

The Gift of Forced Helplessness

Well thanks for tuning in to this week's teaching. As we mentioned in a video or two this week, our plan for the near future is to release a teaching by 9:00am each Sunday morning, so you can watch it on your own, or with your family, or with a small group of people from your LifeGroup, or whatever it might be, while we aren't meeting in person on Sundays.

So here we are, in my wonderful basement office-turned studio, for this week's teaching. I decided to shoot this thing in front of my bookshelf, not because I want to *wow* you with how many books I have, but because it was either that or in front of white cinderblock walls. And the cinder block made it look ever-so-slightly like I was in jail. So bookshelf it is. We're just gonna make it work going forward.

All that said, if you have a bible or bible app nearby, turn with me to James 4. We're going to touch on one other passage before we get there, but we'll be there in a bit. I mentioned in our last video update that we were going to do a series called *Hope Right When We Need It*. And while we're still definitely going to talk about *hope*, the more I prayed through it, and processed through it, and specifically spoke with some of you guys, the more I felt like we should actually take a slightly different direction for the next few weeks.

I think there are actually a few different ways that people are responding out there to both the Coronavirus, and to the adjustments to life the Coronavirus is forcing us to make. Some people, for instance, are experiencing varying levels of *fear and anxiety* about it. Others I think are more just bothered by the *interruptions and inconveniences* it brings with it. And others still are thrown off by the amount of *considerations and precautions* we now have to take, not just for ourselves, but for others in our society. There are several different responses, so I wanted us to take each of those, one at a time, and talk about them from a biblical perspective.

So I've heard some people asking, "did God *send* the Coronavirus?" Or, "did God *cause* the Coronavirus?" And while I understand the desire to know the answer to those types of questions, I'll just be real honest: **that's not really a question the Scriptures answer**. The bible never claims to answer the question, "where does evil and sickness come from in the first place, at sort of a philosophical level?" So the truthful answer to those questions is "I don't know." And to be honest, I don't know that *even if we had* those answers, if they would be all that emotionally satisfying to know. In other words, I

don't know that it would make evil and suffering and sickness any more bearable at a practical level, to know why they exist in the first place.

But all that said, here's what I *do* know. **What is abundantly clear from the Scriptures is that God has the ability to work through things like this, both for his glory and for the good of those who love him.** That is what we read about in places like Romans 8:28, where it says this:

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

So in light of *that*, what I think is *more helpful* is asking and answering the question, "what is God wanting to accomplish *through* and *in the midst of* the coronavirus?" How might God, through something this massive and disruptive and devastating, "work for the good of those who love him"? So *that* is what we're going to spend our time trying to answer for the next few weeks in these teachings: what is God *up to through* things like the Coronavirus. And **today, I want us to talk specifically about what God might be trying to accomplish through the helplessness, fear, and anxiety that this all triggers in some of us.** And that's why I want us to look at James 4. So let's read this thing all the way through, v. 13-16:

[13] Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"— [14] yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring [That right there has to be one of the truest, and yet most unappealing statements for us to hear, right? You do not know what tomorrow will bring]. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. [15] Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." [16] As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. //

So as most of you guys know, about a year and a half ago our church inherited and then began *renovating* a building. Which as you can imagine, was a pretty big undertaking and transition for a young church like ours. And what's crazy is that just about a year and half before *that*, we began meeting weekly for the very first time as a church. That was *also* a pretty big transition. So once we finished the renovations the end of this past year, we as pastors began thinking to ourselves, "finally, 2020 will be the year of no massive *changes* or *transitions* or *interruptions* for our church. This year, 2020, should just be a normal, run-of-the-mill, uneventful year for us as a church family. Cue the Coronavirus

pandemic of 2020, that not only has a huge impact on us being able to gather on *Sundays*, but also is having a massive impact on how we gather and stay connected to each other in our *LifeGroups* too. It has disrupted how we go about doing most everything that we do. So much for the year of no transition, right?

So that is an example of us as your pastors learning the *hard way* what James is trying to *teach all* of us in this passage. What he is saying is that we should be careful not to say “oh *I know* what’s going to happen tomorrow. *I know* what’s going to happen next year. *I know* what my plans are, *I know* what I’m going to do and not do—I’m in *control* of all of that.” He says the reason we shouldn’t do that is because, truth be told, *we do not know* what even *tomorrow* holds. **Knowing the future is not in the cards for us—it’s not something we’re capable of doing.**

So *in light of that*, James says, we should *instead* say “*if the Lord wills*, here are our plans for the future.” Now, just real quickly: I don’t think this is meant to be a legalistic thing. I don’t think James intended to create an environment where you and I are texting about grabbing lunch tomorrow, and I say “okay, I’ll see you there at noon!” and you say “don’t you mean *if the Lord wills*, you’ll see me there at noon? Jesus juke!” I don’t think the vibe James is going for.

But at the same time, I do think he is noting that often, our words reflect what’s in our hearts. And if we are constantly making plans and wheeling and dealing while pretending that those plans aren’t subject to change at all—that they aren’t subject to interruptions and adjustments and delays—if that’s the case, then we may be in for some unpleasant surprises.

