

No Gathering : No Church

A sermon preached by Dr M J Hyde at Galeed Chapel, Brighton, on Wednesday evening, 25th March 2020

‘For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.’ (Matthew 18:20)

I feel the solemnity of the situation we are found in this evening. It is most serious. The government’s new regulations to stop the spread of coronavirus prevent gatherings of more than two people, and so we are no longer able to gather together for public worship. Though this is a result of the action of the state (and our submission to those in authority), nevertheless we need to remember that this is ultimately the hand of God. The state has only done what is deemed sensible. But it is God who has brought this about, permitted it – or rather, more than permitted, he has ordered the circumstances where we are unable to gather for public worship this evening. We are unchurched.

This is a most solemn situation to be in because God has evidently not only brought judgment on the nations of the world, but his judgment has come into the house of God. God could have brought judgment on the nation that would not have interrupted our worship. But God has brought judgment which not only affects the world but affects the church of God as well. It not only affects us outside of the house of God, but it affects the very public worship of the most holy name of God.

So, as we come before the Lord this evening, I cannot beat around the bush. We are under the judgment of God. We are under the judgment of God as a church. And when we are found under the judgment of God we must seek to examine ourselves and what state we are found in, so that under the mighty hand of God, at his appointed time, he may bring us to repentance and to return again in his light and mercy. We know that it must be so with the church. There is a solemn difference between the judgment which is sent on the world, which is only a foretaste of eternal destruction, and judgment which is sent to the church, which is the chastisement of a gracious Father.

As a gracious Father, God does chastise or discipline his people. God chastised his church of old. The Old Testament is witness to that. The New Testament also attests to it, especially in the letters that were written to the seven churches of Asia in the opening of John's Revelation.

I believe we have not been without warning that we have been provoking the Lord and that we have invited some judgment or other to come, and now his hand has gone out against us. Do we realise this? What effect is this judgment having on us? It is very solemn that with some people, it appears to sit lightly on their shoulders that we cannot gather together to worship God. They can listen to sermons on the internet instead, they say. This is only a minor inconvenience to them. It will soon pass over, they think. They see no problem with the interruption to the normal worship of the house of God. Some have almost said that it is easier to sit at home than make the effort to go to chapel. These are unthinking and hard-hearted things to say because it shows that although judgment is upon the church of God, we are not laying it to heart. May this not be the case with us here at Galeed. May the Lord draw near to us to open our ears to hear his voice as he is speaking to us in judgment, to bring us to repent.

The seriousness of the situation is clearly implied in our text this evening. 'For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.' As the Lord would help me, I wish to notice four things with you.

I. How this it is no longer true concerning us that we can gather together in Jesus' name.

II. How the Lord's presence is no longer found in the midst of the gathered church.

III. The cause of God's judgment.

IV. The consolation for the church in spite of this.

I. We can no longer gather together in Jesus' name

Firstly, then I would like to notice why this text no longer describes us as we listen to the Word being opened to us this evening.

In order to understand this, we must examine what is meant by the text.

We must not take this verse out of context. Some of you may assume that if you are gathered together, two or three of you round a computer, listening to

me speaking, that this meets the description in the text. But this text does not refer simply to a gathering of friends or family, it refers to the church of God as it gathers to fulfil the duties given to the church on earth.

Gathering together for discipline

This text is located in the context that begins in verse 15, where the Lord is explaining the subject of church discipline. If a brother offends someone they should 'go and tell between thee and him alone; if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church.' (Matthew 18:15-17)

Church discipline is not something we can carry out within our families or among friends. It is discipline which belongs to the church. It is an ordinance of the church. It is a mark of the true church of Christ that it practices discipline as it is set out in the Word of God. When discipline is carried out in the scriptural way, then, 'whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven.' (Matthew 16:19) This means that when the church is found exercising discipline in accordance with the Word and will of God, their decisions are ratified in heaven.

We have to remember that discipline is not to be viewed as a bad thing. Discipline is for the health of the church. The purpose of discipline is to reclaim the fallen brother, and bring back the straying sheep. Though the church exercises discipline with a heavy heart because of the sin that makes it necessary, nevertheless it is an ordinance of the church, and it is part of the privilege of Christ's church that it has a role to play in restraining sin and winning sinners back to a more God-honouring way of walking. It is a mark of the true church that they exercise this discipline.

Of course, closely allied with the discipline of church members, is the discipline of entrance into the church. It is part of the scriptural discipline of a true church of Christ that the church ensures that those who are received for church membership are received on the grounds of a credible profession of faith and baptism, following the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in that ordinance.

Gathering together for prayer and worship

Another aspect of the life of the church in the context is the prayer of gathered church. The church has a particular ordinance of prayer, as is set before us in several places in the New Testament. 'If two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven.' (Matthew 18:19) And finally there is the public worship of God in the church. 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name,' in the public worship of God, we have the encouragement that the Lord himself is with them.

