

Covid 19 Response

In the 2nd Century, starting in 166 AD. The Roman Empire was decimated by what is known as the Antonine Plague. This pandemic was started by troops returning from campaigns in the Near East.

A Roman physician by the name of Galen described symptoms of fever, diarrhea, and inflammation of the throat. The skin erupted in pus-filled sores. Modern experts believe it was some form of the small pox virus. The Antonine plague lasted for 23 years. We're freaking out about several months and they were looking at decades. This plague killed approximately 10% of the population.

The pagan response to the outbreak was abandonment. Physicians retreated to the refuge of their homes. Roman leaders fled Rome for the countryside. Roman troops who were housed in winter barracks were wiped out in large numbers.

In Athens, so many upper class citizens died, that they had to open up membership to the ruling council to those previously excluded. Taxes in the major cities dried up as populations either died or fled the plague. Government building projects came to a dead stop for 14 years. Meanwhile the construction of temples and shrines to pagan idols intensified as they tried to placate their angry gods. If a family member became ill, the common practice was to expel them from the home and let them die of exposure.

Similarly, in the 3rd Century, the Roman Empire was hit by the Cyprian Plague. Beginning about 250 AD a viral hemorrhagic fever like Ebola devastated the population for two decades. It claimed more than 5,000 victims a day in the city of Rome. Sufferers experienced bouts of diarrhea, continuous vomiting, fever, deafness, blindness, paralysis of their legs and feet, swollen throats and blood filled eyes. More often than not, death resulted.

Although, this is a new experience for us, for most of our spiritual forbearers the threat of widespread disease was an everyday reality of life. In fact, the success and growth of the early church was due, in large part, to how our earliest brothers and sisters in Christ responded to these pandemics.

Chances are when you rang in the New Year, January 2020 you had never heard of Covid 19. My spellcheck in Word underlines it in red as if I'd misspelled it. Coronavirus was probably new to you as well, and if you'd heard it before, you certainly didn't know anything about it.

There are other terms we've added to our terminology in recent days as well— *social distancing* and *flattening the curve*. It's not just our vocabulary that has changed. It is changing our lives whether we want it to or not.

For some of us, the past couple of weeks have been much ado about nothing. "It's just like getting the flu" some say. Others of us, however, know that just one touch in the wrong place

at the wrong time, one ill-timed breath of air could be a death sentence. Whether it's because of your age or some medical condition it can be disheartening to think that a simple trip to the store is a journey through the valley of the shadow of death.

With each passing day, however, it feels more and more like we're all in some sort of pandemic disaster movie. All sports are shutdown. Schools are closed. You can't go to your favorite place to eat. Store shelves are stripped bare. You have coworkers that are quarantined. You've been sent to work from home, which can be hard to do when the kids are there too.

Somewhere in the midst of all this, no matter how much rugged, independent, Ozark mountain blood you have flowing through your veins, you can't help but wonder, "What if?" What if it's as bad as they're saying? What if it gets worse? What if it goes on a long time? What if I get it or someone in my family gets it?

By now you've heard all the medical and public policy recommendations until you know it all by heart. Wash your hands. Avoid large crowds. Wash your hands. Don't touch your face. Wash your hands. Avoid going out. Wash your hands. Practice social distancing. Wash your hands. Flatten the curve.

What I want to do this morning is give a Biblical response to this. How do we look at something such as the Covid-19 outbreak with a Christian worldview? How do we be like Jesus in the midst of a pandemic? How do we be the church in a time like this?

I know we were supposed to be doing Core 52 for the whole year, and it's been a great series. We'll get back to Core 52, I promise, but I believe this is one of those times in ministry that warrants putting your scheduled preaching on the shelf and responding to the need at hand. I can recall two times in my ministry where I've completely changed by planned sermons at the last minute. One was after 9-11, and the other was after a mass shooting indirectly impacted the church I was serving. Now, I will add Coronavirus to the list. If you're doing the Core 52 book and following along in the devotions, go ahead and keep doing that, because we jump right back in.

How do we apply Jesus' teachings such as "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," "Love your neighbor as yourself," and "Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" to a global pandemic?

