

THE GOSPEL MESSAGE

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Spiritual Growth in a Crisis

Jay Graham

I am writing this article in April, 2020, in the middle of the Coronavirus crisis. This article is being published in a later issue, so I cannot be sure if we are still in it, but whether we are or not, I would like to share with you an observation that I was glad to note at the early part of this crisis that continued to be manifest as the crisis continued. As a matter of fact, it was indeed a blessing to observe!

Immediately after this crisis began, it became apparent the vast majority of the Lord's congregations were not going to be able to publicly assemble at any time for a while. Yes, a very few could continue to meet legally due to their very small numbers, but the vast majority of churches could not meet. Of course, we understand this was an attempt to lessen the number of infections and fatalities at the same time or to "flatten the curve" as it is being called in the general population.

This obviously put brothers and sisters in a quandary, and many of them asked, "What can we do?" or "How can we continue to serve and worship the Lord in spirit and in truth?" and "What does God's Word say about what the Lord expects from us, His people in these circumstances?" These are all valid questions that needed to be addressed. And brethren were wrestling with these and other similar questions for answers. Personally, I liked what I was seeing.

Of course, I am not referring to the virus and its many implications, for those in their own right were a grave danger to our society in specific and even to the world in general. I am specifically referring to the mental and spiritual exercises that brethren were going through. These were good and sobering questions, for it was obvious to Christians that the Lord still expected them to be His people for their own benefit and for those of the world who were watching.

As one would expect, after these many discussions, thoughts, and, I am confident, many prayers, brethren came to differing answers. Personally, that was okay with me, for I can easily understand that. After all, there is no earthly headquarters that the Lord's people can turn to for instructions. There is no clergy, as the denominations of men have, to give Christians direction. To be sure, there is the Word of God, and while some might say it contains clear answers to these important questions, of that I am not so certain. However, there are certainly principles to consider and help

brethren come to conclusions.

And yet, there is still room for discussion and judgments to be made as brethren tried to navigate these seemingly special circumstances that we have had to face. It is my thought we must give brethren room to come to their own consciences in these matters. Am I, as an evangelist, the final word or authority? Are other men as leaders among the churches the final word? Of course not! Ultimately, these questions must be settled on a congregational basis only by the various elderships or by evangelists that lead some congregations or even by individual brothers who are working to lead the congregations they are part of to the best of their abilities. To be sure, there have been times in the past when brethren

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seemed to look to men to be spokesmen and voices for the body at large, but in many of these instances harm came as a result to many of the Lord's congregations to various extents. The Lord purposefully and with godly wisdom made His church without such earthly headship, for only Christ holds such a position.

It is for this reason that I personally trust each individual congregation to make judgments as they see fit. Are there some answers that I personally have not agreed with? Of course. But I feel I must give brethren the benefit of the doubt.

What will be the end result with brothers and sisters as they wrestle with these spiritual issues? There will be spiritual growth! As a matter of fact, there already has been that I have seen! I have personally seen and interacted with some brothers and sisters who have considered these issues with seriousness and earnestness who have never seemed to be very involved

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before. I am confident they have grown in their spirits due to gaining knowledge and wisdom as they have wrestled with these very important issues for what may indeed be the very first time. They have asked, "What does God want me to do?"

It may be as simple as brothers who have realized, for the very first time, they are to be the spiritual heads of their families. Perhaps they have had to lead their families in devotional activities in the privacy of their homes that may have included reading the scriptures and praying and speaking of the great spiritual matters that they have been "forced" to consider due to special circumstances that we all have been facing. Who knows, there may even have been seeds planted in their own hearts that may lead them to participate more in their individual congregations as they begin to meet once again. And, can you imagine the precious rejoicing and better appreciation of the assemblies when they do start again! I already praise the Lord for His mercy and courage that He has already and will continue to pour out upon those with soft and sincere hearts. Perhaps they have only needed these "special" circumstances to water and fertilize the seeds that may have been already present in their hearts that they themselves may not have realized.

May we all learn and appreciate more of the truths and guarantees taught in James 1:2-5. May God continue to be with His people scattered throughout this earth as they deal with these various trials. In the end, I am confident the Lord will be glorified if His people hold to Him.

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What a Friend We Have in Jesus?

