

When God Stops the Church

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Bible Verse: Hebrews 12:3-11
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Sunday morning when I preached two days ago, the title of the sermon was "When God Stops the World," and the premise of the message was that God has sent this national crisis, this worldwide distress upon us for a purpose and it carried a purpose, it carries a purpose to all of the world that they would understand certain basic truths that men are not in control of their own lives, that they would realize that and recognize their sinfulness, and that they are in danger of eternal hell from the holy God whose hand has sent this pestilence upon us all, and the desire of God, we saw, was that it is a gracious desire of God by which he sent this in that he graciously sends a call for the world to repent in light of their inability and the difficulties that they are facing in the midst of this distress. The world needs to consider its judgment as God has made it known and this time of disruption causes people to set aside their normal considerations and gives them a window of time, a window of opportunity to consider the call of Jesus Christ upon their lives. But that begs a question and one that we deliberately overlooked on Sunday and that I hope to consider tonight, and the question is this: what about us, meaning what about professing believers in Jesus Christ like us, what are we to think in the midst of this time? What are we to think when God stops the church? It's not simply that God has stopped the world, he has done that and what we mean by that is the severe disruption, obviously there are elements of life that are still going on in commerce and what have you, and there are still aspects of the church that are still going on, that's what we're doing here this evening, but God has acted in a way that has disrupted the normal functioning of the body of Christ, the visible church, broadly speaking the broad body of Christ has been disrupted by this coronavirus affliction that has come upon the world. What are we to think about it?

Well, I'm turning to the text that I read just a moment ago from Hebrews 12:3, and as I did on Sunday, I want to read the text again for the sake of emphasis. It's not a text that we've been looking at, it's not one that is immediately fresh on your minds necessarily, for most of you probably, and so I want to take time to read the text, to have it settle into our minds, and then consider what it has for us in the midst of the fact that God has stopped the church as well in this time. Hebrews 12:3. I invite you to read along with me there at home.

3 For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. 4 You have not

yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; 5 and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reproved by Him; 6 for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives." 7 It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? 8 But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9 Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? 10 For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. 11 All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

Now after the message that I preached on Sunday, a clear message about the danger and the sinfulness of the world and the reality of eternal judgment that awaits our nation in light of its sin and all of the things that we said about that, I was quite concerned lest we as believers fall into a little bit of a smug sense of self-righteousness, to be honest with you, and I'm just going to be extraordinarily candid with you in our time, in our hour here together here this evening. There is always a danger when you preach against the sin of the world, that believers have a sense of exclusion from the warnings, of exclusion from the sense of conviction that should come when sin is being preached upon. I mean, after all, we are trusting in Christ for our salvation and we know that he has fully redeemed us from sin and that we are not facing eternal judgment, what would a message about God's judgment have to do with us? Well, as I said a moment ago, here's what we need to remember is that God has not only stopped the world, he has stopped the church also, and because that stoppage of the church equally comes from his hand just as the stoppage of the world comes from his hand, we as a church, we as the believers in Jesus Christ have a responsibility to stop and consider what this means for us as a body of believers, as an individual local church, and for us as individual Christians. God has stopped us in our tracks, so to speak, and we need to consider what that means for us, what is the significance of that for our souls. As we examine ourselves, as we consider ourselves in light of and under the teaching of God's word, we have to consider what that means for us and to not simply look at the world and point fingers but to look at ourselves deeply in the mirror and consider what God has for us in this time.

So what do we find circumstantially as we consider these things? Well, some Christians, even some that I know, have contracted the coronavirus, none within the body of Truth Community Church as far as I know, but some Christians have contracted the virus, some have died from it. Churches are not meeting, at least most of them are not meeting, and some believers find their livelihoods at risk and have lost their jobs over the cutbacks that have been made in response to this and the stay-at-home orders and the business closure orders that have been issued by state and local authorities. This is a significant impact, one that we should not diminish or marginalize but to look fully at that and to consider

what it means, not simply the individuals that are most directly affected but to understand and to take to heart the fact that this has affected everyone in the entire body of Christ even if your job has not been affected, even if your health is at full strength. This has still affected you, it's affected us in different ways, in different quantities, but the quality of the fact that God has stopped us and changed our lives in such an abrupt way should cause us to pull ourselves up abruptly and say, "Wait a minute, what's going on here? What should be the reflection of my soul? How should I understand what this means for me and for the believers around me?" Well, from this passage in Hebrews, there are four aspects of it that I want us to consider together here this evening, all dealing and all circling around the core idea of affliction, and so that's what we're going to look at here this morning. God has stopped the church and what are we to think about it in the midst of our affliction.

