

A Call to the Church in the Pandemic

David Campbell



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ISBN 978-1-8380775-2-5

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Ettrick Press

98 The Brow, Brighton

BN2 6LN

ettrickpress.co.uk

Introduction

With churches closed, congregations dispersed, and pulpits silenced, what message should we hear from God in these unprecedented times?

When times of crisis come, we should of course respond with faith in the wisdom and faithfulness of the gracious Saviour. But a response of repentance is also essential, even from believers.

Never have churches been closed in our land for so long a period. Should we not ask why? Why would God allow the removal of something so intimately connected with his glory in the world? If we believe that things do not happen to us by chance but by the wise, holy and all-powerful providence of God, what are we to understand of God's purposes? Surely we need to humble ourselves before God even to be able to hear what he is saying to us. If God is calling to repentance (Isaiah 22:12) and we just want things to continue in the most normal way possible, are we being obedient to his voice? How can we expect repentance in the nation if the church is also reluctant to face up to it?

It is easy to think that the call to repent is a message for others, but Christ tells us we must all begin with ourselves (Luke 13:3). It remains true that the Lord's mercies and faithfulness are the same and we must hope in him (Lamentations 3:22-24). 'The Lord is good unto them that wait for him, to the soul that seeketh him.' (Lamentations 3:25) Yet it is vital that we do this in a way that responds obediently to God's call. That is why the message of hope in Lamentations chapter 3 is connected with the call, 'Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord. Let us lift up our

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heart with our hands unto God in the heavens. We have transgressed and have rebelled: thou hast not pardoned.’ (Lamentations 3:40-42) We need to run for comfort to an offended God, for we will not find true comfort anywhere else. As David Dickson put it, ‘God offended is still more full of pity than any other.’ Yet we must do this through loving repentance that is the tear in the eye of faith, laying hold of the mercy of God in Christ.

The origin of these addresses

I prepared these addresses for reading during the period of closure of church buildings on account of the novel coronavirus pandemic, from 23rd March 2020. They were prepared hurriedly and were an attempt to understand the Lord’s providence in the events as they unfolded. Primarily they were intended to provide pastoral instruction and guidance for my congregation, so as to preserve some semblance of a teaching ministry and regularly bring before the people the truths of Scripture in their application to these unique and troubling circumstances.

The addresses were not intended to be sermons, although the basic structure and approach is that of a sermon in outline. They lack the crucial aspect of being delivered in a living and immediate way to the conscience in a gathered assembly, to which the presence of Christ is specially promised. While in some limited way a preached sermon and its essential immediacy might be partially reproduced on paper, this feature cannot be replicated in a discourse that was never preached. Thus these addresses, in common with all expedients during the closure of churches throughout the world, inevitably lack one element or another of what is to be obtained only when pastor and people physically

gather together face to face to worship the Lord in the preaching of the gospel.

The loss of public worship assemblies and of the preached word for these months in 2020, was and remains one of the most sobering, perplexing and searching experiences I have passed through in my life. As time passes, and as no certain conclusion to restrictions on divine worship assemblies is in sight, even at the close of the year, the troubling nature of the providence is not diminished, but rather increased.

Between 23rd March and 28th May a total of 28 addresses were read and shared with the congregation for use on the Lord's day. Of these, 14 are included here. The collection presented in this volume seeks to give some necessary emphasis to the voice of chastisement (for example, addresses 1 and 3), to some of the lessons to be learnt (such as in address 5) and to the nature and value of what was removed from the Church (addresses 9-11). Address 13, dated 7th June, was preached to a small gathering in the church building. No longer believing that the closure of the church for divine worship was justified, I returned to my church building on Sabbath 31st May and preached to my family three times each week, until the church opened again in July.

The purpose of this publication

With this publication I would like to bring three things to the forefront of our minds.

One is the need for repentance within the church. Although many Christians are willing to see that the pandemic is a call to the nations of the world to repent of their worldliness and ungodliness, many in the Christian church do not seem to feel that

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it is also a call to the church itself. Yet the closure of church buildings for public worship brings the implications of the pandemic to our own doorstep as congregations and churches. Congregations are the Lord's beloved flocks, and public worship is uniquely the context of the very means of grace which he especially intends for our conversion and edification. When we are prevented from meeting in flocks and held back from public worship, surely we should not seek to evade or downplay a message of such special significance to the church.

