



2020 Lessons Learned: Discerning the Signs of the Times

December 27, 2020

Text: Matthew 16:1-3

- What's amazing about this narrative and the question asked is that "signs" from heaven had actually been given: they simply weren't enough!
- From the star and angels heralding Christ's birth, to the forerunner's preaching (John the Baptist) to our LORD's healing and prophetic ministry and His battle with devils...many "signs" were evident: the Messiah had come!
- Jesus' rebuke is poignant. Essentially, "You, shepherds of God's flock, can read the weather...the physical season, but cannot read or discern the spiritual one!"
- Maybe this is why He went on to call them "blind guides!" (Matt 23:16) He also said, "they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch." (Matt 15:14)

It is good to learn and discern!

- God's people must be able to observe the spiritual climate and adjust life accordingly. We must be discerning lest we are spoiled *"through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ."* (Col 2:8)
- We must recognize that *"we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places."* (Eph 6:12)
- And also that *"...we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ;"* **2 Corinthians 10:3-5 (KJV)**
- Look around beloved: sin is heralded as holy, and holiness is held up as sin. (Isa 5:20)
 - Family and marriage are broken
 - Churches refuse to preach truth, rolling over to be seen as culturally relevant
 - There is no such thing as sexual sin from a cultural perspective; just about any and everything is acceptable
 - Biblical Manhood and womanhood are a joke; something to make fun of. Biblical gender norms have been abolished
 - Immodesty and perversity run amok
 - Ungodly paradigms and philosophies are taught early to our children in school and media
 - Child-murder is fought for tooth and nail!
 - Culture refuses to be corrected, reviling in rebellion and hardheadedness!
- **Are the events of 2020 God's judgment on such rebellion and sin? I don't know. But wisdom says 1) God allowed such events for His own sovereign purposes and 2) Christians should see them as opportunities to wake up and repent, adjust life according to Scripture, and make disciples!**

Some of the saddest times in Scripture are when God's people did not learn and discern:

- **Jeremiah 8:5-7 (KJV)** *Why then is this people of Jerusalem slidden back by a perpetual backsliding? they hold fast deceit, they refuse to return. 6 I hearkened and heard, but they spake not aright: no man repented him of his wickedness, saying, What have I done? every one turned to his course, as the horse rusheth into the battle. 7 Yea, the stork in the heaven knoweth her appointed times; and the turtle and the crane and the swallow observe the time of their coming; but my people know not the judgment of the LORD.*
- **Amos 4:6-13 (KJV)** *And I also have given you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and want of bread in all your places: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the LORD. 7 And also I have withholden the rain from you, when there were yet three months to the harvest: and I caused it to rain upon one city, and caused it not to rain upon another city: one piece was rained upon, and the piece whereupon it rained not withered. 8 So two or three cities wandered unto one city, to drink water; but they were not satisfied: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the LORD. 9 I have smitten you with blasting and mildew: when your gardens and your vineyards and your fig trees and your olive trees increased, the palmerworm devoured them: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the LORD. 10 I have sent among you the pestilence after the manner of Egypt: your young men have I slain with the sword, and have taken away your horses; and I have made the stink of your camps to come up unto your nostrils: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the LORD. 11 I have overthrown some of you, as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and ye were as a firebrand plucked out of the burning: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the LORD. 12 Therefore thus will I do unto thee, O Israel: and because I will do this unto thee, **prepare to meet thy God, O Israel. 13 For, lo, he that formeth the mountains, and createth the wind, and declareth unto man what is his thought, that maketh the morning darkness, and treadeth upon the high places of the earth, The LORD, The God of hosts, is his name.***
- **Revelation 16:8-11 (KJV)** *And the fourth angel poured out his vial upon the sun; and power was given unto him to scorch men with fire. 9 And men were scorched with great heat, and blasphemed the name of God, which hath power over these plagues: and they repented not to give him glory. 10 And the fifth angel poured out his vial upon the seat of the beast; and his kingdom was full of darkness; and they gnawed their tongues for pain, 11 And blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and repented not of their deeds.*

