



## Benefits Slighted in the Past

### *Jeremiah 8:20*

The prophet Jeremiah lived through the military defeat of his nation, Judah. Because he loved his country and cared for his people, a great part of his ministry was to compose laments as his fellow-countrymen died or were marched off into captivity in Babylon. He was the weeping prophet.

#### **Times and Seasons**

One subject of Jeremiah's mournful poem's was the failure of his people to recognize times and seasons. He moaned, *'The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved'* (Jer. 8:20). There can be no more important goal than receiving salvation from the just consequences of our sins: salvation from the wrath and curse of the Almighty. Salvation must come to nations, to churches, to families and to individuals, or each will fall under destructive judgment from God.

Often in Scripture salvation is depicted as a process. A sower goes out to scatter seed. Some seed falls into prepared soil and germinates under the heat of a warm sun and the watering of gentle rains. Under favourable conditions there is healthy growth. In due time plants bear fruit (multiples of the seed) – Luke 8:4-15. There comes *'first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear ... when the grain is ripe ... harvest has come'* (Mark 4:26-29).

Certain times are favourable for salvation. Sowers scatter seed in the springtime and early summer. They are not to be found in the colder months. Warm weather and rains also arrive in seasons of time. Harvest, gathering into the garner of God, occurs in a very limited time frame.

Gospel preachers are not always effective in a given nation or church. Opportunities to come under the advantages of persuasive preaching may be limited in particular churches. Advantages of hearing the Word by which saving faith comes may be limited for a family. Certainly individuals are not always exposed to the advantageous times of salvation.

For Israel the opportunities to be saved had been abundant, but now they were past, as Jeremiah mourned.

*'The harvest is past'* – the time in which the Lord harvested souls for his eternal kingdom. *'The summer is ended'* – no prophets and priests would sow the seed of eternal life now that the cold winds of judgment were blowing. Where seed had fallen but no faith had sprouted, no warm rays of the Holy Spirit or showers of divine grace would enliven them. The tragedy was that with the passing of the season of planting, growing and harvesting ... *'We are not saved.'*

In Jeremiah 8:4 God had rebuked the unique foolishness of the unsaved people of Judah. *'When men fall, do they not rise again?'* Everyone who stumbles and falls knows that he should pick himself up once more! *'If one turns away, does he not return?'* Those who leave their homes, the places to which they belong, do they not come back again? But Jeremiah's people who had fallen into sin and its damnation would not get up. They who had left the home of God would not return.

To emphasize the point, in Jeremiah 8:7 the prophet reminds perpetually backslidden Jews that even birds know instinctively the proper times to return to their places. Many migrating birds return on the exact day and hour each year. Yet intelligent men do *not* know that there are appointed seasons.

#### **Times of Opportunity to be Saved**

##### **1. The season of youth is gone**

*'Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come...'* (Eccles. 12:1-7). Some young people will say that there is too much to do in youth. Time cannot be taken to seek the Lord. There is plenty of time in which to be saved.

Alas, all too soon Christian parents who teach and exemplify God's Word of life will be gone. The tongues of parents and grandparents who pray for their young family members will be silenced in their graves. For many this season will end too soon. Moses tells us that the length of a human life is 70 or 80 years (for the fortunate). Life expectancy has not changed significantly in the last 3,500 years, has it? So by the time a 'youth' is twenty years of age a fourth of his life has been spent. The days ahead are apt to be more evil in toil, hardship, trials, sicknesses and other difficulties.

On will come wintertime for the soul. For a person who has left youth behind, it may be the end of the season when godliness surrounds him. Instead he might find himself living amongst those who ignore and mock God's Word. His ears would then be filled with cursing, and his social circles made up of those who are revelling in drunkenness and immoral ways. Left alone to make mistaken choices, the ugly, enslaving sins of alcohol excess, drug addiction, teen pregnancies and entanglement with wicked companions often cast a dragnet over those just beginning to emerge from youth.

## **2. The season of the Holy Spirit's working has passed**

John 3 tells us that when a person is born again it is because the Holy Spirit has blown upon his soul like a moving wind. This Spirit does not come and go at men's requests but only at the times of his sovereign choosing. Every gospel minister can tell you that the Holy Spirit does not always work in the same degree at all times!

There are seasons when the Holy Spirit breathes life into many hearts. He visits churches, communities and nations, attending God's word with divine power. The season may last for a week, a month, a few years, or even for a lifetime. However, these seasons always come to an end. The same sermons and evangelistic efforts are again sterile as at other times, and they bear little or no fruit. Ministers have learned that they are like farmers. When the grain is ripened by the Holy Spirit, God's servants must labour both day and night to bring in the harvest.

