

God in the Pandemic Part 2 (Sowing and Reaping)

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[0 : 0 0] I'm telling you how to think about the issues that we find. So the reading this morning that leads us in is taken from Romans 9, and it's where Paul is defending that God is a God of justice, and there is no injustice on God's part, verses 14 through to 18.

So, he's not really defending God, because God doesn't need to be defended, but he is defending the character of God in the sense of how God decides to work out his plan.

So it says this, now hear God's word, What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means. For he says to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.

So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who has mercy. For the scripture says to Pharaoh, For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.

So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. If you're thinking, well, what a strange set of verses to sort of lead us into a second round on God and the pandemic.

[1 : 3 5] Well, if you go back and read the Exodus account, the very first thing that God tells Pharaoh through Moses the prophet is to let his people go, that they may worship him out of Egypt.

That's the very thing. The very first thing that God says. There's no plagues. There's no judgment. There's absolutely nothing. There's just that very simple message that goes out.

And of course, Pharaoh hardens his heart to this. And of course, that's what brings the plagues down onto Egypt. But it began with a message, and a message that was not listened to.

And so this is what Paul is asking us to remember when he talks about mercy and the compassion of God. That God deals with people who do not listen to him.

I don't think we should ever forget that. Well, let me pray, and then we'll come to our next hymn before we go any further. Father God, we would ask that we please turn your attention to Galatians.

[2 : 5 4] Let's pray.

So I have found Galatians. I'm just looking for something else now. I think he sees not found Galatians.

I really have found Galatians. I do feel the pressure of getting there before any of you do. I'm also going to read very briefly from the book of Daniel as well.

Again, the reason for reading from the book of Daniel is because Daniel, like the book of Jonah, like Moses and Pharaoh, God has a way of speaking to nations and to people that do not belong to him through those who do belong to him.

And nations, you know, sometimes we should never think that it is beyond a country to turn to God in uniform fashion.

[4 : 24] Nebuchadnezzar was converted. Jonah went to Nineveh and everyone repented. We should never think that that couldn't happen again. In fact, we should live in the hope that it could happen again.

And so I'm just going to read to you just a couple of verses here out of Daniel and then out of Galatians. So in Daniel 4, verse 34 through to 37, we read, At the end of the day, I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven and my reason returned to me.

And I blessed the Most High and praised and honored him who lives forever. For his dominion is an everlasting dominion and his kingdom endures from generation to generation.

All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing and he does according to his will among the hosts of heaven. Among the inhabitants of the earth.

And none can stay his hand or say to him, what have you done? At the same time, my reason returned to me and for me, my glory of my kingdom, my majesty and splendor returned to me.

[5 : 35] Over in Galatians, we read a few words on the idea of how God has ordered his creation.

So in Galatians 6, verses 6 through to 10, we read, One who is taught the word must share in all the good things with the one who teaches.

Do not be deceived. God is not mocked. For whatever a person sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his flesh will from the flesh reap corruption.

But the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary in doing good. For in due season, we will reap if we do not give up.

So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, especially those who are of the household of faith. Well, I'm not going to go over the ground that we have already covered.

[6 : 46] And I said tongue-in-cheek that out of these two messages, it's quite possible that I offend everyone at some point along the line, which was not my intention. But when it comes to understanding God's actions in the world and understanding our personal relationship with God, I understand that sometimes a interpretation can stand on other people's toes.

In other words, I don't believe that. This is how I believe God works with me. And this is how I believe my life goes. And suddenly you hear a message that almost contradicts everything you hold to.

And so you reject the message rather than questioning your own position before God. So I understand that for all, and this happens to me all the time as I listen to other ministers and hear them and read their books and think, that can't be true.

And then you keep reading the book and suddenly you think, actually, yes, I'm wrong. And this person is correct. And it takes some time to change.

So in this second message, again, I'm not really going to tell you how to look at things. I'm rather going to show you what you need to do to look at them properly, how to interpret what we face.

[8 : 05] And so perhaps a quick reminder might be beneficial. And so we finish the last message by saying that the pandemic is not a better message than Jesus.

The pandemic, if it is a message from God, it is not a better message than the gospel. The gospel makes clear the love of God and, of course, God's accomplishment in Christ Jesus in seeking the lost, saving sinners, in rescuing them from the wrath of God to come.

