The Power of Despair

By
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“And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the LORD for it; for in its peace you will have peace.”
-Jeremiah 29:7

As we enter into another election season I thought it would be a good idea to talk about our current election from a Biblical perspective. Many Christians have believed that because we serve the kingdom of heaven, we don’t really have to worry about the kingdom of this earth and so they have become apolitical, or they have separated their Christian convictions from the political convictions. It is important to remember that the church age resembles the age of Israel when they were dispersed from the land of Israel. This time period is known as the “diaspora” or the “dispersion” and this is the term that the New Testament authors use to describe the church:

“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the pilgrims of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace be multiplied.”
-1 Peter 1:1-2

Because Christians have ultimately been called out of this world and been called into the Kingdom of heaven, we are in a similar position to the nation of Israel when they were exiled from their land. Though they were living in pagan nations, they were always looking to return to the promised land, the land where God ruled and reigned over His people. We are in a similar position because though we live in this fallen world, we really belong to the Kingdom of Heaven and we desire to go to that promised land. However, in the above passage from the prophet Jeremiah, when the Israelites went into captivity, many of the Jews argued that they should ignore the social problems of the nations of their captivity and merely wait to return to Israel.

Jeremiah rebukes this idea though and tells the Israelites that they should act as sources of good in the societies that God had sent them to dwell. That they should spread the goodness of God by seeking the good of the place of their exile, to raise families, build homes, and participate in the blessing of that nation. This commandment then applies to the church. We are not merely to wait for the return of Christ, but we are

to build homes, raise families, and to seek the benefit of our native country. In doing so we will be salt and light to our communities, showing them the principles that govern the kingdom of heaven so that we can lead them to the goodness of God.

All that being said though, my job as a pastor is not to weigh in on every political issue. The matters of the soul are my domain, which means that I am to speak boldly on theological and ethical issues and how these manifest in the political domain, but I am not to speak dogmatically about what I believe is the best political path forward for our nation. Especially considering that many of these political issues contain enough nuance that well-meaning Christians on both sides can meaningfully disagree without compromising Scripture. So when political issues cross ethical lines, I will speak out as fervently as I can, but in this paper, that will not be my focus.

Instead I wanted to discuss one of the main concerns that is expressing itself in this political cycle, and that is the demoralization of our society and the despair that it is producing. I believe that most people sense that something is changing in our political system, that things are in some ways more bleak and dismal than they usually are in our society, but they struggle to explain why that is the case. They tend to focus on the material problems that we are facing, our mounting debt, our foreign conflicts, increasing inflation, and things like this, but I don't believe that this really explains the current problem. While thinking on this problem the following Proverb came to mind:

"The spirit of a man will sustain him in sickness, But who can bear a broken spirit?"
-Proverbs 18:14

As we spoke about last week, when the Biblical authors talk about man's "spirit", they are using words that denote internal vitality, passion, and energy. This is why the term "spirit" is the same word as breath and wind, and it is also why "spirit" is related to fire. These powerful animating forces, and destructive forces, stir up the elements of the earth and transform them by their power. And when the Bible refers to our "soul" what it is really focusing on is the source of identity and personality. This is why "soul" is related to water. Waters can be still or tumultuous, but they have a depth hidden beneath the surface. This is why when we say that someone has "spirit" we mean that they are energetic and vibrant, but when we say that music or art is "soulful" we mean that it is deep, even with a hint of melancholy.

What the above Proverb is referring to is a malady described in Scripture as "the broken spirit". This is not a physical illness nor is it something diagnosable with the eye, but it is a problem with someone's internal vitality. In modern vernacular we refer to this as "depression". It is not really being sad, but a feeling of despair, hopeless indifference, an

inability to experience passion or emotional vitality, an internal numbness. Oftentimes this malady is produced by extreme grief, but sometimes, it can come about through something biological, or even an ongoing malaise or deep discontentedness.

