

BLESSED HELPLESSNESS

Earthquakes! Famines! Wars! Plagues! An increase in wickedness! Hatred for Christians!

Sounds like the evening news.

Well, according to Jesus, these are some of the calamities that will come in the endtimes.

And that means that the endtimes have begun.

In the past few decades alone we've had multiple hurricanes, huge forest fires in the western states that have consumed thousands of homes, tidal waves that devastated India and Japan, genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia and now the Covid pandemic.

"Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events...nations will be in anguish and perplexity...Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world...."

Anguish, perplexity, terror, apprehension—mankind reduced to helplessness in the face of horrendous catastrophes.

Maybe that's the point.

Maybe God is trying to teach us how helpless we really are in the face of the havoc that our sins have brought upon the world.

And what is the moving force behind it all?

Pride.

Pride has been our problem from the beginning.

God created us in His image and placed us on this earth as stewards—caretakers to work and tend his creation and make it fruitful.

This was to be a labor of love; we were to live useful and productive lives with no sin to interfere and an eternity of pleasures ahead.

Then God added one more blessing to all the rest: he warned us to refrain from acquiring the knowledge of evil, which would ruin the whole thing.

Well we all know what happened next.

Something in our original parents moved them to reject God's warning and acquire the knowledge of evil.

That something was pride: the desire to know what God knows. To be equal with God.

Pride convinced us that we didn't have to live in subservience to our Creator, that it would be not only a desirable thing but a noble thing to rebel against His authority.

And so we began to worship ourselves rather than God.

To make a name for ourselves rather than glorify His Name.

To seek our destiny apart from Him and to live by the light of our wisdom rather than His.

Pride started us down this path and pride has led us on our way ever since.

From the men who got together on the plains of Shinar and tried to build a tower that would reach up to heaven to the disciples who pointed to the temple and said to Jesus, "*Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!*"—men have yearned to glorify themselves in their own eyes.

Seeking their own glory rather than God's, they ignored Isaiah's words that all that is exalted by man must be brought down so that God can be lifted up.

The result, Paul says, is that "*their foolish hearts and minds were darkened and, thinking themselves wise, they become fools. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie...and worshiped created things rather than their Creator.*"

Men did all this and continue to do it at the urging of their worst enemy, who counsels them to exalt themselves rather than God and cheers them on as they do so.

That enemy is the one whom God tells Job is, "*...king over all who are proud.*"

What did God make of all this?

Did he just say, “OK, I gave you the freedom to choose and you chose. Now you’re free to follow your own lights. Make of yourselves what you will.”

No, He didn’t say that.

He loves us far too much to say that.

Instead He implemented a plan to save us from ourselves—from our pride and from the death to which it leads.

His plan is very simple: He tries to teach us to give up on ourselves and trust in Him.

If pride is our problem, then humility is the solution, and humility comes from learning just how helpless we really are.

God wants to lead us in to a state of blessed helplessness.

Of course this flies in the face of every natural instinct we have.

There is nothing about “helpless” that appeals to us; we despise the very thought of it.

Part of our reaction is based on our pride.

But part of it is based upon our fear that if we are helpless, we are at the mercy of those who would harm us—especially of the one who would do us the greatest harm.

So before God could invite us to give up on our own strength and confess our helplessness he had to neutralize the power of the one who would do us this harm.

Several years ago, at the church I was serving in Solon, we worked with the Solon Police Department to implement an emergency lockdown procedure for our preschool to follow so that if an intruder entered our premises during school hours, we could protect our children from harm.

The officer we were working with explained to us that if a violent person did manage to get inside our building, the first priority of the police would be to find him and get him under control.

And as they went about doing that, even if they saw children who had been injured and needed help, they would have to ignore them until they had gotten the intruder under control.

The source of evil would have to be neutralized before the victims could be helped.

It may sound heartless, but first things have to come first.

And that is exactly what God had to do.

Like the children in our preschool, we would be helpless before a malicious intruder who entered our world and continually tried to do us harm.

So first God had to neutralize our enemy and render him powerless.

And the weapon he used to do this was humility.

The cross was humility's finest hour.

Everything Jesus did that day was passive.

He refused to defend himself against the charges that had been leveled against Him, choosing instead to remain silent, "...like a lamb before its shearers," as the Scriptures tell us.

He allowed himself to be completely humiliated without retaliating.

He was mocked, beaten, spat upon, scourged, nailed to a cross and left to hang there until He expired—and he didn't raise a hand to defend himself.

But as has been said, it wasn't the nails that held him on the cross.

He had all the power of God to set Himself free.

It wasn't the nails: it was humility.

And that humility changed time and space itself.

The sun turned dark, rocks split apart, the earth was shaken and a new Kingdom was born.

Such was the power of divine humility—which Paul calls “*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.*”

And this is the same blessed humility which can conduct the power and wisdom of God into our lives.

But how do we learn it?

How do we learn how to stop clenching our jaws and saying, “LET ME HANDLE THIS!!”

How do we learn to say with Paul: “*...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.*”

How can we learn to be like Paul?

It's hard. It's very hard.

Our pride goes deep and permeates every bone and nerve and fiber of our being.

We concoct what we hope is an attractive image of ourselves and we feed and nurse and pamper and protect it and will do almost anything to keep it from being sullied.

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 again and again, but we're deathly afraid of anyone finding out.

We're not about to confess our sins to each other because then they would know what moral shipwrecks we really are.

Anyway, we reason, they're our business and if nobody else knows about them and we can manage to forget about them, then what's the problem?

Isn't that pretty much the way it goes?

Our pride, our vain, foolish, self-defeating pride, is the best lever Satan 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 pretzel hold from which we have no way out.

But if we could bring ourselves to confess the truth about ourselves to each other—it is guaranteed to do one thing, and that is to **destroy our pride**.

We cannot confront and confess the truth about ourselves and remain proud.

And that is the best thing that can possibly happen to us, because it's with our pride that we bind our sins and allow them to retain their power over us—which is what the Bible means when it tells us that pride goes before the fall.

When we humble ourselves before God and one another by confessing our sins—**and our helplessness before sin's power**—then, like the tax-collector who beat his breast and said, *“Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner,”* we have peace with God and we are justified in His eyes.

Since the baseball season is drawing to a close I thought a baseball analogy might be helpful to illustrate how this works.

Most of you have heard me use this analogy before—and you're likely to hear me use it again because I LOVE a good analogy.

Imagine that you're in a baseball game and you're standing on first base. You get a signal to steal, so when the pitcher throws his pitch, you make a dash for second base.

As you're sliding into second, you feel the second baseman tag your ankle with the ball a good foot away from the bag.

So you think: too bad, I'm out.

But then you hear the second base umpire shout: **“Safe!”**

Are you safe or are you out?

Now I've put this question to every confirmation class I've ever taught and 99% of the time the kids give the wrong answer.

Almost unanimously they say, "You're out! You got tagged out!"

But for the first time, all three of the children in the confirmation class I'm teaching right now got it right—and they got it right for the right reason.

The answer, of course is: you're safe, even though you should be out.

You're safe quite simply because the man with the power and authority to say so has declared you safe.

The proof is that you're standing on the bag and you're headed for home.

And so it is with us.

By any reckoning, we should be out of the game, but One with the power and authority to do so has declared us safe.

And so safe we are, and the proof is that we're still in the game, and we're headed for home.

Life—like baseball—is a wonderful thing when the umpire is on your side!

When we shed our pride and confront and confess our helplessness, we move closer and closer to Christ, where we're safe and headed for home.

Amen.

