

Understanding the Times

1 Chronicles 12:32 ...the sons of Issachar who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do...

I. Recognizing the Crisis

- A. God uses crisis in the physical realm to alert us to a crisis in the spiritual realm. September 11th, Hurricane Katrina, the economic crisis, all should alert us that God's hand of blessing is lifting from this nation. It may be a gradual and a partial lift because of His great mercy, but we should not allow that to dull us but rather be appreciative of the time He has given us and respond with diligence at the earliest, softest warnings.

- B. God judges in righteousness. Few if any, would dispute that God is just in judging the nation of America. Indeed, He has been very gracious and slow to anger. Refraining for 36 years from judging a nation for millions of legal abortions. Refraining for decades from judging the culture of immorality and lust that has not only consumed our nation but is now one of our primary exports.

- C. God, however, is particularly interested in one part of the nation – the church.
1 Peter 4:17 For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God
 1. When God was dealing with the nation of Israel, He dealt not with her kings but with her priests. The issue was always the spiritual leadership of the day. Joel is no exception – he addresses everyone, except the king.
Joel 2:16 Gather the people, Sanctify the congregation, Assemble the elders, Gather the children and nursing babes; Let the bridegroom go out from his chamber, And the bride from her dressing room. 17 Let the priests, who minister to the LORD, Weep between the porch and the altar

 2. The sin within the government or the nation is not God's primary concern at the moment. It does not surprise God, nor should it surprise us that the wicked are doing wickedly. And yet often our primary response is despairing talk about the state of our nation as though somehow we have nothing to do with that state.

 3. We live in a democracy, which means when we see immorality rising in the government its rising in the people. We also live in a nation with long Christian roots and an immensely available, unpersecuted Christian witness, which means we have plenty of room to affect the nation, and the way in which we've affected it is not effective. The statistics are quite clear – there's a crisis within the church.
 - a. Builders generation (1924-1944) – 65% church engagement
 - b. Boomers generation (1945-1965) – 35% church engagement
 - c. Buster generation (1966-1983) – 15% church engagement
 - d. Bridger generation (born after 1984) – 4% church engagement

4. What grieves God more than the sin in our nation is the lack of an intercessor. There is a lack of those who cry and sigh over the sin in our midst (**Ezekiel 9**). There is a lack of those who see the barrenness of the church and are contending for the mercy God wants to show this nation and beyond that the glory that God wants to give His church. What grieves God is that *His* people, who are called by *His* name are totally disconnected from the pain in *His* heart over the state of our nation and over the barrenness of the church.
Isaiah 59:14 Justice is turned back, And righteousness stands afar off; For truth is fallen in the street, And equity cannot enter. 15 So truth fails, And he who departs from evil makes himself a prey. Then the LORD saw it, and it displeased Him That there was no justice. 16 He saw that there was no man, And wondered that there was no intercessor
Ezekiel 22:30 So I sought for a man among them who would make a wall, and stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one. 31 Therefore I have poured out My indignation on them; I have consumed them with the fire of My wrath; and I have recompensed their deeds on their own heads,” says the Lord GOD.
5. Without a culture of prayer we live disconnected from the heart of God, and when we get to that place the only means that He has available to get our attention is to shake us. God calls us to pray, not just to avert the coming judgment, but so that our hearts will get reconnected with His, we'll hear what He has to say, change our ways and there *won't be a need* for the next judgment.

II. Understanding the Times

A. Understanding the Author of our times

1. Rightly understanding the times requires rightly understanding God who orchestrated the times. The urgency of the hour is a secondary urgency. It stems from the urgency that was already in God's heart when He decided to make the hour urgent so that we would get on the same page with Him.
2. The crisis of the hour needs to drive us to seek out the crisis in God's heart. What is it that He's looking for and not finding? What was He wanting to do that we missed? What is it that's off in our understanding of God?
3. Hosea is perhaps one of the greatest examples, but it is a consistent theme throughout the prophets. God gave the prophets not only a word concerning the times, but a revelation concerning the heart of God. They were to convey that heart right alongside the promise of judgment or mercy because the knowledge of God's heart was essential to rightly interpreting what God was doing.
4. “God is not the author of confusion.” (**1 Corinthians 14:33**) He does not send judgment so that we can run around frantically searching for what we're doing wrong. There is a very clear Biblical response and the call always is 'return to the Lord', 'seek Me with all your heart.' It's a call to come back to the First and Second commandments and to get serious about reaching for an expression of Christianity that fully embraces them.
Luke 10:25 And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” 26 He said to him, “What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?” 27 So he answered and said, “ ‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,’ and ‘your neighbor as yourself.’” 28 And He said to him, “You have answered rightly; do this and you will live.”

