

Does Disaster Come to a City Unless the LORD Has Done It?

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Amos 3:6 “*Is a trumpet blown in a city and the people are not afraid? Does disaster come to a city unless the LORD has done it?*”

Our morning daily readings from *Tabletalk* by my wife and me (we read alternative paragraphs) have been taking us through the letters to the Thessalonians, and this week we read 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 and verse 2 (that is an easy verse to remember with all those 2’s) and Paul says there that he does not want us Christians to be ‘*shaken in mind or alarmed.*’ But that is the emotional condition of much of the world in the year of our Lord 2020. So, knowing how contagious are the fears of the world in affecting the people of God, I have chosen to draw your attention to this well known verse in Amos 3 and verse 6 “*Is a trumpet blown in a city and the people are not afraid? Does disaster come to a city unless the LORD has done it?*” I want you to look at the coronavirus pandemic as the Lord Almighty, our Creator and Defender, our Redeemer and Friend, is seeing it. I want you to be sure of this truth, that he is totally in control of this all-embracing crisis. He is its orchestrator and we are to trust him and be at peace. What the Lord is doing, and why he is doing it, nobody knows now, but we shall know that too hereafter.

I had a letter this week from my friend Andrew Swanson a missionary in Cyprus, and he is facing the same social problems we are facing, everything is closed down and no churches are allowed to hold their meetings. There is a spirit of fear and perplexity over the whole island. But he writes of the local pharmacy where the entire staff are members of the church, earnest Christians. It is one of the few places that has to remain open and many Cypriots are going there. He says, “*The three members of staff are all believers and they are able by the very calmness of their spirit to point a panicking public to hope.*” They are not “*shaken in mind or alarmed*”. I believe that that emotional state is sinful, as much a sin as to steal or to lie or not to love your neighbour. I want us all, like those Cypriot believers, to have a calm spirit and point our panicking neighbours to the Sovereign God who is totally in control of this situation. I read in the *Radio Times* this week a remark Paul McCartney had made about his late partner and co-singer and fellow song writer John Lennon. Paul said, “When I think of John now, it’s the little things I remember, all the inconsequential things, not the big ones.” So we are to have a spirit of peace and trust through this time, displaying this attitude in many little actions and words which, without our knowing it, will touch our family and neighbours and co-workers.

This is a dark time and it is not easy to avoid a heavy spirit. We know that all that God does has some secret purpose that belongs to him, yet we dare not shrug and become fatalistic, underestimating the economic damage this crisis will cause, the misery of lost jobs, the

inconvenience of loneliness and that death is visited prematurely upon many people. Yet sometimes it takes a crisis to help people to grope towards the realisation that they might have been on the wrong track all along. These intimations of impending mortality can impose a certain humility upon them, and we pray also a certain awakening.

See our text: *“Does disaster come to a city unless the LORD has done it?”* An alternative translation is ‘calamity’, while the Authorised Version famously translates it as ‘evil.’ In China, in a vast city most of us had never heard of called Wuhan there was an open air market in which wild animals, live and dead, were on sale to cook and eat, and it is believed that bats were purchased and eaten, but one bat was sick and so some form of contaminated meat was bought and eaten with incalculable consequences. This is called a zoonotic infection. There are in fact thousands of infectious diseases circulating in the animal kingdom and a tiny fraction of them spill over and are transmitted with devastating effects into us human beings. From one person a new disease Covid-19 spread from one inhabitant of this mega-city in China out and out, centrifugally, all around the world and tens of thousands have been infected and moreso every day.

Plenty of trumpets of warning have been blown in London in recent days. A vast range of restrictions have been introduced with others on their way. We are hearing the word ‘lockdown’ which the government has been forced to use in enforcing necessary ‘social distancing.’ These are calamitous weeks, not for Londoners alone but for all fellow Europeans especially Italy and Spain and then for Iran, and out and out all over the world. This plague that has brought the whole planet to its knees, a plague that is created by a tiny invisible coronavirus. You could not see a thousand of them on the palm of your hand but now it is everywhere on our planet. The result is that fabulously wealthy and handsome film stars and football managers and opera singers and wives of presidents and prime ministers and members of the cabinet and millionaires are all struck down, along with tens of thousands of ordinary folk like you and me throughout the cosmos. We are just at the beginning of this pandemic and people everywhere are afraid. “How are we going to survive?” Even scientists and medical men and women are fearful. Plagues and epidemics are nothing new, but the actual response of the country to Covid-19 is uncharted territory. As Christians we are all affected by the decrees of the government. We are perplexed and restrained. So where is the Lord today? We do need him.

