

Christ and Covid-19

A Gentle Wakeup Call

Covid 19, our current world wide virus, is a gentle wakeup call from God. We like to be in control, and when life is predictable, we feel like we are in control. This plague tells everyone in the whole world that we are not in control.

This illness has interrupted and disturbed life in many ways, all over the world. We know that we are not in control, and we are working furiously to get back in control. But the most important response is to worship the One in control.

We want to feel safe, but we don't feel that safe. Too many things are different, and in upheaval. Sensible precautions are a good plan, and we will take them, but the best plan is to worship and serve the God who holds life and death in his hands, and who raises his people from the dead.

Most of us drive cars that have engine lights to warn us when there is trouble. I drive a pickup that does not have these, but most of us have with engine lights to tell us when something is wrong. God triggered the world's engine light, and it is staying on longer than we thought.

It is a gentle light, a gentle wakeup call. About 1% of the people who get this virus die, and most of those are elderly and weak. That's why I say it is gentle. Most of the people who die from this have already had a long time to decide whether or not they will serve God. For most who die, this is not their first warning.

There are illnesses, for example, that kill a lot more than 1 or 2%. And there are illnesses that attack children. Suppose this virus took the life of 30% of the people that got it, and it was hardest on people in the *first* five years of their life, not in the *last* five. That would not be gentle. And there are illnesses like that. So this is a gentle call from God.

Where the World is Heading

We need to remember what kind of world we live in. We live in a world that on the whole has decided to ignore God. Because of this, human history as we know it will end with an outpouring of God's wrath. No one likes to hear this, but the Bible leaves no doubt.

Jesus said his return would be like the end of Sodom and Gomorrah. Life was going on as usual, then God protected his people and the rest died in fire and brimstone. Jesus said his return would be like the flood in Noah's time. Life was going on a usual. God protected his people, and the rest died in the flood. Jesus said that's how the return of the Son of Man would be. (Luke 17)

Paul tells the Thessalonian believers that they turned from idols to serve the living God and to wait for Jesus, who saves us from the coming wrath. The apostle Peter writes the coming wrath, and so does John of Zebedee, and also Hebrews. But mostly Jesus.

Most days I don't like this any better than you do, but in the Bible there is no ambiguity. So I say, this is a gentle wake up call to the whole world, to tell the world that what we're doing is not working, and that we are not safe.

1 Thessalonians 1 tells us that we wait for Jesus, who saves us from the coming wrath. Chapter 5 says God did not appoint *us* to suffer wrath, but to receive salvation through Jesus Christ. The world is moving toward wrath, and we are moving toward salvation. "So encourage one another with these words," he says, "just as you are doing." (1 Th 1:9-10; 5:9-10)

In Revelation, when God sent plagues, people suffered, but they refused to repent and turn to God. That's what God hopes for. But they just get angrier at God. We'll see if this works better.

Covid 19 is the kind of event that reminds the Lord's people of how the world will end, and tries to remind the world also. That does not mean anything special about the present time. The last days began with the coming of Christ and the coming of the Spirit, and this kind of warning has been happening all along. (Acts 2:17; Heb 1:2; 1 Jn 2:18)

We usually think human history will go on and on as normal, and this is a an awkward interruption, and then we'll get back to normal. That is not how the Bible views these things. In the Bible, this is a little taste of the Great Disaster to come.

Believers do not need to fear this at all. We have turned to God, to serve him, and wait for Jesus, who saves us from the coming wrath. We're going to be fine. That's why we came to Jesus, because he will rescue us at that time. No problem. Remember the world we live in.

The Church is being Pruned

In John 15, Jesus compared his Father to a gardener who prunes a grape vine so it will bear more fruit. Pruning means a gardener cuts off unnecessary branches so that the good vine will bear more grapes. Almost all fruit trees get pruned, and other plants from which we take a harvest.

When Jesus talks about pruning his followers, he means that the Father sends things to us that are unpleasant and painful, like branches being cut off a tree. But the Father does this when the plant is already healthy and fruitful, so it will produce even more. This virus prunes the church.

It is suddenly harder for believers to remember what our real call is. We get distracted, and lose sight of what was clear. Jesus told the story of the sower and the seed, and there were thorns and thistles that choked the plant. The thorns and thistles include the cares of life, the worries of life.

The cares of this life choke off real spiritual growth. We shrivel up and produce nothing. They do this simply by distracting us. And now, my brothers and sisters, covid 19 boosted the cares of life way up. The distractions that take us away from following the Lord have gotten intense.