The warning of the Proverb is that if someone has a strong and vibrant "spirit" they can weather any storm. Even if their bodies are struck with illness, or they suffer massive misfortune in their personal lives, their spirit will sustain them within their suffering. It will guide them through to the other side, providing them with hope, optimism, and proactive thoughts. But when someone suffers from a broken spirit, even if their lives are relatively good, (no life will be perfect and free from issues), they will feel despairing, hopeless, aimless, frustrated, bitter, and lonely. Consider a description of a "broken spirit" in Psalm 42:

"O my God, my soul is cast down within me; Therefore I will remember You from the land of the Jordan, And from the heights of Hermon, From the Hill Mizar. Deep calls unto deep at the noise of Your waterfalls; All Your waves and billows have gone over me."

-Psalm 42:6-7

Notice that his very soul is "cast down" or "depressed" within him. This isn't just one sorrowful thought, this is an entire character distressed and grieved. His entire world is cast in shadow, every thought passes through a filter of despair. This is why he uses the metaphor of being underwater. When we are submerged under the water, light and sound can reach us, but the light is distorted, and sound and sensation are muffled. This state makes life itself unbearable. A constant aimless wandering for passion and emotional health. It is a mind that is trapped within itself, constantly longing for the happiness that was, and cynical that anything can change for the better.

If I were to diagnose the current political landscape, this is the term I would use. It isn't that we haven't faced worse crises as a nation, objectively we have faced far worse. It is that our spirit has been cast down. There seems to be a pervasive spirit of cynicism and despair that coats our current landscape. The discourse is increasingly embittered, hopeless, and cutting. It is overly critical of what is, with little to no proactive language behind it. And the great danger is that this kind of despair is deeply contagious and ultimately deadly.

It is a spirit that fills the air and is being breathed in and circulated among the populace like a plague. As a result, the church itself has breathed in the current atmosphere and is feeling the effects at an acute level. This is not a sermon about how I think we can fix the current problems that we are facing, it is only to help us understand where this spirit

of despair is coming from and how we can fight against it in our own homes and communities.

“O LORD, You induced me, and I was persuaded; You are stronger than I, and have prevailed. I am in derision daily; Everyone mocks me. For when I spoke, I cried out; I shouted, “Violence and plunder!” Because the word of the LORD was made to me A reproach and a derision daily. Then I said, “I will not make mention of Him, Nor speak anymore in His name.” But His word was in my heart like a burning fire Shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding it back, And I could not. For I heard many mocking: “Fear on every side!” “Report,” they say, “and we will report it!” All my acquaintances watched for my stumbling, saying, “Perhaps he can be induced; Then we will prevail against him, And we will take our revenge on him.” But the LORD is with me as a mighty, awesome One. Therefore my persecutors will stumble, and will not prevail. They will be greatly ashamed, for they will not prosper. Their everlasting confusion will never be forgotten. But, O LORD of hosts, You who test the righteous, And see the mind and heart, Let me see Your vengeance on them; For I have pleaded my cause before You. Sing to the LORD! Praise the LORD! For He has delivered the life of the poor From the hand of evildoers. Cursed be the day in which I was born! Let the day not be blessed in which my mother bore me! Let the man be cursed Who brought news to my father, saying, “A male child has been born to you!” Making him very glad. And let that man be like the cities Which the LORD overthrew, and did not relent; Let him hear the cry in the morning And the shouting at noon, Because he did not kill me from the womb, That my mother might have been my grave, And her womb always enlarged with me. Why did I come forth from the womb to see labor and sorrow, That my days should be consumed with shame?”

-Jeremiah 20:7-18

The Despair of the Righteous

In the above passage, I believe we see all the societal rot that is on display in our current culture. The prophet Jeremiah had one of the most difficult ministries in all of Scripture. He was sent to the generation of Israelites who would fully reject God and be carried into captivity as a result of their rebellion. This is not like the ministries of men like Isaiah, Ezekiel, or even Daniel, who had a difficult ministry to be sure, because all of these men were met with levels of success in their ministries. Jeremiah on the other hand was met only with opposition and antagonism.

