

Faith Under Fire – Part 3

13 Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. 14 But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. 15 Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. **(James 1:13-15)**

I know that you will agree with me, that we are now living within some of the strangest set of events and circumstances that any of us have every experienced in our lifetimes. And possibly as strange as any that have ever been experienced by any generation before us.

And as students of these scriptures, we would have to admit that these events and these circumstances taking place right now, are eerily similar to what we imagine are described in these scriptures as being the “end time”, the “last days” of this earth.

And as I scan across the Christian broadcast networks, I find that many of our Christian brethren, especially those who hold to the dispensational doctrines of scripture, are indeed preaching strongly that these current events have many of the markings given in the prophetic scriptures about the “last days”.

Some of you may not be as familiar with the current wave of preaching about those prophecies. That’s because, most often, we within the “Reformed Faith”, especially we Presbyterians, tend to shy away from those kinds of programming, choosing instead to believe that most of the Book of Revelations and other similar such “end time” scriptures are meant to be more “metaphorical” in nature than “literal”.

But may I say again, as we listen to many of the sermons being preached and broadcast across our airways, we find that there are many of our brethren within the evangelical community, who believe quite differently from us. They hold that most all the revelations in these scriptures that speak about the “end times” are to be interpreted “literally”; and that all the events that are taking place during the very days that we are living in now, are evidence that our days ahead are drawing nearer to a close.

And I must confess to you that though I am very Reformed in most all of my beliefs, I actually have a strong dispensational strain flowing through my own veins. And I do believe the end-time prophecies mentioned in these scriptures are to be interpreted in a much more “literal” manner than most of my Reformed friends are usually inclined to do.

And many of our evangelical brethren are questioning if all that is taking place is God’s “judgment” upon the world for all our wicked behaviors. Some believing passionately that it is God’s “judgment”, declaring that the events of 911, and now this present plague, are all part of God’s “judgment” upon our sin.

My own conclusions about those questions are mixed, both “yes” and “no”.

But regardless of our private opinions, the fact is, we have very important “signs” right in front of us daily, both within these scriptures, and also in the prevailing events throughout the world. And the question is, “what are you and I supposed to do with the information that is right in front of us?”

What are we supposed to do with these scriptures that clearly speak about a coming “end of days”, and what are we supposed to do with these “signs” of the “end of days” that are taking place in our world, right in front of our eyes?

As to the question about whether these events signal the very last days of this earth, Jesus told us very plainly, that we will not ever be able to know for sure the day or the hour.

And also, these scriptures seem to imply that we will have somewhat of a forewarning. We can note in the prophetic warnings given in Mark 13, that when we see all these many ominous events taking place, wars and rumors of wars, and natural disasters, and plagues of many kinds, that the “end” is not yet come, but is only the beginning of the “birth pains”. So, for us today, as we observe all the many ominous signs taking place, we can assume that the final “end of days” has not yet fully arrived, but that these sufferings are more likely to be “birth pains”.

However, with that being said, it is also well for us to realize that when “birth pains” are present, those birth pains are a definite signal that a birth is surely “close at hand”, and that we had better get busy making our last-minute preparations.

Which brings us back to the “whole impetus” behind why God’s Hand truly is always involved in the events taking place every moment of every day, and why He will eventually call our days to a close. And folks, it is the same reason He nearly destroyed the earth the first time with a flood, during the days of Noah. That reason is “sin”. Sin!

Just before God brought on the flood, we read in Genesis 6:5

⁵ The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of (men) were only evil continually. (**Genesis 6:5**)

And folks, right now, right at this moment, “wickedness” truly is “great on the earth”. It looks very much like the “days of Noah”, and also very much like the circumstances warned about in 2 Timothy 3.

Turn to 2 Timothy 3 with me please. I’d like for you to mark these words in your bible. And listen carefully as I read!