Amos, the spokesman for the only Creator God there is, spoke over 700 years before Jesus Christ. He preached at a time when the people of Damascus in Syria thought they had their own god and that he looked after them and their god was the one who punished them when they were wicked. This god is the one who brought calamities and disasters and evil into Syria. They believed that Israel had their own god and he looked after Israel and he chastised the disobedient Israelites with disasters. But Amos here is warning Syria that Amos’ Lord and God was Jehovah the Creator, the only God there is and he was the one who was going to judge Syria (in chapter 1

and verses 3,4 and 5). We are talking here of unimaginably wicked actions, such as sacrificing babies or virgin teenage girls in order to placate the anger of their idol towards them. They felt they were being punished for their wickedness by a drought . . . and then they committed even greater wickednesses.

Then the people of Gaza similarly believed that they also had their own god that would look after them or punish them, but Amos spoke to them also and he told them that it was the Lord Jehovah who would send fire from heaven and destroy Gaza and her strongholds (Amos 1:6-8). Then see how the prophecy carries on and addresses the peoples of Tyre (v.9), and of Edom (v.11), and of Ammon (v.13) and Moab (Ch.2:v.1) and they all thought that the idols in their cities would take care of them or punish them with disasters, but God says to them through Amos that he alone is the one who would send the fires of judgment on them all (Amos 1:9-2:3), not their own idols who are nothings at all. Those idols do not bring the disasters but Jehovah God does.

Then something shocking is said, because Amos next turns to Judah (the people of God) and to Israel (the people of God) and he tells them that Jehovah the Lord of hosts was going to send disasters and calamities on them too (from Amos 2:4 until the end of the book), that is, on his own chosen covenant people, on these kingdoms who thought they were safe God's planned disasters would fall. In fact, for the length of warnings and judgments we can see that judgment begins with the people of God. They foolishly imagined that because Jehovah, the one living God, was their shepherd and saviour and sovereign protector that they could sin with impunity. But God speaks to Judah and he says, *"I will send a fire upon Judah and it shall devour the strongholds of Jerusalem"* (Amos 2:5) and to Israel he says, *"Behold I will press you down in your place as a cart full of sheaves presses down. Flight shall perish from the swift, and the strong shall not retain his strength nor shall the mighty save his life . . .and he who is stout of heart among the mighty shall flee away naked in that day"* (Amos 2:23,24 & 25). It sounds like what the coronavirus can sometimes achieve doesn't it, a sense of utter helplessness and heaviness?

Amos was blowing the warning trumpets that said that judgment was on its way, and the sound of the ram's horns awakened the people to their plight, telling them very plainly that God is angry with the wicked every day. The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the ungodliness and the unrighteousness of men. Does God have cause to be angry with Great Britain today? Is the holy estate of marriage demeaned? Has there ever been as many crimes of violence and of theft and the abuse of women and children as today? Were there over 200,000 abortions in the U.K. in the year 2018? Since the approval of abortion in 1967 there have been ten million unborn children killed in the British Isles What of the distortion of the gospel of the God-Man Jesus Christ in many pulpits? Isn't he shrunk in many churches to a mere exemplary

man? What of horrible pornography watched by millions of children, men and women each day? I ask you, does the holy God have cause to be angry with our nation?

“What of Jesus?” you ask. “Did gentle Jesus meek and mild believe that God was a God who judged his people?” I tell you that when the incarnate God, the Lord Christ, lived in this world that he cried against the old covenant people of God, against Chorazin and he cried against Bethsaida, and he cried against Jerusalem, warning them of the wrath to come. He cried his woes and wept his tears for what would happen to them. “Woe to you!” he declared to those communities.

He spoke against the church at Laodicea (in what today is Turkey), his own Gentile believers who professed to believe in him, and he said to them, “*I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So because you are lukewarm and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth*” (Revelation 3:15&16). The trumpets of the warning of immanent judgment coming upon both the world and also upon the professing church were sounded out clearly by God the Son. The apostle Peter tells us that the spirit of Christ was in Amos and in all the prophets and they were prophesying by inspiration of the coming Messiah about us in these last days.

In other words it’s not, then, the evils and sins of the world that should be troubling us, but our own shortcomings as the people of God. If we have to speak carefully and fearfully about us living in a moral universe, and that what men sow they are also going to reap, and if you sow a wind you reap a whirlwind, and say such things with a heavy heart and a tear in our eyes as we must, asking whether this pandemic is not also a cosmic judgment, then we Christians should remember that judgment always begins at God’s own household (1 Pet. 4:17). If that is the reality, then the voice of all true Christianity will be asking, ‘Lord, is it me? Are you judging me for my hypocritical and ungodly life?’

