



Be Still & Know

The Impact of Covid-19
on the World, Church & Mission

by Paul Young

The first half of 2020 has proved to be unique. Shops have closed, except those selling food and medicines. Places for gathering and experiencing togetherness have been shut as sports, education, social events and churches have had to cease their activities. Most people have had to stay indoors and we are expected to remain at least 2m away from other people when out for necessities. Health services have been stretched and staff overworked, but appreciated. City centres have fallen silent with many office workers adapting to work from home and some industries shutting down. It feels like the fantasy world of a film set, here and in many parts of the world, as attempts are made to stop the spread of Covid-19.

First detected in Wuhan, China, towards the end of 2019, this new coronavirus has spread with alarming rapidity across the globe. The speed of this virulent disease has been accelerated by travel and people living in close proximity. Symptoms include a fever, dry cough, shortness of breath and in serious cases, pneumonia and

respiratory failure. Its extent and speed have created alarm and deep anxiety in society. It has spread to all five continents, extending into over 200 countries. No community or class of people seems to be immune from its effects. Some may get mild symptoms, while for others, especially older folk or those with underlying health issues, it can be fatal.



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A Fearful World

Alarmed governments around the world have had to react to rapidly changing circumstances introducing the most drastic peacetime regulations we have seen. Draconian powers have been given to the police and promises of huge financial packages have been made for industry, health and care services. All thoughts of austerity or spending restraint have disappeared as governments make desperate efforts to get the epidemic under control. All of this is played out in public through relentless television and social media coverage. Almost hourly updates on numbers of new cases and deaths in different countries have intensified fear and anxiety, with severe loneliness being a problem for many of those ordered to stay indoors.

In Western society there seems to have been two reactions to the fear induced by this virus:

either a deeper sense of community, as people take care of their neighbours, or a deeper sense of selfishness and emphasis upon individualism. A crisis can bring out the best and the worst in the human character.

Where is God?

In this rapidly changing situation, many ask, "Where is God?" How do we react as Christians?

The Bible gives accounts of plagues, pestilence and their accompanying destruction. In biblical times, epidemics were sometimes the judgement of God upon sin. Numbers 16 reveals the loss of nearly 15,000 Israelites due to a plague inflicted by God because of their sinfulness. King David's sin resulted in a terrible plague that took the lives of 70,000 people. Jesus spoke of "great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places..." (Lk. 21:11) in the context of the culmination of the age.

Throughout history, epidemics have emerged from time to time. The present pandemic may parallel past events such as the Black Death and Spanish Flu. So far, the number of deaths due to Covid-19, although tragic, are small in comparison with former plagues. In the Western world, we have improved health facilities and methods of treatment, we have well-trained medical staff and continuing research. Sadly, poorer countries, with limited health services, are much more at risk and face



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the spread of the virus with trepidation. However, Psalm 91 speaks of trusting God and not being afraid of the '...pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday', an apt description of the situation we find ourselves in today.

Impact on Mission

At the time of writing, statistics seem to indicate that the worst of the pandemic may be over in China and slowing down in Italy, but uncertainty remains. Covid-19 should remind people that the world is a dangerous place and life is fragile. It may cause people to take a closer look at their spiritual needs and think more deeply about how Christ can meet them. It may, sadly, encourage some church attenders into a habit of non-attendance after the crisis is over.

work globally at a time when more people are waking up to their need of salvation.

Christians should always live with the sense that the Lord could return at any time and these dreadful events outlined by the Lord are reminders that we should turn to Him and live in the right way. Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (Jn 14:27).

Confident & Obedient

As Christians we need to affirm our confidence in God, knowing that we are eternally secure in Christ. His love for those created in His image is eternal and was revealed at Calvary when Christ died for the sins of the world.

Our confidence in God is reflected in obedience to His Word. Firstly, we obey the government's directives (Rom. 13) and follow the guidelines they lay down for containing and slowing the spread of this disease. Churches may defy government on certain issues (Dan. 6, Ac. 4) but in matters of public health we follow the common-sense guidelines laid down by authorities who are ordained by God.

Secondly, we redouble our commitment to pray for wisdom to be given to authorities and for opportunities for people to ponder the issues of life. Some people have been made to slow down for the first time in their lives. We pray that God will enable them to reflect upon important spiritual and eternal truths. In China, when the epidemic worsened, Christians spent time fasting and rising early to spend hours in prayer. Enforced quiet time enables us, as Christians, to spend more time in communion with God.



Global economic recession may follow, inducing increased political instability. There are likely to be fewer resources available. The stock market has weakened and many small businesses, even large companies, may never recover. Believers could become unemployed or have less disposable income. With churches closed, this all adds up to a potential weakening of support for gospel

More time for personal prayer can be coupled with Bible study to a depth we might not otherwise attain in our busy lives. We need to redeem the time and use the technology available for creative evangelism, while showing the love and kindness of God. The ultimate priority is not the virus but the infection of sin that is alive in every heart and life, a disease much worse and more damaging in its long-term effects than Covid-19.

Faith in His Blessings

Above all these considerations, this pandemic is a timely reminder that we have confidence in the promises of the Lord. He says that all things work together for good to them that love Him. We must believe that truth!

A clear blessing is in the way Christians are being connected through technology. For many years satellite television and social media have been widely used in the Middle

East and in reaching people in closed countries. Now, video streaming, podcasts and social media are being used to make church services available everywhere. This has great potential for evangelism, reaching out to those in lockdown. We heard of one woman who sent for a Bible and was in conversations with Christians about her fear of the future. Pray that the Holy Spirit will move people to consider their eternal destiny and that a creative use of technology will help to reach anxious people with the message of hope.

The uncertainty in our world should remind us that the promised coming of the Lord draws near. We have been made to be still. We should be encouraged to use our time wisely, to reach out to others with the good news and to seek to know the Lord so that we will have confidence at His coming (1 Jn 2:28).

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