Because, as James mentions, you and I are a “mist.” One that “appears for a little while and then vanishes.” And to refuse to come to terms with that reality, and **to instead operate as if we’re the ones that call all the shots and determine reality—that is to fundamentally misunderstand our place in the universe.**

And *that* is where I think this particular passage might intersect with our current moment in history. **Because if there’s one thing that the spread of the Coronavirus across cities and states and countries and continents can reveal to us, it’s that we are not even a little bit in control.** We’re not in control of our circumstances, we’re not in control of our schedules, we’re not in control of our health...like, I don’t know about you guys, but just the idea that the next couple weeks of my life could be determined by whether or not I contract a certain virus that I *can’t even see* and *might not even know I*

have for days is hard for me to even process. And it might not even matter how many “happy birthdays” I wash my hands for—if I touch something between when I do *that*, and when my hands touch my face, it might not matter. I don’t know about you but that makes me feel, quite literally, out of control.

But here’s the irony: **us not being in control didn’t start with the Coronavirus. Friends, we have never been in control. It’s just that we often convince ourselves that we are.** In an age of insurance policies on almost everything, and FDIC-backed bank accounts, and roth IRAs, **we have turned *feeling in control* into an art form in our society.** And listen: having those things I just listed out isn’t *wrong* (heck, I have all of those things). But it does make it easy for us to buy into the lie that we are immune to *surprises*. And **in days like the ones we’re in right now, I think at least one thing that God wants to do is reach in and bring us back to reality:** that we are not in control, and that we shouldn’t *bank on* being in control as a way to go through life.

You know periodically, we hit moments in life like this: that *expose* that we aren’t actually in control of things. A family member goes to the hospital, you experience some type of financial emergency, someone in your family loses their job—there are these moments when we have to admit, at least briefly, that we do not control the things in our world. But for a lot of us, in those moments, we tend respond by doing anything in our power to *regain* some sense of control. If we can’t control our *circumstances*, we try to control our *health*. If we can’t control our *health*, we try to control our *money*. If we can’t control our *money*, we try to control our *kids* and their *behavior*. And so on and so forth. **Not being in control is a crazy difficult lesson to learn, so sometimes we war against it with everything in us.**

But if what James is saying is true, these moments when we realize we aren’t in control aren’t just moments to get *through* or get *past*. They’re actually portals into the *truth*. They’re gracious glimpses into the *way things actually are* in the universe. **They’re not just unpleasant feelings to *alleviate*—they are moments to *embrace* as gifts from God.** As opportunities to *realize* who we are, and who God is. As chances to accept that there is something *better* out there than being in control of our lives at all times. Something better like knowing the God who can work *through* those moments. Knowing the God who can leverage the most out-of-control scenarios for our good and for his glory.

Just a few moments ago, we mentioned Romans 8:28. Let’s look at the verses that come right after that verse, v. 29-30:

[29] *For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be **conformed to the image of his Son**, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*
[30] *And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*

Right now, in the midst of a cultural situation like nothing most of us have ever experienced before, God is working for the *good*—for the *glorification*—of those who love him. **He is working through one of the most trying times in recent world history to form each of us who know him into the image of his son.**

So listen: I am not here to tell you that everything is going to be okay—that’s not a promise I can make. I’m not here to tell you that better things are “just around the bend.” I’m not here to tell you that “the best is yet to come.” I can’t make any of those promises to you. Instead, I am here to tell you that if you are a follower of Jesus, **the God of the universe, the one who holds the sun and the moon and the stars in his hand is ferociously, unwaveringly for your good.** I am here to tell you that there *is no scenario* in which God will not be for your *good*. And believe it or not, that’s a promise better than anything else out there.

And the writer of Romans 8 tells us exactly how we can know that that’s true, down in v. 32:

*He who **did not spare his own Son** but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?*

If God the Father did not even withhold *his own son* for you and for me, don’t we think he can be trusted with everything else? If he did not withhold the most precious thing to him in the *universe*, don’t we think he’ll give us what we need for today? As we try to say often around City Church, **we do not look to our circumstances to know whether or not God loves and cares for us—we look to the cross.** And there we see God saying “here is my son—my very flesh and blood—offered up for *you*. Look *there* and *know*: I can be trusted with the rest of it.” As the great hymn says, “turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in his wonderful face. And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace.”

So the question for each one of us in this season (and in *all* seasons), is *how are you planning to allow God to form you into the image of Jesus in this season?* That’s the

million dollar question, is it not? And we're going to get into some specifics on that next Sunday. But suffice it to say, I would hate for you to *miss it*. I would hate for you to *miss* what God might be doing. I would *hate* for you to be so focused on when this thing is going to get better and when this thing is going to be over that you completely miss God's purposes for you *in it*. So let me just ask you, are you willing to let God do what he does, and that's form each and every one of us into the image of Jesus? That's the question that all of us have to answer.

And if we can get *there*—if we can say yes to *that*—we might just come out the other side of this thing better off than we were before. More *mature* than we were before. More *filled with the Spirit* than we were before. And more *like Jesus* than we were before. God can do any and all of that, even in days like these.

Let me pray.