B. Understanding the context of our times

1. Rightly understanding the times requires understanding the context – not only what has happened, but what is coming in the immediate and more distant future.
2. Joel sets the context for the times by speaking of three separate days of the Lord.
 - a. In Joel 1, he speaks of a day of the Lord where He has already come in judgment on His people that they must rightly recognize and let serve as an awakening.
Joel 1:15 Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is at hand; It shall come as destruction from the Almighty. 16 Is not the food cut off before our eyes, Joy and gladness from the house of our God?
 - b. In Joel 2, he prophesies a day of the Lord that is yet fiercer still that will come upon His people if they do not respond to the first.
Joel 2:1 Blow the trumpet in Zion, And sound an alarm in My holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble; For the day of the LORD is coming, For it is at hand: 2 A day of darkness and gloominess, A day of clouds and thick darkness, Like the morning clouds spread over the mountains. A people come, great and strong, The like of whom has never been; Nor will there ever be any such after them, Even for many successive generations.
 - c. In Joel 3, he speaks of a great and final Day of the Lord that will come as judgment on the nations.
Joel 3:1 “For behold, in those days and at that time... 2 I will also gather all nations, And bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat; And I will enter into judgment with them there...14 Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision.
3. Sitting immediately after a judgment has come, we do not have to question where we stand before the Lord as a nation. If judgment has come, and the people have not yet turned, then we can be sure that more judgment is coming. God's temporal judgments are redemptive in nature, meaning their objective is to cause turning, not just to punish. If a turn does not happen, then we can expect more judgment.
Joel 2:12 “ Now, therefore,” says the LORD, “Turn to Me with all your heart, With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.” 13 So rend your heart, and not your garments; Return to the LORD your God, For He is gracious and merciful, Slow to anger, and of great kindness; And He relents from doing harm.
4. In light of the coming Day of the Lord it is clear to see how the smaller days of the Lord are God's mercy. There *will* come a day of judgment for all. It is the mercy of God that He sends temporal judgments to awaken us before the final judgment.
5. The coming Day of the Lord also makes clear why God's focus in judgment is on His own people. God's chosen people, first Israel and now the Church as well, are His mercy agents to the nations – He needs us awake and at His side first to be a witness unto the nations before the coming day of judgment for all men.

6. Having set the context of their times, Joel then calls the people to pray and they understand what it is they are to pray for. Not only that the Lord would relent, but that they would get back into the Lord's prophetic purposes for His people and He could pour out His Spirit upon them and they would be a witness unto the nations.

Joel 2:14 Who knows if He will turn and relent, And leave a blessing behind Him—A grain offering and a drink offering For the LORD your God?

Joel 2:28 “And it shall come to pass afterward That I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, Your old men shall dream dreams, Your young men shall see visions. 29 And also on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days... Before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD. 32 And it shall come to pass That whoever calls on the name of the LORD Shall be saved.

III. How Then Shall We Live?

A. The character of an appropriate response: urgency and persistency.

1. Urgency – let the hour cut deeply and respond accordingly.
 - a. There is a narrow window for our hearts to respond during a time of judgment and shaking. The question of how long we have until the judgment comes is not the question. The question is have we heard and are we going to respond?
 - b. If we are reluctant and half-hearted in our response God can give us all the time in the world and we will never be ready for what's coming. If we are sincerely responding in our hearts then God will give us grace to be ready no matter how soon it may be.
 - c. God uses desperate times to shake us and give us the grace to take desperate measures. What He desires is that we would use them as His mercy to make radical changes.
 - d. Urgent is not the same as frantic – it is not the frantic stirring of our hearts that God is looking for, that ultimately only gets in the way of us really hearing Him and connecting with His heart. He is looking for a resolute determination to respond to the fullest extent.
 - e. The urgent issue in this hour is not that we suddenly be somewhere, but that we determine to go somewhere. We need to grasp the depth of our situation and use the urgency that produces to make a firm decision in our hearts that we will make every change necessary to bring ourselves fully in line with God.
 - f. The human tendency is to want immediately to do something to ease the burden of urgency. Urgency does not mean that we immediately start running full speed off in a different direction that we determined based on our own ideas of what was wrong.
 - g. Perhaps the best definition of what it means to respond to a judgment of God with urgency is “rend your heart.” It means letting the wound go deep and change the very heart of how we live.

