

The Church's Response To The Coronavirus

Matthew 24

The World's Turned Upside Down #1

Weekend of March 21-22, 2020



Introduction

Last week, we spent some time in 1 Peter as we looked at how we are to respond in times of suffering and trials. This week, we find ourselves facing a shelter in place order... some of us are working from home while others are not working at all. Clearly these are unusual days. As you heard, we're going to continue to gather in digital formats until the day comes where we can gather in person again. For obvious reasons, we're going to interrupt all planned sermon series and spend a few weeks talking about how the church should respond in an extraordinary moment like this one.

We're calling this series, The World's Turned Upside Down. Truthfully, I had planned on us continuing a walk through 1 Peter, but I felt this season required us to specifically address the challenges before us. 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**" (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...

Bible Study

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?" And Jesus answered them, "See that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray. And 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. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of the birth pains. Matthew 24:3-8

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 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."**

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? 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.

As Moses says in Psalm 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!**

Look at this statement from Jesus,, **And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. Matthew 24:11**

Here is the second idea from this passage... **Jesus tells us to avoid false hopes, because many will be offered.**

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.

Ultimately, all earthly solutions will fail! In the final analysis, all of it is sinking sand. The Puritan preacher 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. Look at what Jesus says in verse 13... **But the one who endures to the end will be saved. Matthew 24:13**

The one who endures is the one who sets their hope on Christ and keeps it there regardless of what is going on.

In Matthew 7, Jesus tells the story of two men who built houses on **two different foundations. In the wise and foolish builders, Christ describes two categories in illustrating the building of a house.** Both houses appear equally attractive and substantial, but their comparative stability differs greatly. In their construction, the materials and labor used were similar, and both houses appeared upright, solid, and sound. **Many times, seemingly good people who are uncalled seem to build their lives well and wisely in terms of money, material possessions, and friends. All these things seem good to the human mind, but their end can be disastrous without a Rock foundation (James 3:13-17).** The elect of God build their houses differently, by daily obedience (Psalm 111:10), service, overcoming, Bible study, and prayer.

What is your foundation? Is it on the systems of this world or on the solid Rock of Christ? This passage also provides us a divine opportunity. Look at these words...

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. Matthew 24:14

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.

Let me use all this to encourage you toward a few practical things...

Application

Here is the first application...**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.

In this season, don't take anything for granted. Second, even if you are low-risk, you should take precautions for the sake of your neighbors. Or, as another Christian leader put it, **"Love, not fear, is the reason we should change our behavior."** Here is a second idea...

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. Christian witnesses throughout history have been known for hope, faith, and self-sacrifice, imitating a Savior who ran toward tragedy, not away from it.

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 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."

Here is an interesting fact... Christian death rates in many of these plagues were substantially lower. By nearly 2/3! 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.

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?"

This is when we can be at our best!

- Care for the elderly
- Care for the hourly worker

- **Volunteer to do childcare for medical workers.**
- **Looking for ideas? Visit ourgraceplace.org and check out some of the donation and service opportunities.**

Here is the next idea that prompts us to move to action...

Proclaim hope: 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.

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.** Here is the last idea...

Use this season to develop some good habits!: Get in the word. Increase your time in prayer. Reach out to your neighbors. BE THE CHURCH!

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 do 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."**

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.