

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN PRO-CATHEDRAL IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA

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Scripture: Philippians 3:13-21

"Kingdom Living (3): Citizenship in Heaven"

SIX WEEKS OF TRAGIC DISASTERS

I'm sure we all remember the full solar eclipse that traversed our entire nation in August for the first time since 1918. Outside of the tensions arising from the North Korean missile tests, the summer had been fairly quiet until that time. But ever since that eclipse, it has been something of a whirlwind of serious cataclysmic events – three major hurricanes - Hurricane Harvey hitting Houston and much of Southeast Texas, Hurricane Irma devastating a number of Caribbean Islands, the Florida Keys and southwest Florida; and Hurricane Maria taking out much of Puerto Rico. A major earthquake in Mexico City, coming on the exact day in September that the last one hit 32 years ago in 1985, and now the terrible shooting in Las Vegas – the worst loss of life by a single shooter in US history. Think about that for a moment. There has been something every week since the solar eclipse. Right now as I speak another hurricane, Hurricane Nate is hitting the Gulf coast. Now I am not one to think that every astronomical phenomenon has a spiritual meaning or that it is an harbinger of coming events. However, I do know that the visible world of humanity reflects the invisible spiritual realm of the human heart. I also know that the natural world points us to not only the reality of the supernatural – not only that there is an intelligent and all powerful Creator but also often can reflect greater spiritual truths. And of course, God's Word does warn us that there will be signs in the heavens that will coincide with Christ's Return. There were certainly signs during His first coming on the day of His crucifixion.

It remains to be seen if one can contend that the solar eclipse was some sort of warning as a strip of darkness covered our land for a few hours during a bright summer day. However, one thing is certain, God uses the events in our lives, in our world, to call us back to Himself. Our nation is divided like no other time since the 1960's. We have seen this in the controversy over NFL players disrespecting the national anthem and the flag in protest of so-called police brutality. We've seen it in the protests in Charlottesville, and the never-ending criticism of our president. Of course, we also can't forget the international tensions around the globe. At a meeting with military personnel just a few days ago, our president commented "This is the calm before the storm." The media of course was all over those comments wondering exactly what President Trump meant.

One of the challenges with living in the modern age is that every tragedy and natural disaster is brought directly to our living rooms and now with the smart phones to our very person. It's hard to get away from it all. In fact, sometimes I really feel like I just wish I could move to Montana, live in a nice cabin like home with all the amenities of course – in the beauty of God's creation, and cut off from social media. You know some people do that. Doesn't that sound good? But it probably would eventually get boring and God does not call us to retreat from society though it certainly is tempting. The truth is in this day of 24/7 news, of so much going on, of everyone going to and fro, we can get overwhelmed.

And yet God has ordained it so. Every generation has its unique challenges and struggles, but every generation has the same needs. The need to love and be loved, the need to have purpose and work, and the need

to have something to look forward to. And the challenge for every person is to come to that place in their lives where they recognize that only in Christ will those needs be met. And when someone has come to that place, Christ calls us to let others know that they too can have those same needs met in Him, in His Kingdom.

We have been doing a series on the Kingdom of God. Recall the Kingdom of God is where the King rules and reigns. Jesus is the King of the Kingdom. He wants to rule our hearts first. And if our heart is ruled by the King of kings and Lord of lords, everything else will fall into place. There is the rub. Jesus says repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand. He tells us to seek first His kingdom and to pray that His Kingdom come! Thus, the Kingdom is already but not yet. We can be partakers of the blessings of Kingdom living but not until Christ returns will we see the Kingdom in its most beautiful and fullest expression.

But in the meantime how do we experience the Kingdom? The same way we enter it. Last week we looked at how Christ says unless we become like children we can't enter the Kingdom; and if we want to be great in the Kingdom (that would mean after living in it for a time), we must humble ourselves like children. So we looked at what being childlike means – not childish – but childlike – four things – children are needy – they recognize their need and if those needs are being met by their parents, they will be trusting. Children in their first few years are also humble and they are teachable – wanting to grow and learn about this new world and life itself. So too in the kingdom, such things are necessary if we are to experience the blessing of God's kingdom. So the Kingdom mindset and attitude is recognizing our need for God, trusting Him in all things and for all things, staying humble, and always being teachable – wanting and willing to learn and grow in the love, knowledge and wisdom of the Lord.