The importance of gathering

So, when the church goes about its tasks – whether discipline, prayer, or worship – it must do so as a gathered body.

I cannot water this down. The Greek does not allow the text to be read in any other way. It is as 'two or three are **gathered together** in my name.' The wording is definite. It means brought together.

This wording does not permit widening to include you sitting in your separate homes and listening over the internet. That is not being gathered together. The text means gathering together out of our places, out of our families (and as families), out of the world, to be physically gathered together as the body of Christ in one place. That is the force of the verse here, 'where two or three are gathered together.'

And it's not only when they are gathered together, but when they 'are gathered together **in my name**.' When they gather together as the church, they have his name on them. We are the church, Christians, the Christian church. That is the name we bear collectively. We are not individually the church, though each of us is part of the church. We come together as the church when we gather for the public worship of God; when we come together in his name.

What a high thing it is, to come together *in his name*. What kind of worship do we give him when we gather together in his name? We come together with one desire, to glorify and to magnify his holy name.

We gather acknowledging, for one thing, that he is Lord over us. He is the head and we are the body. Our desires fall submissive before him and we own him

as our king. We say, 'Reign o'er us as King, accomplish thy will.' (Joseph Hart) 'Not our will, but thy will be done.' That is the spirit of the Lord's prayer, 'Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven.' (Matthew 6:10) Anything short of that falls short of real worship.

We gather acknowledging him, not only as our king, our head, but also as our priest. The only way we can gather together, the only way that we can approach God together, is through the 'one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.' (1 Timothy 2:5) The precious blood of Jesus Christ and nothing short of that. All the while we are found gathering together with something else in view other than the glory of his holy name, or coming with some other plea, with some self-righteousness, then we are not gathering as his church should gather

Also, we gather owning him as our prophet. We acknowledge that he is 'the way, the truth, and the life,' (John 14:6) and that all other paths lead to death. We acknowledge that the Word of God, his declaration, the preaching of the gospel, is the truth, and we gather to hear his word and to desire to learn from it and be instructed by it. True worship is when we gather with a desire to hear the voice of Jesus Christ speaking to us through the public preaching of the Word of God.

'When two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.' Ever since Galeed chapel was built in 1868, right up till now, the Lord's people have been gathering together here in Jesus name. But this evening, we a scattered church. We are each listening from our various places, not gathered together. What this verse describes does not match what we are doing this evening.

Some will no doubt tell you otherwise, but I cannot come with any other interpretation of the verse this evening. I must not settle you down on false ground this evening. I must not suggest otherwise, whether in an attempt to make the situation seem better than it is, or to just preach comfort to you and pass over the seriousness of the situation we are in. Though we may hear the Word being opened tonight, we do not hear it as a gathered body. We are not being edified as a body. We are not gathered together as a body in his name. Consequently, we do not have his presence with us now, as we have had

before, as set before us in our text. Therefore, we are found in a very solemn place.

Privileges lost while we cannot gather

Why is it so solemn? While the church is not gathered together, while we are not doing what this text describes, what privileges are lost!

There is no public worship. There is no public preaching of the Word of God. There is no honouring his name within this place as we normally would seek to do. The doors are shut to the people who pass by on the street. The preaching of the gospel is silenced.

I pause. We must not lose sight of the fact that preaching is far more than mere words. Paul's letters were not preaching. Paul makes that quite clear in the tenth chapter of his Epistle to the Romans. They needed a preacher in order to hear the gospel. They needed the preacher to physically be sent (having been set apart by the Holy Spirit). The whole emphasis of the New Testament is on the physical ministry. Epistles had their place. No doubt as we try to open the Word to you over the internet during the coming weeks, there will be some profit. I trust real, spiritual, profit. But it is not New Testament, gospel preaching. We must be clear about that.

Then there is no gathering together of the church. When the church gathers together here for worship week by week it is a little picture of heaven. In just the same way as the children of Israel in the Old Testament were a picture of the New Testament dispensation, so the church in the New Testament is a picture of the church in the kingdom of heaven to come. It is a blessed picture of that place 'where congregations ne'er break up, and sabbaths have no end' (from 'Jerusalem, my happy home'). It is as if the light over that picture has been turned off and it is in darkness. What a solemn thing that is.

Then there is no access to the ordinances of the house of God. Baptism has been prohibited by the State. The ordinance of the Lord's Supper cannot be held. How dreadful it is when God's appointed ordinances cannot be kept! We may only keep the Lord's Supper once a month. And some of our aged church members may not be able to attend chapel any longer to keep it. No doubt that is seen as a loss by the individuals in this situation. But that does not diminish the solemnity of the situation where the church as a whole is unable

to keep the Lord's supper as he has commanded. Holding the Lord's Supper is a time when the church is found gathered together in union 'with each other and the Lord,' and they 'possess in sweet communion joys which earth cannot afford' (John Newton) as they remember his death, as oft as they do so, until he come. Yet now that ordinance is unavailable.

