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THE DARWIN AND HOBART DISASTERS

BY D.B. KNOX

THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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The Australian community suffered a severe shock when Darwin was devastated by a cyclone on Christmas Day. Now that the rescue operation has been completed and thoughts are turning to rehabilitation we should reflect and assess what the disaster means. Hard on the heels of Darwin came the Hobart bridge disaster and further lives were lost suddenly, unexpectedly. In between the two events we read in the newspapers of the destruction of Pakistan with thousands of people losing their lives and we have for some months been reading of the famine in North Africa and particularly in Ethiopia which has brought death to tens of thousands. Misfortune and sorrow overtakes all of us during life and sometimes we suffer more severely than others. The Bible story of Job is an illustration, he was an excellent man, upright and generous and one who feared and revered God as Chapters 30 and 31 of the Book of Job make clear. Yet he suffered terrible blows from misfortune; he lost all his property, he lost his family through a whirl-wind and he lost his own health for a long period of time. Yet it is plain that these events were under the control of God. Though they did not originate with God but with Satan, they brought in the end a very great blessing to Job in a deepening experience and fellowship with his Heavenly Father. So misfortune which overtakes Christians should be turned into blessings for that is the purpose that God allows them. The only real blessing that counts in the end is a deepening experience of God and we may rejoice in our trials if this is the outcome.

But there is a further very important point to stress. If looked at carefully it will be seen that we deserve every misfortune that comes into our life (even though God intends it not for judgement, but for blessing). We deserve God's judgement because we do not fear and reverence God in the way we should. We are not single minded in serving God as for example, our Lord Jesus Christ was and anything short of his perfect character is wrong and deserves correction and punishment. Thus we deserve every misfortune that overtakes us and we should accept them as stepping stones back to God.

But we must not think that those who suffer are more deserving of judgement than those who escape, we all deserve it equally. This was the message that Jesus emphasized in the catastrophes which took place in the community during his ministry.

Pilate the Roman Governor had executed some Galileans. Jesus asked his hearers whether they thought that these victims were more deserving of their fate than those who escaped. This would perhaps be the natural view but our Lord denied it. I quote his words from Luke 13:2. "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered thus? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish". Our Lord then went on to comment on another incident. It would seem that a tower had collapsed in Jerusalem and killed some of those standing close by. Jesus again asked his hearers; "those eighteen upon whom the tower of Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish". We may conclude that those who suffered as a result of the cyclone of Darwin or the accident at Hobart were not necessarily any worse than their fellow citizens but the point that Jesus underlined was that we all deserve judgement and will all receive it unless we repent of our Godlessness. "Unless we repent we will all likewise perish". Jesus' words were literally and terribly fulfilled a few years later in the destruction of Jerusalem and the revaging of the countryside through the Roman invading armies. His hearers suffered much more fearful and terrible deaths than the Galileans or those on whom the tower fell.

The lesson to us Australians should be plain, are we going to sink back into our complacency, pleasure seeking, money making and sexism, or will we repent and come awake to God, who controls all the events of life and who controls our eternal destinies? Nothing happens purposelessly. The collapse of the tower of Siloam should have been a warning that all deserve the same fate. Those who lost their lives or their property in Darwin or in Hobart should be a warning to us. We equally deserve the same judgement and our Lord has warned that unless we Australians repent and cleanse our lives and our society, we will all likewise perish. Perish, not only as a nation overwhelmed by some enemy but we will all individually perish eternally. That is what we deserve and that is what we will inevitably receive unless we repent of our Godlessness and selfishness, and recognise Jesus as the Lord and Saviour to whom we look for forgiveness and salvation, and hallow God's

name in our own life and in our national life.

God's judgement is a very unpleasant subject to speak about or to preach about. But it is the most real factor in life. We are surrounded by the judgements of God and we do ourselves or others no kindness by skating lightly over or ignoring the reality of judgement. But we must always speak of it as persons equally deserving of it, but saved, I trust, from it by the love of the Lord Jesus Christ who bore it for us.

Do you sense the justice and imminence of God's judgement? Then repent, turn back to God, fear and honour Him, acknowledge Jesus as the Lord, call on Him and he will save you, now and always, changing you from being under God's wrath into being in His presence, so that even death, whenever it comes, will no longer be a part of God's judgement, but rather it will be transformed into a gateway for fuller fellowship and joy in the presence of God.

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