Perhaps what we are facing is this heart from the LORD:

Hosea 5:15 (KJV) *I will go and return to my place, till they acknowledge their offence, and seek my face: in their affliction they will seek me early.*

...and our commensurate need for this:

Hosea 6:1 (KJV) *Come, and let us return unto the LORD: for he hath torn, and he will heal us; he hath smitten, and he will bind us up.*

Isaiah 55:6-7 (KJV) *Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: 7 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.*

Friends, let us discern the signs of the times! We can glean at least three propositions:

1. Let us not miss Jesus in our midst, teaching and instructing us as they did!
2. Wisdom says, “We must observe the *times and the seasons*” in which we live.
3. Most of God’s overarching “lessons” throughout Scripture have the same object: repentance and obedience...returning back to Him! If 2020 doesn’t cause us to do this, what will?

**Discernment is essential. God commands, “Get wisdom, get understanding!” (Prov 4:5)
What can we learn from this “year of years?”**

2020 Lessons Learned!

1. We need to Repent!

- I don’t think we are getting the point of 2020. I think we are, by and large, missing the lesson!
- 2020 should have (and optimistically still will) produce some serious humility and obedience!

Psalms 119:67 (KJV) *Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word.*

Psalms 119:71 (KJV) *It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes.*

- If we cannot lay on our faces before God after AD 2020 (COVID and the fallout, contested national election, the increased hostility to the Gospel and holiness across the sectors of influence and power), then it's likely we won't without something MUCH more severe!
- 2020 “should” have made us fall on our faces before the LORD, willing to adjust our lives to His commandments and build upon the Rock (Matt 7:24-27) Has it?
- May we never forget that even in His chastening, there is a loving purpose!

Hebrews 12:5-6 (KJV) *And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: 6 For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.*

Hebrews 12:10-11 (KJV) *For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness. 11 Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.*

2. Trust God alone; Christ is still King!

- 2020 is a year where common idols “should” have been thrown down: politics, jobs, money, “race,” etc. It is also a year where we should have learned to trust and worship God alone.
- Scripture paints a bleak picture of trusting in man and world systems while commanding us to trust in the LORD!

Psalms 56:11 (KJV) *In God have I put my trust: I will not be afraid what man can do unto me.*

Psalms 146:3 (KJV) *Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help.*

Psalms 118:8 (KJV) *It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in man.*

Proverbs 29:25 (KJV) *The fear of man bringeth a snare: but whoso putteth his trust in the LORD shall be safe.*

- 2020 has been a Philippians 3 kinda year!

Philippians 3:7-8 (KJV) *But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. 8 Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ,*

3. Family Reformation is essential!

- In March 2020, all of a sudden school was cancelled, churches closed, and families were shut in for awhile.
- Many couples were suddenly together A LOT; many had time to think about their marriages, parenting and education; their discipleship, and the influences upon their children. Many singles had the opportunity to examine their lives and their support systems. “Is our household healthy?” was a question we asked repeatedly in May!
- Beloved, Family Reformation is like any reformation. It requires repenting and returning to God’s Word concerning men, women, marriage, singleness, and raising children. Scripture must be seen as sufficient!
- What many found is that God’s Word works; following Scripture with the whole heart produces joyful marriages modeled after the Gospel, holy and spiritually vibrant singles, and energetic and fun family discipleship.
- Beloved, I’ve seen so many give up here. Is your family reforming? Have you considered how to bring every area of family life under the Lordship of Christ?

