

CORONA, CERINTHUS AND CHRIST

1 John 5:1-5

About the pandemic

I wanted to say a few words about the current situation with the Coronavirus pandemic. So before we get down to God's word I thought I would just acknowledge this situation. It's certainly the major happening in the whole world today. I didn't feel it was right to depart from our study in John's letters but rather just say a few words before we go into that.

The situation as of today is that, in the UK, we have 2000 people who have contracted this virus and 60 deaths so far. This is rising exponentially, so we will find that every few days the number of cases will double. Of course the number of cases is not accurate because so many people are isolating themselves at home and their symptoms are going undiagnosed. I know the numbers of people who have died so far is smaller than for the regular endemic flu that we're used to. The problem with this is that it far more contagious and more deadly. If it carries on in its current trajectory, it will certainly outdo the one we're used to.

The biggest threat at the moment is that there will be a sudden spike in people contracting the virus. If it all happens too soon, the Health Service will be overwhelmed, and there will obviously be problems in other areas as well, such as in the provision of goods and essential services. The idea from the government is that we should delay the onset so that there will still be a spike but we should try to delay that. This is called "flattening the curve". So if we have the same number of cases but over a longer time it means that the Health Service and the supply of goods and essential services can manage at that level.

The sovereignty of God

Naturally, I want to give the Biblical view of all this. The first thing to say is that **God is sovereign**. God says in Deuteronomy 32 and verse 39: "I kill, and I make alive; I wound, and I heal: neither *is there any* that can deliver out of my hand." All natural disasters and diseases are from God.

I was recently reading a book by Stephen Charnock called *The Existence and Attributes of God*. It says in one section: "If he [God] hath appointed a judgment against any place, there it shall drop, there it shall pierce, and in no other place without a like charge. God, as a Sovereign, gives instructions to every judgment, when, and against whom it shall march, and what cities, what persons, it shall arrest; and he is punctually obeyed by them as a sovereign Lord. All creatures stand ready for his call, and are prepared to be executioners of his vengeance, when he speaks the word; they are his hosts by creation, and in array for his service; at the sound of his trumpet, or beat of his drum, they troop together with their arms in their hands, to put his orders exactly in execution."

He is suggesting that we view all creatures potentially as his army, to do his bidding, so we should see this tiny microscopic virus as one of the creatures sent by God. In Isaiah 45:7 God says, "I form the light and create darkness; I make peace and create evil. I, the LORD do all these things."

So we have ascertained that God is behind it. He sent it. We can say then that the details of where it came from are irrelevant. I do believe some conspiracies are true. Some people think this virus was engineered by men. Some say it was merely due to lack of knowledge of food hygiene in some Chinese markets. But it doesn't matter, because God sent it. However it came about they, those people, are just agents of God. So we are taking a higher view of the whole thing: this is all of God.

His purposes in his pandemic

The question is: why does he send us disease and calamity? There are numerous reasons, and I have made a list of just a few of them.

- *He sends them to show his displeasure at sin* and to forewarn of a greater judgment that is coming in the last day.
- These things also *remind us of the fall*. It is through the sin of man that sin came into the world, and the reverberations are found in disease, suffering and death.
- Perhaps the most important one is that *this is to provoke repentance among the people of this world*. People should fear these things. They should fear and go to God and ask him to be merciful. That is one of the purposes of these things. And the worst-case scenario is that the person who has been sent this message, this shot across the bow by God, turns to him and rages against him. To ask him *Why have you done this?* and complain is awful and terrifying. People need to repent!
- God also sends these things *to end the lives of individuals whose appointed time has come*: of God's children and those who are not God's children in this world. All of them—all of *us*—have an appointed time for our lives to come to an end. And although there is a multitude of different ways God takes us out of this world, it is always according to his purpose and according to his timing. And so he will remove people from this world.
- He also sends these bad things *to chasten, or discipline, his people*. He disciplines us. He reminds us that we need to pay him more attention. We need to devote ourselves more fully to him. And it tests our faith. It tests the faith of God's people. How will they react? Will they panic? Will they wonder why God has done this thing? Or will they just trust and have a peace about them?
- And for us, the big thing here is that *it encourages the church to pray*. We should pray more earnestly for people. We should warn people more urgently about the judgment that is to come. Get them to think about eternity. There are so many reasons, so many consequences. And when we look back we shall see many consequences of God sending this virus. In years to come we will look back and marvel at the things that have fallen out because of this.

Our response

What should our response be? How should we react? Well we should certainly trust God. We trust God and remember that he cares for us, and we should continue to worship him. I know that churches are now starting to close, to suspend meetings. We can't rule that out for ourselves either. We may have to suspend meetings until further notice. It's most obviously a bad thing, a negative thing. We want to fulfil our Christian duties—and not just

duties; it's about experiencing the joys of meeting together and worshipping God together. We're going to have to do without that maybe for a while. We should, however, continue to worship him at home—wherever we find ourselves. So in the absence of the luxury of meeting with other believers, we need to compensate. For example, we should pray more at home. We should use the time to get into the scriptures more. Perhaps get into a Bible-study that will take several months. There are lots of things we can do.