The nation that he was speaking to had no interest in the word of God. They didn’t desire spiritual edification or correction, they only longed for physical deliverance from Israel’s oppressors, namely the Babylonians. The problem was that their real problem

was not physical, though this was a problem, their problem was spiritual. They had all but rejected God and were seeking their own deliverance against the word of God. It is for this reason that Jesus is often related to Jeremiah because His ministry, though to a far higher degree, was similar to the message of Jeremiah. His people only wanted to be delivered from the Romans and so they rejected His far more important offer of forgiveness of sins and full reconciliation with God.

But after years of failing to convince the masses, Jeremiah became discouraged. He even blames God for "deceiving" him. He truly believed that God would work a revival in the nation as a result of his preaching, but while he did have some people listen to him, the nation as a whole was becoming less faithful to God. This discouragement festered in his spirit and turned into bitterness and despair, to the point that he didn't want to do his job as a prophet anymore.

"Hope deferred makes the heart sick…"
-Proverbs 13:12

The reason why the righteous are more prone to experience despair than the wicked is because our standards for goodness are far higher. We have tasted and seen that the Lord is good, we have experienced the miraculous power of His presence in our lives and so we want desperately to see that same power work on those around us. But when things go from bad to worse, when the soul of the nation seems to turn further and further from God, the righteous in the nation can feel downcast and despondent. The hope that gave us energy and strength has now turned poisonous in our hearts.

This is what it means when it says that "hope deferred makes the heart sick." When we hope for something with all our hearts and desire it to come to pass with all we are, if that hope is crushed, or even just put off, it is difficult to not feel an illness in our hearts. Our hearts that had previously filled us with this hope, now feels cold and numb, incapable of hope or positive desire. The optimism that once drove us dries up in our chests and we are left with only dark pessimistic thoughts.

Instead of thinking how things might improve, we spend our days meditating on how bad things have gotten, and how much worse they might get. And it's no wonder why this is happening in our present moment. The Psalmist tells us:

"If the foundations are destroyed, What can the righteous do?"
-Psalm 11:3

As the soul of the nation veers further and further from God, the very foundations of our society are being torn up by the root. The foundations that we relied upon seem to be disappearing, and since the institutions that uphold the country have been weaponized, they are treated, rightly, with distrust and even contempt. It reminds me of C.S. Lewis' last book in the "Chronicles of Narnia" series called "The Last Battle". During this book a wicked ape finds the skin of a lion and places it upon his friend, a donkey, in order to disguise him as Aslan, (the figure of Christ in these books) in order to deceive the nation of Narnia. This ruse is so effective that the entire nation, almost overnight, turns from right morality and begins believing false things and crying out for a pagan god.

When the righteous king hears about this, he doesn't know what to believe. He begins to doubt the goodness of Aslan and rides out with his own faithful unicorn, Jewel, to figure out what to do. On the way they have a discussion where the king says this:

"What lies before us? Horrible thoughts arise in my heart. If we had died before to-day we should have been happy." "Yes," said Jewel. "We have lived too long. The worst thing in the world has come upon us."

C.S. Lewis - "The Last Battle"

This is despair. The desire to have died when everything was happy is the belief that things can't get better, that the bleakness that we feel in the moment is predictive of what is coming for us in the future. This despair is almost so overwhelming for the king that he considers giving up on his quest. Much like Jeremiah, he feels a futility to his actions and wants to flee from his responsibilities. This is what can easily happen to the church. Because we see things getting so much darker, we can doubt that we can have any positive influence on the culture as a whole. We can give up and decide to hide the word of God.

This would mean refusing to speak with conviction about what we believe or to try to make any positive change in our communities. To simply run away from the world, hide ourselves in the bosom of the church and wait for the end to come. But like the king in the story, we don't actually know what the outcome of these events will be. It isn't for us to know the future, it is only for us to be faithful to God regardless of the time that we are living in. And like Jeremiah before us, if our words are ignored or if we are persecuted because of our convictions, this is what God has called us to. But we are supposed to be the soul of the nation, leading the conscience of our culture towards the living God. If we have lost our heart to do this, we have neglected our responsibility.