Joel 2:12 “Now, therefore,” says the LORD, “Turn to Me with all your heart, With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.” 13 So rend your heart, and not your garments

2. Persistency – time gauges the sincerity of our response.
 - a. Lou Engle - “I will never forget the statement I read soon after 9-11 which said on September 11th America was brought to her knees, but the next day she stood up again. Brothers and sisters, that is my fear. On 9-11 millions of people fell to there knees to pray, and then we got back up again forgetting our national calamity. It’s time for America to fall on her knees in prayer and never lose that posture.”
 - b. This is not about a moment of repentance but about a lasting change in the way we do things. This is perhaps our biggest misunderstanding in how to respond to God's judgments. We read 2 Chronicles 7:14 and we instantly picture a day (or less) of prayer and repentance.
 - c. The appropriate response goes beyond changing our practices for a while, and shifts the culture and DNA of our Christianity ensuring that the lesson is not lost, but will be passed on to the next generation. The prophet gives the call: “Tell your children about it, Let your children tell their children, And their children another generation.” (Joel 1:3)
 - d. In Joel and Jeremiah's day, the preaching of the prophets following the initial judgments of God resulted in 17 years of reform under Josiah's reign, but the culture was not changed and within 5 years of Josiah's death the people had reverted completely to wickedness and the prophesied invasion came.
3. We have to make the choice now to make radical changes to the way we do things so that years from now the next generation will have a foundation to reach from.
 - a. There is a call in this hour to change our thinking to align with God's. To get outside of making decisions about our lives and our ministries based on finding short-term solutions to our personal problems and to start basing our decisions on what best benefits the long-term move of God.
 - b. There is a desperate need in this hour for the turning of the hearts of the fathers to the children – for the church to get generation-minded and to start building with the next generation in mind.

Malachi 4:5 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. 6 And he will turn The hearts of the fathers to the children, And the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse.
 - c. The Spirit is stirring and the people of God are beginning to awaken. What remains to be seen is will we grasp the urgency of the situation and respond appropriately, or will we have a few days (or even a few years) of prayer and repentance, make some cosmetic changes and settle back into our complacency?

B. The content of an appropriate response

2 Chronicles 7:14 if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

1. Humble ourselves

- a. This is often the greatest problem and hence the first step. We wrestle especially with this one in America where our culture trains us to be self-sufficient and self-focused – two thought patterns very contrary to humility.
- b. It means acknowledging that we need God and cannot fix this ourselves.
- c. It means becoming small in our own eyes, it also means letting God become bigger in our eyes.
- d. Most especially (and this is the one we most often miss), it means realizing that this is not about us.

2. Pray

- a. It's a corporate call, not just an individual one.
Joel 2:15 Blow the trumpet in Zion, Consecrate a fast, Call a sacred assembly; 16 Gather the people, Sanctify the congregation, Assemble the elders, Gather the children and nursing babes; Let the bridegroom go out from his chamber, And the bride from her dressing room. 17 Let the priests, who minister to the LORD, Weep between the porch and the altar...
- b. How well we do on this one is closely connected to how well we humble ourselves. Will we pray for the blessing to return or will we pray for God to be glorified?
Joel 2:17 ...Let them say, "Spare Your people, O LORD, And do not give Your heritage to reproach, That the nations should rule over them. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'"
- c. The call to pray is more than just a call to cry out for mercy. It's a call to get reconnected with the heart and purposes of God. Joel's calling the people to true intercessory prayer that would birth the outpouring of the Spirit that's in the heart of God so that the great harvest would come in before the Day of the Lord.
Joel 2:28 "And it shall come to pass afterward That I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, Your old men shall dream dreams, Your young men shall see visions. 29 And also on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days... Before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD. 32 And it shall come to pass That whoever calls on the name of the LORD Shall be saved.
- d. The call to prayer is a call to establish a lasting culture of prayer. Joel ultimately calls the people to get their eyes fixed on the great move of God and start a solemn assembly that does not end until the Day of the Lord.