We should certainly pray earnestly for repentance. We've been praying since January for revival among us and also repentance in the world outside. And who knows whether this small but worldwide renewal of interest in praying for revival has had its answer in this virus. Maybe we shall see people in the world starting to consider their mortality. Who knows? But certainly we continue to pray for repentance and opportunities to speak a word in God's favour.

Now the business about taking precautions. Some Christians think that the best attitude is to be careless because being this is more Biblical and it shows faith. Yes, we need to trust God and avoid fretting. We're not to panic about those things. There's enough to worry about today, the Bible says. But I would say to those people to cast their minds back to when Jesus was told to throw himself off the temple. Satan said "Why don't you throw yourself off? Show some faith in your father in heaven. He won't let you die. He will send angels to catch you." What was Jesus' response? He said we shouldn't tempt God. Don't be irresponsible! If I walked out in front a bus, trusting God to save me, I'll probably end up flat in the road, dead. God would end my life by a bus because of my stupidity. So without decrying people's faith—we need to pray, and we need faith—we also need to take precautions. It's not just for ourselves but for the sake of our households and the church family. If you're young, and you think you have nothing to worry about because you'll survive, that's not really the point. The more careless you are, the more likely it is to spread to others in the church. So it's for the benefit of the church, and it's out of a love for the larger society. Why would we not care for them? We would want to minimise suffering. I noticed that on social media people have been posting a quote by Martin Luther and this is what he says in answer to the question of whether we should take precautions. He says:

"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 inflict 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 neighbour needs me however I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely as stated above. See this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God."

So all those hundreds of years ago, our brother Martin was in a similar but worse situation. And he thought it was wise to take precautions and trust in God as well.

Practical advice

Advice on the ground for us then. What would I suggest? For the churches that are staying open, this advice might not apply to them. There are different sizes of congregation, different cultures, etc. But I could say that if we are going to meet we should have less contact, or even no more physical contact at all. We can avoid shaking hands and hugging for a while, I'm sure. The less the better. We can use hand-gel as we enter and leave. Another idea is to use the same hymn book rather than share them. We could sit in the same place each week with our hymn book in front of us. I normally break bread into two, then as the plate goes around people tear off smaller chunks. Instead, we can have it cut up beforehand, hygienically. And of course the glasses for the wine are already separate.

The giving out of literature, either through doors or handing it out to people in the market, will not be taking place for the foreseeable future. Firstly because at the market you're getting close to hundreds of people, which isn't wise. Many people won't attend the market anyway. The ones that do will be unlikely to accept literature, thinking that it could transmit the virus to them. But certainly, we can continue through social media, if you're a user of that. Through the internet we can post scriptures, and make wise comments as we are led. And if meetings are all suspended then we shall find other ways of working. We'll work around it as the church has done in the past. For example, our messages can be found on the SermonAudio website. There's also YouTube and numerous other ways we can communicate the message of the gospel. We have to adapt. and I'd just like to finish with this from Romans, chapter eight and verse 28:

"And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose."

My old Geneva Bible says "all things work together *for the best...*" I'll just leave you with that hearty scripture from God's word. We shall move on now to John's first letter.

Today we shall look at the first five verses of John's fifth chapter. We have seen so far that John's approach is firstly pastoral. We have talked about the love of God to us and also our love to him. We've also considered our love for other people, especially the brethren. There is also a theological aspect to the letter. We have spoken much about the nature of God himself. The nature of God is, for example, light. Last week we saw how he is all love. We said that true love is from God. It proves that we are born again when we exercise this true love that is derived from God. It's an important attribute of his, and it moved God to send his son to die for his people. Curiously, God's love is said to be "perfected" when we love others. To reiterate what I said last time, God's love is perfected not in its quality but in its *purpose*. That is, God had a purpose for this aspect of his love. He showered it on his church and then expects the church itself to then love others. That is "mission accomplished" for that love. And if we, God forbid, are given the love of God and don't express it to others, we are hindering that purpose of God's love.

We're looking at the first five verses. Even here we can see the three great themes of the letter: faith, love and obedience. We see then to begin with that faith is connected to

regeneration, of course. It says in the first verse that whoever believes—that's faith—that Jesus is the Christ is born of God. There is your regeneration. So they are connected. We could perhaps paraphrase this and say, "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ has *clearly* been born of God."

We are to believe that Jesus is the Christ. It says in verse five that Jesus is the son of God. So we stitch those two things together and it describes what we believe: Jesus is the Christ, the son of God. Just to remind you of the view that John sought to oppose here. It was chiefly expounded by Cerinthus. Cerinthus's view found its way into the various branches of Gnosticism. What did Cerinthus say? He said that Jesus said Christ was made up of two individuals. He said Christ temporarily inhabited the body of Jesus, and he also said Jesus was not born of a virgin. I will say that that this particular error is not really seen much today to speak of. However, there are of course many false views around today, for example that Jesus is merely a man; that he was a good teacher. Perhaps some would even say he was perfected in his own nature by the Holy Spirit within. But none of those things are what the Bible teaches. The Bible says Jesus is the Christ, the very son of God. There is apostolic testimony to this. For example, we have in Matthew 16 and verse 16, Jesus asking Peter "What's your opinion Peter? Who do you think I am?" It says in verse 16 that "Simon Peter answered and said, 'Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God'". Also if we look in Acts chapter 17 we will see another example with Paul. In the first three verses in Acts 17, it says:

Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews: And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures, Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ. (Acts 17:1-3)

This Jesus is Christ, and he died and rose again.

