

“Faith in Crisis”

Robert M. Thompson, Pastor

Corinth Reformed Church
150 Sixteenth Avenue NW
Hickory, North Carolina 28601
828.328.6196 corinthtoday.org

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God is neither surprised nor worried about the coronavirus.

Habakkuk 3:16-20; Mark 12:18-27

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I was wrong

One week ago I said from this pulpit that there’s too much hype and I for one wasn’t ready to give up shaking hands or gathering people together. Today I have only one thing to say about that, no, two: “I was wrong” and “I’m sorry.” In stages this week, we at Corinth have embraced both social distancing and social isolation.

In the midst of it, we can’t completely lose our sense of humor. One of my favorite moments this week was a text from Matt, who will be my son-in-law in about a month. Matt plays in Sunday morning ice hockey pickup games, just for fun. Yesterday he received a text message: “Due to concerns surrounding the novel coronavirus and in accordance with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the World Health Organization, and other health authorities, (Sunday morning ice hockey) will be played without fans in attendance.” Matt forwarded a screen shot to the family and added, “Thought this was funny. There has never, ever been one fan there.”

If we aren’t accustomed to clustering around Sunday morning pick up ice hockey, we are programmed for close contact in airplanes, sports venues, schools, and churches. The idea of putting a hold on all of that for even a week or two, much less longer, was virtually unthinkable until the novel coronavirus arrived. Now it’s the new normal.

Here’s what it means for the church. It means we will, indeed, stop doing business as usual, which depends on shoulder-to-shoulder and face-to-face community. What it doesn’t mean is that we will stop being the church. It means we will reinvent how we do worship, community, service, and mission. We will lean in to this crisis. We

will follow recommended guidelines for social distancing, but we will use the Internet, the telephone, and whatever else to shine light into a world that suddenly feels darker.

What ideas do you have? How can we be Jesus' hands and feet to those most impacted by self-isolation? One person has already offered to help deliver food or medicine, another to meet people in a parking lot if they're afraid to go in the store to get their food. David Lowry serves as medical director for Caldwell County Hospital. He told me the healthcare system is already overburdened even before the first case of Covid-19 in our area. When the pandemic hits, healthcare workers may need meals or childcare for their out-of-school children, even homemade surgical masks if supplies run low. What can we do? What are you willing to do? Let us know.

Let's follow the example of the church throughout the ages and reinvent ourselves to love each other and the world because we love God and are loved by him.

Why is the church able to respond like this? Because we know the power of God and the Scriptures. God is neither surprised nor worried about the coronavirus. I didn't say he doesn't care. In the midst of our disasters and crises, we turn to the omniscient, omnipotent Creator in whose hands is life and death, healing and hope.

We choose to trust the power of God. We also look again to the Scriptures. From cover to cover we find stories of God's people facing the impossible, the novel, the crisis that upends and redefines life in previously unimaginable ways. The prophet Habakkuk addressed the southern kingdom of Judah when they faced the impending invasion of a cruel and ruthless army of Babylonian invaders. The result would be their version of a stock market that crashed, shelves emptied of toilet paper and disinfectant, and families isolated at home for who knows how long. Habakkuk's response?

*Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.
The Sovereign LORD is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to tread on the heights.*

We turn to the Scriptures and to the power of God because to do otherwise will inevitably lead to deep despair. These are times to read the Bible not for petty slogans or personalized promises of prosperity, but for rebuilding a deep theology that reminds us who God is. We need the power of God more than ever. We need the Scriptures more than ever.

Time for Jesus to die

In our New Testament lesson today, we come across a group of people who don't know the power of God or the Scriptures. Mark 12 is very appropriate for crisis. This story takes place on Tuesday before Jesus' crucifixion on Friday. No execution in the history of the world has had a greater impact than the death of Jesus. Tuesday is the day that sealed his fate. Jesus is on the Temple Mount, a large stone platform the size of 28 empty football fields. It is the center of Jewish religious life, and he's there during the week before Passover, the most important of the three annual festivals requiring every man who could to attend in person.

What's important about this story is that Jesus and the religious leaders in Jerusalem are all on the same page. It's time for Jesus to die. Jesus up to this point has urged others to keep his identity secret. Now he rides a donkey into Jerusalem on Sunday and the next day overturns the tables of the money changers as a direct assault on the religious and political system. For this and other reasons they want to kill him, but he's ready to die. Various factions of these religious authorities challenge him on Tuesday, trying to trap him in his words so that they can either diminish his popularity among the people or give Rome a good reason to execute him, or both.

