

Coronavirus – what is God saying?

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[0 : 0 0] Well, we're taking a break from our sermon series in Luke for this one-off talk on the coronavirus. What is God saying? After all, we don't want to give the impression that God has nothing to say in the face of current events.

I want us to think clearly. I want us to think biblically so that we can continue to love and pastor one another well and also serve our community well.

Let me lead us in prayer. Psalm 34, verse 22. The Lord redeems the life of his servants. None of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for this psalm, praising your goodness and kindness. And we pray in the midst of this corona pandemic, please would you help us to see your goodness, your kindness, what it is you're saying to your people and what it is you're saying to your world.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. The fact is that you and I live in a world which is never far from suffering. Even in the last 20 years, there's been the 9-11 attacks on New York, the 7-7 attacks in London, the earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand, tsunamis in Thailand and Japan, the stock market meltdown prompting the biggest economic downturn in 80 years, terrorist attacks in European cities, not to mention the personal tragedies that don't hit the headlines and yet which are far more painful.

[1 : 3 9] And yet the coronavirus is in a different league. After the attacks in London in 2005, the Lord Mayor of London said the city goes on. It will be business as usual.

No one is saying that today. The numbers set to die are huge. The economic impact will be enormous. We could soon be in lockdown.

Does God have anything to say? In the real world of suffering, hardship, uncertainty, but above all in the real world of fear, panic buying, the fear that the NHS won't cope, the fear of death, something so rarely spoken of in our culture, yet people are speaking about death.

I split this talk into two, each one considering different Bible passages. The first one, Psalm 34, what God is saying to his people. The second, Luke 13, verses 1-5, what God is saying to his world.

It might be helpful for you to read each of those passages before the respective talk. First of all then, Psalm 34, what is God saying to his people.

[2 : 5 5] Psalm 34 is a psalm of praise, written by King David, the anointed king, and yet he is being hunted down by his enemies. You can read about the background in 1 Samuel 21, verses 10-15.

Psalm 34 itself begins with praise. Verses 1-3, I will praise the Lord at all times. His praise shall continually be in my mouth.

My soul makes its boast in the Lord. Let the humble hear and be glad. O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together.

And then the summary is there in verse 4, I sought the Lord and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears. That theme of deliverance is then echoed at the end of the psalm.

In verse 22, the Lord redeems the life of his servants. None of those who take refuge in him will be condemned. No doubt, verse 4, David was delivered from his enemies.

[3 : 59] But notice that in particular, he was delivered from his fears. The word translated fears could also be translated terrors.

Our fears can take a hold on us. They can get a grip on us. Sometimes our fears can be bigger than the danger itself. I guess we'll have many fears as this pandemic takes hold.

Fears for our health, fears for our family, fears for our security, fears for elderly relatives, the fear of isolation, perhaps fears about money, fears for the future, the fear of uncertainty.

Now, there's loads of sensible wisdom out there about how to deal with this new reality. The most sensible I've read simply says, don't obsess about every news bulletin. Listen once at the start of the day and again at the end of the day and get on with your life in between.

That sounds pretty sensible. Rather more tongue-in-cheek was the following article. I'm off Twitter for Lent because I got sick of reading the loony views of celebrities and I thought it might be nice to spend some time with my friends and family on Facebook.

[5 : 16] Turns out, they are ten times worse. From then, I've discovered the virus is just the cold, that the North Koreans invented it, that Boris Johnson is using it to kill off the poor, and that we're all going to die.

How did the article finish? Worry is rational, panic is unhelpful. And yet, the only real solution to fear in the face of the coronavirus is to replace that fear with another sort of fear, the fear of God.

Verse 7, the angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him and delivers them. This is a different kind of fear. fear of reverence for God, recognising that he is God, that he surrounds and protects his people.

Verse 8, O taste and see that the Lord is good. Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him. What is God's message to those who belong to him, to those who know Jesus?

Well, verse 9, O fear the Lord, you his saints, for those who fear him have no lack. The young lions suffer wanton hunger, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.

[6 : 38] Come, O children, listen to me, and I will teach you the fear of the Lord. What do you say, what does that fear of the Lord look like?

I don't know if you remember when the Lord Jesus calmed the storm. Such a great storm that even hardened fishermen were terrified. They cried out, Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?

Jesus wakes up, and as we'd expect him to do, if indeed he is the creator God come to earth, he rebukes the wind and the sea. Be still, he says.

The wind stops, the sea is calm. Jesus asks the disciples, why are you so afraid? Now, I'd have thought that was pretty obvious. Pretty obvious why they're afraid, and I guess they thought it was pretty obvious too.

But Jesus goes on, have you still no faith? And we're told they were filled with great fear, and said to one another, who then is this, that even the wind and the waves obey him?

[7 : 43] Do you see what happens? Their fear of the storm is replaced by an even greater fear of Jesus. Who indeed is this?

Who can calm the storm? Who's in charge of every aspect of his creation, including the coronavirus? To put it very simply, God is bigger.