Another is the preciousness of gathering for worship. True religion must be inward and personal, and we are sometimes called to be alone with the Lord in it. But true religion must also have outward and corporate expression – and specifically, in gathering for public worship, however small the assembly may be. When believers gather for public worship, they honour the Lord and receive blessings from the Lord in ways which are not otherwise possible. The devotion we express to the Lord in our personal acts of worship, and the blessings we receive from informal, social gatherings, are valuable in their own place, but they are both distinct from and reliant on what happens between the Lord and his assembled people in public worship.

The third is the obligatoriness of pursuing communion with the Lord in his own ordinances. The Lord has given us his ordinances so that we and he can meet together, for his glory and our blessedness. Chief among these ordinances are the preaching of his Word and the administration of the sacraments. Yet both of these belong to public, gathered, worship, not to private devotion or informal fellowship. When we access these ordinances we honour the Lord both by believing his promise that he will commune with us here in a unique way, and by recognising the obligation and duty he puts on us to gather, in his name, on his terms, to receive

his blessing. If we try to reproduce these ordinances outside of gathered worship, we deprive ourselves of the primary means which the Lord has ordained for communing with and blessing his people.

This publication is therefore a small endeavour to grapple with the meaning of the providences of 2020. It attempts to share with a wider audience the burden I felt as a silenced preacher, and to encourage solemn reflection, honest confession, and sincere repentance as we seek the restoration of communion with the Lord, who is justly displeased with us. If it can act as a contribution to a larger discussion of the essential nature of the worship required by the Saviour from his people, and to which he promises his presence, I will be content.

It remains for me to express my deep gratitude to Ettrick Press for the considerable labour involved in editing these addresses and in preparing them for publication. The defects are all mine and the sense that they are but a weak and hesitating attempt to declare God's truth in the written page remains. To my long-suffering congregation, who received the first very rough and hurried transcripts, I also express my sincere thanks for your patience, and my prayerful desire that in this more finished form, these addresses will be of some lasting benefit for time and eternity.

Rev David Campbell
Edinburgh
November 2020

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Is it nothing to you?

Lamentations 1:12

Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, which is done unto me, wherewith the Lord hath afflicted me in the day of his fierce anger?

Sabbath morning, 29 March 2020

We are currently unable to gather for public worship in our place of meeting, and prevented by a lawful restriction in providence from assembling in congregations for a time. These solemn circumstances are in many ways different to those of Jeremiah and Judah but in other ways very similar.

The differences between Jeremiah's time and ours can be outlined briefly. The people of Judah were carried captive out of their land; we remain in comfort in our homes. They were threatened with death by a cruel heathen king; we have peace and security and rulers who are seeking our welfare. They lost everything in a short space of time in a most frightening manner; we have only lost certain liberties of movement and meeting in a most gentle and peaceable manner.

So, we must be ready to acknowledge the Lord's mercies even more than the prophet did. 'It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not.' (Lamentations 3:22)

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But the similarities are also very striking and significant, and it is to these that we want to draw special attention. The opening words of this Lamentation sum up the entire subject of Jeremiah's sorrow and the reason for it. 'How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people!' (Lamentations 1:1)

We now share in a remarkable way what the prophet Jeremiah lamented here. We also are solitary and unable to gather together for the public worship of God freely and in assemblies. We also must say, 'the ways of Zion do mourn, because none come to the solemn feasts.' (verse 4) We also are forced to remember in this providence all our pleasant things that we had in the days of old (verse 7).

For the first time, not only in living memory, but perhaps ever, since the Reformation in Scotland, all the gates and doors of the Reformed church in this city and this land have, by an inescapable divine providence, been shut. The public praise, prayers and preaching of the Word of God have ceased for our sabbath days at least for these three weeks. What sorrow this providence occasions! It was for Jeremiah the greatest possible sorrow, and it is the single most weighty subject of the entire song of the Book of Lamentations.

