

THE BLESSINGS OF HELPLESSNESS

[Re-READ Matthew 24:6-13 (found at the end of this message)]

EARTHQUAKES! FAMINES! WARS! PLAGUES! FALSE PROPHETS! INCREASING WICKEDNESS! PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS! THESE ARE THE CALAMITIES THAT WILL COME IN THE ENDTIMES. WELL, IN CASE YOU HAVEN'T NOTICED, THE CALAMITIES HAVE BEGUN. HURRICANES ON THE EASTERN SEABOARD, WILDFIRES IN THE WEST, TIDAL WAVES SWAMP INDIA AND JAPAN, FLOODS ALONG THE GULF COAST, GENOCIDES IN RWANDA AND BOSNIA, WARS ALL OVER THE GLOBE. THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE RIDE ROUGHSHOD OVER THE EARTH AND NO ONE CAN STOP THEM. AND WHAT'S BEHIND IT ALL? SIN.

AND WHAT'S THE MOTHER OF ALL OTHER SINS? PRIDE. GOD CREATED US AND PLACED US IN A PERFECT WORLD WHERE WE LIVED IN COMPLETE HARMONY— WITH GOD, WITH EACH OTHER, AND WITH CREATION. THEN HE WARNED US NOT TO INVITE SIN AND DEATH INTO THE WORLD.

BUT WE IGNORED THE WARNING. PRIDE CONVINCED US WE COULD BE OUR OWN GOD. *FOR WHEN YOU EAT OF IT YOUR EYES WILL BE OPENED "AND YOU WILL BE LIKE GOD...."* SO WE ABANDONED GOD SO THAT WE COULD EXPLORE OUR "HUMAN POTENTIAL."

WE WANTED TO SEE WHAT WE COULD MAKE OF THINGS ON OUR OWN. WELL, WE'VE FOUND OUT EXACTLY WHAT WE CAN MAKE OF THINGS ON OUR OWN. NATION CONTINUES TO RISE AGAINST NATION, KINGDOM AGAINST KINGDOM, WICKEDNESS ABOUNDS, NATURAL DISASTERS RAVAGE THE EARTH AND RIGHT NOW THERE ARE 18 OFFICIAL WARS AND 64 UNOFFICIAL WARS GOING ON AROUND THE WORLD. STILL, WE CONTINUE TO BELIEVE THAT IF WE JUST KEEP ON DOING WHAT WE'VE BEEN DOING WE'LL GET BETTER RESULTS THAN WE'VE GOTTEN SO FAR.

ISN'T THAT ONE DEFINITION OF INSANITY? TO BELIEVE THAT YOU CAN KEEP DOING WHAT YOU'VE BEEN DOING AND GET A DIFFERENT RESULT? OUR PROBLEM IS THAT INSTEAD OF LISTENING TO GOD, WE LISTEN TO ANOTHER COUNSELOR, ONE WHOM GOD CALLS. *"...KING OF ALL WHO ARE PROUD."*

AS LONG AS PRIDE IS OUR FAVORITE SIN AND WE KEEP WORSHIPPING OURSELVES, THINGS ARE GOING TO KEEP GOING THE WAY THEY'VE BEEN GOING AND WE'LL END UP COMMITTING COLLECTIVE SUICIDE.

BUT THANKS BE TO GOD, HE HAS NOT LEFT US TO OUR OWN DEVICES. HE HASN'T SAID, *"OK, I GAVE YOU THE FREEDOM TO CHOOSE AND YOU CHOSE. MAKE OF YOURSELVES WHATEVER YOU WILL!"* NO, HE HASN'T SAID THAT.

INSTEAD HE HAS OFFERED TO SAVE US FROM COMMITTING SUICIDE BY INVITING US TO GIVE UP ON OURSELVES AND GO BACK TO TRUSTING HIM.

IF PRIDE IS OUR PROBLEM, HUMILITY IS THE SOLUTION, AND HUMILITY BEGINS WITH LEARNING HOW HELPLESS WE REALLY ARE. GOD WANTS TO LEAD US INTO A STATE OF BLESSED HELPLESSNESS. BUT ACCEPTING OUR HELPLESSNESS IS HARD BECAUSE IT FLIES IN THE FACE OF OUR NATURAL INSTINCTS.

