

PANDEMIC WEARINESS

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Multi-Faceted Weariness

As I write this, detailed multi-phase plans have been published in the Republic of Ireland and what looks to be a very lengthy painful process of emerging from lockdown has just begun. Looking at these plans is not only disheartening (from the point of view of the many complicated and slow steps, and the estimated or predicted timescale) but it is also wearisome. For most of us, our normal lives have been significantly disrupted for several months with the current measures. Now we find that, although there may be light at the end of the tunnel, it is yet a long way away, with an arduous journey to get there.

We have become weary with the (anti-)social distancing, the face masks, the plastic shielding, the hand sanitizer, the restrictions on travel and work, and the unavailability of many of the conveniences to which we had grown accustomed. We are perhaps weary of reminding ourselves, “Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content ... I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” (Phil. 4:11, 13). I am aware that many are far more affected than I am personally. We are weary of staying in our own homes, unable to visit family and friends, and we are weary of not being able to gather together for public worship with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Because of this weariness, we become anxious to hear more news as early as possible, even more so now that we no longer hear it casually from family and friends. So we seek out the news regularly, repeatedly, even perhaps obsessively. And we are also weary of the news. We are tired of hearing about the latest numbers of active cases and deaths. We are tired of hearing the latest analyses, criticisms, strategies or statements by politicians, economists, doctors and scientists. At the same time, we continue to seek out the news at this time because we want to hear if there has been any significant development, such as when we may be able to emerge from our lockdown or if the exponential growth in cases or deaths is finally slowing or coming to a plateau, or if the situation is becoming worse, such as a new cluster in a nursing home

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or hospital. As much as we look for the news, we are weary of it: we would prefer to hear news focussed on almost any other subject again.

As we turn to other news sources or perhaps social media to hear something different, and perhaps more social and uplifting, we are again bombarded by this subject. We see new conspiracy theories almost every day, or a new twist or development on an existing theory. No doubt even those who espouse these theories find them wearisome at some point. No doubt others find some distracting entertainment in satisfying their curiosity with such speculations, whether or not they actually believe them. And perhaps this weariness leads yet others simply to disregard them out-of-hand, irrespective of whether or not a grain of truth may be present.

Being tired of hearing about this novel coronavirus pandemic may even mean that we are weary of hearing about the biblical applications which are especially relevant at this time. We perhaps do not want to hear anymore about what the Bible has to say about this situation or about what God's purpose is in this or what our calling with respect to a pandemic or a lockdown should be. All of this is understandable and yet, irrespective of the orders from civil governments, it is still unmistakably in God's providence that this pandemic and lockdown are still ongoing; therefore, it must be received as from His fatherly hand:

Q. 27. What dost thou mean by the providence of God?

A. The almighty and everywhere present power of God, whereby, as it were by His hand, He upholds and governs heaven, earth, and all creatures; so that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, and all things come, not by chance, but by His fatherly hand.

Q. 28. What advantage is it to us to know that God has created, and by His providence doth still uphold all things?

A. That we may be patient in adversity; thankful in prosperity; and that in all things which may hereafter befall us, we place our firm trust in our faithful God and Father, that nothing shall separate us from His love; since all creatures are so in

His hand, that without His will they cannot so much as move
(*Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. & A. 27-28).

As long as this is God's good providence for us, we must not grow weary of learning what He has to teach us through it, especially patience: "Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy" (James 5:11). Further, since in His wisdom, irrespective of the decisions and motivations of church sessions or consistories, God has denied many of us from being able to assemble for public worship (due to concerns about public health, government orders or whatever reason), we should especially sit up and pay attention with diligence.

We dare not say that this is merely a judgment on the wicked world but rather,

... the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God? And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear? (I Pet. 4:17-18).

In whatever adversity we find ourselves, it is a good practice to begin by examining ourselves, not that all adversity is necessarily a specific chastisement (as it was not in Job's case) but it is certainly intended for our sanctification. To promote a better understanding of how the Reformed faith addresses the present circumstances, the Covenant Protestant Reformed Church has produced a Coronavirus Resources Page, which I would enthusiastically recommend for those who are weary.¹ A letter by Richard Holt, a BRF member from Wales, was sent to the *British Reformed Journal's* editor (and forwarded to me) which exemplified this worthy attitude of examining our situation in the light of Scripture. My following comments are indebted to this letter.