The city of Jerusalem was laid waste, broken up and burned with fire (Jeremiah 39). The king of Babylon left the poor of the people there, and they were witnesses to the desolation. Jeremiah had been released from prison and was permitted to live in the land. He went to Mizpah, where he 'dwelt among the people that were left in the land.' (Jeremiah 40:6) He therefore speaks here as one who was observing the attitudes and responses of the people to the destruction of the city and the temple. While we are not in these circumstances, we are nevertheless called to sit down and mourn

the closure of the place of meeting for the worship of God among us. That is what Jeremiah did, seeing this one providence as the greatest calamity to be visited on any people.

What is striking about these words of Jeremiah is that others did not view the desolation in the same way as he did. In reality, many of 'those who passed by' did not see the destruction of the temple and the removal of the priests, or the daily sacrifices being ended and the precious instruments of divine worship being taken to Babylon, as such great calamities at all. Sadly, we can say the same. This view of those who pass by added to the sorrow of the weeping prophet and it should add to our sorrow. The sorrow occasioned by the loss of divine worship in the public means of grace is a spiritual sorrow unique to the people of God.

In these words of Jeremiah there is a great deal that is worthy of careful attention at this extra-ordinary time in our lives, when for our many sins and provocations, the Lord is speaking loudly and solemnly to us and to the nations of the world.

I. The contrast

The contrast is drawn between the different responses to providence. The church sorrows over it, but it means nothing to passers-by. 'Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? ... is there any sorrow like unto my sorrow?'

The church may sorrow in a wrong way over her loss. There may be mere sentiment and a sense of the loss of only the outward and earthly things attached to the worship of God. We may be sorrowing for the lack of social gathering, familiar friendships and hospitality among us. These may be good things in themselves, and blessings now removed from us, but if these are all we sorrow

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for, we have little more than the sorrow of the world. Jeremiah's sorrow was far greater and deeper than that.

Contrasting views about the value of worship

Unlike the passer-by, Jeremiah saw the value of the temple worship in Jerusalem, especially because of what it taught the people about Christ.

Jeremiah saw and heard the gospel in that worship of the priests. He saw the ordinances as the means God had appointed for instructing the people in the most holy faith in Christ yet to come. But to the passer-by it was just a religious ritual, and an assembly of devotees set upon a particular form of worship. They little understood its meaning. Perhaps many of the people of Judah were like the heathen in that regard—they understood nothing of the gospel message in the temple worship, and so it was nothing to them to have lost it.

Do we understand the gospel way of salvation? Or is it really nothing to us, because we don't really grasp its meaning? Hearing about the sufferings and death of Christ, Robert Murray M'Cheyne once said, 'Jehovah Tzidkenu was nothing to me.' If that is so, you are like them that passed by here—the sorrow of not hearing that gospel is comparatively nothing to you.

Contrasting views about how to approach God

For Jeremiah the worship of the temple was the appointed way of access to God for the worshipper.

In the temple worship they were invited and exhorted to draw near to the very throne of God. Now that particular way of access was closed to them. They could no longer joy to go up to Jerusalem and stand within her gates with the voice of joy and melody. But those who never thought of drawing near to God thought nothing

of the loss of that access. They therefore could not feel the sorrow Jeremiah felt.

The ordinances of divine worship in the public means of grace are God's appointed way of drawing near to him still. It is true that there is access to his throne in all places, but there is an appointed and ordained means of grace in the public worship that is unique. There is, for one thing, a unique duty of gathering together. And the authoritative preaching of the Word is a unique ordinance of God. In the preaching of the Word, sinners are offered Christ freely, invited by his authorised ambassadors to come to him, and it is 'as though God did beseech you by us' that we 'pray you in Christ's stead' to be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:20). The passer-by does not value the free offer of the gospel, or the place Christ himself gives it in the plan of salvation—it is nothing to him. But those who see its importance, understand that as faith comes by hearing, 'how can they hear without a preacher?' (Romans 10:12-15)

Contrasting views about God's honour

Also unique to the sorrowing of the people of God is their love for God's honour in their meeting in his public worship.