If any who have so far not professed the Lord's name formally, now desire to profess his name, they now have no means of doing so in accordance with the pattern for baptism given in the Word of God. Those of you who have kept silent up until now, what a solemn place you are in now! You now have no way of giving God the glory by the obedience to his ordinances which is called for in his Word. If we have been disobedient in times when we should have spoken, silent in times when we should have spoken, and now we cannot speak, we will realise the solemnity of the dispensation we are found under. No gospel ordinances!

And we also have to consider discipline, the other mark of the church. Church discipline cannot be exercised either. The church cannot meet as a church in order to exercise discipline. The church cannot meet as a church in order to perform its function as a church. What a terrible loss that is! The meeting of the church as the church should never be regarded as merely the meeting of just another committee. It is not the meeting of a social society or a club. It is not the meeting of a building committee or of a charity. It is the meeting of the church of God. We gather with Jesus as our head. We are the body charged with transacting his business in the church on this earth. But now that has ceased. We trust it has ceased only temporarily, but it does not matter how long it has ceased for. The fact that we cannot exercise church discipline should not sit lightly upon us.

To summarise all this, the candle is burning very low. The light of the gospel in the world has been dimmed. Many are saying it is a day of great opportunity! Perhaps many people will tune in to listen on the internet who never would have come in through the doors of the house of God! That may be the case. But to any poor soul who walks down the road outside this evening, the doors of the house of God are shut. The gospel, which is the light of the world, sent forth into the world, is greatly obscured. You may say, 'But I'm sitting here this evening, I'm hearing the preaching of the Word!' But that is confined within a

few, scattered and separate from each other in your own homes, and no longer according to the commission that is given to the Lord's servants in the Word of God, 'Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.' (Matthew 28:18-20) These things should be a concern to the Lord's sent servants and they should be a concern to you. The door of the house of God is shut, and the gospel light is dimmed. What a solemn dispensation this is!

And think too of the weakening of the local church as a consequence.

Firstly, as regards the ministry. We normally gather together under a common ministry. But while you are sitting at home there are many other things to distract you, which are not there when we gather together with each other in the same place. There are also many other ministers you could listen to on the internet. I don't speak against faithful ministers. You will find ministry far better than mine on the internet, but there are also many who preach error on the internet. If someone is not well versed in what they believe, they may not discern when someone they hear on the internet does not rightly divide the Word of truth. Normally we are largely kept from those things while we gather together sabbath by sabbath and weeknight by weeknight in the Lord's house. Now at home we are more exposed to other sources of teaching and to the risks associated with them.

Not only is there a weakening of the local church as regards the preaching, but secondly, there is a weakening of the local church as regards pastoral oversight. What a strange place I find myself in, shepherding a people who I cannot see, people who I don't know when I will next see! How can a shepherd lead sheep that he cannot see? Think of how hard it is for a shepherd who may on occasions have to try and round up his sheep at night. I have been with a shepherd and tried to do this and it is extremely hard to get all the sheep in. It is a nightmare. You cannot find them, you do not know where to look for them. They can so quickly run away from you in the darkness. But sheep lacking the care of their shepherd are exposed to all sorts of dangers.

Then thirdly, there is a weakening of the church as regards our duties to one another as brethren. Through the blessing of adoption, we are all part of the

family of God. That brings blessings as we are brethren together in the church. One is the blessing of mutual communion one with another. The Word of God lays emphasis on the communion which is based on physical contact or proximity with one another. 'Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name.' (Malachi 3:16) Of course they were days before phones, before the internet, but there is no substitute for spending time in each other's company. The emphasis of the Word of God is here, 'where two or three are *gathered together* in my name.' Letter writing was available in New Testament times but the apostle makes quite clear that the letter, the epistle, was inadequate compared to his physical presence among the church and his immediate ministry to them. He desired to go to the churches, to be with them. We should feel that desire too. When we are separated one from another, we lack the benefit of the communion one with another, encouragement of one another, the support of one another. When we lack the opportunity to be able to see one another falling, how hard it is to hold one another up, to provoke one another to good works, to correct one another, to reprove one another rightly, where one is found erring, so that they would be reclaimed. Quite apart from finding ourselves exposed to loneliness and to the difficulties that brings. What an exposed position we are in! What a vulnerable position we are in! I ask you this evening, do you understand this? Are you laying it to heart? This is a dark day.