How tragic when a soul has witnessed and *felt* the powerful movings of God's Spirit, but eventually that summertime is ended, and he is not saved! His heart that once found it necessary to resist the Spirit forcefully is now calloused toward the gospel. He should have prayed:

*Pass me not, O gentle Saviour,  
Hear my humble cry:  
While on others thou art smiling,  
Do not pass me by!*

In his case he has been passed by.

## **3. The season given to a nation has come to an end**

One may hear of far-off nations where millions are coming to Christ. But it is an unfruitful season at home. Jesus once told the Jews, *'I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into outer darkness'* (Matt. 8:11-12). Today it may be the season for others and not for us. Multitudes are being swept into the kingdom in Asia and Africa, while the Holy Spirit withholds his necessary ministries from us. Entire nations may be cut off from the Spirit's operations because they have despised the Spirit too long.

Some pride themselves on being patriotic. They will serve their nations by supporting them and boasting of their national heritages. They will even volunteer for military service. However, have you ever considered that your first and greatest contribution to your nation is in bowing to Christ as Lord and receiving his saving mercies?

In an era much later than the one in which Jeremiah lived our Lord Jesus sent up a lament from the same city of Jerusalem. The last time our Saviour *'drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying ... "The days will come upon you, when your enemies will ... tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you ... because you did not know the time of your visitation"* (Luke 19:41-44).

Christ visited Jerusalem for 'a time'. Ignorance of and refusal by most individuals to receive him in the appointed time sealed the doom of Israel which has not yet been reversed (after two thousand years). Why do individuals expect God to be more patient with their nations than he was with the children of Abraham?

Do you know the time of Christ's visitation to you through your having been placed in homes and churches where the Word was declared and where the Spirit was at work? Do you realize how difficult it is to recover such advantages now past? You say, 'I did not know!' That did not delay national disaster for Israel.

Do you know that *'the times of the Gentiles'* will be fulfilled or will come to an end as did *'the time of Christ's visitation'* to the Jews? It is foretold by Christ in Luke 21:20-24. Alas, then, for our nations!

Jeremiah uttered his phrase with deep remorse. *'The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.'* He was part of the nation whom God had saved from enemies and natural disasters through a millennium. But the blessings upon Israel were related to the religious response of its people. Now the chapter of harvest would close. In a few short months the nation would fall to her violent enemies. Its population would be scattered to the ends of the earth. For so many years God had given all his prophets to this one nation. They had the only acceptable temple. They had a society arranged by the Ten Commandments. But all of these advantages had been despised. Soon the cries of war would engulf them.

Many of us live in lands where tens of thousands once travelled far to hear God's Words. We have enjoyed churches and schools established by Reformers and Puritans. We have lived where Calvinism and biblical standards formerly ruled the thought of the land. What deplorable changes have come! The means of grace have been despised and squandered. As nations we are not saved.

### **Recognition Should Bring Regret**

We tend to think seriously about the passage of time on only a few exceptional occasions. When a friend or loved one dies it occurs to us that this lifetime is very short. When we experience a life-changing injury or disease it is impressed on us that certain opportunities will never return to us. But – even at the turn of a calendar year it ought to occur to us that so few days remain. Should it not be a time to reflect on the great opportunities we once brushed aside? As we feel the bitterness of harvests past in which we had no part, or of summers ended which brought us no salvation, should we not resolve to use the little time that remains to lay hold of eternal life? Should we not strive to enter in at the narrow gate?

What if the nation is so far from God? What if the churches are so neglectful of God's Word and so impoverished with the Holy Spirit's absence? Can we not confidently say, *'Behold, now is the favourable time; behold, now is the day of salvation!'* (2 Cor. 6:2). Till Christ comes it *is* a day of grace, however little I see. I see others around me using it as such. God *has* promised to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him (Luke 11:12-13). All who have ever entered the kingdom of God have had to be urged, *'Save yourselves from this crooked generation'* (Acts 2:40).

We *must* *'seek the Lord while he may be found'* (Isa. 55:6). The full closing of the favourable time will be when Jesus returns to this earth. But, *'Today, if you will hear his voice, harden not your hearts'* (Psa. 95:7b-8a). Do not be like those described in Proverbs 29:1: *'He who is often reprov'd, yet stiffens his neck, will suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.'*

Do not be like *'the man who died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment'* begged for relief. He was told that in his *'lifetime'* he had received good things, but now *'a great chasm has been fixed'* between the comforted and the suffering. None may cross the chasm in either direction. In his *'lifetime'* the great advantage had been his having Moses and the prophets. Likewise *now* the favourable time consists in having the means of God's Word to prepare for eternity. You despise and ignore this means at your own peril.

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