So, our call has not changed: to love God, and trust God completely, make God our refuge and our Helper, and to serve him, which we do above all by paying attention to one another, taking care of one another, staying connected as we are able to connect with each other. And, as much as it depends on us, to live at peace with everyone.

Do we Face Evil Human Powers?

Some of us are convinced that dark human powers are behind this, either behind the virus itself, or behind the restrictions that isolate us from each other.

I doubt this. Covid 19 is a plague. God has been sending famines and plagues and pestilences since the beginning of time. He sends natural disasters, floods and famines and earthquakes and hurricanes and tsunamis. In the Bible, God has done this all along, to remind us that we're not in control, and that we should submit to the Creator.

This virus right now has flared up all over, particularly in Manitoba. As a result, govt restrictions are getting more and more intense. This convinces some that the gov't has dangerous motives.

This virus hits the weak and elderly the hardest, and quite a few of them have died. And this virus is unusually contagious. It spreads easily. So the govt restricts what the young and healthy can do, in order to protect the weak and the aged. The govts restricts what the young and the healthy can do, in order to protect the weak and the aged.

That is not an evil agenda. That is actually just what God hopes for from govt. That's why God set up govt in the first place. This virus is spreading, increasing, so the rules get stricter. People, this does not make govt evil.

I don't like being told what to do. None of us like that. We are not used to be told what to do like this, and we're being told that now. We are tired of it, and frustrated. That all makes sense. But our govt is not used to making rules like this, either. They are trying to mangle something that feels nearly out of control. They are trying to bring order back, just what God intends of them.

I have sympathy for leaders in this. We the Elders repeatedly, since March, have had to decide how our church will or will not meet. It has been exhausting. Every time, we have been more careful than some of you thought necessary, and not as careful as others of you thought necessary. And we have not easily agreed among ourselves.

So the medical leaders are telling the govt what's happening and how the virus works, and the govt tries to make rules that put the brakes on the virus while basic life keeps going.

So we don't like the restrictions, that's for sure, and sometimes the govt feels clumsy and mistaken to us. Of course. I'm sure we the elders have looked like that too, and still do. I have grumbled about the restrictions, that is for sure. But I don't think that's right.

God and Government

Let's assume for now that evil human forces are behind this, either behind the virus in the first place, or behind the restrictions that are happening. The Bible is clear about all human leaders.

Jeremiah 27:5-8 - This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "With my great power and outstretched arm I made the earth and its people and the animals that are on it, and I give it to anyone I please. Now I will give all your countries into the hands of my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; I will make even the wild animals subject to him. All nations will serve him and his son and his grandson until the time for his land comes; then many nations and great kings will enslave him.

If, however, any nation or kingdom will not serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, or bow its neck under his yoke, I will punish that nation with the sword, famine and plague, declares the Lord, until I destroy it by his hand. So do not listen to your prophets."

Daniel 4:17 - The Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth, and gives them to anyone he wishes, and sets over them the lowliest of people. V25 Seven years will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth, and gives them to anyone he wishes. V35 The Most High does as he pleases with the powers of heaven, and the peoples of the earth. 5:21 - The Most High God is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth, and sets over them anyone he wishes.

Jesus said at the end of Matthew: *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*

Revelation 1:5: Grace and peace to you from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

God is profoundly political. God is not simply greater than human powers. God actively picks all human leaders. God does not ignore human leaders, and he does not wait to see who will win the election, or the battle. God picks the leader, and that person wins the election and the battle. Sometimes, Daniel said, God is pleased to set over them the lowliest of people.

So we are dealing with God, either way. If covid 19 has no human source, or if it is from evil humans, if gov'ts are friendly, or if they are hostile, it makes no difference. We are dealing with God in every case, because he tells us clearly that he sets over us whom he pleases.

It says in Revelation 12 that the beast "was given" authority over every tribe, people, tongue, and nation. This "was given" to him. Who gave him that? The Most High God, just like in Daniel.

John of Revelation knows Daniel very well. The beast gets his authority from God, just like every other human leader.

Whom Shall we Fear?

Isaiah 8 was written at a time when rumors and fears in Judah were going wild. Isaiah 7 says the hearts of the king and of his people were shaking as the trees of the forest shake in the wind. Everyone was terrified, because enemies were plotting to destroy Judah, or so they all thought.