4. Church is essential!

- It is what Jesus is building and giving victory over the gates of Hell! It is where the keys of the kingdom of heaven reside, binding and loosing those things on earth which shall be bound in heaven! (Matt 16:18-19)
- Preaching, corporate prayer, corporate singing to God and one another, the fellowship of the saints, the LORD’s table, loving discipline, and baptism! We need the means of grace and that right often! This is why Scripture declares:

Hebrews 10:24-25 (KJV) *And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: 25 Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.*

- The early church understood and walked in the blessing of the “corporate:”

Acts 2:42-47 (KJV) *And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. 43 And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. 44 And all that believed were together, and had all things common; 45 And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. 46 And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, 47 Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.*

- 2020 reminded us of this precious truth; again, the early church “got it;” often risking their lives to be together before the LORD.

5. Real friends are a gift!

- **Proverbs 17:17 (KJV)** *A friend loveth at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.*
- This point is framed in the most positive way possible; not meant at all to disparage anyone! People are free to make life adjustments as they are led.
- For many, 2020 helped reveal the strength (or lack thereof) of relationships. I believe this can be good going forward.
- True friends are both rare and precious! When you are given one, hold on to them!
- **Proverbs 18:24 (KJV)** *A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly: and there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother.*
- May we all be given at least one “ride or die” friend, like Ruth to Naomi:
- *"And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God:"* **Ruth 1:16 (KJV)**
- And May the LORD grant increase our ability to love our friends sacrificially...
- **John 15:13 (KJV)** *Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.*

6. Fellowship is an important means of grace; we need one another!

- Remember the “one-anothering” teaching from October 2020? We said: *“We will relate in a much healthier way to one another as we actively participate in the life of our church. God has designed the church to not only bring about His worship and honor, but also for the blessing of His gathered people!”*
- I highly recommend reviewing those messages, particularly “The Wonder of Worshipping Together.” In that message, we quoted from the Preacher’s Homiletical Commentary on Hebrews 10:25:

It is of the very essence of a Christian Church that those who stand in the recovered sonship are brought into mutually helpful relations in the recovered brotherhood. A Christian is his “brother’s keeper.” We are responsible to one another for what we can do for one another in the culture and fitting expression of that spiritual life which we have in common. It is not often set before us with sufficient clearness and force, that our duty to fellow-Christians is not merely common-place, every-day, human kindness. This is due from man to man in the ordinary human brotherhood. Our call is to serve our Christian brethren precisely in the sphere of their Christian, that is, their spiritual, life.

We stand in relation not only to one another, but also to the Church, as a body, to which we may belong. We are responsible for our personal example of godliness, and for our loyalty to all the Church’s arrangements and claims. This is put into one matter—one which we are surprised to find thus early in the history of the Church causing serious anxiety: “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is.” Nothing puts a man’s spiritual life in more serious peril than irregular attendance at the services of his Church; nothing more readily checks the process of spiritual culture; nothing affords a more injurious example to others; and nothing indicates a weaker sense of the responsibilities under which a man comes in entering the fellowship of a Church. These duties wait on privilege. There can be no enjoyment of the privilege without meeting the obligations. Let no one deceive himself on that point.

- There are those who stopped attending church due to COVID and others due to Convenience. May the LORD help us as we go forward in love and grace!

7. Good Stewardship increases freedom!

- **Romans 13:8 (KJV)** *Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law.*
- I believe God wants us free to love people, regardless of circumstances. One of the ways we do this is to eliminate as many areas of bondage as we can!
- **Proverbs 22:7 (KJV)** *The rich ruleth over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender.*
- “It’s hard to be prophetic when you work for the king.”
- The more we build this part of our lives by biblical principle, the more free we are to give, serve, preach, and live in holiness unto the LORD.

8. Our physical health is really important.

- **Romans 12:1-2 (KJV)** *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. 2 And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.*
- 2020 made us all think about our health...and how short life is!
- Many realized that we need to take better care of our physical selves!
- Healthy eating, exercise, rest, all make a huge difference in our ability to fight disease.
- We also were reminded that God is a healer and protector!

9. Cross-carrying is difficult; our pain and risk tolerance is low.

- Jesus commanded us to pick up our crosses and carry them daily if we are to follow Him.