The temple in Jerusalem was the place where God put his name, something which all saw as the revelation of his glory to the world. The temple being in ruins was like a defacing or covering of that glory. It is the honour of the church on earth to bring honour to the name of God in the world. We are to do this in a way of publicly professing his name, both in public assemblies and in our personal lives. The sorrow occasioned by the dishonour done to God when his public worship ceases is a deep and painful sorrow. Like Joshua, Jeremiah is asking, 'What wilt thou do unto thy great name?' (Joshua 7:9) Yet the passer-by does not see the preciousness of the public glory of God in the preaching of Christ and the

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worship of his people in public. Indeed, religion is now viewed as a private matter, and many are quite content that there are no public assemblies or preaching. It is nothing to them to have public worship ceased from this point of view.

Perhaps those who passed by Jeremiah derided his grief as excessive. But Jeremiah was deeply wounded in his soul at these losses. He understood the value of the blood of Christ which was pre-figured in the temple worship, the value of the invitation of Christ to draw near to God through him, and the value of the public nature of God's glory in the praises of his people. They who passed by had no real heart interest in any of these things, and so Jeremiah's sorrow was nothing to them. There may have been some who joined him in his sorrow as far as the external calamity and loss was concerned—they could sympathise with personal loss and with the loss of social privileges and even national pride. But if they didn't understand the spiritual blessings he had found and enjoyed in the temple, their sorrow was as though they said that his was nothing.

2. The call

In Jeremiah's call to the passers-by we are challenged to consider if this is a sorrow we share. 'Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow ...'

By explaining and pouring out his sorrow in this song, Jeremiah is teaching the passers-by what they should sorrow for most in the destruction of Jerusalem. The whole book does that, and we should read it that way. There is a great deal to study here of the priorities we should have in relation to our privileges and blessings in the church of God. Like those in Babylon, we are taught in this book to say:

Is it nothing to you?

O how the Lord's song shall we sing
within a foreign land?

If thee, Jerus'lem, I forget,
skill part from my right hand.

My tongue to my mouth's roof let cleave,
if I do thee forget,

Jerusalem, and thee above
my chief joy do not set.

(Psalm 137:4-6)

But here, he is exhorting those to whom his sorrow is as nothing, to behold and see his sorrow more closely.

Examine what we are sorrowful about

We are called to examine whether we are sorrowful like Jeremiah over the loss we have sustained in being unable to meet in the ordinances of public worship.

This is a searching question, because our hearts are deceitful. We can easily be missing the true cause of sorrow, even while we are sorrowful for lesser reasons. Perhaps we have never really appreciated the significance of the public preaching of the gospel and the free offer of Christ before—that it can be heard nowhere else in the same way as in a public assembly. Perhaps we have never really thought of the public glory of God in the assembly of his people as something so important. Are we really sorrowing over the loss of these things, or have we found something to replace them? Let us search our hearts and be honest in confessing the shallowness of our sorrow and the weakness of our attachment to these precious things.

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Do not become comfortable with the loss

We are called to be watchful that we do not become comfortable without these things, seeing that the loss of them was such a sorrow to Jeremiah.

Many millions of people can happily live their whole lives without the public worship of God, without the free offer of the gospel, and without the other means of grace appointed by God. We are most in danger now of becoming like them when we spend some number of sabbath days without these things.

We may not think now that we are in much danger of gradually becoming used to not hearing the gospel preached, or of not gathering with the saints for public worship, or of not having Christ and his atonement set before us in the way he has appointed. While we would be appalled at the suggestion that these things are nothing to us now, we must be stirred up and watchful lest they become nothing to us over time. May the Lord prevent that ever happening, and in his mercy speedily restore his public ordinances to us!

Feel the sharpness of God's providence

We are called to preserve in our souls a feeling of the sharpness of God's arrows in this providence. We must not seek ways of evading the force and point of these arrows.

Jeremiah called the passers-by to come and look into the wound which the Lord had made in his soul. He kept the wound open so that all his sorrow could be clearly seen. That is what the song does. He does not quickly patch things up and try to heal it—he keeps it open as a running sore. He is like Lot in Sodom—he vexes his righteous soul from day to day with these sorrows. He is even willing to be viewed as vile or worthless (verse 11) in the eyes of others as he spreads out his case to them.

