

Dear Christians striving to listen closely to the Lord:

We live in a world filled with warning signs. It might be an ordinary “yield” sign at an intersection or a heart-stopping siren announcing a tornado is in the area. It might be the furrowed-brow glare of a parent toward a misbehaving child or a sudden pain in the upper chest area. Whatever the warning signs, they are meant to be heeded. You can put a gate at a railroad crossing, but it does little good if people drive around it. You can have the best physicians warn us about a spreading virus, but it does little good if we don’t listen to them out of love for our neighbor.

We look at the words of Isaiah the prophet. Are they not a stark warning? ***"Hear, you deaf; look, you blind, and see!... You have seen many things, but have paid no attention; your ears are open, but you hear nothing."*** Our first thought might be that God’s talking to the pagan nations: the Amorites, Amalekites, Edomites, Moabites, and all the other “ites” around Israel who opposed God. After all, he does frequently warn them. But that’s not the case here. God is warning his own people! He’s saying to them, and therefore to us: ***"Look and See! Hear and Listen!"***

(1) *God has shown and told us so much,* (2) *Don’t become blind and deaf to it.*

1

If ever people had clear evidence of the grace and favor of God, it was the OT Israelites. God says to them, ***"You have seen many things!"*** Just think of the wonders they had seen during their nation’s history -- the power of God to lead them out of Egypt through the Red Sea and across the Jordan; the miracle food of manna and quail; the ability to defeat enemies of incredible size like Goliath; Gideon scattering the Midianite army ***"thick as locusts"*** with only 300 men armed with torches and clay jars; the sun stopping in its course for a whole day while Joshua pursued and routed 5 Amorite armies. Yes, they had seen so much in their history how God loved them so much!

And, of course, the greatest thing they’d heard was the promise of a Messiah who would one day arrive in this world to bring forgiveness and give them an eternity of God’s love. They were blessed and doubly blessed!

But yet God said, ***"You have seen many things, but have paid no attention."*** They paid no attention to God’s love and God’s Word. Like spoiled brats, they went off and did their own thing.

God calls them ***"deaf"*** and ***"blind."*** ***"Who is blind but my servant, and deaf like the messenger I send? Who is blind like the one committed to me, blind like the servant of the LORD?"*** There can be no one blinder than the one who has seen but now refuses to see; no one deafer than the one who has heard but now refuses to listen! God showed them his power, his providence, and his forgiving love -- but they had become stubbornly blind and deaf to it all.

2

These are strong words God uses through Isaiah. Nowadays people call it “fire and brimstone” when God issues warnings. We don’t like to hear God’s warnings because they hit close to home. They hurt because it’s like trying to pull a dandelion out by the roots. Sin is deeply anchored in our hearts. But we are wrong when we call God’s *warnings* “fire and brimstone.” No, the “fire and brimstone” come after people don’t heed the warnings that God lovingly gives us!

If your child runs out into the street without looking out for traffic, is it loveless to warn them or even discipline them if they don’t listen? I did that once when I was in grade school -- ran right into the street without looking. My dad saw it and made me write a 100 times: *"I will not cross the street without looking both ways."* Man, that was drudgery. I didn’t want to do that! I could have been playing ball or catching frogs at the creek, or doing 100 other things rather than writing a sentence a 100 times. But Dad’s point was: *"Now you’ll live long enough to play ball and catch frogs."* Obviously it worked. Do I despise my father for what he did? No, he cared enough to warn me. This is what God

says about that in Hebrews: ***“We have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it”*** (Heb. 12:9, 11).

God is our very loving Father, so he warns us too. I don't think anybody here would deny the fact that we all stray from God's Word (in other words, we are sinners) and need to have some spiritual cold water splashed in our face to wake us up from our sinful stupor once in a while. (This penitential season of Lent is an especially good time to carefully consider God's warnings and why it's important to heed them.)

Israel's blindness and deafness toward God's Word is often mentioned in the OT. Are we sometimes blind and deaf to his Word as well?

The answer, of course, is yes, we are. Sometimes we are slow to hear the Word of God. Even in Christian churches that are growing, most of them are experiencing a downturn in attendance over the past decade. Other things are becoming our priority. I don't think I have to list them. We all know. And even though churches are trying to schedule worship times all over the calendar to accommodate folks, what God would consider faithful attendance is still a struggle for the most blessed people on earth: *Christians*.

I think one of the most instructive passages in the whole Bible on this topic is found in Luke (4:16). It's a simple little passage about Jesus that often goes unnoticed: ***“He [Jesus] went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom.”*** Did you catch that? It was Jesus' ***“custom”*** to worship weekly. We're not talking about any Joe and Sue in the pew. We're talking about God! God the Son chose to gather around and hear his own word regularly with his people. It was his priority. Should our priority be any different?

Oh, I totally understand that sometimes we can't worship. We have vulnerable members who would love to be here today but can't be because of their health situations. More importantly, God understands. But it's when we ***don't feel*** like worshiping that we should really be concerned. Can you imagine Jesus saying, *“Oh, I don't feel like going to the cross. I'm too tired. It's too early. The weather is too chilly. It's just not that important.”* No. Jesus made no “creature comfort” excuses. He didn't operate on feelings, but actions of love for others. Our eternities hung in the balance.

And then, when we do hear God's Word, including his warnings, do we heed them? Israel's backsliding started, I'm sure, with little things. They weren't immediately ***“blind”*** or ***“deaf.”*** It just kind of creeps up on us. E.g., the kind of movies we watch, or allow our children to watch, has that slid in a more permissive direction over the past decades? The way we express ourselves about others, the use of gossip and rumors, has that changed in this age of social media? The line just keeps getting pushed further and further. What a horror if God would say to us as he said to Israel, ***“Who is blind like the one committed to me.... Your ears are open but you hear nothing.”***

We are blessed when God warns us, fellow Christians. It means he cares about us. That makes us happy. And what makes him happy is when we, his children saved by grace alone, heed his warnings. He wants nothing but the best for his children. That's why he gave the best for our salvation: his own Son, Jesus Christ

Amen.