



Volume 7 Issue 4

West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



April 2020

Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant

Fear Factor

When I moved to central Florida in 1992, I was told that this part of the state had not been directly hit by a hurricane since the fifties. We were hit by the outer edges of some hurricanes and tropical storms on occasion, but nothing major. All of that changed in 2004 when this one small part of the state was hit by not one, but three strong hurricanes in the short space of six weeks. Hurricane Charley hit us the evening of August 13. Three weeks later we were hit by Hurricane Frances. Three weeks after that we were hit by Hurricane Jeanne. It was not a pleasant time to live in this part of Florida.

There was one side effect of the 2004 hurricane season that I probably should have expected but did not, and that was the effect it would have on our local meteorologists. As the 2005 hurricane season approached, some of them lost their minds. If I may be permitted a bit of hyperbole, the typical weather report that year could be paraphrased as such: “A tropical depression has formed off the coast of Africa. It is probably going to turn into a major hurricane. It is probably going to hit us, and we are probably all going to die.” They seemed to have one goal — to create a perpetual state of fear and anxiety. I stopped watching after a few weeks of this and asked my wife to let me know if and when we needed to board up the windows or evacuate.

Those who have watched or read the news over the last several years have likely noticed this tendency regardless of where you live. Watch the news long enough and a monologue begins to develop in your mind: “The economy will soon collapse, hampering our war against the terrorists who are on the verge of attacking us again. The only thing that may stop them is a pandemic of bird flu, swine flu, or the black plague, but this pandemic will only affect those of us who haven’t already succumbed to the dire effects of global warming. Stay tuned for a report on what popular food product has been shown to cause cancer in lab rats and chimpanzees.”

How do we deal with all of this media-induced paranoia, fear, and anxiety? An example from church history proves instructive. Saint Augustine (354–430) lived at a time of great fear and anxiety. His world changed dramatically in A.D. 410 when the barbarian Alaric entered Rome. This was the beginning of the end for the western half of the Roman Empire. As refugees fled to northern Africa, bringing all manner of ominous reports, Augustine was forced to deal with the issues as many were going so far as to blame the fall of Rome on Christianity. His classic work *The City of God* was written to respond to the crisis. One of my favorite quotes from this book addresses the fearfulness of his readers. He encourages Christians who are surrounded by danger on every side, saying: “*Among the daily chances of this life every man on earth is threatened in the same way by innumerable deaths, and it is uncertain which of them will come to him. And so the question is whether it is better to suffer one in dying or to fear them all in living*” (bk. 1, chap. 11). These are the words of one who trusts the sovereignty of God. Augustine knew there was no point in being constantly fearful about all of the dangers surrounding him. He knew God was in control and that not a single hair could fall from his head apart from God’s will.

The world is fearful and anxious, but it is fearful and anxious about the wrong things. The world is fearful about the economy. The world is fearful about retirement accounts. The world is fearful about natural disasters and man-made disasters. The world is fearful of terrorism, and the world is fearful of disease. The world, however, is not fearful of God.



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Fear Factor

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Jesus tells us that we are not to fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Instead we are to fear God who can destroy both (Matthew 10:28). The wrath of God makes all other objects of the world's fears seem like nothing in comparison. A truly fearful thing is to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:31).

Those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ, however, have nothing to fear from man, or from anything else for that matter. Those who trust Christ have nothing to fear from hurricanes, diseases, economic collapse, war, famine, or even death. All of these things are under the control of our sovereign Father in heaven. Of course, this is easy enough for us to say, but we all too easily take our eyes off of God and dwell on the dangers surrounding us.

Is there anything we can do to fight worldly fear and anxiety? I believe Paul provides one important clue by contrasting fear with prayer. He writes: *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus”* (Philippians 4:6–7). A neglect of prayer almost always results in a corresponding rise in our fear and anxiety. This is no coincidence. Prayer is an act of faith in God, and faith in God leads to the peace of God. ~ **Dr. Keith A. Mathison - Professor of Systematic Theology at Reformation Bible College in Sanford, Fla.**

The Humbling of Civilization: Praying for the Mercy of God

An unforeseen global crisis forces the entire world to learn a new vocabulary, set of habits, set of rules, and a new set of expectations—all of this by a tiny, invisible coronavirus known as COVID-19. Indeed, this virus has reshaped the social, moral, political, and economic landscape not just of one or two nations, but the entire planet. Our vocabulary now includes “social distancing” and “flattening the curve.” More will come.

A historic event of such proportions naturally leads us to reconsider social reality and everything in our day to day life that we took for granted—and of course, theological issues are right under the surface as we are facing the COVID-19 pandemic. We are, after all, talking about matters of life and death, the gift of human life, and what it means to care for our neighbors. We are confronted with difference between selfishness and altruism. Indeed, the coronavirus raises just about every question imaginable given its unsurpassed urgency.

Of course, throughout history, there have been times of plague and pestilence—some that exacted enormous death and cultural destruction. During those moments, much like our own time, everyone asked the most basic, fundamental questions. Christians understand why – it is because each and every one of us, in every generation, is made in the image of God. Thus, we all have the same fundamental questions and are driven by the same impulses.