Well, first of all, we need to consider this, we need to consider the scale of our affliction. The scale of our affliction. In other words, just how bad is it and what is our perspective on that? Well, my friends, at a time like this we need to do something that we're not naturally inclined to do, we need to turn away from our preoccupation with self and consider our Lord Jesus Christ. That's right, that's exactly what we need to do, we need to stop for a moment and stop thinking about what this means for us and the inconvenience or the frustration or the fear that it brings to us, step back from all of that and consider our Lord Jesus Christ. That is exactly where our passage starts tonight and it's where we want our thinking to start, looking at verse 3 where it says,

3 For consider Him [consider Him] who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

What can we say about our Lord Jesus Christ? I mean, we could talk for unending ages about him, right? But for tonight, let's just think about it from this perspective: God the Father gave his Son a work to do, a work of redemption to purchase the people that the Father had chosen for his Son before the beginning of time. Christ came to earth to do that glorious and noble work, and what did he find while he walked on this earth and so? What did he encounter? He encountered ongoing hostility from the very people that he came to save. He encountered resistance and opposition throughout the course of his public ministry. He lived a perfect life on behalf of his people, he offered that life as a sacrifice for their sins at the cross of Calvary, but he did so in the face of relentless opposition throughout the course of his public ministry. Now and we're just kind of treating this passage, unfortunately, in a rather hurried manner here this evening. I hope in the future to come back and to deal with it in more detail. But the fact that our Lord suffered like that and endured hostility in the midst of his noble work and in the midst of his sinless life, that has implications for us about the way that we are to think and to consider what is happening to us in this challenging time.

You see, you and I are all tempted to varying degrees, we're all tempted toward grumbling, toward discontentment, toward fear, maybe toward sarcasm. I know many people are afflicted with that disease of the soul. But whatever else we say about our situation, our difficulties in the midst of this coronavirus pandemic, we need to

understand and recognize something very important: none of us are suffering at all like the Lord Jesus did. None of us are on the cross bearing the weight of the sins of everyone for whom he died. No one bore the weight of opposition like Christ did as he was going about fulfilling his Father's will. There was an order of magnitude to the resistance to him and the difficulties that he had, and even in the human isolation and suffering that he had. He was hungry. He was thirsty. He said he had no place to lay his head. So in the midst of wandering about physically on the earth like this and in the midst of such opposition, we realized that there was a weight that Christ carried even in the reality of his human life that was augmented and infinitely underscored by the constant temptation and resistance from the demons and the demonic host and Satan himself to the work that he came to do. Our Lord bore the brunt of that and he lived a perfect life nonetheless, in love staying faithful to the task that he might become our Savior, that he might offer himself up in that climactic event at the cross.

Well, we need to look at that and realize that in this time, none of us are suffering on any comparison of scale like that. We all have food. We all have covering. We all have shelter to one degree or another. Most of us have family or friends of some kind to bear the isolation with us. And further when you consider faithful believers in the past, you realize that haven't suffered like them either. Look at verse 4 where it says,

4 You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin;

This is coming just after that chapter in the Hall of Faith chapter in Hebrews 11 where it speaks about some who were sawn in two, who were beaten, who were stoned for their faith and suffered at the hands of evil wicked men in the mere desire to be faithful to Christ, and reflecting in greater measure than what we have known the sufferings of Christ in their own body. Well, do you see, my friend, do see, beloved, what that does for us and what the perspective is that it gives to us? Yes, we are dealing with situations that are difficult and this is a trying time for us, but we should not be weary in the midst of it as we look to the example of Christ. He suffered more than we did and he persevered in perfection and he went ahead in the suffering on our behalf. We read the pages of church history and we see the suffering and the depravation that other believers went through and we realize that what we are going through right now does not compare in magnitude of order to that, and Scripture says that we should consider that and let it motivate us, and as the Spirit of God opens our minds and gives us depth of comprehension and consideration to that, that we would not grow weary in the midst of our lesser suffering; that we would not lose heart in the midst of it. People have gone before us in greater suffering than what we're having now and they persevered and came out well in the end.

Well, what's God going to do for us and what's God going to work in us except a like perseverance to persevere through the end through lesser trials than what they faced. The scale of our affliction shapes the way that we think about it, and so here we are, yes, we're under stay-at-home orders to one degree or another, yes, we're not able to meet together as a local congregation right now but, beloved, think with me, the authorities are not threatening us with execution, none of us are facing the death penalty for our

devotion to Christ. As I said earlier, we have food and covering and Scripture says with those we will be content. Our affliction is light by comparison to what the saints and what Christ has suffered before us. The scale of our affliction is light by comparison and that should give us perspective and it should have a humbling impact on us to quiet the grumbling, to soften the discontent, to take away the edge of fear maybe that you're feeling in your circumstances or as you read the endless news reports about these things, we need to look past ourselves, set aside our preoccupation with self, look to Christ and see that which gives us strength and encouragement for the challenge that is at hand. The scale of our affliction points us in that direction and it should humble us in the presence of God. You know, it's humbling to think that with all of the comparative advantages that we have, it's humbling to think that we would complain in the midst of it when Christ bore more on our behalf without opening his mouth against those that were persecuting him. Humbling, isn't it? The scale of our affliction softens our attitude, it closes our lips and makes us reflect with gratitude on the grace that God has already shown to us and still continues to do.

