

## LINCOLN'S MESSAGE TO AMERICA IN ADVERSITY

God sends plagues when a nation has crossed the line with God, when the cry of the oppressed reaches the throne of God, and when people and nations war against each other. *“For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines and pestilences, and earthquakes, in diverse places. All these are the beginning of sorrows”* (Matt.24:7-8).

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You may recall hearing of the day, 160 years ago, when people were so divided it caused a civil war that killed 620,000 American citizens. The cause? Enslaving a class of people under tortuous and inhumane conditions and profiting by it! Then the war came and tore into its wealth piled up by the unpaid toil of forced labor.

Just 50 years later, as nations fought against nations in the first world war (1914-1918), God sent a plague (1918-1920) that infected one-third of the world's population killing 50 million<sup>1</sup> (including 675,000 in the United States). History shows that this plague was a product of the war. Soldiers became a conduit for spreading the disease, with greater numbers of them succumbing to the disease than from enemy fire. And just like the Civil War before it, the war tore into the profits of people and nations to pierce their love of money and power, which induced them to war against their fellow man. *“Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not”* (Jas. 4:2). Once more God judged the nations for its root cause (Matt. 4:8-9), and did so at a crucial time in the war when it would hurt the most. When was that? In the middle of what was to be a climactic military offensive. The plague diverted precious financial resources from combatting an enemy to combatting the disease infecting humanity by the atrocities of war.

Other epidemics would come, but not as devastating as today's pandemic (COVID-19) that so crippled our nation's economy, the symbol of America's wealth and power, it was likened to the Great Depression. Not since the pandemic of 1918 has America suffered such a staggering loss of life and economic power and wealth from an infectious disease. Right in the middle of the plague came another blow. As Southerners struggled to cope with the rapidly spreading virus, deadly tornadoes sliced through their homes. Again, a month or so later, amid the pandemic, thousands of Michiganders lost their homes in a catastrophic flood. And then to further divide the nation came a killing of a black man. This one, in Minnesota, was so blatant and cruel it stoked the fires of anarchy exposing untreated wounds of racism. Of all the calamities mentioned here, perhaps this one exposed the root of them all—love of money and power—the driving force of racism and inequality.

And yet in spite of the signs, people looked to government for an economic solution to sustain them during the national crisis, but did they fear God? Perhaps they thought things would continue the way they were, knowing not that they are in the last days (2 Pet. 3:4). But people of faith know, and to them the signs are clear: God is drawing people of all nations back to the Bible with a call to repentance. From the Bible, we go to the prayer of King Solomon:

*“When there is a famine in the land, pestilence or blight or mildew, locusts or grasshoppers; when their enemy besieges them in the land of their cities; whatever plague or whatever sickness there is; whatever prayer, whatever supplication is made by anyone, or by all **Your people...**, when each one knows the plague of his own heart, and spreads out his hands toward this temple: then hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and forgive, and act, and give to everyone according to all his ways, whose heart You know (for You alone knows the hearts of all the sons*

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<sup>1</sup> National Archives and Record Administration (<https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/influenza-epidemic/>)

*of men), that they may fear You all the days that they live in the land which You gave to our fathers” (1 Kings 8:37-40 NKJV).*

What does God want us to see in all of this? First, He wants us to see that plagues, seething hatred, murder all come from seeds that were planted in the earth decades ago, never fully acknowledged. Today we are faced with a poisonous crop that is tearing the nation apart. Second, God wants us to see that in all of this, His hand is not shortened to deliver, but, rather, is setting the stage for national reconciliation.

The nation will not come to this place by harsh means (2 Chr. 10:1-7). Words of condemnation will not bend knees, but love can. When God’s people come up to the platform clothed in humility and speak healing, the spirit changes, and people in their desperation will listen because they see we care. This was the approach Jesus used with the infirm, brokenhearted, and demon possessed who came to Him (Mk. 5:8, 15, 18-20; Jn. 5:6-8, 14). *“A bruised reed He will not break...He will bring forth justice for truth” (Isa. 42:3 NKJV).*

## The Missing Ingredient: Moral Power

Because of the times we are in, we can learn from history. Turning back the pages to America’s Civil War, we get a sense how sins against humanity stir up the ire of God to bring judgment upon nations. Once again, we are engaged in a similar contest that has divided the nation with persons of one political philosophy warring against the other. Both call upon God to achieve their ends, with no letup in the warring, and then God’s answer came with the *harbinger of a Great Spiritual Awakening*. He sent a plague to get our attention. We saw the fragility of life in the suffering and discerned that the plague was no discerner of persons. It touched all humanity, the rich and the poor alike. Government officials scrambled, at times together, to solve a crisis that clearly was beyond their reach, because there is a spiritual dynamic at work they may not have considered. To know what we are fighting against, we have to understand what a virus is, what it does, and its spiritual counterpart. You will see that the “invisible enemy” comes from within and not without.