That's important because the biggest problem that this world faces is not another virus or a second wave. It's not even the sin of people.

It's rather the wrath of God that is coming. That the coming judgment is the most frightening thing that is going to impact the lives of people in this world.

And so if the pandemic is a message, it's not a clear one. It's not a very good one. I'm not saying that it's not exposed things, which I said last week it really has.

[9 : 13] But it's also impersonal. I mean, when you look at the message of Jesus, one of the things that strikes you, surely it strikes you when you read the gospels, is how all the gospels say nothing about several decades of Jesus' life.

There's whole decades that the gospels say nothing about Jesus. And then you get to the end chapters, and like most of John and what have you, focus on his death.

And it's clearly the case that the gospels want to draw your attention not to the beginning of Jesus' life or what happened in between, but rather the ministry, and then of course his death and resurrection.

That is clearly the focus. Even if you just take the books and divide them up proportionately in terms of focus, all the focus is on either speaking about the death and resurrection or the death and resurrection itself.

Jesus is personal, the personal God coming to seek and to save sinners, giving us a way of escape from the wrath of God to come because Jesus has taken it in our place.

[10 : 25] It's personal. The pandemic is very impersonal. So I think on balance, though I don't want to stand here, and you've never had me stand here in the last 10 years that I've been here and say, this is what God wants you to know.

I say that only in light of reading his word, the same word you read, but I'm never going to stand here and say, God has told me. God has told me that the pandemic has been sent from him.

I'm not going to do that because I can't do that. And by implication, if you understand what I'm saying, I'm also saying that no one else can do that. And if they have done that, then we've got serious problems because not only do we lose the basis of authority and means of interpretation, when people don't know how to handle the word of God, it's very difficult to say to someone, God didn't say that to you.

And I have been in a meeting where someone has got up and spoken this great elaborate vision, and someone else, five minutes later, or just after they finished speaking, got up and said, God has said, that wasn't me.

And you think, well, what are you supposed to do in that? Everyone burst out laughing at the point, but it was a serious issue. And I think the man who said that wasn't me was making the point that it's very, very difficult to know what is from God other than what is from God in the word that we have.

[11 : 54] So if the pandemic is a message from God, it's not clear to me. And I don't think it's really clear to anyone. The clear message is the one that he's given us in the person of Jesus Christ.

The message that actually seeks and saves and rescues people from the much bigger problem than the COVID-19 virus, which is the wrath of God to come.

That's where our focus ought to be. However, however, God is not mocked.

God has never been mocked. Pharaoh couldn't get away with it. Nebuchadnezzar couldn't get away with it. The Ninevites could not get away with what they were trying to get away with.

And people will reap what they sow. God has so ordered his creation and ordered the world in such a way that we understand things as seed time and harvest.

[12 : 59] That if you sow one type of seed, you'll get one type of crop. And so what is sown, you will also reap. And so what the world experiences is largely due to what they have sown.

And what they have sown comes back not only to the generation that has sown it, but so often to the generation that follows. So the previous generation can make it much worse for the generation that follows them because of the attitudes and the things that have been sown previously.

God has spoken like this quite clearly. I pray all the time that my sins, that God does not take my sins and they make their way out into my children.

And God, I know that that type of thing will happen because the Bible says that type of things happen. It should be no surprise to a father or a mother to see the sins that they commit coming out in their children.

This is the way it's sowing and reaping. And we tend to think, well, that's just a personal issue. No, it's a national issue. It can happen right across the board.

[14 : 14] God allows us to see causes and effects so that he would allow us to understand that we are responsible. One of the best ways for a person to understand that they are responsible is for them to see the consequences of their own actions.

And the consequences of your actions is largely due to what you sow and what you reap, or rather what you don't sow and therefore you don't reap.

There's a wonderful bluegrass song that comes out of America about the boy who couldn't bother to get up at springtime and sow seed.

And then when it came to harvesting the corn, he had nothing to harvest because he didn't put the work in when he was meant to back then. And then when it came harvest time, he's got nothing to harvest.

Now he has to live with a consequence of a decision that he made months ago, which was a decision to do nothing. It'll be all right. We'll get there in the end. Life just, life never works like that.

[15 : 20] What we sow, we reap personally and nationally. And God is not marked. And so what the world goes through is not taking God by surprise.