How our earliest brothers and sisters in Christ responded to these crisis and provide for us an example to follow. I want to look at this this morning in terms of the right response over the wrong response. The biblical response over the selfish, sinful response. And in true preacher fashion, I'm going to give you three of them.

I. Plan over Panic

The first is plan over panic. Or you could look at it as prudence over fear. Biblically speaking, it is

wise to have a plan and to work a plan. It is a bit surreal to walk through the grocery store and see so many empty shelves. It reminds how much we take for granted in modern life can quickly disappear.

But can I be blunt with you for a moment? The reason there's not toilet paper on the shelves, and a whole bunch of other stuff as well, is because people don't have a plan. When you don't have a plan, when you're not prepared, you panic. These people panic and they fill their whole car with Charmin and a week later, they're back at Wal-Mart returning extra toilet paper because now that can't pay their bills. You've probably seen those signs where store are not accepting returns on all these things that people are hoarding. They didn't plan. They panicked.

When you have a relationship with Jesus, you know that God is ultimately in control of everything, but you also know that God expects us to use our minds. He expects us to grow in wisdom and think. And that means wisely planning and being prepared.

Proverbs is full of sayings about the wisdom of planning. Proverbs 21:5, *"The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty comes only to poverty."*

Prov. 24:27, *"Prepare your work outside; get everything ready for yourself in the field, and after that build your house."* Can I paraphrase that for you? Don't start a project until you get your poop in a group.

The greatest story of wise planning in the Bible comes from the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis. Joseph had been sold into slavery by his brothers, then he was falsely accused and was thrown in prison. While behind bars, he interpreted a vision of Pharaoh's cupbearer who had done something to tick off the king and was also serving time.

Two years later, Pharaoh had a vision of his own, and this is when the king's cupbearer remembered Joseph and his ability to interpret such visions and he told Pharaoh about it. God enabled Joseph to interpret the vision which was there would be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine.

Joseph put together a plan that created a long-term agricultural policy and infrastructure that allowed Egypt to thrive during this famine. Genesis 41:53-54 says,

53 The seven years of plenty that occurred in the land of Egypt came to an end, 54 and the seven years of famine began to come, as Joseph had said. There was famine in all lands, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread.

Jesus himself acknowledges the importance of being prepared. In Luke 14:23-33, he tells this story:

For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build

and was not able to finish.'

Wise planning and preparation doesn't mean that we don't trust God. It's a partnership between God's control and our wise planning. Proverbs 16:9 acknowledges both, "*The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.*" Think about it this way— the way God often provides is through our wise planning and preparation.

A prepared person isn't living on the edge of panic, so when the unexpected happens, they can weather the storm. A panicked person will never be at peace in the midst of the storm, because every wave, every flash lightning, and every crack of thunder will make them wonder what they are not ready for. When panic follows upon panic, there is no peace.

Let's apply this to our current situation. Having an extra case or two of toilet paper makes sense. Having a few flats of canned goods sitting in the pantry is wise preparation. You're not living day to day, vulnerable and exposed to any unexpected situation.

We live in a world where there can be blizzards, ice storms, power outages, and yes, viral pandemics. It's a good idea to have a 30 day supply of food and necessities. It's the same advice that your grandma or great grandma had. Keep enough extra staples on hand that the unexpected doesn't totally upend your life. That's wise. That's prudent. That's just good planning. Sadly, most Americans and many Christians aren't prepared to get by for a single week without 3 trips to Wal-Mart.

Our lack of planning and preparation leads to panic. When we're panicked, we're more likely to be selfish, angry, distrustful, anxious, all these qualities that are the opposite of what we're called to in Christ.

Panic is living in a state of fear. As Christians, we are not to let our lives be dominated by fear. Paul writes in 2 Timothy 1:7, "*For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.*"

Wise planning and prudent preparation, however, lead to living in peace. One of the important lessons we should learn from this time is that we need to wisely plan ahead, so we don't have to panic when we're unprepared. As a Christian, we choose to plan rather than panic.