A virus is an infectious agent that replicates itself in living cells making people so sick *from* each other that they must separate *from* each other in order to mitigate the symptoms! There is another infectious disease that does the same thing, only it is in man’s heart. The agent is unresolved offenses. Like the virus, this infection left untreated creates systemic hatred, and it replicates itself in living cells, passing by and between human beings. This one, the greater of the two infections, builds a defensive barrier to keep people away so that the symptoms of heart disease are never mitigated. They keep moving with them wherever they go and infecting more and more people along the way.

Thus, it is fitting and proper to pull back the pages of history to remember the days preceding the Civil War and see the “virus” that started the civil war: It began when eleven states seceded from the Union over their presumed right to hold slaves as their own property and profit through their forced labor! How could an enlightened people who value their own freedom and self-determination think they will prosper by denying the same privilege to other human beings, and not cause an uproar? By all accounts, it is happening again. Going back into history, we get a glimpse of the miscarriage of justice that sanctioned slavery, the infection it spread to divide the nation, and President Abraham Lincoln’s moral leadership in bringing it to an end. For over a year, I was occupied with reading multiple biographies of Lincoln’s character, faith, and courage, and wondered why I had such an interest in his life. Now I know. It was for such a time as this.

Lincoln rose to power at a time, like now, the nation's founding values were hanging in the balance. He struggled over his failure as commander-in-chief to successfully negotiate an end to the war and save the Union. In time, he came to realize he could not end the war without Divine intervention, for there was a moral cause associated with slavery that transcended the political/military cause taking so much of his attention. There is a moral cause for this pandemic.

So how did President Lincoln come to end the Civil War? Battle weary, devastated by the loss of life, and experiencing abject military failures, along with a dwindling support among the people, Lincoln got down on his knees and sought the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. That's how! We do not know what Lincoln prayed, but we do know that God does not respond to partisan petitions that are rooted in evil motives and schemes. *"Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be heard"* (Prov. 21:13 NKJV). Lincoln noted in his Second Inaugural Address that both the North and the South prayed to God, each seeking His aid against the other. God's favor rested on neither side. If he would choose one side over the other, half would be elated, and the other half livid, but if God's righteousness would prevail, all the people would have reason to rejoice (Prov. 14:34, 29:2).

To the Savior, slavery was abhorrent. He paid a big price to crush it and liberate every human being from the scourge of tyranny so he could govern himself. Politically speaking, both sides had ambivalent feelings about the slave! Some wanted to break up the Union in order to extend slavery and were willing to go to war against their brother; and others wanted to save the Union and fight for it, not necessarily to emancipate the slaves, but for their own economic prosperity. What neither side could grasp was the right of the slave to be free trumped all other rights, and if the slave was not free, neither could anyone be free. *"But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream"* (Amos 5:24 NKJV).

We need no introduction to God's love. We have known His mercy, forgiveness, kindness, compassion, and gentleness, but there is another element to God's love that is often overlooked, but shows up in times of crisis, and that is His justice. Thomas Jefferson once said that he trembled for the country when he remembers that God is just and that His justice does not sleep forever. God's justice to the slave, and mercy to the nation, came together in three ways. First, He leveled the playing field so both needed mercy. In the same way the slave-owner deprived the slave of his right to pursue his own livelihood in the land of the living and prosper in it, God took away that very right from the slave-owner and depleted his accumulated wealth as the war decimated his fortunes. Second, through Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, He released thousands of ex-slaves to join the fight against their own enslavement. Third, God's mercy rejoiced against judgment (war) when it was overtaken with truth (Jas. 2:13; Ps. 85:10). The truth set in place at the nation's founding—namely that all men are created equal—would triumph over tyranny. When the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution was enacted outlawing slavery forever in the United States, God remembered His covenant with the Pilgrim Fathers and kept the foundation from crumbling. Thus God brought forth truth to justice through the moral leadership of Abraham Lincoln who understood there can be no middle ground between slavery and freedom. And America survived an imminent collapse.

In our day as well, sometimes, the Lord has to permit disastrous things to get our attention, but we can look for God's mercies, because out of turmoil there arises a path for good if we follow it. The American Civil War brought a staggering number of casualties before the rebellion ended and a foundation was laid for reconciliation. And then the

Reconstruction could begin. For this, God needs Spirit-filled vessels, honed in the truth, to speak for Him.

Once more, pull back the pages of history, this time to 1650. The colonies had become self-reliant, but God used “plagues” of grasshoppers and caterpillars, and droughts to call them back to their spiritual roots, but to no avail. Then the thing they feared the most, a massed Indian uprising, came upon them. In their terror, they fasted and prayed for deliverance, but deliverance did not come until pastors recommended a renewal of church covenants. Congregations met together and renewed their covenants with God and with one another, repenting individually and corporately, and reconciling relationships that had been broken for years. God heard and the tide of battle turned in favor of the colonial militia.<sup>2</sup>

What was it that made Abraham Lincoln great? It was his use of moral power, leaving us a legacy so we would never forget what is important to God, especially in times of moral crisis. How did he do it? In his hour of darkness, Lincoln tuned out the contrary voices pulling at him to reverse course and followed that still small voice which he knew was the will of God. With God's grace, he publicly stood upon his deeply-rooted moral convictions. A reconciler at heart, Lincoln was forgiving, conciliatory and magnanimous in his dealing with his enemies. At the end of the war, when asked what should be done with the rebels, Lincoln simply said, “Let ‘em up easy.” This is what made Lincoln head and shoulders above other leaders.

