

# The World Upside-Down, 1

## *How Should the Church Respond to the Coronavirus?*

Well, Summit family, clearly these are unusual days. As you heard, we're going to continue to gather each weekend, like this, worshipping together digitally until we can come together again in person.

For obvious reasons, we're going to interrupt our weekend plans--finishing up our Forever Family series and then jumping into Nehemiah. Instead we're going to spend a few weeks asking how the church should respond in an extraordinary moment like this one.

We're calling the series The World Upside-Down, because right now, recent events have challenged much of what we thought was certain.

In the midst of uncertainty and fear, I want to show you we have a special role, one God will make us sufficient for. The early church's commitment to the gospel in times like these that others said of them, "These men and women have turned the world upside down" (cf. Acts 17:6). In these upside-down times, the gospel can shine more brightly than ever.

I'm going to kick this series off in Matthew 24, where Jesus talks about how crises like this one will characterize the last days.

<sup>3</sup>As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" <sup>6</sup>You will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. <sup>7</sup>For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines (and pestilences) and earthquakes in various places. <sup>8</sup>All these are but the beginning of the birth pains."

Now, let me be clear right up front—I'm not saying that this is some kind of divine sign that Jesus' return is right around the corner and we should all go huddle up around the mountaintop and wait for him. Far from it. Jesus told his disciples that it was not for them to know the times or the seasons, nor the day and hour of his return.

What Jesus indicates here is that God uses things like this to wake the world up to the fragility of life and to the reality of divine judgment. They rock our foundations. These are like birth pains, he said. Birth pains can't tell you the exact moment of new birth, but they indicate that the time is getting shorter and a new reality is coming. As the time of judgment draws near, we can expect things like this only to increase.

So, we are wise to hear in these things a divine warning God is giving to people on earth: The world we live in is temporary. All your foundations are faulty.

- This has been humbling, has it not? When I first heard about COVID-19, I thought this would go in the category of "near misses" I've grown accustomed to. You hear about an asteroid that comes close to earth,

but it always seems to miss and life goes on. Or you hear about epidemics in other countries and think, "Our medical system can keep us safe." Or natural disasters in other places that don't directly affect us.

- But think now about how something that none of us can even see; something that a month ago none of us were worried about has brought our nation to a screeching halt.
- Even if the reality ends up not being as bad as some of the predictions, how quickly and easily our whole nation has shut down shows us just how fragile we are.
- Many say that regardless of what happens with the medical care of this virus, the economic impacts of this shutdown are going to be staggering.
- Throughout Scripture, we see that God repeatedly uses things like this to wake people up.
  - For Jacob, God brought him to his knees through a desperate fear for his personal safety
  - With Moses, he found God through the loss of his career and the breakup of his family he experienced when he was driven out of Egypt into the wilderness
  - For the mighty Syrian general, Naaman, it was a health scare--being diagnosed with leprosy-- that brought him to safety
  - For Nebuchadnezzar, it was the loss of his job and loss of his sanity
- In all these cases, we have God putting themselves flat on their backs, we love to say, so that they would finally look the right direction. God was saying, WAKE UP! Do you realize how fragile life is, and how helpless you will be if you stand unprepared before the judgment of God?
- **Is God doing saying that to our nation now? To you?**
- **Let me ask: What happens when your foundation gives way?** What do you turn to tell yourself it's ok? Family. Health. A country with great prosperity, state of the art medical care, and strong national defense?
- It's all a faulty foundation! Everything outside of Christ is sinking sand.
- **Ps 90:12.** Only by reflecting on the fragility of life will I ever develop the right perspective on life. Count your days, Moses said, so you'll know how to make your days count!

