

Christians Responding to Crisis

David Flatt

Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul (Acts 11:27-30).

We all have been challenged by the current global pandemic. While we have had public health crises in the recent past, we have never experienced something to this scale. At the beginning of the crisis, no one seemed to know how to react. Well, we have been living with this new danger for two months. We have had time to absorb the facts of our situation. How are we responding now?

We have been saying how nothing like this has ever happened in our lifetimes. Certainly, a major pandemic has not happened since the early 20th century; however, bad things have happened in our lifetimes. My grandparents were children during the Great Depression and World War II. My grandpa served in the military during the Korean War of the 1950s. My parents grew up during the Vietnam Era. When I was a teenager, I watched airplanes fly into the World Trade Towers and saw Washington D.C. aflame. In 2008, the housing market crash sparked the largest economic down-turn since the Great Depression. Now, today, we find ourselves in another crisis.

My purpose is not to stir up bad memories or fear, but to bring perspective to our time. Generally, we have been blessed to live comfortable lives. The quiet, simple lives we lead can sometimes detach us from an unsettling reality: bad things happen all the time. Like what is happening now, bad things can happen on a large scale. Or, bad things can happen on a smaller scale. We have all faced family crises of one sort or another. The question is not if bad things will happen, but how will we respond when they drop on our doorstep.

Christians Respond to a Famine

Our current crisis has shed new light on the Judean famine prophesied in Acts chapter eleven. A famine is unquestionably a crisis. Some translations use the expression “great dearth” to describe the magnitude of this event. Luke notes that this famine took place in the days of Roman Emperor Claudius.

Claudius was enthroned from 41-54 A.D. He came to power in the turbulent aftermath of the assassination of Emperor Caligula. Claudius’ reign eventually came to an unceremonious end. One of his wives, Agrippina, was believed to have poisoned him. She wanted her son, Nero, to be emperor.

The thirteen-year reign of Claudius was noted for having four famines. One famine impacted the city of Rome. One impacted mainly Greece. A second famine impacted the city of Rome, but was more severe than the first. Historian Suetonius described its severity as being a divine judgment. The fourth famine of Claudius' reign impacted Judea. This famine happened in 51 A.D. at the end of his reign.

The Jewish historian, Josephus, was a young boy living in Judea during the reign of Claudius. He described the Judean famine by writing, *"A famine did oppress them at the time (in the time of Claudius); and many people died for the lack of what was necessary to procure food withal. Queen Helena sent some of her servants to Alexandria with money to buy a great quantity of grain, and others of them to Cyprus to bring a cargo of dried figs."*

Everyone living in Judea was affected by this famine. Life was not easy. Typically, famines are the result of war or drought. While war was not the cause of this famine, both war and drought affect the food supply chain. Without water, crops cannot be cultivated. Without water or crops, cattle cannot be sustained. Farmers and shepherds would have been economically ruined. Food shortages would have created high inflation. And, not the least of which, people would have starved.

Thankfully, a prophet from Jerusalem came to Antioch to forewarn Christians of this impending crisis. In response to Agabus' prophecy, Christians took action. They contributed money to send to the church in Jerusalem. They gave the money to Barnabas and Paul to take to the elders of the church in Jerusalem. The elders would then distribute the money to saints in that congregation who were in need.

Of course, Christians from Antioch were not the only Christians to send relief-money to these saints. The book of Acts shows how Christians took care of Christians. Paul collected money from brethren especially of pagan backgrounds in his travels to help the Jerusalem church. Paul would often write about how Christ broke barriers and reconciled believers into one family (Gal. 3:27-29; Eph. 2:11-22). This fundraising project would test the doctrine of unity.

Learning from the Judean Famine

The famine experienced by the saints in Jerusalem was severe. Their dire situation would have been compounded by earlier events. Remember, many of the saints in Jerusalem had given their possessions to aid needy saints when the Church was established (Acts 2:45). Thankfully, the generosity they had shown in the past came back to them.

But, how does this famine relate to what we are experiencing today? When this crisis occurred, Christians took action. Saints throughout the brotherhood sacrificially contributed money to relieve other saints. Meanwhile, the Christians in Jerusalem learned how to live with the famine.

Likewise, today, we must learn how to live with our new danger. Paul wrote, *"Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know*

how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:11-13).

Since we have not experienced anything like this virus before, we must learn how to adjust our lives. We especially need to learn how to deal with this new danger as Christians. We cannot just stop living and laboring to advance the Gospel. As a church, we must learn how to do our work. More than anyone else in the world, Christians are to be the ones with steady hands in times of crisis. We are to be steadfast and unmovable in our work (1 Cor. 15:58).

Our adversary is active. He wants to use this crisis to expose vulnerabilities. If he can crush faith and steal hope, he will. If he can rip Christians from their Savior and break church families into pieces, he will.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, we are in a serious time of crisis. How have we been responding? With the benefit of time, perhaps, we can now begin to renew our perspective and recognize we have been through hard times in the past. We adjusted then and learned how to live with a new danger. We must do the same again now.

We certainly can learn from the Judean famine. When saints first heard of the impending crisis, they took action with determination. Likewise, we need determination and courage now. By the word of God’s grace, we can find our way forward. We must. The alternative is unacceptable.