¹ . . . understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. ² For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³ heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, ⁴ treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, ⁵ having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. (**2 Timothy 3:1-5**)

Folks, do not these prophetic words perfectly describe our current culture, and the prevailing sins of people today? Let me read some of those again . . .

² . . . people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³ heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, ⁴ treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, (**2 Timothy 3:2-4**)

And remember, also that Jesus said that the “final” end times will be as in the days of Noah. People in Noah’s day were simply going about their day, caught up their wicked ways, ignoring the preaching and the warnings given by Noah. And then suddenly, their “end” came, and they perished!

Folks, without question, “wickedness” is right now also “great upon the earth”. And the question many people are asking is, “are we now in those “end-times” that Jesus warned about?”

Again, we really can’t know for sure. But even more so, you and I can’t do very much about the things that are taking place in the world. But in 2 Peter 3, the Apostle Peter gives us the best guidance as to what we can do, by saying that in those last days . . .

The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.

¹¹ Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives ¹² as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. (**2 Peter 3:10-12**)

This folks, is exactly what you and I are to be about doing right now, while we still can, “living holy and Godly lives”. And we need to get about dealing with the sin that is rampant within our own personal souls. And as much as we are able, we need to minister the gospel to our beloved families and friends.

And that is what God is presenting to us here, and warning us about in these words of James 1. Here, God is telling us that we must be ever so careful to guard our hearts against the wiles of sin and its consequences, that though sin may begin as only a subtle desire within the depths of our souls, left unattended, it can quickly and easily work its way out into “full-blown” rampant wickedness, just as in the days of Noah.

. . . May I back up for a moment and simply restate the obvious, that it is “sin”, and the manner in which each of us deals with sin, that can be the “great dividing line” in our personal relationship with Christ, determining whether we will suffer the “wrath of God” and the everlasting punishment of hell described here in this bible, or we’ll spend our eternity in heaven with Christ.

On these matters' folks, the scriptures are clear, and not up for private interpretation. Each of us will surely stand before God on that great and terrible "day" of judgment.

And with "sin" being the central issue of concern, you and I really ought to make every effort to know as much as we can about how sin can so easily and so subtly inject itself in the matters of our daily lives, else, while we are still stumbling around in the darkness of foolish ignorance, "sin", with its subtle, but overwhelming power, will seize the opportunity, and overcome our souls.

Remember the counsel given by God as He warned Cain away from the evil he was about to do to Abel. God said to Cain, "sin is crouching at your door, and it desires to have you, but you must master it"!

May I say this again! "Sin" truly is a subtle, but devastatingly powerful enemy, ever-desiring to take absolute control over our souls. And if we aren't prepared to realize the reality and the urgency of that threat, and aren't prepared to deal firmly with it, then we will surely be caught unawares and suffer, even perish, in our ignorance. Because remember, even in our ignorance, we are still always, without excuse, and fully accountable for our sin.

Another truth regarding "sin" that we must always keep in mind is that sin is not something that you and I acquire along our way in life. Not at all!

Yes, we do have our daily episodes of sinful behavior that we will stumble into. But folks, the basic condition of "sin" is part of the "nature" that came with us at birth, born into every fiber of our being, interlaced into our DNA. That is why we have the doctrine of "Total Depravity". You and I truly are "Totally Depraved", from the moment we breathe our first breath. And that depravity within us is ever-desiring to have its total control over us.

If you ever doubt, or want to deny, that you or someone else has that depraved nature, just go back and read how God explains it in Romans 3. Listen to these emphatic words . . .

¹⁰ As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one; ¹¹ There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. ¹² They have all turned aside;

They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one." (**Romans 3:10-12**)

A question . . . why is God so decisive in His words to us here? It's because He wants you and me to have no confusion about our condition and about sin's control over us.

Thankfully, a few verses later there in Romans 3, God gives us the answer and the remedy for our dilemma of sin. It is "Christ's atonement" and "His Justification".