**The second thing Jesus tells us to do in this passage is to avoid false hopes, because many will be offered:**

**<sup>11</sup>And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray.**

- Democrats will say that if they are in charge, it would be better. Republicans will say the opposite.
- We'll revisit the medical systems. Develop vaccines. Review protocols for early containment.
- Business will resolve to save more. To move more of their businesses online.
- And most of these are appropriate.
- But ultimately, all earthly solutions will fail! In the final analysis, all of it is sinking sand.
- Nothing can deliver us from the sentence of death we're all ultimately under. For a few of us, death may be a long way off, and we may die pleasantly, surrounded by friends and family. But for the majority of us it will be sudden and unpleasant.
- Jonathan Edwards said: **Unconverted men walk over the pit of hell on a rotten covering. And there are innumerable places in this covering so weak that they will not bear their weight--and we can't even see these places!**
- It is foolish to live your life as if death was not certain and we won't face judgment.

**<sup>13</sup>But the one who endures to the end will be saved.**

- The one who endures is the one who sets their hope on Christ and keeps it there regardless of what is going on.
- Jesus told a story in Matthew 7 about 2 men... Sand = anything else.
- Is that where yours is?
- Why don't we stop and proclaim and worship? There's a song we love to sing: My hope is built on nothing less... On Christ the solid rock I stand; all other ground is sinking sand.
- For many of you, it can be a time of rejoicing, that you have a foundation better than anything else life could give and that death cannot take away.

- For others of you, it could be a time to make a new declaration--that from this point forward you are going to make Christ your foundation.
- Join our worship team as we proclaim this, and then let's spend a few minutes just proclaiming this as families!

**Song:** *On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand!*

Lastly, I want you to see in this text a divine **opportunity**. **Notice vs. 14:** <sup>14</sup> **And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.** On the heels of disastrous events, the gospel has unprecedented opportunity! When God has done the work of shaking their foundations, many are ready to look to him, so we have to use this opportunity to point them to Christ.

So, Summit, let me use all this to encourage you toward a few practical things:

First, very practical: **I. Heed wise counsel**

- This is not a time for carelessness or bravado. Nor is it a time for panic.
- We all have a natural bias--some of us gravitate toward worst case scenarios and doomsday prophecies and overreact. Others tend to brush aside reports as hysteria or some kind of mainstream media political agenda. It's probably wisest to know our bias, avoid extremes, and listen to counsel.
- My encouragement to you is to avoid online extremists, particularly those that pander to your bias. We know social media isn't helping that much. It's ironic that in an age of unprecedented access to information that during a crisis social media does more to spread disinformation and hysteria.
- Our disposition as a church, at this point, is to defer to the CDC and our government, neither getting way far ahead of them nor lagging behind. We believe this is why God gave us governing officials, and we're going to follow them.
- And let me say something to those of you who feel young and invulnerable, since I know that many of the reports we have heard have indicated that young people are not as much at risk as others. First, don't take anything for granted. There are plenty of stories of young healthy people developing serious complications, even dying, as a result of contracting this virus.
- Second, even if you are low-risk, you should take precautions for the sake of your neighbors. It's like a friend of mine said, *"I'm taking CDC instructions seriously, not because I'm afraid of getting it. I'm young, healthy, in Christ and have no fear about the future. I'm taking Covid-19 seriously because I'm afraid of distributing it."*
- Or, as another Christian leader put it, "Love, not fear, is the reason we should change our behavior."

**II. In this season, move forward in faith, not backwards in fear**

- The early church wasn't known for stockpiling ample food and ammunition for themselves or spreading fear on social media. Or, as I've heard said, Mother Teresa's legacy built on hoarding months of supplies for herself and then berating the poor of Calcutta on why they weren't as wise as she was.<sup>1</sup>
- Christian witnesses throughout history have been known for hope, faith, and self-sacrifice, *imitating a Savior who ran toward tragedy, not away from it.*
- This is a time of great opportunity for us. Rodney Stark tells the story of how the gospel saw unprecedented expansion in a time of plagues in the 1st Century:

In AD 165, while Marcus Aurelius was emperor, a plague struck the Roman Empire, and over a 15-year period, it killed nearly 33% of the population. At this time there were 45,000 Christians in existence, just 0.08

<sup>1</sup> <https://careynieuwhof.com/crisis-leadership-christian-leadership-and-the-corona-virus-epidemic/>

percent of the empire. Despite their numbers, their response to this pandemic won admiration and a greater following.