## Our Day of Visitation

So why is the civil war period relevant to today’s moral crisis? First, God wants us to see our present state, brought about a hatred that has turned people against each other, not unlike the conditions that prevailed prior to the Civil War. As in the 1850’s, this “civil” war is fought daily on a partisan battlefield. Today, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, many of God’s people saw the government’s “stay-at-home” lockdown to be an opportunity, a day of the Lord’s visitation in which he granted a space of time to separate ourselves from distractions so that we might hear His voice. Judging from his human frailty and depressing countenance, I imagine Lincoln also had his day of visitation when he sought the Lord’s direction for the country. I also imagine that God heard him, because he emerged from his hour of darkness with God’s strength, courage and wisdom for the task set before him, perhaps because he heard that still small voice. Similarly, the loss of lives, liberty, and financial freedom begs every person to ask the question, “What is God saying to me in this health crisis”? If we do not distinguish His voice from the throng of voices vying for our attention, we can hear the wrong message and walk down the wrong path. His purpose is to prepare us and equip us for what lies ahead. His message is simply, “Turn to Me.”

As we submit to the process, we see the love of God in it and know that we are safe because His love drives out fear (1 Jn. 4:18). Whoever would have thought that physical distancing to contain the spread of this deadly disease could bring people together? Physical distancing is not social distancing, but rather, because we share a common humanity with our neighbors, it connects us with the most vulnerable. They know they are not alone because, whether rich or poor, black or white, we are in it together. Therefore, physical distancing is a path toward greater spiritual breakthroughs. Though isolation is not the “natural” way to win souls, it is the “supernatural” way when there is a blockage because it

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<sup>2</sup> David Manuel and Peter Marshall, *In God They Trusted*, p. 29.

gets us to think, pray for, and care about the welfare of others, especially our adversaries. I have the hope that neighbors who barely knew we existed, and friends who separated from us, will suddenly look into our eyes and see God. Then we will see that all this suffering is working for the good to bring Salvation and restoration to a people who have lost their way.

This speaks to the second reason why the civil war period is relevant today, and that is so we might see the broken down walls that are in need of repair. We know we are in the end times, and in the end times, there would be plagues and pestilences. In the last prophecy in the Old Testament, God said He would send a prophet to turn the heart of the fathers to their children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, *or He would strike the earth with a curse* (Mal. 4:4-5). So we know there is a spiritual consequence attached to plagues that can be remedied through reconciliation. Given the backdrop of incivility, and the destructive force of secret enmities over generations, some going back to the civil war days, could it be that God is setting the stage to bring reconciliation to our nation, and that He may be using the pandemic to disrupt structures of economic power in order to expose the nation's sins?

So for this cause God is shaking the foundation once more, this time with a plague, not to punish, but to bring a nation to repentance, and the heart of repentance is reconciliation with God. With reconciliation there is one very powerful antibody that counteracts "heart" disease: the blood of Jesus, because it remits the root cause (sin) so that we are no longer "infecting" one another (Matt. 26:28; Acts 2:38). But if it were possible, and it is, the blood of Jesus does something else: it heals all our diseases (Psa. 103:3) when our heart is vaccinated with God's Word and we believe it (Prov. 4:20-22; Ex. 15:26; Matt. 9:35) because healing is in the atonement (Isa. 53:5; 1 Pet. 2:24).

In our hour of darkness, if we turn to God, there is peace, and we find ourselves focusing less on the economic downturn, negative news cycle, or what the devil is doing, and more on the things God is doing—laying a foundation for national reconciliation! Then we will see Him breaking down walls that keep enemies apart so that they come one step closer to reconciling old grudges. Is this not the "turning from our wicked ways" that God demanded before healing the land (2 Chr. 7:14)? This must begin with God's people reconciling broken relationships, for we must lead the way. We have a destiny to fulfill.

*"Arise, shine; For your light has come! And the glory of the LORD is risen upon you. For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and deep darkness the people; but the Lord will arise over you, and His glory will be seen upon you. The Gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising" (Isa. 60:1-3 NKJV).*

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### **Some Recommended Reading:**

*Abraham Lincoln -A Man of Faith and Courage*, by Joe Wheeler  
*Abraham Lincoln-The Man & His Faith*, by G. Frederick Owen  
*With Malice Toward None-A Biography of Abraham Lincoln*, by Stephen B. Oates  
*A. Lincoln*, by Ronald C. White, Jr.  
*The Soul of America - The Battle for our Better Angels* – Jon Meacham

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