My argument is this, that when disasters came to those cities of Amos’ day, to cities that refused to believe in and obey Jehovah and operated in terms of other gods and idols, or who spent their lives serving no god at all, then where did the disasters that they experienced come from? Not from their gods. Our text answers that question, “*Does disaster come to a city unless the LORD has done it?*” (Amos 3:6). Plagues, and viruses, and famines, and locusts, and forest fires, tsunamis, and storms, and drought, and wars must all ultimately come from the living God in whom men live and move and have their being and yet they’re rejecting him. Those cities of Syria and Ammon and Gaza with their temples and idols had no independent existence, isolated from the Almighty. Viruses are not entities who arouse themselves and decide, “Right we will smite Europe.” They are merely rods in the hands of the holy, holy, holy God. Calamities that affect us don’t come about by chance or by bad luck. Ultimately you must always go to the great First Cause for everything, to the God who has the whole world in his hands, who works all

things according to the counsel of his own will, who determines when little sparrows fall and tiny viruses spread.

Of course the world is full of disasters. It is a groaning creation since the fall of man. By man sin entered the world and death by sin – not by God - and so death passed upon all men for all have sinned. There was a time when there was no disease, and no killing viruses, and the first man did not die. God and man walked and talked together. The evolutionist does not believe this. He believes that from the beginning, for ever and ever, it has been nature raw in tooth and claw killing and being killed. The evolutionist believes that this is how it has always been, but more than that, in his melancholy he believes that this is how it will always be, that there is no God who intervenes, all you will always have for ever and ever is man battling with death until the day when the earth is a cold lifeless rock sailing through a dead cosmos. This, the evolutionist believes, is how it is going to be. This is how it will all end. But the Scripture is full of hope. It says that God made things upright and perfect but the first man, our federal head, was given free will and he rebelled and fell and pulled down mankind with him, and so there are plagues and death in our world and it will be like this until the last day when God will intervene again in our world and he will regenerate all things righteously. A new heavens and a new earth is to be our expectation.

Of course there are secondary reasons why the world is a groaning world. There are undoubtedly statistics that show that temperatures have never been so high as in the past few years. The global village we live in makes the spread of disease far swifter. There are frightening new dangers and new disasters. There are also new weapons of mass destruction. There are movements that rise and they long to dominate the world – that they hate. Initially they spoke in the name of the god they serve and it was words of welcome to coronavirus because they reckoned it would kill many people in the west. Such words are not words of a religion but of a madness! Foot soldiers who will knife and shoot and bomb and kill all they consider to be their enemies in the name of God are not serving God at all.

God is permitting this but God will restrain them. We believe that he will not allow the world to become a hell. He will frustrate and check the schemes of wicked men who rebel against him. He will protect us from the devil day by day. Think of it that there are millions of Christians in the world and the demons are seeking to destroy them in many different ways every single day and each one is being frustrated by the power of God keeping every one of his people, even the newest lamb and the weakest lamb and the most backsliding lamb and the most hypocritical old ram in the flock of Christ our Shepherd. And maybe that old ram is me, and maybe it is you. But God preserves us from the devil in vast mercy! So there is no more frustrated creature under the heavens than Satan.

Our God is a consuming fire, says Scripture and yet at the same time he does not take away from us our full responsibility for what we do. He holds us to account. He does not make us puppets; he is not merely a puppet master. We bring disasters on ourselves, but he is bringing the very same disasters on us. Let me give you three illustrations of this.

1. GOD BRINGS DISASTER ON JOSEPH.

Joseph came from a very dysfunctional family. There were four mothers to the twelve half brothers. There were favourite wives and favourite sons and inevitably there was jealousy and friction. This grew and festered to a terrible disaster when Joseph's brothers, all sons of the same father, hated him and decided to kill him. Fratricide! Just like the first born child of Adam and Eve, Cain, murdered his brother Abel. But the brothers changed their minds when a caravan of slave traders going to Egypt went by that very hour and instead of killing him his brothers made money from his sale. Who did this disastrous evil action? Who decided to sell him? Many of the brothers did. It was their scheming responsibility. That is one absolutely true answer. But there is another true answer to this question as to who did this evil. God did this disaster. Listen to these words spoken by Joseph to his brothers many years later. Genesis 45 and verse 5 and again the same words repeated in verse 7 "*God sent me before you!*" They were doing the will of God is selling Joseph into slavery and breaking their father's heart. But even more powerfully in Genesis 50 and verse 20, Joseph's words, "*And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.*" He does not say "but God *used* it for good" nor does Joseph say, that "God *overcame* it for good." There were two powerful intentions here in this statement of Joseph, the intention of his wicked brother meaning to do him great harm, and the intention of God meaning to work by the same actions to bring good and life and deliverance out of it. It was 100% the resolution of wicked man, and 100% the resolution of holy God. 100% plus 100% equals 100%. Calamity in the city was caused by the folly of fallen man. Wickedness in that city was also caused by the wisdom of the omnipotent God.