II. Give over Get

Secondly, as believers, we should seek to give over get. Give over get. Generosity should beat selfishness every time. One of the most disconcerting realizations over these last couple of weeks is just how selfish some people can get. Whether it's buying more toilet paper at once than your whole family could use in year or buying \$17,000 worth of Purell just so you can price gouge at \$20 a bottle, we are seeing some Americans at their worst.

Times of need and crisis should be times for our generosity to shine. Give over get is as old as ancient Israel. Leviticus 25 contains this law:

35 *"If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you.*
 36 *Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God, that your brother may live beside you.* 37 *You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit.*

One of the reasons we as Christians are to be prepared and have enough in times of need is not just so that we have enough. It's so that we can share with others. Hebrews 13:16 says, *"Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God."*

The Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Ephesians and commanded those who had been stealing to no longer steal, but to do honest work with their own hands. This wasn't just to provide for himself, but as Paul says in Ephesians 4:28, *"so that he may have something to share with anyone in need."*

What kind of difference would it make, if during this crisis people knew the place where they could get food and toilet paper were Christians? My churchgoing neighbors next door just gave me toilet paper. They didn't charge me \$10 per roll. What kind of witness would that be? Who ever thought toilet paper would be an evangelistic tool.

If some of you have found yourself doing some panic buying over the last couple weeks, try this exercise. Take some rolls of toilet paper wrap each one up in some tissue paper or a Walmart bag or something, and just leave some rolls on your neighbor's front steps with a little note sticking out of the tube that says thinking of you, or something like that.

Run to the store and pick up supplies for someone who is in a high risk group. Call some of our elderly people and visit with them. See if they need anything. Thank a truck driver. Thank the grocery store employee endlessly stocking shelves and dealing with angry customers. Thank the health care worker who is daily facing risk and dealing all sorts of extra hassle to keep us safe. Ask the question, how can I focus on giving at this time and not just getting?

Let others see not only the best of people, but let them see Jesus in you.

However, the greatest things we have to give as followers of Jesus at a time like this aren't things you can buy in a grocery store. They are the matters of the soul that can't be bought, sold, or delivered.

We offer love, hope, encouragement, mercy, and understanding. Like common household supplies, these things can be in short supply in a time of crisis. Lyman Stone writes in *Foreign Policy* magazine:

The coronavirus leaves over 95 percent of its victims still breathing. But it leaves virtually every member of society afraid, anxious, isolated, alone, and wondering if anyone would even notice if they're gone. In an increasingly atomized society, the coronavirus could rapidly mutate into an epidemic of despair...Bereft of work, school,

public gatherings, sports and hobbies, or even the outside world at all, humans do poorly. We need the moral and mental support of communities to be the decent people we all aspire to be.

This is where the body of Christ can stand in the gap. There are so many things that we can give, that the government, that charities, that corporations never can. This crisis can be a shining moment for the church, if only we let our lights shine.

In the plagues of the 2nd and 3rd Centuries it was the church who rose to occasion. When the pagan world was fleeing and abandoning the sick and dying, it was the church who volunteered to care for the sick, even opening their churches to house them. It was followers of Jesus who willingly buried the dead. They did these things often at great risk to themselves.

Christians died in large numbers early on in these plagues, however, those who survived developed a herd immunity, so in the long run, the Christians fared quite well. The Cyprian plague in the 3rd Century gets its name from a church leader named Cyprian, because most of what is known about the plague comes from him as he helped lead the church's response to the pandemic.

He urged Christians to not grieve for plague victims who now live in heaven, but to redouble their efforts to care for the living. Another church leader, Dionysius described how Christians, "Heedless of danger...took charge of the sick, attending to their every need." The pagan emperor Julian complained bitterly of how the "Galileans" would care for non-Christian sick even better than they did.

Most of those who survived the sickness did so because of the love and care of Christians. They had also seen how their pagan doctors and idol worshipping families had abandoned them. So, many people became Christians following these outbreaks. The end result was that the church grew. What if one of the results of the great 2020 Coronavirus pandemic, was a great resurgence of the church, a revival in the land, because Christians answered the call, loved like Jesus, and put giving over getting?