But how do we maintain such a childlike mindset? That is what I want us to look at today. Let's now look again at our second lesson from Paul's letter to the **Philippians 3:13-21**.

"Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, 14I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. 15Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; 16however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained. 17Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. 18For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, 19whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. 20For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; 21who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself."

THE SPIRITUAL LIFE IS A MARATHON – Don't look behind, look ahead!

The Apostle Paul here uses the metaphor of a footrace. In light of other passages, chief among them **2 Tim. 4:7** where Paul talks about finishing the race of life and mentions the laurel wreath as the prize received from the Lord, it is clear that the best analogy to our spiritual journeys is that of a marathon. In a marathon, the

runner certainly can recall some of the various points of the course behind him; but his focus is not on what is behind him, but it is on what is in front of him so he can finish well. This means staying focused on the task at hand (running the race) and continuing to do so until he arrives at the finish the line to win the prize. That is why Paul writes, ***“but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize...”*** The prize for the Christian believer is receiving salvation – once and for all – in the Kingdom of God! God has called us to be His people so we must act like it. To do so means remaining faithful to that calling which is expressed in His Word.

To maintain the Kingdom mindset means to not get bogged down in our past – both successes and failures. As Coach Mike Ditka once said when being interviewed after a game in which his new team the New Orleans Saints had lost and how they compared to his Chicago Bears team and if he missed those days, he replied, “Those who live in the past, die in the past.”

As believers who trust in the Lord and His Word, we are to always look up and go forward. In other words, we are to keep our minds on God and what He has said, rather than on our past or our present circumstances. What is God trying to do in the here and now? What does he want us to do? What is He trying to accomplish in our lives? We need to keep on keeping on despite not knowing all the answers.

Notice that such an approach is the one of a mature believer. When Paul writes, ***“Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude.”*** The Greek word translated as “perfect” actually means a perfected maturity rather than a perfect sinlessness. God is most concerned with our attitude and motives for doing what we are doing. It is why Paul then writes, ***16however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.”*** In other words, wherever we are in our spiritual journeys keep living by what we know is good and true with the goal of growing into further maturity. Keep walking even when you haven’t figured everything out.

So it is always onward and upward – the kingdom mindset – means keep moving forward and keeping our focus on heavenly things (***the upward call of God in Christ***). In other words, developing DAILY habits of prayer and biblical study, and then seeking to put what we know to be true into practice. Paul adds, ***17Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us.***

THE DISCIPLINE OF A HEAVENLY FOCUS – don’t look around, look up!

What is true of a pattern? It is unique and has several characteristics that are repeated over and over again. That is the Christian life – kingdom living – it should be repeated over and over again.

When there are tragedies like natural disasters and man-made carnage, what should the Kingdom response be? It should be one of meeting the needs of those affected with Christlike love and witness each and every time. It does not mean that we act one way for one tragedy and another way for another. Same for our day-to-day lives.

Maintaining focus and developing daily habits is key to maintaining the heavenly mindset.

What is the opposite to maintaining the heavenly or kingdom mindset? The way of the world which Paul says has crept into the church in Philippi. ***18"For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, 19whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things."*** It is no different today.

We know these folks are supposedly Christians, for Paul says that ***"many walk"*** but ***"they are enemies of the cross of Christ."*** They do not have an end that is salvation. Why? God is not really their god; rather their appetite – in other words, their own lusts and desires – is the god they serve, and they think they are right in doing so! Here we have an example of the exaltation of self which inevitably sets its mind on earthly things. There are two main problems with the things of this earth – they will never bring lasting fulfillment and they will end. It is why John writes in ***1 John 2:15-17 "Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. 17The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever."***

So it is both what we focus on and saying no to those things that drag us down. Social media, television, music, newspapers, books, magazines, videos – what does our media diet look like? What do we fill our spare time with?