Well, secondly, let's consider the source of our affliction. This is kind of a different aspect or a different angle of looking at the same thing that we talked about on Sunday. On Sunday we said the hand of God was in the affliction being sent to the world, it's the same for us, the hand of God is in it. This affliction comes to us from God himself. It comes from the God whom we call Father. It comes from the God who providentially cares for every aspect of our being and directs every detail of our lives. God has sent this suffering that affects the world and affects the church. God has stopped the world. God has stopped the church. We need to look past all of the earthly secondary causes and look to the primary source, the single source from which all of this comes to us is from the God who orders all things after the counsel of his own will, and that includes the suffering and the difficulties that are faced by his people right now.

Look at verse 5 with me in Hebrews 12 where it says, and some including the English Standard version translate this as a question rather than an indicative statement. It says,

5 and you have forgotten [or have you forgotten] the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him;

He said, "Don't faint when God disciplines you. Recognize that all of your circumstances are ordered by God. God has providentially sent to you the circumstances that you are facing." You know, sometimes people, teachers want to soften that and, "Well, God permitted it or Satan has the upper hand right now." Beloved, that's not biblical thinking and it's very destructive to your spiritual health. We must understand that the God who is sovereign over all things has sent this to us and he has sent it to us with a purpose, a purpose of discipline in our lives. So on Sunday we said that God's hand is in this upheaval to the world, you and I as Christians have to remember that that's true of us as believers as well. The circumstances that we have right now are what God has sent to us here in the month of April, 2020.

Now he sends it to us with a distinct purpose, however. To the world, he sends the affliction with a simultaneous call to repent lest they enter into eternal judgment. For us, he has sent the same nature of affliction to us but it's with a distinct purpose, it's with a different goal in mind. We, in Christ, have already been delivered from eternal judgment, we are not ever going to face eternal hell or eternal wrath, that was the whole point of the redemption that Jesus accomplished on our behalf at the cross. He saved us, he redeemed us from that and so God isn't sending it to us with the same purpose, however, he is sending it to us and he does have a purpose in it for us. It comes from our God and because of that and because we are among those who fear God and revere him and worship him and defer to him with the utmost respect and worship, that has implications for us. When such a sudden change has come upon our lives, we should not regard it in a light manner, we should not consider it superficially, you might say.

Now what that means for us is this, and we start to step into a little bit deeper consideration of the things that are in front of us here this evening with this text. We're talking about the fact that all of us, the entire Church of Jesus Christ, all of Truth Community Church corporately and individually, we all have a responsibility of self-examination in a time like this. Now I think saying without much fear of any contradiction, I want to say this: it would not occur to most believers to examine themselves in light of these circumstances. We see something coming from outside of us, we respond on a natural level as it affects our jobs or our homes or our health, but to think about it as something that requires us to examine our hearts, to look at our souls and to take inventory of where we're at with the Lord, I think is something that is outside the purview of the way that most people are thinking. We are considering it too superficially. We are considering it too lightly. We are not taking into account the fact that our heavenly Father, our holy God, has sent this to us with a purpose. He whose thoughts are higher than our thoughts, he whose ways are higher than our ways is doing something in us and to us and for us that we are to contemplate and to take spiritual stock and to benefit from spiritually.

Now what does that light attitude look like? Friends, this is going to sting for some of you but what the light attitude does in part anyway, is that it looks past this present situation and contemplates a return of life to normal. Somebody might say, "I'll be so glad when things are back to the way they were before this all happened. I'll be so happy when everything is back the way that I wanted it to be and the way that I enjoyed it beforehand and we're able to be together and all of that." Well, there is some understandable reality to that. I'm in sympathy to some degree with the sentiment of that. We miss the fellowship of the church. We want our lives back that we were enjoying before it was all disrupted. I get that but, beloved, that's not what we're talking about here today. There's something more important than having things return to normal and I will say that that light attitude that I'm describing, that is a serious mistake for us to be making in the midst of this time. It overlooks the fact that God has a purpose for us now in the midst of it. He is doing something in the present time and so unless we think about it from that perspective, we are going to completely miss the point of why God has stopped the church. We need to stop and think about it now and rather than longing for a return to

Egypt, so to speak, we need to consider why is it that God would do this. Why would God send such a remarkable discipline upon his people?