You see, King David's testimony in Psalm 34 is really very simple. It is that God has rescued me, and you too are safe in his hands.

As we saw in Romans 8 a few weeks ago, if we put our trust in Jesus Christ, nothing can separate us from him. Neither death, nor life, neither angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Brothers and sisters, now is not the time to fear. Instead, now is the time to trumpet the God who delivers and saves.

[8 : 57] To remind ourselves, to speak kindly to others of the death of the Lord Jesus on the cross for our sins, of the assurance of sins forgiven, the safety that we have in him, both now and in eternity.

Well, here are three specific applications for us. Firstly, fear the Lord more than the coronavirus. Our infection or otherwise will ultimately depend not on statistics or risk factors or age, but on the Lord's specific permission to allow it.

It's a time for trusting, not my plan for my life, but the Lord's plan for my life. Here's one woman's testimony of God's kindness and suffering.

It's quite a long quote. Suffering in different circumstances, but I think it's worth hearing. Life refuses to shape itself to the neat narratives we plot for it.

When you're young, you plan. You'll study this course, get that job, marry, have this many kids. At some point, you realise life isn't turning out the way you thought it would. Sometimes, as in my case, this might be because life takes an unexpected turn, our son's chronic ill health, my husband's cancer.

[10 : 20] This can lead to grief and fear. But it's also an opportunity to learn something we should have known already. We are not the author of our stories.

God is. He is the one who ordains every one of our days. God is the author of my story, and he's a far better author than I could ever be.

I would never have written so much hardship into the recent pages of my life. But as I look back, I'm surprised to realise that in some ways the suffering is the part I'm most grateful for.

It's helped me to see just how weak I am, and driven me to rely on God's strength. It compels me to set my hope on eternity rather than this life, and moves me to comfort others with the comfort I've received.

I don't fear the future like I used to, because God has been with me in the darkest times. My faith is more stable, my joy more intense, and Jesus more precious.

[11 : 24] No one would ask for it. The grief, the pain, the fear. But in God's mercy, I've gained more than I've lost. That's the first implication.

Fear the Lord more than the coronavirus. Second implication. Remember what you've seen over these last couple of weeks on Sunday mornings in Luke chapters 10 and 11.

The one thing necessary each day far more important than keeping up with the latest news bulletin is hearing the words of Jesus, reading the Bible, having a quiet time.

Remembering that we pray to one who is our Heavenly Father, that we do so with boldness and confidence. And of course, the wonderful thing is that many of us are going to have rather more time on our hands over the next few weeks than normal.

Some of the most encouraging conversations actually I had in last Sunday were where people are saying, look, I'm going to have longer for a quiet time. I'm going to be able to read those Christian books I'd be looking forward to reading.

[12 : 29] After all, there's no sports to watch, no meetings to attend, no commuting. So don't waste the opportunity and simply binge it on Netflix.

The final implication, the final implication is the warning that fear can drive us to self-centeredness. Notice in Psalm 34, the fear of the Lord has an outward facing dimension.

Verse 11, I'll teach you the fear of the Lord. But then we say, well, what does that look like? Verse 14, turn away from evil and do good. Seek peace and pursue it.

The sociologist Rodney Stark says that one explanation of the success of Christianity in the Roman Empire was its response to plague.

When everyone else who could left and ran, the early Christians remained and they looked after the sick. They didn't just look after their own, they looked after those in their communities.

[13 : 35] Now, obviously, we need to abide by government restrictions, but it would be a great shame if out of fear we retreated from each other and from our neighbours and our communities. Let's pause there.

I want to look at Luke chapter 13 in just a moment, but let me pray first. Let's pray together. I sought the Lord and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are the one true living God. We thank you that you are all powerful, that you rule over all things. And we pray, therefore, like this psalmist, please would you help us to trust you and to have a right fear and awe and sense of who you are.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Now, if you haven't yet read Luke chapter 13 verses 1 to 5, that's where we're going to be turning to now.

So do pause this video and read Luke chapter 13 verses 1 to 5 as we think together, what is God saying to his world? Because, strikingly, when Jesus himself was faced with human suffering and tragedy, he addressed it head on.

[15 : 05] In other words, suffering is not the kind of elephant in the room that he dare not mention. Rather, he took the opportunity to urge his listeners to examine where they stood with God and whether they would be ready if a similar thing happened to them.

When we hear the most recent update about those who have died from the virus, surely the most important question to ask is, were they ready?

the advice a doctor may give you to put your affairs in order, get ready. But far more urgent than putting our affairs in this world in order, is being ready for the next world.

So look at verses 1 to 4 of Luke chapter 13. There were some present at that very time, who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

And he answered them, do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

[16 : 20] Or those 18 on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? Now two events were on the minds of Jesus.

Listeners, two tragedies. The first is man-made, a massacre. The Roman governor, Pilate, known for taking a hard line on political disturbances, had allowed his troops to go on the rampage, killing Galilean Jews when they were about to form a religious duty.