"You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men.

-Matthew 5:13

We will speak more about the solution to our discouragement later, but for now let's focus on the rest of the culture.

The Passion of the Wicked

"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity."
William Butler Yeats - "The Second Coming"

The above poem was written by the Irish poet William Butler Yeats during the 1920's. In the aftermath of World War 1, Yeats saw how the spirit of Europe was crushed and how decadence reigned supreme and how it seemed that the only people with passion were the revolutionaries who had taken over Russia and the ones who were on the move in Germany, Italy, and Spain. He noticed that while the righteous were despairing, the wicked were on the move with fervent passion.

He named his poem "The Second Coming" because he thought this was the end of the Christian west and the beginning of a new pagan era, and his dark prophecy, in many ways, came true. We see this exact phenomenon in the passage in Jeremiah:

"For I heard many mocking: "Fear on every side!" "Report," they say, "and we will report it!" All my acquaintances watched for my stumbling, saying, "Perhaps he can be induced; Then we will prevail against him, And we will take our revenge on him."
-Jeremiah 20:10

Though Jeremiah considered giving up his ministry, the wicked among the nation were not filled with despair nor were they tired from speaking. They were animated with fresh vigor, they were excited to move the nation further down the road away from God and towards depravity and rebellion. They were happy to make a mockery of Jeremiah's warnings, all the while plotting his downfall.

Though I disagree with the singer Bob Marley on most things, there was an event in his life where he showed an admiral quality. Before a concert in the late 70s, gunmen came

into his home and shot him twice, once in the arm and once in the chest. Two days later, Bob Marley took the stage and performed anyway. When asked why he did this he said:

“The people who were trying to make this world worse are not taking the day off. Why should I?”

-Bob Marley

Whether the church likes it or not, the people trying to make this world worse are not tired or discouraged. They are not roiling in despair and wanting to give up, they are filled with passion to make this world a worse place, though some of them think that they are doing something noble and meritorious. This makes sense because the prince of the power of the air, Satan, is passionately working to twist and corrupt the work of God even though he has already been defeated. The interesting thing about the church is that even though victory is assured through Christ we are discouraged and despairing, and yet even though defeat is certain for Satan he is motivated and innovative.

Herein is the biggest problem. The young in our nation will always be drawn towards passion because they want the world to be a better place. The older someone gets, they have a tendency to accept reality as it is and to stop fighting for it to get better. But since the young have to make their way in this world, they can’t accept its brokenness, they have to fight for a better tomorrow. This is the main positive aspect of youth. They know that the world could be a better place and they are willing to fight and die to make it so. The benefit of the old is that they have the wisdom to know that the world can be a lot worse than it is, so they don’t try to revolutionize too many things and have a tendency towards complacency.

This is why the old and the young need each other. The young need the wisdom of their elders, and the old need the passion of the youth. We can see this phenomenon clearly in the church. New believers have incredible passion to want to reach the lost and transform their lives. But as such, their expectations might be too high and their passion might be misdirected. But the older believers have seen what a long and difficult process sanctification really is. They have preached the gospel passionately to friends and family members over the years only to get rejected by them. They can grow tired and complacent and they need to remember the passion of their youth.

But this dynamic makes the youth vulnerable to wicked passion. Since they want desperately to make the world a better place, revolutionaries appeal to their sensibilities. They grow frustrated with the apathetic complacency of the old, and they are bitter and resentful of the despair of the righteous that has all but given up on

making the world a better place. They flock to the voices that promise them a better tomorrow and they drink deep of the passionate rhetoric that spews poisonous resentments and radical ideologies.