In Isaiah 8, God takes Isaiah aside and warns him privately (vv11-13) *This is what the Lord says to me with his strong hand upon me, warning me not to follow the way of this people: "Do not call conspiracy everything this people calls a conspiracy; do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it. Make the Lord Almighty your Holy One, let him be your fear, let him be your dread."*

God put a strong hand on Isaiah, and warned him not to be afraid like the rest, do not follow their way. Here's our choice. We can fret about human fears and conspiracies, or we can make the Lord Almighty our Holy One. If we fret about human fears and conspiracies, human kings and powers, we are not making the Lord Almighty our Holy One. We must pick.

This is God's strong hand of warning on the prophet himself. "Don't you be like them. I'm the Lord Almighty, or I'm not." And we choose by what we fear.

Romans 13:1 *Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.* The authorities that exist were established by God. Sounds just like Jeremiah and Daniel.

In the following verses, Paul writes, *The one in authority is God's servant... They are God's servants... The authorities are God's servants.* (13:4 [2x], 6). God called Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, "my servant Nebuchadnezzar."

So we obey, because we fear God alone, and our God says he established all the authorities, and he wants his children to submit to them.

Paul had been persecuted by every level of Jewish and Roman government. But he's still completely clear on this. Even when gov'ts have their dark side, God established them.

Paul writes at length on this only to the church in Rome. It seems that the church in Rome despised the govt, and felt free to ignore it. Rome was the ruling city of the world at that time, another Babylon. That was not God's way, and Paul writes clearly about this.

If the beast itself posts a new speed limit, that will be our speed limit, because Jesus is our Lord. If the beast itself raises taxes, we will pay taxes, because Jesus is our Lord.

If the beast says to worship him, we won't; if he says to deny Christ, we won't, because Jesus is our Lord. But we will keep his speed limit, and we will pay his taxes.

This all is why the most important thing is to serve God, worship him, and live in his ways. Because no matter how we understand the details, he's ruling all of it, the illness and the different responses.

And we will not fear the beast, or worry about him. We will not follow the way of the people, or listen to their prophets. We will make God Almighty our Holy One, he will be our fear and our dread. And we will remember that Jesus saves us from the coming wrath, and we will give thanks to God. God destined us for salvation through Christ, and that's where this all leads.

Jesus is coming back.

This is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent means coming, and in Advent we remember both comings, the first coming of our Lord, which already happened, and his second coming, when we finally get to see the Lord and be with him.

And when he comes back, he will rule over everything that gives us trouble. He will be our government (Isa 9): *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.*

Let's pray that what God wants to get done with covid 19 will happen, that his Spirit see it done. Pray that people in the world will see the God who hopes to get their attention, and they will turn to God. Pray that God's people will not fall away, but be purified and strengthened.

This virus strains our church unity in different ways. We have different ways of understanding it, and responding to it. And it is much harder than before to connect with each other at all. But the bond that the Spirit made between us is very strong. Let's resolve to guard it. And since we know that this is from God, we know that we can still live in his ways, and please him.

So let's be gracious with each other, and give each other lots of room to be different. Let's serve each other, and take care of each other as we are able.

Our unity rests on 7 pillars. This is from Eph 4. There is one body, and one Spirit. There is one baptism, and one Lord. There is one faith, and one hope. And there is one God and Father, who is over all, and through all, and in all. That's what binds us together.

So we will celebrate those, and thank God for those, and after that be very different from each other, and we will know that God enjoys the differences. And in the world, as much as we can, we will live at peace with all people. Amen.

PRAYER: Oh Lord Jesus, may we your people be a credit to you. We'd like to make you look good. You say that we are the light of the world, a city set on a hill which cannot be hidden. People should see how we live and glorify your Father. We want to bring glory to him, and to you. We'd like to show the world what you are like. I'm sure that in some ways we are doing that, but in others we are probably not.

God, Ps 25 says that because you are good and upright, you teach sinners in your ways, and guide the humble in what is right. We are sinners. Teach us your ways, and guide us all in what is right.

And God, these isolation restrictions are very hard on some of us. Have mercy on us, have mercy on those can hardly stand how much they have to be alone. It is very difficult for them. Hear their prayers, and open your heart to their distress. Hold them fast with your strong right hand. Amen.

(response time)

BENEDICTION: This is from Psalm 20.
May the Lord answer you when you are in distress;
 may the name of the God of Jacob protect you.
May he send you help from the sanctuary
 and grant you support from his temple.
May he remember all your sacrifices
 and accept your offerings.
May we shout for joy over your victory;
May the Lord grant all your requests. Amen.

Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.