WE HATE THE IDEA OF BEING HELPLESS FOR TWO REASONS: ONE IS PRIDE AND THE OTHER IS FEAR. PRIDE HATES IT BECAUSE THE IDEA OF OUR BEING HELPLESS IS HUMILIATING. AND FEAR SAYS, *"IF WE'RE HELPLESS WE'RE AT THE MERCY OF OUR ENEMIES."* OUR PRIDE IS A STUMBLING BLOCK BUT OUR FEAR IS JUSTIFIED.

WE DO HAVE AN ENEMY WHO WANTS TO DO US GREAT HARM—THE BLOOD AVENGER WHO PURSUES US AND IS CALLED SATAN. PRIDE TRIES TO CONVINC US THAT WE CAN HANDLE SATAN ON OUR OWN. BUT PRIDE IS WRONG, FOR AS WE JUST SANG IN OUR SERMON HYMN: *"AND STILL OUR ANCIENT FOE, DOTH SEEK TO WORK US WOE, HIS CRAFT AND POWER ARE GREAT, AND ARMED WITH CRUEL HATE: NO ONE ON EARTH HIS EQUAL."* WE ARE NO MATCH FOR SATAN'S POWER. AND THAT'S WHY GOD TOOK AWAY HIS POWER ON THE CROSS.

SEVERAL YEARS AGO AT THE CHURCH I WAS SERVING IN SOLON, WE WORKED WITH THE POLICE DEPARTMENT TO IMPLEMENT MEASURES THAT WOULD PROTECT OUR PRESCHOOL FROM VIOLENT INTRUDERS. ONE OF THE MEASURES WAS CALLED A LOCKDOWN PROCEDURE WHICH WOULD GO INTO EFFECT IF A VIOLENT PERSON DID MANAGE TO GET INTO THE BUILDING DURING SCHOOL HOURS.

THE OFFICER WE WERE WORKING WITH EXPLAINED TO US THAT IF SUCH A PERSON DID MANAGE TO GET INTO THE PRESCHOOL, THE FIRST PRIORITY OF THE POLICE WOULD BE TO FIND HIM AND GET HIM UNDER CONTROL. AS THEY WERE LOOKING FOR HIM, EVEN IF THEY SAW CHILDREN WHO HAD BEEN INJURED AND NEEDED HELP, THEY WOULD HAVE TO IGNORE THEM UNTIL THEY HAD GOTTEN CONTROL OF THE INTRUDER.

THE SOURCE OF DANGER WOULD HAVE TO BE NEUTRALIZED BEFORE VICTIMS COULD BE HELPED. FIRST THINGS FIRST. AND THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT GOD DID. HE KNEW THAT WE WERE LIKE CHILDREN WHO WERE HELPLESS BEFORE A VICIOUS INTRUDER WHO ENTERED OUR WORLD AND WAS OUT TO DO US HARM. SO HE TOOK AWAY HIS POWER.

AND THE WEAPON HE USED TO DO THIS WAS: HELPLESSNESS. JESUS CONQUERED SIN, DEATH AND SATAN WITH HELPLESSNESS. WHEN HE WAS CURSED AND ACCUSED OF TREASON AGAINST ROME HE WAS *"SILENT LIKE A LAMB BEFORE ITS SHEARERS."* WHEN HE WAS BEATEN, SPAT UPON, MOCKED

AND SCOURGED HE DID NOTHING TO RESIST. WHEN HE WAS STRIPPED, NAILED TO TWO PIECES OF WOOD AND RAISED UP AS AN OBJECT OF RIDICULE, HE DID NOTHING TO RESIST.

WHEN HE WAS MOCKED BY THOSE PASSING BY HE DIDN'T RESPOND. SEEMINGLY HELPLESS TO THE END, BUT THAT HELPLESSNESS CHANGED TIME AND SPACE ITSELF. THE SUN TURNED DARK, ROCKS SPLIT APART, THE EARTH WAS SHAKEN, AND A NEW KINGDOM WAS BORN. THE ENDTIMES HAD BEGUN.

SUCH WAS THE POWER OF DIVINE HELPLESSNESS WHICH PAUL DESCRIBED AS, *"CHRIST CRUCIFIED...A STUMBLING BLOCK TO JEWS AND FOOLISHNESS TO GENTILES, BUT THE POWER OF GOD AND THE WISDOM OF GOD TO US WHO ARE BEING SAVED."* THIS IS THE SAME BLESSED HELPLESSNESS THAT CAN CONDUCT THE POWER OF GOD INTO OUR LIVES.