Precursory Sign

Not only should we understand this pandemic as our heavenly Father's providence but we can also view it as a precursory sign of Christ's coming

¹ <https://cprc.co.uk/coronavirus-resources-page>

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(diseases and economic upheavals are specifically represented as brought by the riders with pale and black horses respectively in Revelation 6, where “to kill ... with death” refers to pestilence). Prof. Ronald Cammenga gave a speech in the summer of 2019, which was later published, in which he observed,

Science boasts that it has succeeded in curing a certain disease, but as soon as one disease has been conquered, two others that are more devastating take its place. In a previous generation it was polio and tuberculosis. Then it was cancer. And today it is AIDS and ebola. With the modern means of transportation and the shrinking of the world, various health organizations warn of the increasing danger of a pandemic that could have disastrous effects on the world’s population.²

Fitting words in retrospect or perhaps he too was involved in some conspiracy with prior knowledge! Leaving humour aside, I highly recommend studying this article to obtain a better understanding of these precursory signs generally. The rest of the speeches from the same issue of the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* are also very worthwhile. Especially helpful is the list of purposes which Prof. Cammenga gives for the precursory signs, both positively and negatively. I will simply enumerate the positive here, and I refer the reader to the original article for the edifying explanations. God gives these signs: 1) as a reminder that Christ is coming, 2) as a reminder that He is coming in judgment, 3) to confirm the believer’s hope of His coming, 4) to indicate the general nearness and progress of His coming, and 5) as warnings to the wicked.³ Much more could be said on each of these purposes but practically, for our purposes now, these signs exhort us, “let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:9-10). We have many opportunities in this season and these signs remind us to make the most of them (Ecc. 3:1-8)! Instead of being weary, let us be busy and watchful:

Let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning; And

² Ronald Cammenga, “The Signs of Christ’s Return,” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, vol. 53, no. 1 (November, 2019) pp. 76-77.

³ Cammenga, “The Signs of Christ’s Return,” pp. 74-76.

ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their lord, when he will return from the wedding; that when he cometh and knocketh, they may open unto him immediately. Blessed are those servants, whom the lord when he cometh shall find watching: verily I say unto you, that he shall gird himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them. And if he shall come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants (Luke 12:35-38).

Especially this calling from the precursory signs to watch and pray is the reason why the title is so apt for Rev. Martyn McGeown's book, *Called to Watch for Christ's Return*, which explains the precursory signs from Matthew 24 and 25.⁴ This book did not originate in a cold analysis of this passage but in the trenches of preaching sermons to build up a small group of believers in Limerick, myself included. This is probably the most relevant passage in all Scripture for explaining the signs of Christ's coming, and I heartily recommend this book as a thoroughly Reformed and immensely edifying treatment of it.

Thankfulness for Trials

Finally, I want to highlight some of the ways in which, rather than being weary, we can be truly thankful for these trials, not merely thankful *in* these trials but *for* them. First of all, we can be thankful that such events stir us up to study the Bible more closely regarding these subjects, so that we "grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (II Pet. 3:18). We can also be thankful that, although we may be separated from loved ones, we are not separated from the love of God in Jesus Christ but are more than conquerors through Him that loved us (Rom. 8:37-39). We are more than conquerors, since we do not merely endure and pass through these things victoriously, but God works them for our good! It is the very opposite of a pyrrhic victory.

⁴ *Called to Watch for Christ's Return* is available from the RFPA in the US (www.rfpa.org) and the CPRC Bookstore (www.cprc.co.uk), 7 Lislunna Road, Kells, BT42 3NR, N. Ireland (028 25 891851). The cost is £7.50 (plus 10% P&P in the UK). Make cheques payable to "Covenant Protestant Reformed Church."

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Further, we can be thankful that we learn and grow in patience as we endure these things. Rather than be weary with the testing of our faith, we can be grateful and joyful in the knowledge that the work of patience is being accomplished (James 1:2-4). These trials of our faith, although they may bring heaviness, are of great worth to us now and will be at the appearing of our Saviour (I Pet. 1:6-7). We may also be thankful now for the greater appreciation that we will have for the official corporate worship of the church when we can meet again, and also for the enjoyment and edification of the organic life and fellowship of the church as we meet again in person. How often Paul wrote in his letters that he longed to see his fellow saints face to face!

Last, but not at all least, we may be more thankful for all the means which we have at our disposal, especially by using them energetically and diligently. No lockdown can take us away from the throne of grace to which we have access with boldness in prayer (Heb. 10:19-22). We have the Scriptures, in our own language no less, readily available to us. We have the heritage of the Reformed faith and the writings of saints, past and present, to whom the Holy Spirit has given insights and understanding of the Scriptures throughout the ages. From these writings, we ought to learn, as the parts of a body supply strength to each other working together. We have fantastic means of communication with one another, nearly instant audio and video transmission over the internet, such that we can not only see and speak to one another, and have Bible studies together, but we can even watch live-streamed preaching.

Have we been faithfully using these means? How can we grumble and complain when God withholds other means from us, if we are not using the means that He has provided? So there is much about these trials, as in all trials, for which we can be thankful, and indeed for which we must be thankful. May we all pray for the grace to be more grateful as we learn patience.