II. The Lord's presence is no longer in the gathered church

The second main point we want to come to is this. If it is a dark day because of the loss of church privileges, it is even more dark because Jesus is no longer in the midst of us. If we are not gathered together, then this is not true concerning us, 'I am in the midst of them.' Without the gathering together, we no longer have the Lord's special presence among us, even as we listen to the Word this evening.

You may say, 'But God is everywhere!' It is true, God is everywhere. You may say, 'But God is especially with his people!' It is true, God is especially with his people, in a way that he is not with the people of the world. He has promised

to be with them always. 'I will never leave thee nor forsake thee.' (Hebrews 13:5) He will be with his people wherever they are.

But here our text speaks of a special presence, additional benefit, obtained as we are found gathered together as the church. The blessing of having God in the midst of us as a church is contingent on the gathering together of the church. 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, *there* I am in the midst of them.'

I am not saying that you as individual believers, that you as individual members of the church and of the congregation, that those of you who are God fearing, are now without the presence of God *personally*. Certainly not! But *as a church*, the presence of the Lord has been withdrawn from us. Not taken away for good, I trust, but withdrawn. The Lord's people should feel this.

Consequences of the Lord's absence

What an awful thing it is for the church to lose the Lord's presence, because it is as he is in the midst of us, the Word of God tells us, that we receive so many blessings.

First of all, we can consider that he was in the midst of his people as they wandered in the wilderness. He was in the fiery cloudy pillar to lead them and to guide them. But if the Lord withdraws his presence from the church, then we are left without the fiery cloudy pillar to guide us. How fearful that is to those who realise that left to ourselves, how quickly we will err, and misjudge things.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan his works in vain.

(William Cowper)

Then we can think of Psalm 46. 'God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved: God shall help her and that right early.' (Psalm 46:5) With his presence withdrawn from us while we are not able to meet together, the church of God is more vulnerable to being buffeted and rocked. The fiery cloudy pillar was for protection of the church as well as for guidance. Without the Lord's presence we need to be especially careful that we are not left to go the way 'which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.'

(Proverbs 14:12) The church needs to keep close to the Word of God during these solemn times and not be left to rest on what she thinks or feels.

Zephaniah sums up so much concerning what God's presence means to the church. 'The Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing.' (Zephaniah 3:17) Here is a beautiful picture of the Lord's delight in his salvation, in the people he has saved, and gathered out of the world to be a people to himself. How will the Lord's church rejoice and enjoy *as the church* the sense of his smiling favour and the delight of his love, if he is not present in their gathering together?

And Jesus rejoices in the gatherings of his people. 'In the midst of the congregation will I sing praise unto thee.' (Psalm 22:22) Jesus leads the praise in Zion. As he is in the midst of the congregation, the church finds their hearts burning within them in love to him. But when there is no congregation to gather in Zion, what has become of this gospel praise?

If you say to me this evening, 'I feel you are exaggerating, I feel you are going beyond things,' I would urge you to search the scriptures. If I am not mistaken, we are in most desperate times. It helps explain the experience of the Psalmist in Psalm 137 where the singers said, 'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy. Remember, O Lord, the children of Edom in the day of Jerusalem; who said, Rase it, rase it, even to the foundation thereof. O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed; happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us. Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones.'

It is a sad, dark and solemn place to be found as the church of old, removed from the house of God, taken into captivity in Babylon, far off from Jerusalem their happy home, far off from the praise and the sacrifice of the holy place. Then they say, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' But how shall we sing the

Lord's song in a strange land? We are in a very strange situation, and surely we must weep when we remember Zion.

Our response to the Lord's absence

If you are brought into a place like Psalm 137 in this season, I tell you why you are brought there. It's because the house of God means something to you. The ministry of the Word means something to you. The company and fellowship of the Lord's people mean something to you. The ordinances of the Lord's house mean something to you. That's why to be separated from them is very serious, it is very troublesome, it is a very difficult and a very dark dispensation to you.

I ask you this evening, do you feel it to be so? Is it weighing on you this evening? Is this the most important thing, the biggest part of the trial that is on us this evening? It's not the empty supermarket shelves, it's not the scarcity of food and essentials. It's not the fear of the affliction in our families, or even coming on us personally. It's not even the fear of death. Instead the worst thing for you is the separation from the house of God and from the blessing that is contained in our text, 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.'

But what if these things sit lightly on your shoulders? Do you think that you can get by as easily at home listening to a sermon as you can hear in the house of God? Some of the Lord's own people may fall into the trap of thinking like this. If this is the case with you, then you need to think things through carefully in the light of Scripture so as to have the right priorities. Or perhaps the things of God and his worship and his house are not important to you at all. Then where are you? It is unspeakably solemn if these things have never meant anything to you, especially in the face of death surrounding us at this time.

How stands the case, my soul, with thee?

For heaven are thy credentials clear?

Is Jesus' blood thy only plea?

Is he thy great forerunner there?

(John Kent, verse from the hymn, 'There is a day, 'tis hastening on')

There may be some who look back and say, 'Well, once the things of God did mean something to me, but tonight I find myself cold and indifferent. I'm so taken up with the cares of the world, so concerned about my family, my bank

balance, my job in the days ahead, my elderly relatives...' I cannot cast a stone at anyone with these legitimate worries. Yet things come sometimes to waken us, to make us realise, 'Thou art careful and troubled about many things: but one thing is needful.' (Luke 10:41) We should find in these circumstances a reason to seek again with renewed vigour the one thing needful. To make the house of God, the ordinances of his house, to be the dearest things to us. To cause us to cry out to the Lord, 'Return unto me!' To say with the hymn writer:

Where is the blessedness I knew
When first I saw the Lord?
Where is the soul-refreshing view
Of Jesus and his word?
Return, O holy Dove! Return,
Sweet messenger of rest!
I hate the sins that made thee mourn,
And drove thee from my breast.

(William Cowper)

Oh that this solemn dispensation would be sanctified to us individually and as a church and people!

The church, not the building

Remember too that it's not the bricks and mortar. Some people think that the desire for the house of God is just because we put undue emphasis on the bricks and mortar, the literal chapel building. But the church can gather anywhere. If Galeed had been burnt down, if the church was gathered together this evening in someone's front room, or in some hall somewhere, that would not mean that we were outside this text.

But the situation that we are in this evening is that we are unable to gather for the public worship of God as a church, unable to gather together as one body. This is not something to take lightly. May we not be those who 'forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is.' (Hebrews 10:25) I believe this tendency to neglect the assembling together has crept in amongst our churches. There has been a certain disregard for the house of God, a certain willingness to sit at home and listen over the internet or to recorded sermons, rather than to be in the house of God. There is no longer a desire to

make an effort to be in the house of God. The desire to be here rather than anywhere else, seems to have left Zion. Yet think of the fortitude of our forefathers in getting to the house of God. One soul in Tenterden congregation when my family moved down there had walked miles across the fields to the house of God every Lord's day all her life, until she came to the point where she was too infirm to do so. In previous times our forefathers counted the walk to the house of God a little thing, even if it was many miles, for the benefits of the blessing of gathering together in the Lord's name, and having his presence in the midst of them. 'For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.' This was the highest blessing to be sought after, to be gathered together in his name. Back then in more blessed days, it was probably rare that there were only two or three. Many gathered, because of the hunger and thirst, the desire for the presence of God, the desire for the place where his honour dwelleth, the desire for the place where he feeds his sheep and makes his flock to rest at noon. (Song of Solomon 1:7)

We have lived in days of peace and plenty, days of ease in Zion. The Word of God speaks solemnly to such. 'Woe unto them that be at ease in Zion.' (Amos 6:1) We need what Isaiah prophesied, 'Until the Spirit be poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness be a fruitful field.' (Isaiah 32:15) Is this what you desire this evening? Is it your prayer that the things we are experiencing at this time would fall out to the good of Zion?

III. The cause of the Lord's judgment

Why is it that the Lord has brought us into such a place? Why is it that his judgments have gone out against us?

There is no easy answer. I cannot give you a complete answer this evening. We must search our state. We must ask that God would give us the enlightening of his Spirit. That he would bring us to his Word of God. That he would bring us there individually. That's where it must begin, individually. How are you standing this evening before God, in the light of his Word?

How far short we come of the standard that is set before us in the Word of God! We read the blessed cases of those who have gone before us, the obituaries in *The Gospel Standard*, the biographies and autobiographies that have been left, the fragments of generations that have preceded ours. As we

read them, we feel that we are ‘weighed in the balances and found wanting.’ (Daniel 5:27) ‘Tekel’ is written over much of our religion personally. And if it is written over our religion personally, then as we gather together as a church, ‘tekel’ must be written over the church. God does not chastise without cause. He is not an unjust God. Therefore as God’s judgment has come on the church, we know that his judgment must be righteous. There is a cause. It will be a blessing if we hear the rod, and cry to the Lord that he would reveal to us where we have erred, that he would teach us his ways, that he would search us, and see if there be any wicked way in us, and lead us in the way everlasting, (Psalm 139:23-24) and gather us again once more in his presence.

I would say that the verdict on us is not Ichabod, it is Tekel. If it was Ichabod then the Lord would not be chastising the church, because God has no requirement to chastise those who are not sons.

Bastards may escape the rod,
Sunk in earthly, vain delight;
But the true-born child of God,
Must not, would not, if he might.

