

Run with the Horses



Gary Wilkerson June 21, 2021

Faith for Times to Come

I can still remember how deeply affected I was by a song that came out several years ago. It's called "Clear the Stage" by the musician Jimmy Needham.

The song speaks of how a great number of churches—including the last one I pastored—can make a big impression through smoke machines, giant video screens and massive racks of lights. Jimmy's message was how easily we become dependent on outer trappings like these and end up missing Jesus.

Often in my sermons and messages, I've used the Hebrew term *kavod*. This refers to the "weightiness" of God's holy presence and how its effect is to drive us to awe and reverence. To me, this is what's behind the song "Clear the Stage." It reveals how purposeful we have to be—metaphorically, symbolically and sometimes literally—to approach the *kavod* of Jesus and to maintain his centrality in our lives.

In some churches, the pandemic forced what the song suggests we do. Stages were cleared as many congregations stopped holding services out of consideration for people's safety. Countless Christians had to resort to Zoom or video services to have times of worship.

Needless to say, it has been an agonizing season for many in Christ's body. At the same time, it has reminded us how important true fellowship and pure worship are.

As more people are vaccinated and churches begin to fully reopen their doors, a question lingers: Will we forget what we've experienced and hold onto idolatrous trappings? Or did this sobering season stir us to hunger for *kavod*? Were we moved to seek the weighty substance and presence of God in whom we live and move and have our being?

Throughout the history of God's people, disastrous times could be times of cleansing or refining.

Even in some of the worst times, the Lord sent manna to remind his people of his goodness. Such times are meant to cause our hearts to cry, "Lord, all I want now is you. I see clearly all the idols I've relied on, the earthly things I've allowed to preoccupy me. They're all meaningless to me now. Please, remove my fleshly wants and steer my desires to your purposes. I ask you to clear the stage of my heart so I can have a clean conscience and clear vision. I want nothing before me but the weight of your glory, Jesus."

As restrictions lift in the wake of the pandemic, does your heart hunger for God's glorious, weighty presence? Do you long more than ever to make Jesus central in every part of your life?

Paul stressed this centrality in his epistle to the Colossians. "...all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (*Colossians 1:16-17, ESV*).

A few years ago, after I first heard “Clear the Stage,” I preached a message about it. A young pastor approached me afterward and said, “I appreciate your sermon, but I don’t think it’s right for our church. It’s much too serious and sober. I can see how it would be appropriate for World Challenge’s ministers’ conferences where you’re charging pastors with their holy calling. But a lot of people in the pews need encouragement.”

I answered him gently and sincerely, “I don’t think there’s any message more encouraging than ‘Put Jesus first in your life. Get rid of every idol that holds you back from following him. Then, no matter what you face, you’ll find blessing for yourself, your family and everyone around you.’”

Jesus told us trying times like this excruciating year we’ve just gone through are to be expected in this world.

In Matthew 24, the disciples were alarmed to hear Jesus predict the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. They asked when these severely catastrophic things—and the “end of the age” (*Matthew 24:3*)—would take place, and Jesus’ response was telling. “See that no one leads you astray” (*24:4*).

I find Jesus’ answer here curious. When asked about things to come, he focused on false teaching. This very theme continues throughout the New Testament, especially regarding end times, from the pens of Paul, Peter and Jude.

“But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed” (*2 Peter 2:1-2*).

In hard times of anguish and confusion, we may be tempted to turn to voices or things that bring a false sense of comfort. We have to continually turn to the Holy Spirit in full trust that he’ll remind us of the solid Word we have received. In turn, we are to faithfully speak biblical truth to our brothers and sisters who may be tempted to follow destructive heresies.

In the difficult times like those we’re enduring, I believe the Holy Spirit asks a question of everyone who follows Jesus.

The Spanish flu wiped out a huge number of the world’s population 100 years ago. Now scientists tell us that after the ravages of COVID-19, more viruses may follow. The world has already been wearied by one pandemic; how will we deal with other potential catastrophes?

I find a passage in Jeremiah very helpful. When the prophet was wearied by a vicious attack from someone, God posed a question to him: “If you have raced with men on foot, and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses?” (*Jeremiah 12:5*).

I wonder whether the Spirit is asking something similar of Christ’s followers today. “Are you overwhelmed by the daily struggles you face? Are they casting you into despair and confusion? Tell me, if you’re freaking out over such things, how will your faith carry you through really hard times to come?”

No one can be blamed for struggling to find peace in times of great trials, but how can we gain strength today for more difficult battles to come? As Jeremiah asks, how shall we learn to run with the horses?

I believe the best way to prepare for difficult times to come is to ask what it means to pick up the weapons of spiritual warfare.

In the midst of deeply hard times, what does it look like for us to rely on the shield of faith, the sword of the Spirit, the breastplate of righteousness, the helmet of salvation, a passion for Jesus and the fire of the Spirit? How do we wield these armaments so that our faith not only endures but thrives in the times to come?

Paul speaks to this in his second letter to Timothy. By this time, the apostle was an older man, imprisoned in Rome and had been through every kind of trial, even having faced death. He wrote to Timothy, “For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control” (2 Timothy 1:6-7).

Paul makes clear that we are not to fear anything to come. He says the gift of the Holy Spirit is in us and that we’re to fan the flames of the faith already residing in us.

Meanwhile, we’re not to give in to fear but trust God for all the power, love and self-control he supplies through the Spirit. “...which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (1:9-10).

When Paul wrote this, he knew he was going to die. He wasn’t afraid, and he instructed Timothy to have the same spirit, saying in essence, “Do not fear any suffering you may face. God has both saved you and given you a holy calling. His purpose and grace are manifested through the appearing of Jesus who abolished death and gave us immortality.”

No matter what happens here on earth, through the Spirit, we are able to fix our minds and hearts on the immovable Christ who holds our salvation in his unshakable hands.

Our Savior’s grace empowers even the weakest among us to have faith to run with the horses. Friend, I urge you to fan the flame of the Spirit within you, to obtain power, love and a sound mind. Then you will have peace about your loved ones and courage to face anything in any season, for his great glory. Amen.

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