

DROUGHT

by
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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

As you know parts of Australia at present are in the grip of a bad drought which is particularly severe in New South Wales. Many of our fellow citizens are suffering hardship, livestock is perishing, and if rain does not come soon the situation will become disastrous for many. All of us are involved as the economy of the whole state will receive a setback.

This painful and anxious time is a reminder that even the most advanced civilization and elaborate social structure is dependent upon the basic reliability of the seasons. There is no substitute for the rain and fertility of the soil, nor for the growth of grass and food crops.

In anxious times like the present it is natural to turn to prayer because the Creator is the controller. As Jeremiah wrote in a time of severe drought "Are there any among the idols of the heathen

that can cause rain, or can the heavens give showers? Are you not He O Lord our God? And therefore will we pray to you for you have made all things" (chapter 14, verse 22). There are some Christians who feel a reluctance to pray for such things as rain although we need it so badly, because, so they argue, rain is brought about by the meteorological laws of the atmosphere. Of course this is true, but God is the author and controller of all things including the meteorological laws and He works through them. When He sends rain it will not be contrary to these laws, but by means of them. But Scripture enjoins us to bring our needs to God as He is well able to supply them, and since we need rain we should acknowledge Him as the sovereign controller of His universe and call upon Him earnestly for our need. Jesus' teaching could not be clearer in the sermon on the mount (Mt.5:45) "Your heavenly Father sends rain".

1230 We are to think of God as completely in control of everything that takes place. He is the sovereign Lord. There is nothing therefore that enters our lives by accident. Luck is only things as seen from our point of view. It does not exist in reality. All things are under the control of our Heavenly Father, even the minutest of details. So St. Paul told his hearers in Acts 14:17 that it is God who controls the seasons making them normally so bountiful as to fill our hearts with joy and gladness. For God who is a sovereign God is also a loving God and crowns us with blessings. Why then does He allow the present drought? From the Bible we will find that droughts are permitted by the sovereign control of God for the purpose of bringing a nation to its senses. There is a famous passage in Isaiah 5 where God describes the nation of Israel as His vineyard, but it is a rebellious God-ignoring nation, and so the poem warns "I will also

command the clouds that they rain no rain upon my vineyard".

You will remember that this also was the object of the drought in the days of Elijah when for $3\frac{1}{2}$ years no rain fell and Elijah told King Ahab in I Kings 18 that the reason for the drought was that the children of Israel had turned their back on God's commandments. Or again in Jer. 14 we read the same message. After all, what are the means by which God can bring a nation whom He loves to their senses when they are turning their back on Him, when they are gaily going their own self-willed way? Very often only a catastrophe will bring them to their senses and make them reflect on what they really believe. And so we find from the Scriptures that God often uses natural calamities such as war or plague or pestilence or famine or drought for the purpose of bringing about national repentance, in

the same way as a father may need to use punishment and chastisement with a wayward child.

But both in the case of the child and the nation what we need is a recognition of the rod, and Who has appointed it. Now if we reflect on our own country and on ourselves as members of it can we doubt that we need the chastisement of God. If God is sovereign, as He is, He is not indifferent to the fact that we as a nation are God-forgetful, and thus are hastening headlong to catastrophe. We have received from the past very great blessings with regard to the knowledge of God and very great material blessings, yet instead of being thankful to the divine author as a nation we are more and more God-ignoring. Let me give you just one or two indications of this failure to honour God as a nation. Firstly, there is the constantly growing disregard of the Lord's day, and the turning of it simply into

a day for our own enjoyment. This shows the state of our heart. Although in the Lord's prayer we all pray "Hallowed be Thy Name" we regard as a thing of slight importance the honouring of God by honouring His day. Or again, consider the constant rise in the amount of gambling. No nation that honoured God would be so careless in its use of money as to gamble it so wantonly.

These things are signs, straws in the wind, of our national attitude, and the root problem is the problem of the heart - the God-forgetfulness of our community which simply reflects the God-forgetfulness of the individuals that make up the community; and when God is ignored, self and selfishness take the centre of the stage. There is no doubt that we as a nation need to be brought to our senses and anything that will achieve this is an act and sign of God's gracious concern for our welfare, even though it may involve painful chas-

tisement. For consider the facts, the Australian nation is in a most precarious position at present. Our soldiers are fighting in two different local wars in Malaysia and Vietnam, yet we ourselves are so inadequately defended, and our nearest friendly nations who could come to our aid are thousands of miles away. I do not suggest that we had any real alternative but to join in these local wars, but we don't make nearby nations more friendly by fighting them! but the fact that the seriousness of our situation has not affected our way of life one iota shows how extraordinarily blind we Australians are to our own situation. This drought has been allowed to overtake us in order to bring us to our senses so that we might not be completely swallowed up. The honouring of God is the basic principle in national wholeness, and unless we turn back to Him in our thoughts and give Him thanks for our blessings and seek His will for our lives,

all other defence will be in vain in the end. Thus the drought not only reminds us of our need to pray to God as the source of our blessings, but more fundamentally the need of repentance. It is not in our nation's interests that the drought should be relieved till it has done its work of turning our thoughts back to God. All of us need to repent of our attitude and to make God and Jesus Christ central in our attitude and in our life.

In Jeremiah 14:1, we read "The word of the Lord that came to Jeremiah concerning the drought" and in verse 20 the prophet concludes "We acknowledge O Lord our wickedness and the iniquity of our fathers, for we have sinned against Thee. Do not abhor us for Thy Name's sake ... Are there among the idols of the heathen that can cause rain? Or can the heavens give showers? Art not Thou He O Lord our God? Therefore we will wait upon Thee for

Thou hast made all these things". With Jeremiah we should confess our own sins and the sins of our fellow countrymen. In praying for rain, pray first of all for a change of heart acknowledging that we have not kept the first commandment, to love God with all our heart and mind and strength. This sort of confession can only be made between our own souls and God Himself. One of the objections to the doctrine that all confession must be made to a priest is that this makes confession a shallow thing, confining it to confessing this action or that action. Of course the requirement that all sin must be confessed to a priest before it can be forgiven has no basis in the Bible, and the practice weakens our fellowship with God by introducing a compulsory human mediator between ourselves and our Heavenly Father, and these are very serious objections. But I am not now speaking of these aspects but only of an important side effect, namely

the making shallow of the idea of what sin is and of what confession is. If sin is confined to the sort of things a penitent can list in a confession to a priest, we overlook the ongoing need to confess and repent of the more fundamental sin of pushing God out from the centre and on to the edge of life.

What Jeremiah is speaking of and what we need is the radical confession that we have not loved and do not love God with all our hearts and all our minds and that we are constantly involved in this sin from which all other sins spring. And with this confession must go the resolution that we will turn back to God, make Him central in our thinking, hope steadily in His promises and in particular trust Him for forgiveness and for salvation. If we do this we may be assured that we will receive once again the blessing of fruitful seasons and with them the greater blessing of a healthy community because

a God-fearing, God-honouring community.

We should all pray for rain. We have a duty to do this, for we all need this rain, and especially our brothers in the country, God is the source of this blessing, and our prayers are an acknowledgement that this is so. But at the same time let us remember that we have a more fundamental need, namely the change of heart so as to make God central in our thoughts and lives, just as He is in fact central in the control of the universe. This is Australia's need, just as it is the need of each of us individually. So as we ask for rain, ask also for this gift of repentance, for God is the supplier of this gift, just as He is of every other gift and blessing.

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