Dionysius, bishop of Corinth, reported: *Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy... Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead.*

This stood in stark contrast to those outside the church. Dionysius continues: *“But with non-Christians everything was quite otherwise. They deserted those who began to be sick, and fled from their dearest friends. They shunned any participation or fellowship with death; which yet, with all their precautions, it was not easy for them to escape.”*<sup>2</sup>

Stark even points out, in evident irony, that Christian death rates in many of these plagues were substantially lower. By nearly ½! Why? Some analysts also say it was because of their strong sense of community, their commitment to care for each other, and their robust hope in the face of death. In their willingness to embrace death, they found life.<sup>3</sup>

**Andy Crouch** explains this: *“[If you were a first-century Roman], after you had recovered from the plague, where would you want to worship? The pagan temple whose priests and elite benefactors had fled at the first sign of trouble? Or the household of the neighbor who had brought you food and water, care and concern, at great risk to themselves?*

*When this plague has passed, what will our neighbors remember of us? Will they remember that the Christians took immediate, decisive action to protect the vulnerable, even at great personal and organizational cost? Will they remember that, being prepared and free from panic, the households of their Christian neighbors were able to visit the needy (while protecting them by keeping appropriate social distance!), provide for their needs, and bring hope?”*<sup>4</sup>

This is when we can be at our best!

- Care for the elderly
- Care for the hourly worker: Share: 20% unemployed? Devastating
- Volunteer to do childcare for medical workers.
- Looking for ideas? Visit **summitchurch.com** and check out some of the donation and service opportunities

### III. Proclaim hope

I got this message from one of our team members earlier this week. *“While this situation is new, our calling has not changed. The gospel is still the most important message in the world, and we are still called upon to tell it. It is a gospel of love and faith, precisely what we need when society is filled with fear and uncertainty.”*

Your neighbors are scared. They are feeling hopeless. They are asking questions—about life and death and what happens after—that are usually hidden deep down. As believers, we have answers to those questions. God is up to something. We have to be faithful to be at our post pointing the way.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/4-lessons-church-history/>. Quoting from Eusebius, Eccl. Hist. 7.22.7–10.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/4-lessons-church-history/>

<sup>4</sup> Andy Crouch, “Love in the Time of Coronavirus,” <https://journal.praxislabs.org/love-in-the-time-of-coronavirus-26aaeb0396e3>

In just a few weeks, we are going to celebrate a holiday that has been at the center of Christianity for 2,000 years—Easter. There was never a more hopeless time, humanly speaking, than when the Son of God was in the grave. At that point, it seemed like the end. The disciples themselves were despairing. But Easter is a reminder: *He is risen!* And as sure as he walked out of the grave, he promises life to those of us living in the shadow of death.

**IV. Use this season to develop some good habits!** Our D-team has prepared a small group guide called Don't waste your quarantine . Family Devotions. Reading. Structured Days.

God does some of his greatest work in secret, mundane places. We're entering a sort of extended "Sabbath," when most of what we would normally doing we won't be able to do. Don't just make it through this time. Redeem this time. Don't waste your quarantine!

C.S. Lewis lived at a point in the 1960's when a lot of people were genuinely afraid we were going to be destroyed by nuclear weapons, and he was once asked how one could live without fear knowing that at any minute the world could be destroyed. He said, "Well, what I know is that all of us will die eventually, and for most of us it will be sudden and for many of us it will be unpleasant. We may not know when or how death will come, but we know it will come for all of us and it's very likely to be unexpected and unpleasant. And I know that sounds a bit morbid, but when you resolve yourself to that, you can start to use whatever amount of time you have--whether it's 6 months or 60 years, to embrace life and capitalize on whatever opportunities God has put in front of you. Our main question should not be when and how we'll die, but how we'll live when we are alive.

Summit: God is up to something. He's one the move--maybe more now than many of us have seen him. He's leading us in new ways. Let's go forward with great expectation as we follow him in this season.

So, why don't we take just a little bit more time to worship and pray for the safety of our neighbors and our witness in this time!