BUT HOW DO WE LEARN IT? HOW DO WE LEARN HOW TO STOP CLENCHING OUR JAWS AND SAYING, *"I CAN HANDLE IT!"* HOW CAN WE LEARN TO BE LIKE PAUL, WHO SAID: *"...I WILL BOAST ALL THE MORE GLADLY ABOUT MY WEAKNESSES, SO THAT CHRIST'S POWER MAY REST ON ME. THAT IS WHY, FOR CHRIST'S SAKE, I DELIGHT IN WEAKNESSES, IN INSULTS, IN HARDSHIPS, IN PERSECUTIONS, IN DIFFICULTIES. FOR WHEN I AM WEAK, THEN I AM STRONG."*

OH IT'S HARD. IT'S VERY, VERY HARD. OUR PRIDE IS BONE DEEP AND PERMEATES EVERY CELL OF OUR MORTAL BODY. OUR PERSONALITIES, OUR ACCOMPLISHMENTS, OUR PLANS—ALL OF THEM ARE STEEPED IN PRIDE. WE CONCOCT WHAT WE HOPE IS AN ATTRACTIVE IMAGE OF OURSELVES AND WE NURSE IT AND TRUST IT TO DO ITS WORK. WE DEFEND IT AND DO ALL WE CAN TO KEEP IT FROM BEING TARNISHED. I WANT YOUR GOOD OPINION OF ME AND YOU WANT MY GOOD OPINION OF YOU AND SO WE "STRUT AND FRET OUR HOUR UPON THE STAGE" AS SHAKESPEARE PUT IT.

DOWN DEEP WE KNOW THE TERRIBLE TRUTH: THAT WE ARE POOR AND MISERABLE SINNERS WHO HAVE FAILED THE TEST TIME AND AGAIN—AND WE'RE DEATHLY AFRAID OF ANYONE FINDING OUT. WE'RE NOT ABOUT TO CONFESS OUR REAL, SINS TO EACH OTHER BECAUSE THEN THEY WOULD KNOW WHAT MORAL SHIPWRECKS WE REALLY ARE. SO WE TELL OURSELVES THAT OUR SINS ARE NOBODY ELSE'S BUSINESS AND SWEEP THEM UNDER THE RUG AND FORGET ABOUT THEM. ISN'T THAT PRETTY MUCH HOW IT GOES?

OUR VAIN, FOOLISH, SELF-DEFEATING PRIDE, IS THE BEST LEVER OUR ENEMY HAS ON US. AS LONG AS HE CAN KEEP US CONVINCED THAT MAINTAINING A FAÇADE IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN CONFESSING THE TRUTH, HE'S GOT US IN A HAMMERLOCK FROM WHICH THERE'S NO WAY OUT. BUT WHEN WE CONFESS OUR SINS TO GOD AND EACH OTHER WE ARE HUMBLED, OUR PRIDE IS WASHED AWAY, AND THE DEVIL HAS LOST HIS LEVERAGE.

WITH OUR PRIDE WE BIND OUR SINS AND ALLOW THEM TO RETAIN THEIR POWER OVER US. THAT'S WHAT THE BIBLE MEANS WHEN IT SAYS, *"PRIDE*

GOETH BEFORE THE FALL.” BUT WHEN WE HUMBLE OURSELVES BEFORE GOD AND OUR NEIGHBOR BY CONFESSING OUR SINS WE SET OURSELVES FREE. LIKE THE TAX-COLLECTOR WHO CRIED OUT, “*LORD, BE MERCIFUL TO ME, A SINNER,*” WE GO HOME JUSTIFIED BEFORE GOD AND AT PEACE WITH OURSELVES.

TODAY IS REFORMATION SUNDAY, THE DAY WE HONOR THE GREAT REFORMERS WHO DISCOVERED AND PROCLAIMED THE GOSPEL WHICH HAD COME TO BE BURIED UNDER A THEOLOGY OF WORKS-RIGHTEOUSNESS. THIS WAS NEITHER THE FIRST NOR THE LAST TIME THAT WORKS RIGHTEOUSNESS HAS PREVAILED IN MEN’S MINDS: WE TAKE TO IT LIKE DUCKS TAKE TO WATER. DO THIS AND YOU’LL BE REWARDED; DO THAT AND YOU’LL BE PUNISHED. FOLLOW THE TEN COMMANDMENTS AND YOU’LL GET TO HEAVEN; BREAK THEM AND YOU’LL GO TO HELL. YOU GET WHAT YOU EARN. THAT WAS THE LAW AND THE LAW HAD COME TO RULE IN THE MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH.