'Behold and see this sorrow I have,' he is saying, 'it really is a terrible pain and burden to me.' He allows the sharp point of the arrow of the Lord's providence to stick fast in him. Perhaps we are in need of an arrow of the same sharpness. If we try to evade the sharp providence, we will only invite the Lord to send even sharper providences to bring us to sorrow more deeply, and to value more highly those things he has taken from us.

Understand the sorrow of the godly

We are called to join those who are most sorrowful and learn why they sorrow.

Jeremiah wants the passers-by to stop and consider. They are not to be like the Jews coming to the crucifixion who passed by and wagged their heads at Christ in scorn and mockery (Matthew 27:39-42). They are rather to be like the godly women who stood around beholding what happened at the cross (Matthew 27:55-56).

We are to join them to learn about the hand of God in it. We are to sit down and learn to read the providence and to listen to the godly interpretation of it. We are very much surrounded by worldly commentaries and stories of what has happened and what is happening in the world. News about it is livestreamed from all over the world, but we can very easily miss what we are supposed to be learning from God in it.

The Lord sent wind and earthquake and fire to show Elijah his great power, but 'the Lord was not in the wind ... the Lord was not in the earthquake ... the Lord was not in the fire.' (1 Kings 19:9-12) He does not always bless remarkable things like these to bring people to be humbled. After the fire Elijah heard a still small voice. It is this that we need to listen for, and we are called here to do that. 'Behold and see.' What is the Spirit saying to the churches in the

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divine providence that has overtaken us when all public ordinances have ceased?

Share the sorrow of the godly

Lastly, we are called to have the same sorrow ourselves as the godly have.

The sorrow of the godly is not something we are called to be mere spectators of. We are in danger of standing aloof from the grief and sore pain which the people of God feel. We perhaps respect it, and perhaps we feel sorry for ministers, and for those who have been faithfully keeping the door of the church open in small and weak congregations. We are also rightly concerned for one another in various ways.

Yet we may be unwilling to really sorrow over the providence or feel the pain that the godly feel at the loss of the ordinances. Yes, we would like things to get back to normal and return to our comfortable existence around the public assemblies, but we have no real intention of changing the way we live or the way we approach God. We have no real intention of learning any lessons from what has happened. Indeed, we may be in danger of unlearning much and becoming harder rather than softer. We may become quite comfortable and 'at ease in Zion' without any of the songs of Zion and without even being in Zion's daughter's gates! This is a call to awaken from that sleepy attitude and to stir ourselves to the sorrow which we ought to have if we read our providence correctly.

3. The cause

The cause of Jeremiah's sorrow comes from his correct reading of providence. 'My sorrow, which is done unto me, wherewith the Lord hath afflicted me in the day of his fierce anger.'

Jeremiah had been sent to declare the message of the Lord in his warnings of judgement, and now he is seeing his warnings come to pass. He is now explaining that what the Lord had said he would do, he had indeed done. He is here reading the providence and explaining that the Lord was dealing with them very directly.

Are we learning to read our providence in that way? We are liable to say that we believe everything happens according to God's providence. We don't doubt that. But what is the Lord really saying to the church, and to us in particular? What is he saying to us personally in this providence—the providence of the ceasing of divine worship?

Often people read providence incorrectly

There may be times when the church reads providence incorrectly and concludes things that are not true. This can often be done by individual believers, when they conclude that in some difficulty or another the Lord has forsaken them and forgotten them altogether (Isaiah 40:27; Psalm 77:7-9).

Reading providence is not an easy thing for the Lord's people. It requires much prayerful and patient searching of the Scriptures to understand the Lord's ways and his doings towards his people found in the Bible. It is easy to come to wrong conclusions about what the Lord is saying to us in any particular providence.

It is even easier to make wrong conclusions regarding the providence of God towards others. This is what Job's three friends did, and they were reproved by God for it.

Jeremiah is reading providence correctly

Jeremiah gives a correct reading of divine providence. He was the Lord's prophet and he had expressly warned and prophesied that the destruction of Jerusalem and the captivity were going to happen. He had had to suffer for saying that, but he said it faithfully, and identified the true cause of it—the sins of the rulers, priests, prophets and people of Jerusalem and Judah.