It's completely ordained within the will of God. My free will has been ordained by God, which sounds like an oxymoron. It's a bit like saying dry water.

How can every single choice I make be ordained by God and the freedom I have to be ordained by God? How can both be true? Well, they can be true.

If you imagine Shakespeare and the play Hamlet or you imagine any other author in play where you have the person writing the story and then you have the people in the story.

Well, you're able to understand that the person in the story has their own character, has their own will, they're doing their own thing, making their own decisions, but the author is directing every single bit of it.

[16 : 18] Well, if we can understand that on a human level, just with the story, how much greater is God able to ordain our free choices and yet ordain those choices as well?

Complicated it may be, but it's simply another demonstration that God is not mocked. God is never mocked. Pharaoh didn't get away with it.

Nebuchadnezzar didn't get away with it. And these are pagan nations. These are nations that do not have the wealth of knowledge that Israel had, for instance, growing up in Egypt.

And Daniel knew and understood in Babylon. And Jonah having to go to Nineveh. And yet God's authority is still able to reach into those nations and direct what happens.

What does this mean? Well, it means that when God speaks, the listener has to do two things. Not only do they have to listen to what God has said, what God has promised, what God has instructed, what God has explained and demonstrated in what he's saying, the person has to understand those words within the creation itself so that we don't understand God's word independent of the world that we live in.

[17 : 39] Hence, there's a big difference between believing that you are to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and saying, I'm a believer because I believe that I'm to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

There's a big difference between that and seeking first the kingdom of God and righteousness. One is an action, one is a belief in an action. And sometimes we redefine the actions to beliefs only.

So we say, yes, I believe that we should seek righteousness, but we're not actually doing it. But we comfort ourselves because we've redefined the action to a belief only and say, well, I'm okay because I believe the right things.

Well, it's good that you believe the right things, but seeking righteousness on earth is like Jonah going to Nineveh. It's like Pharaoh going into, like Moses going into Pharaoh and saying, let my people go.

That's why, because God is looking for righteousness to be established on earth. The reason Jesus came and the reason why Jesus Christ will restore all things is because they are unrighteous and Jesus is seeking to restore righteousness throughout the world and, of course, through his people.

[18 : 59] God's authority is over the whole of creation and God has ordered creation in such a way that if bad things are sown, then a bad harvest will be reaped.

And if good things are sown, then good things will be reaped. So you can sow righteously or you can sow unrighteously. And the world is reaping a harvest at this time of things that have been not only brewing but have been sown for the last 20 or 30 years.

And the pandemic has just given the opportunity like a magnifying glass to see things clearer, to expose them.

They were always there but the pandemic has allowed people to see those things which most people knew that were there clearer than ever before.

Hence why we've had mass demonstrations on streets, this idea of decolonization and neo-Marxism and you think, well, what are you talking about?

[20 : 13] I don't see any of that in the world. It's there. It's there. And it even got as far as the proms as to whether or not they were going to sing a certain song and yet they went ahead and did it because it was a colonization song and should they sing, you know, this is an oppressive song.

Well, all of these things are beginning to be exposed in a world where people are being locked down. People are just venting and it's nothing more than sowing and reaping.

And therefore, one of the most important things we need to do as Christians is to be able to look at the world and what's happening and understand, yeah, not only is there a lot of unrighteousness in the world, but the church has to put its hand up and say, we believe in seeking first the kingdom of God and righteousness, but we've not done it.

We've not actually done it. We've redefined the action to a belief so that we can comfort ourselves that we believe the right things, but we've not actually done what we are meant to be doing.

And so God gives us his words to be able to interpret them in the world. When Jesus says, I am the door, we know that he's not a literal door. When he says, I am the way, the truth, and the life, we understand that what he is saying is that he is the way to God, into the presence of God, the way of eternal life, we interpret these sayings.

[21 : 47] Those who continue in sin are not born of God. What does that mean? Well, it means that we identify people by those statements. If you continue in sin, John says, you're not born of God.

Well, I'm either going to be convicted or I'm going to either have assurance that I belong to God because I'm repenting of my sin and not committing sin contrary to what I believe is true.

God gives us his word to make a difference in the real world and to make a difference to our lives. And so, God's word is either upheld and lived out or it is simply believed or it's completely rejected as many do in the world.