(William Cowper)

But tekel means ‘weighed in the balances and found wanting.’ (Daniel 5:27) That’s solemn enough. I don’t minimise the solemnity of it. But what a blessing it would be if he is visiting us with the rod to bring us to realise that, and to turn again to him! The blessings of those who turn to him are recorded so beautifully in Isaiah 55. ‘Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.’ (Isaiah 55:7) Although we often quote those words and often consider them regarding the sinner, those who have never approached unto the Lord, nevertheless it is a call to the backslider principally. Set alongside God’s righteousness in his judgments are his mercy and his grace, which are exceeding abundant. May we not lose sight of that this evening.

But although there are no easy answers, we can consider the examples in the Word of God where the church has already passed through this experience.

The reasons for Israel's captivity

For example, those who sat down by the rivers in Babylon (Psalm 137). Why were they there? Firstly, they had gone whoring after strange gods, idols, Baal. We may not necessarily have set up open idolatry, but we may have brought idols into the church of God. 'Other lords beside thee have had dominion over us.' (Isaiah 26:13) The things that become idols in the church of God are, for example our traditions. Or our pharisaic self-righteousness. Or even at times the bricks and the mortar, the literal buildings we worship in, rather than remembering the one thing that is important, 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.'

I fear this is a spirit which has risen up amongst us. I'm not necessarily casting stones at you, my dear people at Galeed, but within our churches, there has been a certain honour associated with us being 'Gospel Standard.' There has been a certain honour amongst those who regard themselves as being on the 'right,' as we may say, being conservative. If that has become our religion rather than the one thing needful, we have become idolatrous and gone a whoring from God.

It wasn't just for idolatry that the children of Israel went into captivity in Babylon for those 70 years. They had also married the people of the land. Mixed marriages were an evidence of wayward hearts. JC Ryle makes the comment that a spouse either brings you nearer to God or takes you further away from God. We may consider this principle in its widest sense, our associations with the world. Our friends and companions either bring us nearer to God or take us further away. All the while that other gods have had reign over us, we have given our hearts to the ways of the world rather than to the things of God. We have found ourselves more concerned over what the man in the street will think about us, more concerned about what the state will think about us, more concerned about what the LGBT lobby might think about us and what we must fear from them, than being concerned about the honour of our God and how we stand before him. We are more concerned about next week, rather than how we stand in the face of eternity.

That is where the root of the matter lies. Israel was reprimanded by the Lord for her idolatry, for her whoring from him, for the fact that she joined herself to those that were not the people of the God of Israel. For these things Israel

went down into the land of Babylon, into captivity and banished from the place where God was worshipped. Far off from the house of God, far away from Jerusalem, far away from the place where sacrifice was made. 'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.' (Psalm 137:1)

The reasons for Laodicea's rebuke

We can go to the New Testament for another example. Think of the church at Laodicea. All of the seven churches of Asia, bar one, the Lord had something against them. But when you come to the church of Laodicea, I fear it speaks very much to our day and generation.

'And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God; I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot.' (Revelation 3:14-15)

Laodicea was a church without zeal. Is that why the Lord has sent judgment on us, because we are neither cold nor hot, but just drifting along, indifferent? There is much talk about the low state of Zion, much talk about the empty pews, but (and I have to examine myself), where is the zeal for the house of God? Where is the zeal for the preaching of the gospel? Where is the zeal to

... Tell to sinners round,
What a dear Saviour I have found;
I'll point to thy redeeming blood,
And say, 'Behold the way to God.'

(John Cennick)

It's a fine line, isn't it to know when it is a time to keep silence, and a time to speak? (Ecclesiastes 3:7) It's a fine line, 'neither cast ye your pearls before swine.' (Matthew 6:7) But we have often remained silent and it is to our condemnation.

'I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth. Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked...' (Revelation 3:15-17)

‘Demus hath forsaken me, having loved this present world.’ (2 Timothy 4:10) He’d been taken up with the spirit of the present world, he loved the things of the world rather than the things of God. So in Laodicea, they thought they were rich and had need of nothing.

How we have to prove, all the while things go well with us in life, all the while we have no natural cares concerning tomorrow, the throne of grace remains unvisited! How solemn it is when our religion is only a rainy day religion, only a religion that we need in time of trouble, we only turn to God in time of trouble and all the rest of the time we walk in our own strength, in sparks of our own kindling! What a deplorable place we are in if this describes us, saying we are rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing, and not realising that we are wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked! Self-sufficient. Leaning on our heritage. Leaning on our own strengths. Leaning on our reputation. But the Lord said to the church in Sardis, ‘I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.’ (Revelation 3:1)

These are some of the reasons that are set before us in the word of God, as to why God withdraws himself from the presence of the Church. You know how you measure up personally to these things, and it behoves us as a church to ask how we measure up to these things as a church.