You know the tendency people have when there is a calamity in a family to say to the parent, "Now don't blame God for this." As though God was not there when it happened, as though God was helpless to do anything there, wringing his hands in frustration. What a grieving parent wants to know is that God was there, God was present in the party when drugs were distributed. God was there when the man lost control of the speeding car and it hit that person. Men mean it for evil but God means it for good. Does disaster come unless the LORD has done it? No it does not. God does it still today in London in the inconvenience, in the sick room, in the virus.

2. GOD BRINGS DISASTER ON JOB.

You know what happened as the devil grew frustrated and angry at the blameless life of Job and he challenged God telling him that it was because of his riches and health that Job served God. So God removed some protection from Job and in a day a band of outlaws took all his children's

possessions and killed his employees. Then God permitted a great wind to blow the house down upon the entire family at a celebration and killed all his children and employees except for one man. The wind can only blow when and how God decrees. God today in this year 2020 has allowed Covid-19 to spread throughout the world and thousands die. What do godless men deserve? We have forfeited every right to claim riches and long life and heaven because of our sinning. It is millions of cruel rebels refusing to leave the broad way that God has to deal with daily! A great city is a great sin. Men will not have Jesus Christ to rule over them.

Then God permitted an unusual virus to strike down Job, and he not only had lost his family and possessions but he lost his health too. Yet he said to his wife, *“Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?”* (Job 2:10). “We will accept this virus as coming to me from God” he told her sternly. So where does adversity come from? From the fall of man and men’s individual wickedness? Yes! Of course! But Job says that calamity also comes from the Lord. Of course we know that behind the calamity is something else, there is the god of this world, the enemy of our souls, the devil himself whom God allows to try and test us so far and then no further. God does not and cannot sin, nor does he tempt us to sin. That is the work of Satan, but God uses the devil’s devices and our trials to strengthen and purify us and make us long for heaven.

3. GOD BRINGS DISASTER ON HIS SON JESUS CHRIST.

We know why our Lord was crucified, the Pharisees hated him and his teaching, Judas betrayed him, the high priests bribed witnesses to lie, Pilate was afraid he would lose his power and was a cheap coward. So Romans and Jews together put Christ to death. It was 100% the act of evil and greedy weaklings. But it was also Almighty God who put his Son Jesus on the cross wasn’t it? The prophet Isaiah in chapter 53 presents us with almost a photograph of Golgotha, and in that inspired Scripture he describes Christ as *“smitten by God and afflicted”* (Isa. 53:4), not smitten by the priests and the Roman soldiers alone. Isaiah says in that same chapter *“It pleased the Lord to bruise him. He has put him to grief”* (Isa. 53:10). Not just Judas causing Jesus such grief, it was also 100% God. And on the day of Pentecost when Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit and his preaching was so blessed by God that 3000 men were converted this is what Peter told them about our Lord, *“Him being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken and by lawless hands, have crucified and slain”* (Acts 2:23). That wickedness was 100% the action of evil men and 100% the action of Almighty God.

We know that without the shedding of blood there is no remission for our sins. We know that the blood of cows or goats or sheep can’t cleanse us from our guilt and that in the Old Testament those sacrifices were only pictures, types and foretastes of Jesus Christ the Lamb of God who would take away not just the sin of the Jewish nation but of the world. The death of God the Son makes atonement and propitiation for mankind’s sin. God was preparing us for this reality by

the sacrifices and prophecies in the Old Testament period. Now whatever God decrees in eternity men will always desire to do in time. So they all cried “Crucify him!” And they did kill him with wicked hands on a sledge hammer and nails and a spear, but it was also God who put him on the cross and bruised him. That was eternally the plan of God, that we might go at last to heaven saved by his precious blood.