Now this notion of God being in the flesh is not fully explicable by man. Yet I find myself having to go as far as I can in getting this point across of who he was. We might describe it like this: there is the divine nature and a human nature in the one person. That is Jesus Christ. And we must understand that those two natures are preserved. The divine is not made less divine as a result of intermingling with a human nature, and the human nature is not made less human by its association with the divine nature. They remain completely preserved. It's interesting that the members of the Trinity talk to the each other. We see the Son addressing the father, and other communications within the Godhead. But we never seen Jesus speaking to himself. We never see "Jesus talking to Christ". It's silly, because it's one person. Jesus never referred to himself in the plural. We have God incarnate here—God in the flesh. Why?

- Only God incarnate would be a sinless sacrifice
- Only God incarnate could be a sacrifice of infinite value
- Only God incarnate could appease the fierceness of God's wrath
- And it was only God incarnate who could have the power to conquer death and raise himself from the dead.

It says here in Romans, the first chapter, and verses three and four, “Concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh; and declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead.” (Romans 1:3-4)

We’re still in verse one. It says, “...everyone that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him.” That sounds a bit of an awkward phrase. Of course, how we understand it is that believers on Jesus Christ are born of God, and if we love God we’ll love these other children of his. If you love God, you’ll love his children: the believers. How do we love them? We hold them in greater esteem than we do ourselves. We assume they sin less than us. We genuinely want their happiness. We want good for them. We want more good things for them than we want for ourselves. There is also a delight in communion with the brethren. That’s part of love as well. It is wanting to be with each other. Love is also tied in with service. We just love to serve others. We almost hope for opportunities to serve them in some way.

If we look at first two, it may have occurred to you that this is a slightly unusual or backward way of expressing the truth. Back in chapter three and verse 14 it says, “We know that we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren”. So when we come to this particular case you might like to read it as, “We become aware of our love for the brethren when we get to know God”. But I think it’s better understood as this: loving God shows that our love for the brethren is *true* love. You will remember that we made this point last week about the nature of true love. As we apply that to verse two today, it leads us to that conclusion: that when we love God, when we keep his commandments—in other words where we are in a proper relationship with him—then we can be sure that the love we have for the brethren is real.

In verses two and three we have mention of these commandments. Verse two says about loving God and keeping the commandments, whereas verse three goes further and says that loving God *is* keeping his commandments. We shouldn’t really be surprised at this, that love for God is defined as keeping his commandments, obeying him. You will remember that we saw that genuine love for the brethren was not primarily emotional but is rather shown through our actions. You may like to compare that to true faith. Faith on its own as an inward attitude is not enough; it needs to be accompanied by good works. And so with love for the brethren. It is primarily to do with doing people good, and it should be accompanied by an inward feeling as well. We want their good, most certainly, but love for them is not primarily an emotion. We see that there is then a connection between the attitudes and actions, that they are required. We are required to obey God, and we cannot describe a mere inward love for God as genuine if it does not produce obedience.

Verse three tells us that doing this, obeying God, is not grievous. It is something that is not difficult. It is not a hardship. Now compare that with those who work under the law. Look at Acts 15:10. It says, “Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?” (Acts 15:10) We can say that about the people around us. They cannot be said to be under the yoke of Mosaic Law, but still the basic elements of obeying God are grievous to them. Let’s take this one: whatever

you do in life, whether eating and drinking, or whatever it is, do everything to the Glory of God. Or this one: God says you must not steal. You must not forge documents, or be deceptive in submitting tax returns or benefits claims. People find that just too burdensome, to be honest in their dealings and to glorify God in what they do. They're just two examples. But what is discomfort for them is our joy. And why is that? Why is it that these rules if you like, these obligations, are not burdensome to us? Well it's because we love God. Do we love to do good things to those people our lives who we love? Then so it is when we love God. It is a joy to do things for him. It is our greatest joy, and we always trust that obeying God is for the best. It is *always* for the best.

We shouldn't rule out of course that there is an eternal reward for those who live by faith in Christ and who obey God. In Matthew's eleventh chapter and verse 29 and 30 Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:29-30) It is indeed! It is our joy to serve.

If you look at verse four, it says that whatever/whoever is born of God overcomes the world. Do you remember in chapter two, that address to the fathers, young men and children, those three groups? It says to the young men that they were "overcomers". And, chiefly, this overcoming—this victory—is by faith. It is chiefly through faith. Now it is not limited to when we first trusted in Christ. But certainly that was a victory. It was a victory because by that initial faith we overcome unbelief and Satan in conversion. But it is also by faith that we are united to Jesus so that, as it were, we die with him, we live with him and we obey with him. And in these we are "more than conquerors through him that loved us". And of course it is through faith that we have the blessed hope of the resurrection to eternal life.

Amen.