

Good evening,

On a typical Wednesday evening some of us would be together for our regularly scheduled service. Right now, very few things in our world seem typical or regular. For tonight, I am going to share a few thoughts with you in writing.

Each of the past several mornings I've had the same surreal experience while waking up. Initially, I am upset to hear the sound of my alarm. When that feeling wears off, I begin to get excited about getting up and enjoying a new day. Then I remember that I've got nowhere to go. Covid-19 is here and we're staying home.

All of us are being affected by this in one way or another. Many, perhaps all of us, are wondering how we'll survive physically, financially and emotionally if this drags out for very long. These concerns can significantly challenge us spiritually as well.

It is unnecessary for me to share anything with you about the virus, the economy or the decisions currently being made by political leaders. Information on those matters is everywhere. What I do feel is necessary is to offer some spiritual encouragement that can help us as we walk through these difficult days.

Tonight, I am sure there are prayers being offered from around the world, begging God to step in. Believers, and probably many non-believers, are calling out to Him to fix everything, to stop the virus, to take away the pain, the confusion, the fear and to restore some sense of stability. Perhaps we've all recently prayed in the same manner and there is certainly reason to pray that way.

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Romans 5:3-5

Those type of prayers have been presented to God through the ages, in times of suffering. I have thought of the Biblical stories of Job and Habakkuk this week. Specifically, I've thought of the kinds of questions that they had for God in the midst of suffering. We're familiar with the same questions. Why God? How long? Have you had those questions lately? Being honest, I have.

I don't have any idea when all of this will end. I don't know when life will return to normal, or if it ever will. What I do know is that there is an opportunity for us in this season, that we will miss if we quit talking to God and don't look to Him in trust and in faith.

This may not sound like an exciting opportunity but it is a rare moment in history for all of us who call ourselves Christians to be radically changed and to learn what it means to experience peace that surpasses understanding, even in the midst of suffering. This is a moment when the church can truly experience what it is to stand on something unshakeable when the whole world seems to be trembling.

Suffering changes everyone. We will all be changed by this. We must make some decisions, both now and in the days ahead, about how we will allow these circumstances to change us.

Consider what the Apostle Paul had to say to the Romans.

"We rejoice in hope of the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" **Romans 5:3-5**

I do not pretend to know God's will as it relates to the virus or the economy. However, it is plain to me that God's will for us is grow when we experience suffering. He wants to use these seasons to produce endurance, character and hope as the Holy Spirit make His love known to us. Since all of that is true, we can have joy and suffering simultaneously. This is because we believe that, in such seasons of life, God is at work to produce good things in us that we could not produce ourselves. This leads us to hope that won't put us to shame.

I mentioned that we have some decisions to make in all of this. While Paul's teaching encourages us to rejoice in the fact that God is at work in us, producing good things as we experience suffering, there is another option. Unfortunately, it is an option that produces additional loss.

In times of great adversity, some choose to respond in rebellion and anger toward God. They become bitter with God for not stepping in and changing the situation immediately. Ultimately this steals their hope and their faith diminishes or fails.

As you think and pray in the days ahead, I want to encourage you to approach God with this in mind. He is causing all things to work together for your good. He loves you. Scripture declares that to be true. The Cross of our savior is the sign of that love and the Holy Spirit makes it known to us.

If you pray with all of that in mind, your hope won't be wrapped up in a specific outcome to the situations we are all facing. That's a dangerous way to pray and one that can quickly lead to despair. You can pray for outcomes. You can call out to God and make petitions to Him. I would just encourage you to not have your hope in God be dependent on Him doing things exactly the way you want.

If your hope is in God, whom you know loves you and is using all things for your good and is even able to produce good things in you in times of suffering, your faith will not be easily shaken. Instead, your faith will be strengthened. As we endure with Christ and find him sufficient, the stronger our faith becomes.

Endurance produces character. In the days to come our character should be changing in many ways. As the Lord works within us, He will humble us and soften our hearts. I suspect we will all come out of this with a greater sense of the value of people over things. This will force us all to focus on what's truly important in life.

Perhaps this will all make us more loving, joyful, peaceful, kind, good, faithful, gentle and self-controlled. I believe that God wants to do all of that in us and the season we're in is the perfect season for Him to produce such things in us as we trust in Him and stand in faith.

You are loved.

Tony