(Luke 9:23-25 (KJV)) *And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. 24 For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it. 25 For what is a man advantaged, if he gain the whole world, and lose himself, or be cast away?*

- Throughout church history, we read of the saints of God carrying out this command, willing to give their lives for the cause of Christ: preaching the Gospel, gathering together (do you remember the catacombs?), or sometimes, simply being Christians.
- Even in our modern day, in some places in the world, simply being identified as a Christian can get one murdered.
- In March of 2020, the truth that our lives are short was evident. Less evident was/is the truth that we should be willing to give our lives in pursuit of Christ.
- From prison, Paul declared, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” (Php 1:21) His desire was to depart to be with Jesus, but he recognized his need to remain to minister and raise up the churches, at least for a little while.
- This isn’t meant to be a rebuke, just a reality. I’ll phrase it with a question to mitigate any offense: “Is it possible that our desire to preserve our lives is more powerful than our desire to obey God?”

10. We are too tethered to the world system.

- **1 John 2:15-17 (KJV)** *Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. 17 And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.*
- We all need to work and earn, live in homes, drive cars, and use the “system” in some ways. I think we all get that. Indeed, as we are able, we should all work for the betterment of our communities!
- What is obviously lacking however, is the means by which Believers could and would care for one another should things get really bad.
- Remember the toilet paper lines? Fears of food shortages? Fears of foreclosures and evictions? Remember when the streets were completely empty?
- For a minute there in March/early-April, many people were wondering how they would eat, get medicines, educate their children, or even survive!
- I don’t have all the answers here, but us being “too tethered” is easy to see. At a minimum, we need think and pray about:

1. An early church mindset on caring for one another
2. Getting out of debt

3. Building a liquid “war chest”
4. Living minimally
5. Growing/storing food
6. Building church networks
7. Really getting to know our neighbors

11. The Government is not God!

- Scripture tells us that magistrates are ministers of God, should be honored, and generally submitted to. (Rom 13:1-7; 1 Pet 2:13-17)
- But civil government is one of three jurisdictions, or spheres of authority God has created. The other two are the home and the church.
- When government creates laws that contradict God’s Laws...
- **Acts 5:29 (KJV)** *Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.*
- As our Nation moves towards Statism (Socialism/Communism), we must resist seeing the government as almighty. It too must submit to the King of Kings!

12. We need to adopt a “Babylon Posture” going forward!

- What does this mean in short? It means:
 1. Knowing and embracing that the drivers of culture aren’t neutral.
 2. Understanding that increasingly, the world/culture will be hostile to holiness.
 3. Embracing our “stranger-ness” and “pilgrim-ness.” ;) (1 Pet 2:11)
 4. Taking up the difficult responsibility of striving for multigenerational faithfulness in “the midst of.”
- Let us prepare for a long “captivity,” living life seeking peace...

Jeremiah 29:4-7 (KJV) *Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, unto all that are carried away captives, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem unto Babylon; **5** Build ye houses, and dwell in them; and plant gardens, and eat the fruit of them; **6** Take ye wives, and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; that ye may be increased there, and not diminished. **7** And seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray unto the LORD for it: for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace.*

- But refusing to compromise....

Daniel 1:8 (KJV) *But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank: therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself.*

Daniel 3:16-18 (KJV) Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. **17** If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. **18** But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.

- What will we do WHEN (not if) WE “hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and dulcimer, and all kinds of musick?” (Dan 3:15)

13. We need a plan that works when nothing works!

- In other words, we need to follow the Bible. Seriously! Sorry for sounding like a broken record, but...

Matthew 7:24-27 (KJV) Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: **25** And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. **26** And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: **27** And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it.

- We must build our lives upon the Rock of Scripture! Christ is our Chief Cornerstone!

1 Peter 2:6-9 (KJV) Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture, Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner stone, elect, precious: and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded. **7** Unto you therefore which believe he is precious: but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner, **8** And a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, even to them which stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed. **9** But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light:

Amen!