They were not immoral people, they were religious people. So why did God allow it? The second was the collapse of a tower, killing 18 people, whether through shoddy building or mismanagement of crowds, we don't know.

Noticeably, the Lord Jesus doesn't hold up his hands in moral outrage and say, this shouldn't happen. Nor does he simply pretend that these things don't happen.

He lives in the real world. Instead, Jesus warns us against drawing the wrong conclusion. He says, don't imagine that God had it in for these people in particular.

[17 : 31] In the culture of the first century, the assumption would have been that for people to suffer in this way, they must have done something to deserve it, or perhaps those in their wider family must have done something to deserve it.

Now, of course, we don't come across that worldview in our culture, because much of our thinking has been shaped by the teaching of Jesus, but plenty of other cultures do think like that. So, notice, what is the lesson that Jesus draws?

Verse 3, no, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Verse 5, no, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

Can you see how the Lord Jesus lovingly and compassionately tells us that such tragedies are a warning to us? just as when that warning light appears on the dashboard of the car, you know it's going to be inconvenient to take it to a garage and get the fault fixed, but you also know that if you ignore it, then something far worse will happen.

Similarly, says Jesus, the existence of suffering is a constant warning to us that there is something very wrong with the world in which we live.

[18 : 51] Now, there has, hasn't there been at least some acknowledgement of that over these last few weeks. Media articles about the fact that we've had something like the coronavirus coming because of the way we have endangered and abused the environment.

And yet, of course, that diagnosis doesn't go nearly far enough. All suffering in the Bible is either directly or indirectly the result of human sin.

Our turning our backs on God, saying that we will live in God's world without reference to him. And God's just punishment for sin is death, and beyond that, the judgment.

And therefore, you see, it's very natural for Jesus as he sees the consequences of human sin and rebellion played out before him in these two disasters, to warn his hearers of the final consequence of sin, which is to perish at the judgment.

The Prime Minister has spoken about being in a war. In the middle of the Second World War, the Christian writer C.S. Lewis said this, War does something to death.

[20 : 09] It forces us to remember it. War makes death real to us. And that would have been regarded as one of its blessings. by most of the great Christians of the past.

They thought it was good for us to be always aware of our mortality. And we say, why should that be? Well, Lewis goes on, it's then that we see unmistakably the sort of universe in which we have long been living.

If we thought we are building heaven on earth, if we look for something that would turn the present world from a place of pilgrimage into a permanent city, satisfying the soul of man, we are disillusioned and not a moment too soon.

What is C.S. Lewis saying? Tragedy warns us against pinning our hopes and ambitions on this world. It helps us, if you like, to see the world as it really is.

A world terribly distorted by sin. A world in rebellion against God, a world facing the judgments. One American commentator spoke last week about the humbling of a civilization.

[21 : 27] We read, don't we, about plagues that wiped people out in the past, or the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918, and we say to ourselves that couldn't possibly happen now, today, in our society.

we're far too sophisticated. Our medical knowledge, our scientific advances, it is indeed the humbling of a civilization.

And Jesus calls his heroes to action, as twice he says, but unless you repent, you too will all perish. That is God's message to his world, as the coronavirus takes hold.

Yes, of course, Christian compassion means loving and serving people practically, but above all, surely it means having the boldness to speak about the truth that really matters.

True repentance, true faith in the Lord Jesus, who died on the cross for forgiveness of sins, the assurance of his presence, both now in this life and his care in this life, but also in death and beyond.

[22 : 38] the confidence that Jesus has defeated death and says to his people at the point of death, today, you'll be with me in paradise. if you're listening in and you haven't yet put your trust in Jesus, if you haven't yet repented in the words of Jesus in this passage, if you don't have this confidence that we're speaking about, then do please chat to me, get in touch with me or a Christian friend.

We'd love you to have this assurance for yourself. death. In 1854, there was a cholera outbreak in London. Charles Spurgeon, the pastor of New Park Street Church, wrote subsequently that it is during that time that he found Londoners most receptive to the message of Jesus.

He wrote this, We should pray that the same would be true today.

As a friend of mine who's a vicar in Toxteth in Liverpool, says to his church from time to time, as we hold out the message of eternal life in Jesus Christ through faith in him, we are not mucking about.

Let's pray. Let's pray that we'd be true to our gospel convictions. Let's pray for compassion to speak to people about what matters most and for the Lord's kindness in bringing people to true faith in Jesus.

[24 : 30] let's pray together. No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the Lord Jesus Christ, God on earth. We thank you for the way which he speaks with the authority of the living God, the way which he speaks with clarity and compassion in the face of tragedy and death and fear.

Thank you, Heavenly Father, for the confidence we can have in him, the one who died on the cross for our sins, to bring forgiveness, to ensure peace with God both in this world and the next.

Christ. We pray, Heavenly Father, for us as a church. Please would you help us to be true to these convictions we hold. Grant us the compassion and love we pray in our community and we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen.