



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (PCA)

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Greetings to the saints of God at First Pres Fort O.,

We are in the midst of a season of challenge unlike anything in living memory. Although none of us can personally remember a like situation to what we currently endure, history testifies to us that our times are not unique.

The 1918-1919 "Spanish" Flu Pandemic saw communities completely shut down for weeks and months on end. Going back further, we can read about outbreaks of plague or other contagions in earlier centuries. Our Presbyterian and Puritan forefathers in Britain in the 17th Century addressed how the Church should respond to the plague and government bans on meetings in their own day.

Richard Baxter wrote this in his *Christian Directory*:

If the Magistrate for a greater good, (as the common safety) forbid Church Assemblies in a time of pestilence, assault of enemies, or fire, or the like necessity, it is a duty to obey him. Because positive duties give place to those great natural duties which are their end: so Christ justified himself and his disciples violation of the external rest of the Sabbath. For the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.

Baxter subtly reminds us that our outward performance of the Sabbath is not of paramount importance. Though this is no excuse to profane the Sabbath in ordinary times, there are times in which the love of God and neighbor and submission to God through the government ministers of His appointment mean we cannot remember and sanctify the Sabbath to the full extent that we desire to do.

As Protestants and Christians whose religious practices are reformed after the pattern of Scripture, we can draw great comfort from the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ for this season in which we are unable to gather for worship and to partake corporately in the means of grace.

Because our salvation is on the basis of Christ's finished work, we can be assured of our continued access to God and of God's love for us in Christ. As we are kept from *some* of the means of grace (e.g. corporate worship, the sacraments), we grow in both our appreciation of them *and* our gratitude to Christ because our salvation is not in any way contingent on our successful participation of the means of grace. Our salvation is grounded entirely on what Christ has already accomplished. The Apostle to the Hebrews reflects on this beautiful truth:

But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. (Hebrews 10:12-14)

How different this is from what is practiced in other religions, which offer little comfort in such times. For example, the Romish religion announced recently it would forgive the sins of those suffering from Coronavirus if the sick fulfill certain conditions such as saying a certain number of prayers and following certain celebrations at a distance. This is proffered to the sick as merciful and gracious.

But there is a host of problems with such 'mercy' and 'grace,' right? One problem is that it requires the sick person to contribute something to his or her salvation. Another problem is that many who are hard hit by the Coronavirus are too ill, too weak, too sedated to offer the requisite prayers.

As with all man-made religions, Romanism may try to extend grace, but in reality their efforts only "load people with burdens hard to bear" (cf. Luke 11:46) and direct people to be "anxious and troubled about many things" (Luke 10:41) rather than resting in Christ and gratefully receiving by faith what He has done for sinners in the body of His flesh on the cross.

Even as we rest in Christ, we continue to make use of what means of grace are available to us, trusting God will grow us in our love for His grace and continue working His purpose in us and transforming His people to make us more firmly resemble our Lord Jesus Christ.

While the times in which we live are not unprecedented, some *aspects* of our church and national situation are indeed unprecedented. For example unlike in every other pandemic, the church is still able to continue much of the rhythm of church life through live streams and video chat. This is far from perfect, but at least we can keep up the rhythm and pattern until we are again able to gather.

We are in the midst of a national crisis, so it's important to continue our spiritual disciplines, because even in a crisis our God does not change and neither do His purposes for His church. We see this very clearly in the Scripture; one of the clearest places is in Numbers 14 and 15.

In Numbers 14, we read the history of one of the most tragic episodes in the entire Bible. The Old Covenant Church has been liberated from slavery in Egypt, they've been sustained by God through the wilderness (i.e. desert), and they have finally reached the border of the Promised Land. They send out spies and they see the land is everything God promised: rich, spacious, fertile, etc. But they also see that conquering the land will be hard and they don't think they're up to the challenge, so they reject the Promised land and resolve to go back to Egypt.

You can read all of the details for yourself, but Israel is in a state of national crisis and is nearly wiped out because of their sin, yet Moses prays for them. Their sin means they will wander in the wilderness until the generation that rejected God's Promised Land is dead, but their children will inherit the land.

It's an exceedingly tragic chapter. But the most striking thing of all is that once you finish Numbers 14 - and all the foolishness, rebellion, death, and judgment - then comes Numbers 15, which begins with beautiful hope: "*... When you come into the land you are to inhabit, which I am giving you...*"

In spite of the church rebellion and national crisis, the effects of which will be intensely endured for 40 years, God just goes right into talking about land they will certainly receive and the sacrifices He will appoint to remind them of His mercy toward them.

A national crisis and even widespread rebellion within the Old Covenant Church does not stop God from making known His means of grace for His people. We abide by and trust in the same principle for our own national crisis.

That's one reason we haven't left off our study of Exodus to focus on something more topical. We believe God speaks to us through the Word and the best way to hear His voice is simply to let the Scriptures speak for themselves chapter by chapter and verse by verse.

Even though our sermons are in the midst of God sending judgment on Egypt by plagues, and that might hit too close to home for us, we trust that God will nourish us by the means of grace and strengthen us for the days and weeks ahead by reminding us of His mercy in the midst of judgment.

Your friend,



Ryan Biese