As image bearers of the living God, even the most hardened secularists among us must deal with the most ultimate issues and questions—especially when faced by this kind of life and death challenge.



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The Humbling of Civilization: Praying for the Mercy of God

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The urgency and desperation of this present global crisis is precipitated by the sheer issue of time and the contagion of this highly infectious virus. Indeed, just a week ago it seemed implausible that the United States would face an entire shutdown of almost every sector of our society—we now face a complete halt of travel between the United States and Europe, the cessation of school attendance from kindergarten all the way through college, with many universities and institutions moving to entirely online instruction. Restaurants are closing, major sporting events are canceled, and all of that was made necessary in the matter of a few days, or even just a few hours. What was last week's implausible hypothesis is now today's reality.

Who would have ever expected a headline like *“The Day Sports Stopped in America?”*

A week ago, it seemed like the coronavirus was manageable. The façade of control eroded as the days continued. Just consider the fact that on Sunday, Italy reported 3,590 new cases of the virus and 368 deaths in the same twenty-four-hour time span.

This virus has gripped every contour of society. On Sunday across the United States, thousands of churches did not meet, either taking their services online or suspending services altogether. The Centers for Disease Control issued an official advisory that called for the cancelation of any gathering over fifty people for at least the next eight weeks. The guidance from the CDC stated, *“Large events and mass gatherings can contribute to the spread of COVID-19 in the United States via travelers who attended these events, and introduced the virus to new communities. Examples of large events and mass gatherings include conferences, festivals, parades, sporting events, weddings, and other types of assemblies. Therefore, the Centers for Disease Control, in accordance with its guidance for large events and mass gatherings, recommends that for the next eight weeks, organizers cancel or postpone in-person events that consist of fifty people or more throughout the United States.”*

The only people who might be able to relate to the extreme nature of these instructions are those who lived through World War II. That generation may remember similar kinds of immediate deprivations and cancellations that the condition of total war required. The surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, the declaration of war by Germany, and the fact that the United States found itself fighting a war in two different arenas of the world simultaneously, brought the nation and its normalcy to a sudden and violent stop.

Christians are driven by the reminder that when Jesus was asked, *“Which is the greatest commandment?”* [Matthew 22: 36-40] he responded with Deuteronomy 6:4, repeating the commandment to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and soul, and mind. Jesus went on to say that the second is like it: *“You shall love your neighbor as yourself,”* which was a quotation from Leviticus 19:18. Jesus, therefore, argued that all the law and prophets hung on these two commandments—love God and love your neighbor are summaries of the entire law.

For Christians, the command to love our neighbor now looks very different given the realities of the coronavirus. In the matter of a few days, Christians could no longer gather in large assemblies for corporate worship. We cannot meet where we would otherwise meet; we cannot go where we would otherwise go—and we acknowledge all of this in order to try and slow down the spread of COVID-19.



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The Humbling of Civilization: Praying for the Mercy of God *Continued from Page 3*

But the church of Jesus Christ has been here before. Christians throughout church history have faced the challenge of plague. Our circumstances and situations are different, but the theology and our commitment as Christians remains the same. Today, we know more about the existence of germs and how viruses are spread from one individual to the next. As different as March 2020 might be from the plagues of the 16th century, our calling to love neighbor remains unchanged.

Today, most school children are not in class. Most colleges and seminary students are not in the classroom. Campus have been evacuated. Playgrounds are empty. None of us can fully predict the ultimate economic and political effects of COVID-19.

We are witnessing at this very moment the humbling of a civilization that believed itself to be in control of the world—impervious to this kind of threat.

When the headlines first appeared about the coronavirus, most of us never considered that we would face such a time as this. We thought humanity was merely facing just another close call.

But this is no close call. This is a full-on pandemic of epic proportions. We do not know how the story will be recorded. But we do know this: All of us must think about things we don't want to think about; to consider realities we fundamentally don't want to consider.

For Christians, this becomes an opportunity to translate some of the proximate questions into ultimate questions. True, we do not know exactly how far the virus will spread or how the history will be recorded. We do not know what kind of announcements will come in the days and weeks ahead. We pray, by God's common grace through modern medicine, that an effective vaccine will eventually be used to restrain the virus and even conquer it, but we have no clue when that day will come.

The reality is that no vaccine nor human ingenuity will ever overcome the problem of human sinfulness. With all the uncertainty in these troubling times, Christians know that hope, refuge, and peace is found in Christ and in Christ alone. At this time, love for neighbor is pointing a world in chaos to the God who loved us so much that he gave his only Son to die for us.

Our ultimate refuge is only in the true and living God. We must remind ourselves of that now. We must pray fervently for God's grace and mercy. And we must share that love to our neighbors and point them to Christ alone as our hope—even if we now share at some distance. ~ *Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.*



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What C.S. Lewis and Martin Luther Would Say About Our Coronavirus Panic

It's easy to panic in times of great uncertainty, like with the growing concern over the novel coronavirus, formally named COVID-19. We should all take necessary precautions, following the instructions given to us by medical experts.