3. Seek His face

- a. This is often opposite to the way that our flesh responds in a time of judgment. Our eyes turn anywhere and everywhere except to look the Lord in the eye.
- b. The purpose of the crisis in the natural is to alert us to the crisis in the spiritual. If the crisis in the natural becomes our focus then we have erred in understanding and responding to it rightly.
- c. The solution to the crisis in the spiritual is always 'seek Me with all your heart.' If we try instead to fix it ourselves, or if we run from God in shame rather than to Him in love, we have erred in understanding the crisis and responding rightly.
- d. The correct answer, always, is to press in to the heart of God. There we will find answers for this and every hour.
Hosea 6:1 Come, and let us return to the LORD... 3 Let us know, Let us pursue the knowledge of the LORD.
- e. The primary purpose of God's temporal judgments are to alert us to to focus on what should always have been our focus – rightly relating with God. God is our biggest problem, but we rarely live like it until in His mercy He makes us acknowledge that He is our biggest problem.
“All the problems of heaven and earth, though they were to confront us together and at once, would be nothing compared with the overwhelming problem of God: That He is; what He is like; and what we as moral beings must do about Him.”
- A.W. Tozer

4. Turn from our wicked ways

- a. Sin within the church is, of course, a serious issue. We need to be reaching under the grace of God for a life with no compromise.
- b. Even beyond that, though, God rebukes His people not just for outright sin, but for lives lived less than holy. God set Israel apart as a dwelling place for Himself and His heart burned not only when she sinned, but when she forgot her glory and turned to the empty wells of this world.
Jeremiah 2:11 Has a nation changed its gods, Which are not gods? But My people have changed their Glory For what does not profit. 12 Be astonished, O heavens, at this, And be horribly afraid; Be very desolate,” says the LORD. 13 “ For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, And hewn themselves cisterns—broken cisterns that can hold no water.
- c. One of the most challenging phrases anywhere in Scripture is “a walk worthy.” What does it mean to have a walk worthy of our calling, knowing that we are the redeemed of the sovereign God of the universe, bought with His own blood and now temples of His glory and God Himself dwells within us? That's what we're to be reaching for.
Ephesians 4:1 I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called,
Colossians 1:10 that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;
1 Thessalonians 2:12 that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.

C. The arena of an appropriate response

1. It is both corporate and personal. We cannot ignore our own hearts, neither can we ignore the state of our nation.
2. We must take up the call to prayer for an outpouring of the Spirit that would turn hearts before more judgment is required.
3. If our burden is sincere then it must also cut us deeply in our own hearts and cause us to diligently examine our own walk.
4. As we come to understand that God is looking for something and not finding it, that should birth a burden in us – to see Him have it, both in our own lives and community, and in the nation.

D. Grace in our time of need

Hebrews 4:16 Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

1. We respond under grace – though we fall seven times as long as we're getting back up, the Lord is pleased and His mercy covers us.
2. We respond through confidence in love – He bids us draw near with confidence in our hour of need.
3. God is looking at the reach of our hearts, not at our attainment. The urgency is not that we be somewhere but that we determine to go somewhere.
4. God delights in showing mercy. He is not looking for opportunities to judge, but for opportunities to show mercy. We rend our hearts and change our ways, we fast and we pray, not so that we will earn a reprieve but because it gives God the opportunity to show mercy as He longs to do.

Micah 7:18 Who is a God like You, Pardoning iniquity And passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, Because He delights in mercy.

Joel 2:12 “Now, therefore,” says the LORD, “Turn to Me with all your heart, With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.” 13 So rend your heart, and not your garments; Return to the LORD your God, For He is gracious and merciful, Slow to anger, and of great kindness; And He relents from doing harm.