So there are these three examples of God being very involved in the calamities and disasters and wickednesses that affect each city and every one of us. Nothing happens merely by chance. Nothing happens because God was looking the other way while the devil stepped in and tossed out a horrible virus, frustrating a God who was helpless to stop it. God is in total sovereign control when our congregations are able to gather together, and he is still in control when our churches are forbidden to meet to prevent us spreading this pesky virus. Always this same God of providence gives us his peace and it keeps our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Our ‘*hearts*’, that dispositional complex out of which come all the issues of life, and our ‘*minds*’, our thinking and understanding, our rationality and our judgments. We are at peace because we know this truth that the living God is going to work the virus (as all other providences) for the growing Christ-likeness of billions of those who trust in him. So we have a peace that passes all understanding in the midst of the little inconveniences of the present time. We live in the age of Alzheimer’s, and cancer, and heart disease, and terrorists with knives and bombs. Your body may be restrained and compelled to live at home for some months and it is tough especially if you are single, but there is no need for your heart and mind to be restrained. There is no need to be whimpering, or complaining, and bearing a long face. The living God is your Shepherd and Friend. He is going to supply all your needs in the day of coronavirus. He reigns, not that virus. We know we are going to die and we have put our trust in the one who says that he is the Resurrection and the Life. We are preparing to meet our God.

You say, “How I wish I had this peace! How I long that it could *reign* in my heart!” Then turn that longing into prayer. Go to the Lord with it! Say to him, “Lord, please let your peace rule in my heart. Get the victory of your total sovereignty over the remnants of my rebellious mind, over everything that is not consistent with your will in my life. Subdue every wrong spirit. Oh Lord, may your sweet peace overrule everything that veers towards rebellion and bondage. Lord, let your gracious, peaceful rule correct me, and subdue my restless heart, and keep me believing and trusting in you.”

USES OF THIS TRUTH OF THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD IN TIMES OF DISASTER.

1. Let us support the government in its wonderful exhortation, “Go Home!” I remember that something was closed down in Aberystwyth, and some young people whinged to the local paper complaining “there was nothing to do in Aberystwyth”. It is a resort town with the sea and a beach and a promenade and a harbour and a pier and boats and miniature golf and a swimming

pool and twenty cafes and four or five gospel churches. I wrote a letter to the paper and addressed the young people who had nowhere to go.

“Go home!” I exhorted them. “Do sensible things! Do human things! Help your mother! Build a raft! Make a tree house! Write letters to your friends! Do your school work! Play draughts! Learn to play chess! Learn to cook! Bring out your Lego! Learn the guitar! Make a friend of someone with learning difficulties!” Karl von Habsburg the Archduke of Austria has been so weary of his confinement at home after getting Covid-19 that he picked up a vacuum cleaner and for the next five hours he cleaned the carpets in his entire dwelling. Go to your home, sweet home! So we totally support the government when it exhorts people to go home.

I read on the web these words, “When the Great Plague of London was going around in 1665, Cambridge University shut down and Isaac Newton was forced to stay home. During that time, he invented calculus, parts of optic theory, and allegedly while sitting in his garden, he saw an apple fall from a tree that inspired his understanding of gravity and laws of motion.” I am on safer ground when I remember what Luther achieved in his confinement in the Wartburg, and what John Bunyan wrote in Bedford jail

2. Love your neighbour. I mean very literally the people who live on your street. One of our neighbours in our road of twenty terraced houses typed out a note of about five lines and pushed it through the door of every house on our street. They offered help to people who were having to stay indoors. They would take the dog for a walk, run errands, take them shopping or go shopping for them. The young couple in our neighbouring apartment e-mailed us and offered us any help. Just let us know’ as you are practising social distancing, is we can do anything and we will do our best to help you if we can.” I do not know if people from these two households ever go to church, but an earlier grace in London is evident in their kindness. Their actions knocked on the door of my inner man. Can you, can I, help the housebound and the shut-ins this week?

3. We are living at a great time of transition in our country and so it is a time for more earnest prayer. People are beginning to realise that things are going to be different and that they have to change their routines, practices and attitudes. This is the day the Lord has made. My friend Andrew Swanson in Cyprus, after years of giving out Scriptures and gospels to the people of his town exhorts us to pray, “Over the past months and years many Bibles and New Testaments have been bought or given. People shut in their houses will be bored and anxious, not just about the loss of work but about the all sorts of cares. May they at this time turn in a powerful way to God’s Word.”

Pray for the authorities running our countries and cities. Pray for the overworked staff treating the sick, especially the women who are working night and day in care homes longing to keep them virus-free zones. Pray for the men, women, and children who have been infected with

Covid-19, for the people afraid to leave their homes, for those living in tough areas of London where there are more gangs and knife crimes. Pray for those at high risk with other illnesses. Pray for the elderly. Pray that the Lord would protect us all and keep us so that we don't dump our frustrations on our church leaders. Pray to our Father in heaven, that he might show us his mercy. Pray also for the Lord Jesus to return, that he might come back to take us to our Father's house that he is preparing for us, a place with no viruses, no Covid-19, no pain, no death, no tears, no mourning, where Jesus Christ is smiling at us, close to us, for ever.