We should also remember that, no matter the situation, nothing happens outside God's control or care. Scripture calls the Lord our "rock," our "fortress," and our "deliverer" (Psalm 18:2). Some 72 years ago, the great C.S. Lewis reminded his readers of those truths, calming fears over an atomic bomb.

Those words are just as appropriate now, regarding COVID-19. The following is an excerpt from an essay Lewis wrote in the 1940s, which is now found in a collection of his works called "*Present Concerns*."

In one way, we think a great deal too much of the atomic bomb. "How are we to live in an atomic age?" I am tempted to reply: "Why, as you would have lived in the sixteenth century when the plague visited London almost every year, or as you would have lived in a Viking age when raiders from Scandinavia might land and cut your throat any night; or indeed, as you are already living in an age of cancer, an age of syphilis, an age of paralysis, an age of air raids, an age of railway accidents, an age of motor accidents."

*In other words, do not let us begin by exaggerating the novelty of our situation. Believe me, dear sir or madam, you and all whom you love were already sentenced to death before the atomic bomb was invented: and quite a high percentage of us were going to die in unpleasant ways. We had, indeed, one very great advantage over our ancestors—*anesthetics*; but we have that still. It is perfectly ridiculous to go about whimpering and drawing long faces because the scientists have added one more chance of painful and premature death to a world which already bristled with such chances and in which death itself was not a chance at all, but a certainty.*

*This is the first point to be made: and the first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things—*praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts*—not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs. They may break our bodies (a microbe can do that) but they need not dominate our minds.*

Lewis is not the only one with wise words in the middle of a panic.

The 16th-century theologian Martin Luther had this to say during the bubonic plague, offering his thoughts in a letter titled "*Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague*" on how best to practically and spiritually overcome:



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What C.S. Lewis and Martin Luther Would Say About Our Coronavirus Panic

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You ought to think this way: "Very well, by God's decree, the enemy has sent us poison and deadly offal. Therefore, I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine, and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others, and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me and I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others. If my neighbor needs me, however, I shall not avoid place or person, but will go freely."

As Christians, it is OK to be concerned, particularly if we are in an at-risk class or love someone who is, like the elderly and those who are immunocompromised.

But we don't need to be gripped with fear, because the Lord has given us a spirit "of power, love, and self-discipline" and has encouraged us to "pray about everything," telling him what we are scared of, worried about, and dwelling on (2 Timothy 1:7, Philippians 4:6). ~ *Tré Goins-Phillips is a writer for Faithwire.com.*

Perceiving the Power of Preaching

Every Sunday morning we observe a strange phenomenon in our cities, towns, and villages. Millions of people leave their homes, take respite from their jobs and recreation, and gather in church buildings for services of worship. People sit quietly and listen while one person stands before them and gives a speech. We call the speech a sermon, homily, or meditation.

What's going on here?

The power of preaching is found in the Spirit working with the Word of God and through the Word of God. God promises that His Word will not return to Him void. Its power is located not in the eloquence or erudition of the preacher but in the power of the Spirit. Preaching is a tool in the hands of the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit is a supernatural being, the third person of the Trinity. His presence in preaching is what makes it a supernatural event.

Salvation is a divine achievement. No man can save himself. God sovereignly ordains not only the end (salvation) but the means to the end (preaching). We conclude then that what is going on Sunday morning when the Word of God is truly preached is a divine drama of redemption. Thank God for the supernatural power of preaching that effected the drama of redemption in your life. ~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.*



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If you have an April birthday or anniversary that is not posted here or is listed in error, please e-mail Walt (gwlcfl0415@gmail.com).

Birthdays and Anniversaries Corner April 2020

Lydia W. (1)

David A. (8)

Walt and Carol L. (15)

Amber H. (4)

Jeremy W. (26)

Carol L. (7)

Relying on God's Grace

The irony of the theology of meritorious suffering is that it tends to produce the very opposite effect from its original intention. What began as a call to humble willingness to suffer became an insidious tool for self-righteousness. Perhaps the most difficult task for us to perform is to rely on God's grace and God's grace alone for our salvation. It is difficult for our pride to rest on grace. Grace is for other people—for beggars. We don't want to live by a heavenly welfare system. We want to earn our own way and atone for our own sins. We like to think that we will go to heaven because we deserve to be there.

All the suffering I could possibly endure could not earn me a place in heaven. Nor can I merit the merit of Christ through suffering. I am altogether an unprofitable servant who must rely on someone else's merit to be saved.

With Paul we can rejoice in our sufferings if they enhance the glory of Christ. We can rejoice in our persecutions and look forward to the promised blessing of Christ. But the blessing Christ promised, the blessing of great reward, is a reward of grace. The blessing is promised even though it is not earned.

Augustine said it this way: "Our rewards in heaven are a result of God's crowning His own gifts. *Sola gratia.*" ~ **Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.**



***West Suffolk Baptist Church
Leadership***

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Please submit information to the editor by the second Sunday of each month preceding publication by e-mail, in person or at the church office. The editor reserves the right to edit for content or space. May the Father be glorified in every word.

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