Sad, you see

Mark 12:18 says the Sadducees don't believe in the resurrection. This is what made them "sad, you see." (I heard that twice this week, so I had to include it. Sorry.) You will find no shortage of theories about who the Sadducees were, but all of it is somewhat uncertain since they didn't leave us written records. We're fairly sure they were aristocrats who stayed close to Jerusalem to oversee the temple functions. They had significant power and representation in the Sanhedrin. Their theology was based on the books of Moses only. They didn't recognize the validity of the writings and the prophets or other oral traditions passed down by Jewish rabbis.

Like any other affinity group, they held on to their set of private biases and jokes and what they considered to be unanswerable objections for their opponents. I picture the Sadducees getting together and asking which impossible dilemma they can present before Jesus that will make him stumble and stutter and cry Uncle: "You got me there! I suppose there's no answer for that, so I'll clink back to Galilee, tail between my legs."

Verse 19 introduces their trap. "Teacher," they said (but they don't mean it) "Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother."

They are referring to Deuteronomy 25. The law of Levirate marriage (from *levir*, meaning "brother") was originally designed to protect property inheritance. The property was almost always held in the man's name. A young man would marry, have a son, and pass on the family land to his son, then grandson, and so on. But what if the

man died before he had a son? In that case, his brother was to marry the widow and the first son produced would bear the name of the deceased brother and also become his heir. Otherwise, the widow might marry someone from another clan or country and the land would leave the family.

The Sadducees had no desire to make Levirate law look ridiculous, but they did want to make resurrection (and therefore Jesus) look ridiculous. It was assumed then, as it still is now for many who believe in life after death, that when you marry you do so not only for life but forever. In other words, you get to share eternity with your sweetheart. If that's true, resurrection makes Moses ridiculous. How can a woman be married to multiple men? (I don't know that they had a problem with a man being married to multiple women.)

In verses 20-22, their hypothetical situation has seven different brothers sequentially marrying the same woman trying to produce an heir for the first. They all die before she does, and none produces an heir. Verse 23 is their punch line: "At the resurrection, whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?"

The Sadducees were quite sure Jesus was caught between a biblical rock and a logical hard place. Their conclusion, not directly stated but clearly implied, is this: Resurrection is absurd. Resurrection actually nullifies God's law. God can't raise the dead and he won't raise the dead. This life is all there is. They really did believe they had caught Jesus. The people would now see how stupid he really is.

Badly mistaken

Jesus' response is both enlightening and a bit puzzling. It is also relevant for such a time as this, a time of crisis. Here's a summary of what he says.

First, the Sadducees are wrong. Verse 24: "Jesus replied, 'Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God?'" In this case, Jesus agrees with the Pharisees against the Sadducees. Never let your assumptions or your friends or your enemies get in the way of the truth. There are some areas we can disagree, but there are also the non-negotiables. The resurrection of the dead is one of them. We need to dispense with the idea that theology is personal – you can sort of make up the kind of God you like and worship him. When you don't know the Scriptures or the power of God, you will find yourself "in error" like the Sadducees. And you won't be ready for any novel crisis.

Second, life after death will surprise everyone. Jesus continues in verse 25: "When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven." The Sadducees are making assumptions about heaven based on our current experience. We still do this today. We think of heaven as a place where we leave behind the worst of this life but hold on to the best. For most (not everyone) sex and marriage and family are among God's best gifts, so we want them to continue.

The Bible is actually very reserved in its description of the life to come. The Bible gives us mostly negatives and analogies. The negatives include no death in heaven, no sorrow, no night, no sun, no sin or sinners, and, as we learn in this text, no marriage. As for analogies, heaven is like a wedding, like a mansion, like a perfect city. Our existence is like the angels.

We want to know more. Will we know our loved ones? Will we live in families? Will we have our pets? Will we be able to enjoy golf or chocolate or oceans or mountains or ice cream? The problem with all of those questions is that what awaits us is so far beyond our current experience that we can't understand it. Imagine trying to explain to a baby in the womb what it will be like to be able to talk or have a family or climb a mountain or pet a dog? Passing from this life to the next is like that. Even something as wonderful (to many of us, not all) as marriage and family is only a glimpse of knowing and being known in the resurrection life. Whatever that life will be, it will be different but infinitely better.