I would like to speak gently to us here at Galeed. I would say to your encouragement that you are my encouragement. I do find here an exercise concerning the things of God, a desire to hear, a desire to be fed on the deep things of God, a desire to grow in grace and the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. For this I am very thankful. I have spoken in this sermon of a lightness concerning the house of God, a lack of concern over whether we can gather here or not. I have been very thankful that this spirit has not been found to my knowledge among you here at Galeed. Instead there has been a desire over the last week that the doors would be kept open, and sadness when we have had to announce that we have had to resort to the situation we are in this evening. In that you have been to my encouragement. And when the Lord looks on these things, you won’t need my commendation. The Lord will bless you in it.

Yet perhaps at Galeed we have our own pitfalls, our own specific snares. Perhaps our heritage is one of them. The name Galeed once meant very much

amongst our churches. It was once a badge of honour to attend Galeed, and I would say rightly so in many ways, because it was an indication of respect for the faithful ministry that you sat under. That faithful ministry has left its mark, and I feel to come very far short in following after. But we cannot rest on the past. We must not. If that's what we are setting store on, if we are setting up our religion on the shoulders of those who have gone before, settling down on self, or something base, instead of trusting sovereign grace (William Gadsby), the Lord will wean us from it. If he is weaning us from it by preventing us from gathering as a church in his house, then may we hear the rod.

And we live in a city which is a byword among the people of God, and is notorious in our land, because of the liberalism and the darkness which is found here. Paul was fearful about going to the city of Corinth, but the Lord told him, 'Be not afraid ... for I have much people in this city.' (Acts 18:9-10) When I came among you as a people these words were given to me, and I felt them to be the final seal on taking the pastorate here. These words still follow me about. Have we been failing in our duty, failing to speak to others faithfully and about the blessed gospel of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ? We are called to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ in a very dark place, and that's hard. I confess that the natural man shies away from it. He'd rather stay at home. Have we still got to learn the lesson that Jonah had to learn, 'Salvation is of the Lord'? (Jonah 2:9) He will have mercy, even in this wicked place, but it cost Jonah to realise it. Are we willing to spend and be spent to warn sinners to flee from judgment?

Why is the Lord bringing this judgment on us? A minister in Brighton wrote to me yesterday morning and said he was writing round to the local ministers and trying to make sense of the situation we are in. Why have these things come on us? At the moment I feel I can only say that they have come on us in judgment, but we should be praying that the Lord would open our eyes to understand the controversy he has with us, so that we would be made willing to return to him.

Weary of wandering from the Lord,
And now made willing to return.

(Charles Wesley)

The Lord knows how long the plague must stay in order to bring us to be willing to return.

What a blessed thing it is that he stands ready to receive us! 'Turn ye unto me, saith the Lord of hosts, and I will turn unto you.' (Zechariah 1:3) As the father met the returning prodigal and kissed him, so the Lord will meet his returning church. He will restore everything. 'And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten, the cankerworm, and the caterpillar, and the palmerworm.' (Joel 2:25) 'Be glad then, ye children of Zion, and rejoice in the Lord your God: for he hath given you the former rain moderately, and he will cause to come down for you the rain, the former rain, and the latter rain in the first month.' (Joel 2:23) 'My doctrine shall drop as the rain, my speech shall distil as the dew.' (Deuteronomy 32:2) It will then again be blessedly true concerning his church, that 'where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.'

IV. There is still consolation for the church

In the final place this evening, I wanted to say there is encouragement for the church in the day of trial. What is that encouragement?

Judgment on the church is fatherly discipline for a good outcome

Firstly, there is encouragement in the difference between the judgment that God pours out on the nations of the world and the judgment that God pours out on his people. The one is tending to death, to eternal destruction. But the judgment of God on the church cannot and does not tend to destruction. The Word of God declares that he will have his church out of every nation, kindred, tribe and tongue down to the very end of time. His presence he cannot and will not take away from his church because he is covenanted to them in love, love which cannot be changed.

In union with the Lamb,
From condemnation free,
The saints from everlasting were,
And shall for ever be.

(John Kent)

Therefore if we are under the judgment of God, it is his chastising rod, and it is tending to a blessed outcome.

Gold in the furnace tried,
Ne'er loses aught but dross.
So is the Christian purified
And bettered by the cross.

(Joseph Hart)

'All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.' (Romans 8:28) The chastisement will be painful, it will be a bitter thing to the Lord's people, he will make us to 'drink the wine of astonishment,' (Psalm 60:3) but it is working for good.

If we are fearing the lack of being able to gather in his house, for the right reasons, sitting down with the captives of old, weeping for Zion, then these things will be painful, but it will 'cease before long, and then O how pleasant the conqueror's song!' (John Newton)

The day is coming when these things will turn out for blessing on the church of God.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds you so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessing on your head.