But first, by giving us these verses, and others like them, God wants you and me to be fully aware of and fully accepting of the totality of the wretched state of our soul. And until that realization takes place within us folks, the remedy God has for our sin will not work. "Repentance" cannot begin and our "justification" will never take place until we fully accept God's truth about the condition of our wretched souls.

And yes, we can recognize that sin is rampant within the hearts of other people, especially "unbelievers". But folks, listen! We must understand that sin can also become rampant within the souls of us believers, yours and mine. And sadly, too often, it does.

And because that is true, God instructs us in these scriptures to always be diligent to examine our own hearts carefully.

⁵ Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you, unless indeed you fail to meet the test! (**2 Corinthians 13:5**)

What are these words revealing to us? It is this! That even though you and I might truly be saved, struggles, like those experienced by the Apostle Paul in Romans chapter 7 can "rise up" within us, confusing us and discouraging us, even plaguing us continually most of our lives.

And what is taking place within our souls as we experience our own episodes of sinful behavior. And what is God's role during it all? It is as we have been studying here in James 1:13-15 . . .

13 Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. 14 But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. 15 Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. **(James 1:13-15)**

As we consider these truths, we know that sin and sinful desires can and do manifest themselves differently within each of us. Some of us have desires and lusts towards money, some towards sex, others toward power and position. But the effects of all those sins end up being all very similar. And left unattended, each of those sins can lead us down a step-by-step decline into “reprobation”.

God describes that step-by-step decline very vividly in Romans chapter 1. There He tells us that if we don’t resist our inclinations towards our various sinful desires, then He will go ahead and “give us over” to those sins. And He will even “give us over” to the next step, and the next step of those sins, even until we become completely reprobate.

And folks, yes, those words are most often used in speaking about “unbelievers”. But listen, these same “steps of reprobation”, can also be said of some of the paths taken by even those of us who are truly saved.

And God’s part in this matter of temptation is given here to declare to us that yes, God, in His position of being our Sovereign Lord, is always very involved in this whole process of our dealing with sin. And He is not passive! He takes a very active role, with His Providential Hand at work in every part of every circumstance.

But let me say, without equivocation, that God will never cross the line into Himself tempting us into any manner of sin. Yes, He ordains whatsoever comes to pass, and He leads and He guides. But in all of His “ordaining” and “leading” and “guiding”, God Himself will never be the actual “causer” of sin, nor the actual “tempter” of anyone to sin. It is just as these words of our text tell us,

13 Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. **(James 1:13)**

The clear example being given here is that if we want to walk a sinful and evil path, God will not just allow us to do it, He will do as is said here, He will “give us over” to those evil and sinful ways and behaviors. So, we must be very careful.

The bible commentator, R. C. Sproul, envisions this process as being, that as we give ourselves over to sinful desires and lusts, God will simply “widen” out the “protective hedges” He has placed around us, and He will allow our old sinful nature to rise up and do whatever it wants to do.

And as we take those steps, it is not God who is tempting us or causing us to sin, it is us simply doing what we already have a sinful desire to do.

And that is the essence of these words here in James 1,

13 Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. 14 But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. 15 Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. **(James 1:13-15)**

So then, the answer to the question about whether God is bringing judgment upon the sins of men through such events as 911, and now through this coronavirus, the answer is both yes and no. Mostly, it seems that we can assume that we are simply suffering the “God ordained” consequences for our own sinful behaviors, as God widens out His protective hedges and allows consequences to have their way.

And sadly, as our world becomes more and more depraved, God will continue to widen out His protective hedges and will more and more give us over to the next steps of reprobation. And that will continue until God will simply call it all to a close.

And as to whether these days we are living within now are the very “last days”, may I close with these words from 2 Peter 3.

⁸ . . . do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. ¹⁰ But the day of

the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.

¹¹ Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives ¹² as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. ¹³ But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. ¹⁴ So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. ¹⁵ Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation. **(2 Peter 3:8-15)**

Let's pray.