PEOPLE HAD EVEN COME TO THINK OF JESUS AS A JUDGE INSTEAD OF A SAVIOR. AND MARTIN LUTHER WAS ONE OF THEM. DURING HIS EARLY YEARS AS A MONK HE DROVE HIMSELF BERSERK TRYING TO OBEY ALL OF GOD’S LAWS—AND FAILING TO DO SO. HE SPENT HOURS IN THE CONFESSIONAL BOOTH BUT FOUND NO RELIEF. HE CAME TO THE POINT WHERE HE HATED GOD FOR GIVING HIM AN IMPOSSIBLE TASK AND THEN BLAMING HIM FOR FAILING TO DO IT. HE VERY NEARLY FELL INTO DESPAIR.

BUT THEN, BY GOING TO GOD’S WORD, HE DISCOVERED THE GOSPEL—THE GOOD NEWS THAT GOD HAD FORGIVEN ALL HIS SINS THROUGH JESUS CHRIST AND LOVED HIM AS A FATHER LOVES HIS CHILD. AND THE GATES OF PARADISE OPENED UP TO HIM. BUT FIRST HE HAD TO GIVE UP ON HIMSELF—ON LOOKING FOR ANY RIGHTEOUSNESS OF HIS OWN—BEFORE HE COULD SURRENDER TO GOD’S MERCY. HE HAD TO BECOME HELPLESS IN ORDER FOR GOD TO HELP HIM.

WHEN CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS MADE HIS SECOND VOYAGE TO AMERICA, HE LANDED ON AN ISLAND WE NOW CALL HAITI. HE ESTABLISHED A SMALL TOWN THERE AND CALLED IT LA ISABELLA, AFTER THE QUEEN OF SPAIN. LA ISABELLA WAS THE FIRST SETTLEMENT IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE. BUT WHEN COLUMBUS RETURNED YEARS LATER, HE FOUND THAT THE RESIDENTS HAD ALL DIED.

BY EXAMINING THE BONES THAT REMAIN, SCIENTISTS WERE ABLE TO DETERMINE THAT THEY HAD DIED OF SCURVY. SCURVY COMES FROM A LACK OF VITAMIN C. THE IRONY WAS THAT THE SETTLEMENT WAS SURROUNDED BY FRUIT-BEARING TREES THAT WERE LADEN WITH FRUIT THAT WAS FULL OF VITAMIN C. THEY DIED OF A LACK OF VITAMIN C BECAUSE THEY DIDN’T KNOW THAT VITAMIN C WAS THERE FOR THE TAKING.

AND SO IS THE WORLD FULL OF PEOPLE WHO ARE DYING BECAUSE THEY DON'T KNOW THAT ETERNAL LIFE IS THERE FOR THE TAKING. GOD WANTS TO SAVE US FROM OURSELVES. ALL WE HAVE TO DO IS REALIZE HOW HELPLESS WE ARE WITHOUT HIM AND TURN TO HIM FOR HELP. HE WILL BE DELIGHTED TO PROVIDE IT.

AND THAT'S THE GOSPEL TRUTH. AMEN.

Isaiah 2:6-18

You, LORD, have abandoned your people, the descendants of Jacob. They are full of superstitions from the East; they practice divination like the Philistines and embrace pagan customs. Their land is full of silver and gold; there is no end to their treasures. Their land is full of horses; there is no end to their chariots. Their land is full of idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their fingers have made. So people will be brought low and everyone humbled— do not forgive them. Go into the rocks, hide in the ground from the fearful presence of the LORD and the splendor of his majesty! The eyes of the arrogant will be humbled and human pride brought low; the LORD alone will be exalted in that day. The LORD Almighty has a day in store for all the proud and lofty, for all that is exalted (and they will be humbled), for all the cedars of Lebanon, tall and lofty, and all the oaks of Bashan, for all the towering mountains and all the high hills, for every lofty tower and every fortified wall, for every trading ship and every stately vessel. The arrogance of man will be brought low and human pride humbled; the LORD alone will be exalted in that day, and the idols will totally disappear.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Matthew 24:3, 7-14, 29-31

As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" ...

Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains. "Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come...

"Immediately after the distress of those days "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.' "Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.