(William Cowper)

It must do.

So for our comfort this evening I would say that when God chastises, it is not like a natural father chastising his children. We can try and correct our children but we can't change their nature. But when God deals with his church, his people, he gives the graces he requires, and draws into exercise the graces which he himself imparts. As Augustine prays, 'Grant what thou commandest, and command what thou dost desire.' Or as Joseph Hart so beautifully sums it up:

If God rebuke for pride,
He'll humble thy proud heart;
If for thy want of love he chide,
That love he will impart.'

When the Lord is working his judgments in the church, he is working them to a good end and he will sustain his people under them. His people will prove that,

Though our cup seems filled with gall,
There's something secret sweetens all.

And,

The lash is steeped he on thee lays,
And softened in his blood.

(Joseph Hart)

He is acting with judgment *and* with mercy. It is being worked out for our good and for his eternal glory. Therefore, though we may be in darkness this evening, may we be encouraged in these things.

'For a small moment have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies will I gather thee.' (Isaiah 54:7) May we be longing for that day and looking for it. But that day will not come until the dark dispensation has worked its purpose. Therefore our prayer should be that the Lord would make us to understand our ways, that he would correct us in his love, that he would show us where we have come short, and that he would give us grace, so that we would be found walking according to his Word, pleading with him that he would return to us and draw us again unto him. 'Draw me, we will run after thee.' (Song of Solomon 1:4) 'He will have mercy upon him ... he will abundantly pardon.' (Isaiah 55:7)

Jesus in the midst of the church is the church's foundation

Finally, we would like to consider that the one who says he will be in the midst of the church, he is the foundation. 'For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid.' (1 Corinthians 3:11) What a blessed foundation it is! 'Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.' (Matthew 16:18)

It doesn't matter how dark the day feels, it doesn't matter what tides seem to have risen up against the church, it doesn't matter how much the church seems to be shaken to its very foundations, this truth stands. Nothing can prevail against this truth. Nothing can destroy it. 'Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.' (Matthew 16:18).

The virus that has emerged will not wipe out the church of God on earth. Instead it must work for the betterment of the church, it must work for the greater glory of God. It must work together with everything else for the good of the church of God, and to the glory of the foundation, and to the glory also of the top stone, for the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is both the head and the foundation of the church.

Therefore, as we sit this evening and weep remembering Zion, may we also remember the foundation of our most holy faith, the rock on which the church is built. May we remember the top stone, the one who also holds the whole building together, safe in his hands. 'The gates of hell shall not prevail against it.' (Matthew 16:18)

When we are called to walk through dark dispensations, though the Lord is dealing with us in a hard way, nevertheless his purposes are being worked out surely for his glory, because the foundation of the church still stands the same, 'Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever' (Hebrews 13:8)

On the Rock of Ages founded,
What can shake thy sure repose?

(John Newton)

The church must and will stand safe and secure even in a dark and difficult day, because we have a shield and defender who is divine. Almighty God himself is in the midst of his church. He has not withdrawn from the midst of his church, in the sense that he is still the foundation on which the church is built. But in experience we have to walk through the painfulness of not being able to gather together, and this is accompanied by a very real withdrawing of the presence of Christ from our midst. He is no longer present in his ordinances, in the public worship of his house, in the discipline of his church. May we not be left to minimise it, to pass it off as a light thing, to think that because you can hear the ministry this evening over the internet all is still well.

May we be given eyes to see the solemnity of the state we are in. May these things be sanctified to us by the Holy Spirit, and cause us to cry to him for mercy, to seek him while he may be found and call upon him while he is near, (Isaiah 55:6) and to plead that he will remember Zion.

May we, wherever we are this evening, truly enter into the hymn:

My soul shall pray for Zion still,
While life or breath remains;
There my best friends, my kindred dwell;
There God my Saviour reigns.

(Isaac Watts)

May we mourn over the separation that has been made between us.

May we plead earnestly with the Lord that he will hasten the day when we will again be able to gather together and enjoy his presence in our midst. 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.' For those who mourn now, that will be a day of rejoicing. 'The Lord has done great things for us; whereof we are glad. Turn again our captivity, O Lord! ... He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing previous seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.' (Psalm 126:3,4,6) May the Lord hasten that day. May we be spared to see it.

And may we look forward to the day when nothing shall separate us from his presence, when we will be gathered, the body with the head, in the glories of heaven to come. The day of darkness shall not be known there, where there is no darkness, but the Lamb is the light, an eternal light to his people.

May the dispensation we are in make us long more earnestly for that day, and quicken our steps in the pathway Zion-ward, so that we would run with patience the race that is set before us, (Hebrews 12:1) looking to Jesus alone. 'Unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation.' (Hebrews 9:28)

May the Lord bless his Word to us.

Amen.