jealous of Him. Jealousy has been described as the Green-Eyed Monster and is a major cause of sin. As Christians we should always do our best not to covet and to be content with all that God has given to us.

Based on a sermon by MIKE DANIEL
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SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES

1. What was the name of the field where Abraham buried his wife?
2. From which country did Solomon import horses?
3. In Zechariah, the prophet has a vision of a man riding a red horse and standing among what kind of tree?
4. How many wise men does the Bible say came to visit the baby Jesus?
5. Jesus appeared to his disciples after the resurrection beside which sea?

ANSWERS NEXT MONTH