So, when Jonah went to Nineveh, just as an example, is a wonderful example of God's word isn't just for God's people and that God's authority isn't just for God's people and that God's righteousness is to extend into all nations not just amongst God's people.

It's a bit like Christians who believe that the Ten Commandments are only for God's people. No, the Ten Commandments are for the world. Everyone's meant to live by the Ten Commandments but we have almost privatized that kind of idea to the Christian church that these are our laws and that only we keep them.

[23 : 15] They're meant to be kept by everyone. And so, what we have seen in the world according to God's word is nations that are sowing and reaping and the same kind of corruption that you can find throughout God's word with people within nations you can find throughout the world.

Hence why it is entirely possible for people to sow and reap and other people to suffer because the idea of nations being such that people are supported within the nation that they belong to is just not true.

So, what does this mean for us moving forward? You say, well, I can't really do anything about it. Again, this isn't a message to get you to do something but rather at least for you to see that the things that the church ought to have been doing they have not been doing.

And perhaps we do need to start but then the difficulty is how do you get Christians to do things that they don't believe in, that they ought to believe in because everything comes down to, well, I see it differently.

So, someone has to lead the way and I can remember saying, it was Keith, I can remember and he says, what do you think of the two most important things?

[24 : 36] I said, well, the two most important things for a church, this was the conversation, I said that the church has to be teachable and leadable and he went, yeah, of course.

So, I said, what do you think? And he smiles at me as he always did but he didn't really give me a straight answer which was fine because he could get away with it but the point was that he understood that there is a difference between being teachable and leadable that a church has to be both and so, you know, it sits with me tremendously heavy.

I hope God is merciful on me when I meet him and I've tried to teach faithfully for 10 years here but I don't think I've managed to get any of you to follow and so, for the last five years at least from 2015 I've just started doing my own thing in my own time out with the church just to see if the problem is with me or if it's with, hmm, I'd never say it was with you.

So, I thought, well, I'll just promote things that I think are godly and see whether or not and sure enough it's the age-old example that people will commit to what I call the *ordo amoris* that when people are able to make and understand what is valuable and able to understand how to make those valuable connections then they'll commit to things, they'll invest in things, they'll look further forward.

But when you have a group of people within a church who are all very lovely people and it's not a criticism, it's just an observation for why a church doesn't progress.

[26 : 16] And it doesn't progress because I think one very, very simple reason and that is because we all have our individual commitments rather than understanding what seeking first the kingdom of God and righteousness actually looks like.

What do those actions actually look like? And if it's possible for God's people around the world to establish schools and hospitals and care homes and care packages all out with the church, all fully with God at the center, then it should be possible for all of God's people to do that.

And of course, my vision is hopefully shaped by God's word that in the end, as far as the way I read the Bible, God is not wins but he has already won.

The whole point of the cross is victory. We live on the victory side. We're not waiting to see who's going to win in the end.

We won. And yet we can often live as defeatists, as the, I can't try anything, the world's going to pot, it's going to hell in a handbasket, let's just give it up, please Jesus, just come back now, it's not going to get any better.

[27 : 40] And we want to escape the very world that Jesus is restoring righteousness into. Why do you want to escape something that Jesus is making better?

Go read, we look, we've read Colossians and Galatians, we've read, we've done these books together as a church. So what does it mean?

What does it mean for us as a church to speak into these issues? Well in many ways, some of us are going to have like the Jonah experience where we do have to speak into nations and say like what you're doing is wrong and it's wrong according to the righteousness of God.

It's not necessarily wrong according to your standard but it's wrong according to the righteousness of God that all authority belongs to Jesus and I'm seeking his righteousness as I'm told to do in these very vocal and action, ways of action.

So I don't find it surprising at all and I think neither do any of you to understand that one of the biggest things that is on the news is the economy of how the economy has been hit by the coronavirus and of course as Jonah rightly said those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.

[29 : 01] In other words, those who look to other things and make those things gods and to trust in those things have come to realize that they don't save.

God has been made of money by many nations and yet at this very time it's not saving anyone. And so we ought to be able to see that these people are people who are trusting in the idols of the world thinking that they can save them and yet they can't save anyone.

It concerns me that people are growing up thinking that such views is like neo-Marxism and sort of critical race theory and socialism and stuff.