CITIZENSHIP IN HEAVEN MEANS POWER FROM HEAVEN

20For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; 21who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself."

Why is our focus and the actions that demonstrate our focus so important? They reflect wherein our true citizenship lies. When Paul says for our citizenship is in heaven, it is the same as saying our citizenship is in the Kingdom of heaven. We are citizens of the King and His Kingdom. We have all the rights and responsibilities that come with it. We can't forget that. So if we are following His laws and following His Person, don't you think He is going to take care of us? The believers in Philippi would appreciate this analogy – since they were citizens of Rome even though Rome was a thousand miles away! Even though they were far away, they still had the same rights and responsibilities as those in Rome.

And the same God who will transform our earthly bodies that are weak and susceptible to temptation, disease, and death will transform them into the same body as the glorified Christ! Can you imagine that? What a promise! Do you know what that means? The only way I am going to be able to maintain the kingdom mindset is not only maintaining focus, developing godly habits and saying no to the world, but I am going to need to rely on God's power, on His Holy Spirit to do what I need to do.

So how will we maintain focus, develop good habits and trust in God's power?

All of this boils down to one thing – our wills. What will we choose to do each and every day?

What is the greatest motivating factor in choosing the right path? God's love.

After surviving the Las Vegas shooting, Taylor Benge told CNN, "I was agnostic going into that concert and I'm a firm believer in God now." He explained: "Because there's no way that all of that happened and that I made it and I was blessed enough to still be here alive talking to you today."

And yet another man responded on social media to the shooting by quoting atheist Sam Harris: "Either God can do nothing to stop catastrophes like this, or he doesn't care to, or he doesn't exist. God is either impotent, evil, or imaginary. Take your pick, and choose wisely."

But that is a lie. The truth is God created us with free will so we could choose to love him and each other (Matthew 22:37, 39). But freedom without consequences is not free. If I choose not to go to work but God miraculously transports me to my office, I have no real choice in the matter.

And even though we would like God to prevent horrific misuses of freedom such as the Las Vegas shooting, he could not honor our freedom while preventing its results, no matter how tragic they are.

And yet, sometimes God does intervene! But he does so always for the greater good. Think of when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were condemned by King Nebuchadnezzar to the fiery furnace, God protected them from the fire (Daniel 3:27). Or when Daniel was thrown into the lions' den, God sent an angel to shut the predators' mouths (Daniel 6:22). Or when Herod imprisoned Peter, the Lord sent an angel to free him (Acts 12:6–11).

If God could protect these men from the consequences of misused freedom, why did he not protect those who were killed or injured in Las Vegas? Why did he not protect the victims of the Holocaust or 9/11?

God has reasons that we cannot fully understand. He declares through the prophet Isaiah, my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts. If God is God and we are not, it is only logical that his thoughts would be higher than ours (Isaiah 55:9). A math teacher cannot teach calculus to a toddler. Even God cannot explain what we cannot comprehend.

The truth is that when God allows or prevents the consequences of misused human freedom, he must have reasons that are consistent with his loving heart. Yes, there was a Holocaust, but out of the Holocaust came the state of Israel. Yes, there was 9/11 but out of 9/11 came a greater awareness and vigilance against those who would destroy us. And yes, there was the Las Vegas shooting, but from this shooting will come a better defense against high-rise attackers.

There is a greater purpose to everything that happens. And no matter what happens, our purpose must be found in the God who loves us.

I do not know why God allowed the tragedy in Las Vegas. But I do know that He redeems even the most tragic and evil of circumstances that He allows and that He is love. The less we understand our Father's ways, the more we need to trust His heart, the more we need to set our minds on the things above where Christ is, rather than on the things of earth, and the more we need to rely on His power and not our own. That, my brothers and sisters, is Kingdom Living, that is living as citizens of heaven! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!