Charles Fry

The sisters were terribly disappointed. Jesus was their friend, and they believed he was the Great Teacher, the Christ, the Son of God. He was their friend, and they called him "Lord" (**Luke 10:40**). They knew he had healed many who were sick and done wonderful things. So, when their brother, Lazarus, Jesus' friend, was very sick, the sisters, Mary and Martha, sent word to Jesus, "*Lord, the one you love is sick*" (**John 11:1-3**).

Jesus got the message, but Jesus didn't come, and he didn't heal Lazarus from afar. He chose to stay where he was two more days before turning his steps to the place where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived; except Lazarus didn't live. He had died of the illness the sisters had sent word about to their friend, the Lord. By the time Jesus came to the town where Mary and Martha lived, Lazarus had been dead and buried four days. The

sisters and their friends from the surrounding area were mourning when Jesus arrived. News of his approach preceded Jesus' arrival. Martha heard and rushed out to greet him. Though she was glad to see their friend, grief and disappointment were painfully obvious in Martha's greeting, "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died*" (**John 11:21**). Martha then expressed confidence that Jesus could have whatever he asked of God, but it doesn't appear that she had any expectation Jesus would do anything to assuage her grief. She had hope in the future resurrection of the dead, and she plainly said that, disappointed though she was, she believed that Jesus was "*the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world*" (**John 11:27**).

After talking to Jesus, Martha went to bring her sister, Mary, to him quietly, calling her away from the mourners. But the crowd noticed Mary's abrupt departure from the house and followed her to the meeting with Jesus. They saw Mary fall at Jesus' feet. Is this worship? Or is this overwhelming grief, collapsing at the feet of the man she called, "Lord"? Her words echoed the same sad disappointment as Martha's greeting, "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*" She was weeping at his feet, loving the Lord, but distraught with grief for her brother. Jesus loved this family, and they all knew it. John points this out repeatedly in the story. Jesus was deeply affected by the anguish of Mary, of Martha, of the crowd of weeping mourners. Jesus wept. And as Jesus came to the tomb where his friend Lazarus was buried, John says again he was deeply moved. The death of a friend, the grief of friends, these feelings resonated in Jesus, the Teacher, the Lord, the Christ, the Son of God. And yet, he had waited two days after receiving the message of Lazarus illness to start toward their home. He chose to disappoint his friends, though he loved them. He let them suffer sickness, death, and grief, including the confusion of his prolonged absence, when he could have helped with a word.

Jesus took no offense at the sisters' plaintive cry, "*If you had been here...*" Nor did he apologize for allowing them to suffer. He shared their pain, grieved with them, but he had let the process of sickness and death proceed without intervention. Afterward, Jesus did restore Lazarus to them in a phenomenal way. Despite her faith in Jesus, Martha was clearly confused and astonished by the raising of her brother after four days in the tomb (**John 11:39-40**).

Jesus may have had many reasons for allowing his friends' distress, permitting the sadness he shared in but did not prevent. Only one purpose is clearly expressed, when Jesus told the disciples, "*for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe*" (**John 11:14**). Jesus restated that purpose at the tomb in public prayer when he called on the Father saying, "*I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me*" (**John 11:42**). And people did believe in Jesus because of what he did that day (**John 11:45**), when he wept with his friends and then raised a man from the dead after

four days in the tomb.

Jesus had no joy in the disappointment and suffering of his friends, but he saw value in choosing a path that included grief and uncertainty for them. We know that the sisters still loved Jesus though he had disappointed them so badly, because soon afterward Jesus was again in their neighborhood, and a meal was given in his honor, at which Lazarus was a guest and Martha served (**John 12:1-8**). There, Mary anointed Jesus with an expensive perfume, so expensive the value was described as more than a year's wages. When some objected to Mary's tremendous generosity in fealty to Jesus, he defended her and blessed her for her kindness and the honor she showed him.

Has the Lord ever disappointed you? Probably, because his timing and his plan aren't always just what we want. "*Lord, if you had been here...*" Yet there is no doubt that he cares, he sympathizes, he shares the hurts and griefs, and he wants us to trust him no matter what happens, so that, as he did that day, he can show everyone who believes in him "*the glory of God*" (**John 11:40**).

And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us (**Romans 5:2b-5**).

