

Blow the trumpet in Zion

What do you expect from God? The answer to that question depends on how you see God.



Michael Olmsted

Is God otherwise occupied or perhaps distracted when difficulty replaces the expected blessing or immunity from heartache? Are God's people excused or isolated from evil in this broken world? Life is neither simple nor easy. No matter how hard you try, God cannot be compressed into our finite preferences. Praise God, neither can his love or grace be reduced to a philosophical formula.

In the first chapter of Joel the prophet tells a horrifying story of unbelievable destruction by locusts that leaves the land utterly barren. The surprise in this story is not characterizing that plague as God's punishment for sin but a call for Israel to see beyond the disaster to what God will do for his people if they open their heart to God.

The easiest response to tragedy is to focus on our guilt and piously announce we deserve punishment for our evil. Without debating who deserves what from God, why not consider the numerous instances and specific scriptural references to God's mercy, compassion, patience, love and healing grace? I remember the day President Kennedy was assassinated and hearing a preacher announce this was God's punishment for America's sin. Years later at the tragedy of 9-11, we heard that same pronouncement.

Joel immediately moves beyond the locust tragedy of chapter one to a word of hope: "Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your hearts, with fasting, with weeping, and with sorrow...return to the Lord your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, very patient, full of faithful love, and ready to forgive."

I am not suggesting we deny the importance of responsibility or repentance, but that we open mind and

heart freely to the God who makes his love abundantly available in the person of Jesus Christ. Joel reminds the people that this locust plague is only the beginning of even greater catastrophes that will culminate in a final judgment day (Joel 2:1-3, 11). So this is much more than a simple "confess your sin and God will make everything wonderful again!"

We usually react to tragedy either by turning to God or away from God. What Joel is suggesting is that whatever we face this is an opportunity to deepen our faith and truly trust God in everything.

Joel reminds us that our God is caring and compassionate. We are never promised immunity from the tragedies of this world, but we are promised that God is always with us and the conclusion will be his when Christ returns. God is patient. One of the reasons I love the Psalms is their inclusion of human frustration, pain and even anger as the writer finally sings the ultimate melody of God's unending love for us.

The cross is the ultimate expression of that love and the resurrection is the assurance. Grace means God will not forget or forsake us. God's forgiveness is not a limited gift that he will cancel. We need God's forgiveness every day. We read the ancient stories of Israel and wonder why God kept reaching out to them in their unfaithfulness. We should examine ourselves and realize God is just as steadfast in his forgiveness to us.

Joel calls God's people to a special assembly, to fast, repent, sacrifice and pray. He speaks of that day when the world will see they are God's people. God will once again send them "corn, new wine, and fresh oil, and (they) will be fully satisfied...and will no longer be a disgrace among the nations" (v. 19). Plus, God will drive out any army that threatens them (v. 20). "The Lord is about to do great things!" (v. 21). God's covenant promises have not changed. When God's people turn back to him his grace will replace their fear with hope.

Formations

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Scripture: Joel 2:12-21

Many times Jesus was asked if specific sins caused a death or illness. Some asked Jesus if the collapse of a tower that killed 18 people was the fault of those killed. Jesus turned that question back on those asking when he said: "Unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did" (Luke 13:1-5). On another occasion, Jesus was asked if a man blind from birth was in that condition because he or his parents sinned. Jesus answered that this tragedy was not punishment for anyone's sin but an opportunity for God's healing (love and restoration) to be shown (John 9:1-3).

It appears that whatever tragedy strikes our world it is appropriate for us to seek God's help and restoration. As a part of this fallen creation we must remind ourselves that we cannot solve all the problems, sort out the blame or make perfect judgments. But we can always seek the help of God who has proven he loves us.

We are told to trust God with all our heart. Have you reached that point? God fully understands we are human! Do you remember the heartfelt cry of the father of the epileptic boy brought to Jesus? He cried out, "I do believe; help me in my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). God understands our fears and uncertainties. He will help us grow in faith.

The evil and brokenness of this world should become reminders pointing us to "the day of the Lord." The locust scourge called Israel back to faith in God and a witness to his grace. In these days of violence and religious wars there is a desperate need for the good news of Jesus Christ. That need is real in the United States and on every continent. Our calling is to "blow the trumpet."

Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.