We can be in no doubt then that the reasons he gives here in this Lamentation, after his words were verified and under the very providence he had predicted, are accurate, and that he is reading the providence of the church correctly. It was an affliction from the Lord in the day of his fierce anger (verse 12). The yoke of transgressions had been bound upon them by the hand of the Lord (verse 14). This was not melancholy and depression writing hard things against himself and the people with excessive grief. This was an honest and truthful presentation of what had happened and the reasons for it.

The true cause of sorrow is accurately identified as God's anger

Jeremiah's sorrow is caused by the knowledge he has of the Lord's fierce anger. '... the Lord hath afflicted me, in the day of his fierce anger.' However great his sorrow was about the external and outward calamities which had come on the church and people of God and on the city, now that the temple and the pleasant things they once enjoyed were removed, it was the Lord's anger in all of this which was the real source and cause of his deep sorrow. The mockery of the enemies, their triumph, the treachery of men, the cruelty of their oppressors—these were all things which brought great sorrow, but the real ingredient of the sorrow in them all was the Lord's anger towards him and the church.

It was no exaggeration or mistaken view of God's anger

Nor was this view of God's anger a mistaken reading of providence or an excessive and exaggerated description. It was indeed the fierce anger of the Lord, as promised and prophesied so often before. From the days of Moses, and in all the prophets, the Lord had warned the people that destruction and captivity would be the outcome if they persisted in rebellion. Jeremiah himself had been sent to declare it.

God may be angry even with his own people, and with his children whom he has adopted into his family, including Jeremiah and others involved in this captivity. Although God's children are delivered from the curse of God, they are not shielded from his displeasure and very sore chastening. He is angry with his people with a fatherly anger, which has more of sorrow in it than any other anger of God, but it is real anger and it is dreadful to his people. It is God's anger seen in the light of his mercy to them.

The Lord's anger is great reason for sorrow and deep humiliation before him

Some people are uncomfortable with the idea that God can ever be angry with his people. Yet the Lord's people are called to be sorrowful for their sin against God and particularly for their sin against his mercies in Christ.

All sin is against God who is holy. The fierce anger of God against the wicked will be to their eternal destruction unless they repent. His fierce anger against the sins of his people fell in a way of punishment upon the head of the man of sorrows—their surety and substitute. There is no sorrow like unto his sorrow which was done to him. The transgressions of his people were laid upon him and he was wounded for them, bruised for their iniquities.

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It is in looking upon him whom their sins have pierced (Zechariah 12:10) that true and godly sorrow for sin is brought into the experience of believers like Jeremiah. When they are considering their sins as they ought to, their sense of God's mercy towards them in Christ only adds to their sorrow for their sins against Christ, both past and present. It is often to bring these sins to remembrance and for deeper humiliation before him that the Lord gives his people tokens of his anger against sin.

Sorrow on account of God's anger can co-exist with joy in his salvation

Jeremiah in his sorrow was also able to say, 'The Lord is my portion, saith my soul, therefore will I hope in him.' (Lamentations 3:24) Lamentations 3 contains such large views of the Lord's mercy in the midst of all the sorrow! We should be drawn to it. It is the exercise of a greatly tried soul, but a believing soul, and one who enters into the holiest by the blood of Jesus.

May we be able to take up this same language ourselves. 'It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness... The Lord is good unto them that wait for him, to the soul that seeketh him. It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord.' (Lamentations 3:22-26) Dear friends, seek that salvation in Christ today.

Conclusion

The more we see of our sins against the love and kindness of God in Christ, the deeper our humiliation and sorrow for them will be. When we are surrounded by the tokens of the Lord's anger, may we be brought to such a sorrow for sin which works repentance

Is it nothing to you?

unto salvation, not to be repented of. May we not be left to the sorrow of the world, which worketh death. (2 Corinthians 7:10)

May the dark providence that hangs over us not be nothing to us. As those who are banished by providence from the precious assemblies of the Lord's house of prayer and praise, we are called to deep sorrow and humiliation for sin. Let us not allow the world and the things of the world to rob our souls of this response to our providence. Let us seek the spirit and language of Jeremiah the godly, weeping prophet, in these days.

May the Lord bless his Word to us.