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Blindness that Helps Us See

Michael Allen

In **Acts 13**, Paul and Barnabas set sail on what would be their first missionary journey. Their first stop took them to the Island of Cyprus. After making their way through the entire island, they wound up in the city of Paphos. Here they encounter two men: Sergius Paulus, who wanted to hear the gospel from Paul, and Elymas who wanted to keep Paul from telling this man about the Gospel. The writer Luke describes Elymas in unflattering terms: that he was a Jewish sorcerer and a false prophet (**verse 6**); that he was deceitful, fraudulent, an enemy of righteousness, a son of the Devil; and that he worked in opposition to God (**verse 10**). That is not the kind of spiritual resume any of us would like to have. But whatever opposition is presented by this man is quickly dismissed as Paul tells him that he will be blind for a period of time. Elymas is then led away, Sergius Paulus believes, and Paul and Barnabas continue their ministry.

Giving this man blindness immediately removed all opposition to their message, and through this miracle it

contributed to the belief of someone seeking God. But could there be more to this story? Elymas appears to be a man that didn't want things to change. He was willing to go to great lengths to keep the status quo. He opposed God and the preaching of the Gospel and tried to turn people away from God as an enemy of righteousness. And, in the end, he was given a temporary case of blindness.

Elymas sounds kind of similar to the type of person Paul was before his conversion. Clearly, they are not exactly identical, but their stories do seem to have similarities. Is it possible that Paul saw a little bit of himself in this man, and through similar circumstances had hoped he might see the light as well? Paul knew the effectiveness of blindness for a period of time and maybe this miracle was done to allow them to speak the word AND help someone who opposed the spread of the Gospel. If so, this was similar to what had been done to Paul. The three days that Paul spent in blindness was a blessing that removed all distractions, allowed him to gain a better perspective on his life. Ultimately, his blindness allowed him to see things a lot clearer. For a short period of time something that was very important to him was taken away, so that in the end he could walk away with something better.

In **Philippians 4**, Paul talks about dealing with the extremes of life and working toward an attitude that in all things we do our best to be content with our surroundings. There will be times when things are going great, and times when they are not. But these types of things need to be placed in perspective when compared to our spiritual lives. Bad times are by definition, bad; but maybe they are also times that we can use to try and refocus our efforts and to push aside the day to day distractions that so easily seem to consume us. Maybe this is a time to meditate on where we are today and the direction of our lives, and see if any changes need to be made. Maybe times like these are OUR three days of blindness, so that we can emerge on the other side with a better spiritual perspective.

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Glory to God!

The church in Vincennes, IN rejoiced when Jamal Sidney was buried with Christ on May 1.

Blessed Are the Dead

Mildred H. Oldham, 93, of Marceline, MO died May 15. She married Leroy Oldham on April 5, 1944, and he preceded her



Please check your expiration date!

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in death in 1982. Mildred was a graduate of Marceline High School and babysat for many children over the years. She was a member of the **Church of Christ in Brookfield**.

Dorothy E. Burt, 100, a faithful sister in Christ of the **Union Hills Church of Christ, Phoenix, AZ** finished her earthly race and went on to be with the Lord on May 26, 2020. Dorothy was a diligent worker both physically and spiritually. She will be missed by all who knew her.

Special Meetings

The church at **Old Lamine**, rural Blackwater, MO is still planning its annual Family VBS for Saturday, July 18. Your editor apologizes for listing the wrong date in past issues.

The church in **Kirksville, MO** sends the following note:

It is with sadness and conviction that the elders and deacons of the **Kirksville Church of Christ** have decided to cancel the "20/20 Vision" meeting because of the uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. That meeting was scheduled to take place at the Kirksville Church of Christ from July 25 to August 2. We will certainly miss the intense fellowship we would have shared and the teachings on our different topics. We are working on a plan to have those teachers still come to Kirksville individually to share their learnings from the Word. Our hope would be that we could schedule them one per month for a weekend meeting starting later in the year. When we get the details figured out, we will invite you to come and join us if you can or listen to their lessons on our website. May the LORD bless us all as we show grace and mercy to those we meet.

The brethren in **White Oak**, rural **Ethel, MO** plan a special meeting for August 23.

2020 Meetings

July 18.....Old Lamine Family VBS, Blackwater, MO
August 23.....White Oak, Ethel, MO

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