It is important to note that Jesus doesn't say we will be angels, just like them. But again, in what ways? The clear answer is that we won't marry, because angels don't marry. But in what other ways? Will we shine? Will we fly? Will we receive special assignments as messengers? We don't know all the answers; just that our existence and desires will be something other they are now. Everything will be incomparably lovelier.

Third, the Torah itself teaches there is life after death. Verse 26 continues, "Now about the dead rising, have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the account of the burning bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'?" The Sadducees must have been surprised to hear Jesus say, "Have you not read...." about one of the most well-known passages in the Law, Exodus 3. Their eyes had seen those words, but their hearts had missed it. They brought their inadequate theology to the Bible, which prevented them from seeing the obvious.

Jesus concludes in verse 27, "He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!" You think that there is nothing after death, but God tells Moses, "I still have a living, vital, interactive relationship with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." I am still their God. I'm not done with people when they die.

So there you have it. Less than 72 hours before Jesus hangs on a cross, he declares to Sadducees and all of us, Whatever crisis you ever face, you'll only be ready for it when you know the Scripture and the power of God. Truth will get you through.

No time like today – Pastor Paul Cummings

Imagine the relationship between Jesus and the Sadducees. I can imagine it with a little analogy. My wife teaches in the Preschool here. I used to go visit her class and the kids would say, "Hey, Pastor Paul!" Then it was, "Hey, Pastor Potato." Then they started going hard. "Hey, Pastor Diaper Head." They started adding more names. Last

week during Preschool Sunday as the kids were marching into worship service they leaned in and said, “Hey, Pastor Poop Face!” “Hey, Pastor Dumb Dumb.” It was that way with Jesus. He showed up to give life and all they wanted to do was tear him down.

In Mark 12, we have the Sadducees giving it to Jesus. When you avoid the truth you ask the wrong questions. How sad it would be to be in a religious system where you can only look back and see what God has done versus what God is doing right now. The Sadducees had the richness of history, but they said no – no to Psalms, no to prophets. They thought they knew everything they needed to know with the first five books. Jesus shows them that they missed it even with the Pentateuch. They were so intent on what had happened that when the living God showed up, they were blind. They missed him.

I’ll paint this through my own bias, but what if researchers at Carolina discovered the cure for the coronavirus and went over to Duke to present the cure? Then all they got from Duke was rebuke. In reality a lot of Christians are like this as well. Our faith is built entirely on a past event with Jesus but there’s no daily, current walk with him. “I went to Young Life camp,” but there’s no current walk. “I went through Confirmation,” but there’s no current walk. “I walked the aisle at a Billy Graham event and remember giving my life to Jesus,” but there’s no current walk. It was that thing that happened back there, but isn’t current.

When a crisis comes, if you only have a past with Jesus, you act like the rest of the world – fear, desperation, anxiety, panic. When we read what Martin Luther or Dionysus said about the plague, there wasn’t the same attitude as the world. Instead, when we are walking with the God of peace we have peace. When we walk with the God of power we have power. When the power of this world comes, it’s dwarfed by the power of God. Scripture and the power of God are not once and done, but a way of life.

So let me ask you a couple of pointed questions. First, how have you ensured that you don’t have to lean on God? We build up our finances and our health and our routine in such a way that we don’t need God. Pastor Benard from Kenya is used to working in a ministry where they are in daily fear for their lives over what people who hate the Gospel might do. He’s used to leaning into God daily. He doesn’t ask for small things; he prays and dreams for things only God’s power can do.

Second, what distraction has kept you from having to lean on God? To borrow from Dr. Phil, how’s that working for you? Every time you turn on the news or Facebook or Instagram, you’re confronted with the coronavirus.

God is not like us. He’s not saying, “Since you didn’t need me then, I won’t be with you now.” God is merciful. Even in the midst of crisis, God wants to respond to you with the power of God and the Scripture. There’s no time like today. Even if it’s been forty years since you accepted Christ, there’s no time like the present to have a present and a future with Jesus. Don’t let Jesus simply be your past. Let him be your present and your future. Lean on his power through his Scripture. Amen.