Who are teaching these people to believe these type of things? How do people end up believing these type of things? And do we understand the difference that it actually makes for the coming world?

The point here is to understand that what is sown is reaped and many Christians look onto the world and don't see any of this and yet it's actually there in God's word for us.

[30 : 17] What do you do when people in the world can no longer tell the difference between equity and equality? I'll tell you what will happen. you'll have riots upon riots upon riots and that's exactly what you've got.

People are crying out for equity because they think it means the same as equality. Christians know that equality that God looks upon us in exactly the same we're all his children but he doesn't treat us the same.

He never treats his children the same. He doesn't even give us the same amount. We belong to a father who gives out more to one child than he does to another. And this is why we read Romans are you going to complain that you belong to a God like that?

I mean can God not choose to do whatever he pleases? Some Christians he makes rich other Christians he keeps poor some Christians he allows them to live in a country where there are no opposition to Christianity in other countries there's massive persecution.

God loves us all the same because we're all his children but he does not treat us the same or allow us to live within the same circumstances as everyone else. This is the God that we belong to because the calling is to seek first the kingdom and righteousness.

[31 : 45] That's what should occupy us. And so it's no surprise that those who live in comfortable countries are more comfortable in their faith because one has a knock on to the other.

And so the pandemic has had this effect of this magnifying glass. It has exposed what has always been there. It's like the water in a cracked glass that the moment the glass is filled the water begins to leak.

You didn't see the crack before but it only took the water in the glass to expose it. And so this is what has happened that if anyone's paying attention to God's world through the lenses of scripture you'll understand exactly what is happening and why it is happening.

The pandemic has simply allowed us to see it with clarity. So with this I'll finish. One of the things that concerns me is that is it possible that the church could enter into a Hezekiah attitude?

Hezekiah as you'll know got word that he was going to die and then he prayed to the Lord can I have a few more years?

[32 : 59] And Isaiah the prophet is explaining to Isaiah this and Hezekiah prays and God gives him 15 more years. things. Now you would imagine that or at least I would that your decision over 15 of wanting more time would depend on what you've got to look forward to.

Because if you've not got much to look forward to, take me now. Okay? That's an important part. God gives him 15 extra years and then the word of the Lord comes to Isaiah the prophet to go and tell Hezekiah what's about to happen.

And Hezekiah is told that there's coming a day, he won't get to see, his 15 years will be up and he'll be dead at that point. But his nation will be carried off into Babylon, the people will be carried off into Babylon, even his own sons will be carried off into Babylon and made eunuchs.

And Hezekiah says this, the word of the Lord that you have spoken is good. For he thought, why not, if there will be peace and security in my days?

And what he's saying is this, well as long as I've got it good, I don't have to worry about what comes after me. As long as I've got it good, I don't have to worry about what comes after me.

[34 : 29] When the church loses the very biblical principle of sowing and reaping, we tend to think that things finish with us. They never finish with us.

What we sow is reaped at a later date. And sometimes we want to hold on to the things as they are just so that we can see our time out on earth.

We don't want anything to move on from what it currently is because we want to see our time out on earth just as it is now. We don't want anything to change because that will cause further problems for us to sort out down the line.

I wonder if the church has not just our church but over the years adopted a Hezekiah attitude where we only are concerned about our life and our period of time on earth.

We don't think about what will happen to those who come after us. God will be to God and God's righteousness and redefining the action into a belief and comforting yourself that you're doing it because you're believing it.

[35 : 39] God but it's not something just to be believed. It's something to do. And so the call I think for all of us here this morning is not only to pray that we would be a people who seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness but understand what that means.

That we're seeking God's righteousness to be established in every square inch of this world. Every square inch. And we are concerned with it in such a way that we understand that it will fit within the sowing and reaping process.

That what you sow today, think of the many Sunday school teachers that sowed the gospel into young lives and those young lives you've never seen again. And then suddenly 15 or 20 years later they confess faith and go, well actually I learnt the gospel in Sunday school here.

That's what I'm talking about. That's what I'm talking about. Amen. Well let's close with this final song before we have the closing words.

The house of the Lord our God, we will seek your good. And may we know the mercy of the Lord as we go. And I pray this for you all.

[36 : 59] In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

What were you laughing at? I put your sins. Oh right, yeah, you're crying.

Amen. Do you recognise him?

Has he?