The German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer witnessed this in his own nation as Hitler rose to power. We will speak much more about Bonhoeffer next week for All Saint's Day, but for now it is important to understand that Bonhoeffer did something that few did in his own time. Because the righteous in his nation were despairing, all they could do was lament and complain about the rise of fascistic ideologies in the youth while the bulk of the nation foolishly believed that the Nazi's were a mere fad that would fade away with time. Bonhoeffer was one of the only people who took the complaints of the youth seriously while also pointing out the folly of their decisions. Here are a couple quotes from a speech he gave the day that Hitler was elected to power:

"They (the younger generation) reached maturity during a period of history during which the previously well-established Western world came apart at the seams—war, postwar period, crisis. Thus the inner task facing them could only consist of the attempt to avoid being pulled into a complete collapse and instead to find the foothold that would allow them a continued existence. Three impressions shaped their move toward this foothold: first, in the collapse they experienced the triumph of objects over humans, of machines over their creators. Technology, which was intended to master nature, had been turned against defenseless humans and thus robbed of its essential meaning! Second, the impotence of the entire existing political, intellectual, and religious ideology seemed to have been proven, and third, the millions who fell in the Great War, the revolutionizing masses of the postwar period, and the million-strong army of unemployed during the crisis must have given the younger generation a convincing impression of the meaninglessness and complete isolation of the individual and of the blunt power of the masses. The masses and lifeless objects appeared to have emerged from this collapse as victors. In neither, however, was the younger generation able to find the foothold that could help sustain their lives in this chaos. A sense of the individual and the sense of true community seemed to have been completely destroyed."

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer - "The Fuhrer and the Individual in the Younger Generation"

Much like the youth in our country. The youth of his day *knew* that the Germany that they inherited was a mere ghost of the former glory that Germany once held and they wanted someone to blame for their misfortune and someone who would fix what was broken. They didn't want simple platitudes or nuanced philosophical discussions, they wanted solutions and they wanted them quickly. But at the heart of their problem, as Bonhoeffer pointed out, was the immense isolation that was brought about by the aftermath of the First World War and the rise of new technologies. They sought

community in a movement instead of in their families and local communities, this gave them a sense of purpose, but it also directed their passion towards destruction. In the same speech he said this:

“And to this point it must be said that the youngest generation’s sense of reality has and is becoming a metaphysic of reality. Reality is not taken as that which it is; there is no reflection on what it can and cannot be; rather, reality is taken as what it should be; it is naively held to be open to any development and construction; in it the elements of God’s kingdom on earth are seen in the process of coming into being.”

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer - “The Fuhrer and the Individual in the Younger Generation”

The Nazi’s had weaponized the Utopian fantasies of the youth. They had spoken directly towards this tendency of the young who genuinely believe that they can reshape the world in their strength and make it perfect. As the old saw goes, “the road to hell is paved with good intentions”, by trying to bring heaven down to earth, we oftentimes end up bringing earth down to hell.

This week as France and Italy have succumbed to violent and destructive riots, I have been thinking of the musical “Les Miserables” which centers around one of the many youth revolutions in France after the original revolution in the late 1700’s. As the young men rise up for the revolt they sing this song:

“Do you hear the people sing?
Singing a song of angry men?
It is the music of a people
Who will not be slaves again!”
Claude-Michel Schönberg - “Les Miserables”

The wrath of young men can be passionate and convincing, and the laments of these men are often well founded, but the belief that wrath could ever bring about a better world is belayed by the facts. The passion of the wicked seduces the optimism of the young and by doing this creates a worse world for all those involved.

“...for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”

-James 1:20

Complaint and Dissatisfaction

“But to what shall I liken this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their companions, “and saying: ‘We played the flute for you, And you did not dance; We mourned to you, And you did not lament.’

-Matthew 11:16-17

Unfortunately, what Jeremiah witnessed and what Bonhoeffer witnessed is the same thing that Jesus Himself witnessed. The spirit of the generation who would burn down their own world. Jeremiah found himself ministering to a people who would not listen to reason, who allowed their own resentment burn within them. They ignored wise counsel and listened to the passionate folly of the charlatans leading them to doom.

Jesus faced the same problem. The men of his day were resentful that Israel was not what it had been historically. Existing under the shadow of the Roman empire, the men of Israel wanted to be free. Now this desire was not a bad thing, and Jesus, like Jeremiah, never resented this desire, nor did He condemn it. It wasn't that the desire was wrong, it's just that it wasn't what God had in mind. This is why when Peter tried to "strike a blow" for Israeli independence on the night of His arrest Jesus says to him:

"Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword."
-Matthew 26:52

Jesus is not preaching pure pacifism here, as some of falsely believed, but like Jeremiah before Him, He was saying that now was not the time for physical revolt, now was the time for spiritual revival and restoration. More than this, Jesus was preaching a spiritual revolution that would actually bring about a complete forgiveness for sin and a redemption of mankind. But this is not the message that the people wanted. They were unhappy with their circumstances, rightly so, but they had allowed their unhappiness to build into a smoldering bitterness and resentment.

And here's the thing, wrath can tear down, but it can't build up. It's like Cain. His wrath allowed him to strike down his brother, but it never gave him the vision necessary to build his life into something honorable or good. The wrath of the youth can complain about what is, but they have no idea how to actually make things better which is why they are drawn to these revolutionary ideas. Because these ideas are so different from what we have now, they can seem rational, but they are merely different.

Because another key thing that the youth don't understand is the incredible difficulty in trying to build something new. Tearing down the old is easy and anyone can do it, but to build something else requires something more than wrath, it requires vision, discipline, and genuine care. In Ray Bradbury's classic work "Fahrenheit 451" he describes a dystopian future where "firemen" go around burning books to keep the populace placid and "happy". In the novel, the main character Guy Montag comments on the pleasure of burning things:

“It was a pleasure to burn. It was a special pleasure to see things eaten, to see things blackened and changed.”

-Ray Bradbury - “Fahrenheit 451”

The passion of youth wants to see things change, but it lacks the vision and the wisdom necessary to change things for the better. They can only burn down the great things built by those who preceded them without constructing something better in its place. Later in the novel, Guy realizes this:

“Last night I thought about all that kerosene I’ve used in the past ten years. And I thought about books. And for the first time I realized that a man was behind each one of the books. A man had to think them up. A man had to take a long time to put them down on paper… It took some man a lifetime maybe to put some of his thoughts down, looking around at the world and life and then I come along in two minutes and boom! it’s all over.”

-Ray Bradbury - “Fahrenheit 451”

The irony of what is happening in Europe is that these angry youth are setting fire to monuments that took a lifetime and an almost unfathomable level of skill and knowledge to build, and in a moment they are reduced to ash by individuals who lack any ability to construct anything that is even a fraction of its beauty. This is what is happening with the youth. They can't even fathom how difficult it is to make a governing structure work, let alone work for centuries. And yet, in their passion, they are convinced that these structures have failed them so much that they are willing to tear them down.

The leaders of Jesus’ day were so excited to get back to the “glory days” of Israel that they never considered that maybe there was something in the spirit and the soul of ancient Israel that they lacked. This is the problem with complaint, the two people, (Jesus and John the Baptist) who were showing Israel that their real problems were internal and not external were cast out and killed. This is one way to understand Jesus’ famous statement:

“And why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? “Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove the speck from your eye’; and look, a plank is in your own eye? “Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”

-Matthew 7:3-5

The spirit of resentment always blames unhappiness on external factors that are outside their control, but it never considers that the root cause is internal and that we are responsible for addressing it. When Jesus exhorts the Israelites to consider their own “eye”, He is exhorting them to consider first addressing the problems in their own soul before they try to fix the world.

Historically, like the men who mocked Jeremiah, the Israelites ignore this message. They blame all their unhappiness on external forces and so they choose violent evolution instead of somber repentance. The tragic results are displayed for all to see. Like the monuments of old, to create something that is beautiful and good requires love, not wrath.

Baseless Hatred

“For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!”

-Galatians 5:14-15

Because this resentment is so pervasive, it poisons personal relationships. As Bonhoeffer talked about, the young men weren't seeking true love and harmony, they were seeking camaraderie and collectivism, they didn’t know any other way. But because they didn't know how to produce harmony, they only spread chaos and division wherever they went.

The same is true today, the reason why everything feels so divisive now is because it is. We are not looking for the spiritual solution, we are only looking for the physical. Now the world is flattened and simplified, it is no longer about the nuances of love and mercy, it is only about people who are on my side or in my way.

It isn’t as though, as a nation, we haven't experienced bigger divisive topics, think about the Civil War as a much greater example, it is that the spirit of the nation who fought that war was far different than the modern nation. It was a nation that could fight such a war and find some form of reconciliation at the end of it. The modern world has reasons to divide but they also don't seem interested in reconciling, only in defeating their opponents. As Jesus warned His own generation:

“*And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. “Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. “And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold.”*

-Matthew 24:10-12

This prophecy literally came true. The very generation that rejected Jesus was the same generation that rebelled against the Romans in 66 A.D. and were disastrously defeated in 70 A.D. But why did they lose? While there are physical factors, the subsequent generations of Jews seem to agree with Jesus as to the cause. Consider this section from the Jewish Talmud:

“However, considering that the people during the Second Temple period were engaged in Torah study, observance of mitzvot, and acts of kindness, and that they did not perform the sinful acts that were performed in the First Temple, why was the Second Temple destroyed? It was destroyed due to the fact that there was wanton hatred during that period. This comes to teach you that the sin of wanton hatred is equivalent to the three severe transgressions: Idol worship, forbidden sexual relations and bloodshed.”

-”The Talmud” - “Yoma 9b”

The generations of rabbis who came after Jesus looked back and couldn't see any idolatry or sexual immorality, like Jeremiah's generation who were destroyed by the Babylonians, so what was their sin? The above passage translates a Hebrew phrase, “sinat chinam” as “wanton hatred”, but what did this phrase really mean? A more direct translation would be “baseless hatred” or “hatred without cause”.

The generation that lost to the Romans was so divisive that when the Romans surrounded Jerusalem, they fought each other and even burned their own storehouses of food so that they couldn't outlast the Roman siege, just to spite their neighbors. This is a generation doomed for destruction.

Just as an individual with a broken spirit is more likely to harm themselves than suffer harm from another, a nation with a broken spirit will hate and harm themselves more than anyone else. Remember that France is burning itself right now, they aren't under attack from a foreign military, they are damaging themselves. Nations who are about to fall commit suicide rather than succumbing to external defeat.

Why? Because the problem is internal, not external. It doesn't mean that external things can’t be better, but without the internal reformation, the external actions will be destructive and not constructive. A society that is biting and devouring each other is not a nation that can build something new and better. It is a nation bent on self destruction and our enemies need only to wait for the opportune moment to finish the work that we are starting.

This is where Paul's exhortation in the passage from the above passage in Galatians is so relevant. If the nation is biting and devouring itself, what is one practical thing the church can do? We can dare to be different. We can strive to maintain unity amongst ourselves, to disagree agreeably, to reconcile, show mercy, to show grace when we can and justice when necessary.

However, the obvious question is how do we do that? When the world has become mad and forgotten what it means to live in harmony and love, how can the church avoid being pulled into the cycle of despair and vindictiveness that is consuming everyone around us? Just as Paul points out, the spirit of the world has a gravity to it that threatens to pull in even the faithful in God. This means it takes real effort and intentionality to avoid moving in the direction of the world.

“For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity.”

-Ephesians 2:14-16

Hope Beyond This World

“In the original passage we quoted about Jeremiah, Jeremiah decides to preach the word of God faithfully whether or not the world around him would listen. But how was he able to do that? In order to understand his conviction, even in the midst of his grief, we have to go back to an earlier point in his book to see the truth God showed him that allowed him to minister to a world that was coming apart.

“Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, And whose hope is the LORD. For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters, Which spreads out its roots by the river, And will not fear when heat comes; But its leaf will be green, And will not be anxious in the year of drought, Nor will cease from yielding fruit.”

-Jeremiah 17:7-8

The state of “blessedness” in the Bible is beyond the state of “happy” or “unhappy”, both of which are emotional reactions to external circumstances. To be blessed in this sense is to be intrinsically filled with joy and hope. Jeremiah even makes the point that someone who is dwelling in this state *will* suffer reversals of fortune, in the above passage he calls these seasons of “drought”, but also claims that the one who is living

in a state of blessedness will not fear the “drought” but will continue to bear fruit regardless.

The way that they are able to do this is for all their hope to be rooted in God. This is different than merely hoping in God, notice his language is not that they hope in God, but that their hope *is* the Lord. Meaning that they have found the way to root all their hopes and desires in God’s presence and not in a particular outcome. This is not an easy thing to do, but it is a necessary thing to do otherwise we will succumb to the despair and wrath that is taking root around us. To return to an earlier Proverb:

“Hope deferred makes the heart sick, But when the desire comes, it is a tree of life.”
-Proverbs 13:12

Notice that it is deferred hope that makes our heart sick, but it also says that *when* desire comes, not *if* it comes, but *when,* that it is a “tree of life”. This resonates with Jeremiah. The hope that can be deferred is earthly hope that is fragile and uncertain, the hope that fulfills our deepest desire and longing is the heavenly hope that is immutable and certain. As the writer of Hebrews puts it:

“Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.”
-Hebrews 6:17-20

The hope that anchors our souls in the ever shifting and tumultuous waters of this world is the same hope that dwells with Christ “behind the veil”. A Christian maintains their sanity in an insane world only by learning to root our ultimate hope beyond this world. It isn’t that we don’t hope for things on this earth, we should. But if we find ourselves in despair, not sadness for the negative consequences of this world, but legitimate despair, this is evidence that our ultimate hope is rooted on this earth, where drought and famine can destroy us. It is rooted in flimsy promises, broken politicians, and human ideologies. Such things can breed temporary passion, but they can’t actually create in us the stability necessary to actually be a force for good change and transformation in this world.

Only by doing this can we “remove the plank from our own eye” that we can see clearly enough to try to address the “speck” in society's eye. Without this correct perspective we will only do damage in an attempt to do good, just like everybody else. This is also found in the Psalm that we quoted before about the foundations being removed:

“In the LORD I put my trust; How can you say to my soul, “Flee as a bird to your mountain”? For look! The wicked bend their bow, They make ready their arrow on the string, That they may shoot secretly at the upright in heart. If the foundations are destroyed, What can the righteous do? The LORD is in His holy temple, The LORD’s throne is in heaven; His eyes behold, His eyelids test the sons of men.”

-Psalm 11:1-4

Notice that the larger context is for the believer to find their foundation in heaven and not upon the earth. To put it another way, if we find ourselves shaken with this world that is evidence that our foundations are in this world. This is how the Apostle Paul puts it:

“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.”

-2 Corinthians 4:7-10

It is ok to be shaken a little, but not crushed in despair and feeling forsaken. When we can do this, and it is a lifelong pursuit, we won’t find that we are apathetic towards society or politics, we will find that, like Jeremiah, we will fight even harder to make our world better. But not out of fear. We want a better world, but we also know that the better world that we really want will only come when Christ returns. No, we fight for a better world even if we are losing, even if defeat is all but certain. Not because we are foolish, but because we wish to please the coming King.

Back in the musical “Les Miserables”, after the revolution fails spectacularly, the main character dies and is taken to heaven. While he is going to heaven the old song about angry men plays again, but this time with different lyrics:

“Do you hear the people sing?
Lost in the valley of the night
It is the music of a people who are climbing to the light
For the wretched of the earth
There is a flame that never dies

Even the darkest nights will end and the sun will rise

They will live again in freedom in the garden of the lord
They will walk behind the ploughshare
They will put away the sword
The chain will be broken and all men will have their reward!"
Claude-Michel Schönberg - "Les Miserables"

The peace and the joy that we are seeking *do* exist and they *will* come, which is why we must never despair. But they will not come through human effort, only by the will of God. Our job then is not to redeem the world, but to serve and obey the One who already redeemed the world. In this will we find peace and passion without despair, envy, or wrath.

"These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland."
-Hebrews 11:13-14

"Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."
-Nehemiah 8:10