In 1527, when the bubonic plague hit Europe, Martin Luther refused to flee the city and protect himself. Rather, he stayed and ministered to the sick. He urged fellow Christians to do likewise writing, "We die at our posts. Christian doctors cannot abandon their hospitals, Christian governors cannot flee their districts, Christian pastors cannot abandon their congregations. The plague does not dissolve our duties: It turns them to crosses, on which we must be prepared to die."

We all feel so limited right now, but from a biblical perspective, this crisis doesn't limit the church. It unleashes us to love. It is an opportunity to give over get. Let's let the world see Jesus in us. Let the world see the best of the church.

III. Obedience over Obstinace

So, first we plan rather than Panic. We give rather than get, and thirdly we must pursue obedience over obstinance. We may not like everything that those in authority are asking us to do. We may not agree with all of it. We may think it's an overreaction. We might believe it does more harm than good.

But Biblically, here's what civil authorities need to see from the church and from Christians - obedience. They need to see our cooperation and submission. God calls us to obedience in these things. As followers of Jesus we should be the best citizens we can possibly be, and that is doubly important at times like this.

Paul writes in Romans 13:1, *"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God."* He encourages a young minister in Titus 3:1 with these words, *"Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work."*

In the same way, Peter says in 1 Peter 2:13-14, *"Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good."*

The only time the church should be uncooperative and engage in civil disobedience is when the state asks us to disobey God, to go against our foundational beliefs, then as Peter told the governing authorities who had arrested he and John for breaking the law and preaching in the name of Jesus, *"We must obey God rather than men."*

Some may wonder why we aren't going ahead and having church the way we do every Sunday, this principle right here is why. We have been asked by those in authority to do certain things and not to do other things. Now, is not the time or the place to be obstinate.

We are still the church. We can still be the church. You can't cancel the church. You can force the church to do church differently, but so what? We can do that. The church is an organism not an organization. The church filled with believers indwelt by the Spirit of God is a living, breathing thing. We can adapt. We can adjust. We can still glorify God and serve Jesus. None of that has changed.

During the Bubonic plague outbreak I mentioned earlier, Martin Luther also argued that that our duty to love our neighbor also required us not to be reckless or endanger others through our own negligence. Christians should, Luther urged, obey quarantine orders, fumigate their houses, and take all necessary precautions to avoid spreading the disease.

If that means no public gatherings over 10 then so be it. If that means we move church online, then we go online. If that means we share toilet paper in the name of Jesus, then we'll "roll" with it.

Lyman Stone writes in *Foreign Policy* magazine, “For Christians, it is better that we should die serving our neighbor than surrounded in a pile of masks we never got a chance to use. And if we care for each other, if we share masks and hand soap and canned foods, if we “are our brother’s keeper,” we might actually reduce the death toll, too.

In one way we think a great deal too much of the atomic bomb. “How are we to live in an atomic age?” I am tempted to reply: “Why, as you would have lived in the sixteenth century when the plague visited London almost every year, or as you would have lived in a Viking age when raiders from Scandinavia might land and cut your throat any night; or indeed, as you are already living in an age of cancer, an age of syphilis, an age of paralysis, an age of air raids, an age of railway accidents, an age of motor accidents.”

In other words, do not let us begin by exaggerating the novelty of our situation. Believe me, dear sir or madam, you and all whom you love were already sentenced to death before the atomic bomb was invented: and quite a high percentage of us were going to die in unpleasant ways. We had, indeed, one very great advantage over our ancestors—anaesthetics; but we have that still. It is perfectly ridiculous to go about whimpering and drawing long faces because the scientists have added one more chance of painful and premature death to a world which already bristled with such chances and in which death itself was not a chance at all, but a certainty.

This is the first point to be made: and the first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things—praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts—not

huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs. They may break our bodies (a microbe can do that) but they need not dominate our minds.

— “On Living in an Atomic Age” (1948) in *Present Concerns: Journalistic Essays*

Where do you think the line from wise planning crosses to fearful panic?

Where do you think your response to Covid 19 falls in the plan/panic spectrum?

Do you tend to become more generous or more selfish in times of crisis?

What are some ways that you and your family could give to others at this time?

When government official issue recommendations are you suspicious or trusting? Why do you think that is? How should your faith affect that response?