So I want to say to you that instead of saying, "I'll be glad when this is over," we should be taking a more humble posture, a more serious posture that says something like this, "What does God have for my soul here and now? What is the lesson for me in the midst of this? What is the lesson for our church, our local church? What is the message to the broader body of Christ that we might be able to discern something of this?" It's always impossible to read the fullness of God's motives in his providence, but if we understand that there is an element of chastening to a time like this, that there is an aspect of discipline for it, then that points us in the direction of saying, "Ah, let me look in my life a little bit more closely to see if there is sin that I have allowed to accumulate in my life. Maybe there are aspects of sin that the Holy Spirit is pointing out in the midst of this that I should consider and confess." And we'll look at that in just a moment.

But look again at verse 5, we are called by Scripture, this is a quote from Proverbs 3:11 and 12, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reproved by Him." You see, there is a corresponding reaction of greater weight on the other side of an overreaction on another side. You can under-react by simply saying, "Boy, I'll be glad when this is over and, you know, I'll just try to hang on until then," without any sense of self-examination, or you can faint under the reproof and turn it into something morose and something really heavy, or a sense of panic and fear and anxiety. You see, Scripture here is giving us warnings on both hands. We should not regard it too lightly, and on the other hand we should not faint under this trial either.

So let me say this on the other end of the spectrum. My Christian friend, my brother or sister in Christ, there is no place for panic in this. There is no room for that kind of fainting spirit. There is no room for anxious posts on your social media feeds decrying and worrying out loud about what is happening in the world or what is happening in your personal life. That is a display of a fainting spirit that is inconsistent with the recognition that our heavenly Father has sent this affliction to us. We all, and I include myself in this, we all kind of need to grow up now. It's time for us as a son to grow into the maturity that our Father has appointed for us in this time. Neither treating it lightly and superficially as if this time doesn't mean anything to us spiritually and we just need to kind of hang on until things go back to normal, I don't know, you don't know if they ever will go back completely to the way they were before. At the same time, there shouldn't be this mournful sounding, "Oh, woe is me! And look how bad it is, and what's going to happen to us?" Stop it. Stop it. Stop thinking that way. Stop speaking that way. Stop posting on social media that way. You know the living God if you are a Christian, you know Matthew 6, you know that God feeds the birds of the air, you know that he clothes the lilies of the field with stunning beauty, and all of Scripture and we've covered this many times from the pulpit of Truth Community Church, those lesser things about the way that God cares for his creation means that he is going to care for us too, and so there is no place, we have got to grow up beyond that kind of anxious murmuring and grumbling against the circumstances, quiet our lips, be quick to hear from God's word, and slow to speak about the nature of our circumstances. And for some of us, for some of you, we

need to turn off the news. We need to just turn it off. You need to stop focusing and fixating on your iPhone and your smart phones like that, and I say all of that not because it's wrong to listen to the news or wrong to use your iPhone, that's not my point at all, my point here in the midst of these circumstances that God has given to us, that he has sent with a disciplining purpose on us, is that we as Christians have something more important to do than to fuss over lesser earthly things. We need to contemplate what it is that God is doing in us. Why has God stopped the church? That's what we need to ask. That's what we need to deal with and we need to remember, therefore, the source of our affliction.

Look at verses 6 through 8 where it says this,

6 for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives." 7 It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? 8 But if you are without discipline, of which you all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

To summarize this passage, we need to highlight a couple of things. As those that have been bought by the blood of Jesus Christ, we have been adopted into the family of God. 1 John 3:2 says, "Beloved, behold what manner of love the Father has given to us that we should be called the children of God, and we are." In salvation God adopted us into his family and now he treats us like sons, and that means that our heavenly Father exercises toward us a disciplining and chastening hand in order that we might go in the direction that he wants us to go. He does this because he loves us. As the passage, as the tenor of the passage is showing, it makes this continued analogy to the way that earthly fathers deal with their sons and with their daughters. An earthly father, if he has any sense and any love about him at all, he disciplines his children. He realizes that they do not have the wisdom to choose their own way. He understands and realizes that there is sin in their heart and they need to be corrected and they need to be trained over time that they might learn to follow a righteous path rather than the dark, sinful, rebellious, destructive path that their own sinful hearts would naturally take them into.

Well, if an earthly father can do that and he does it because he loves them and he wants what's best for the children, we are to understand and to recognize that God, we go from the lesser to the greater. If the earthly father deals with his children like that, how much infinitely more will God seek the righteousness and the proper discipline of his own children that he's brought into his family? You know, a father doesn't discipline children that aren't his own. I don't discipline the children of other families. That's not my place. They're not my children and it shows that they don't belong to my family. Especially as they were growing up, my children, my six children, they felt the discipline of my hand, and not really my hand but whatever my hand happened to be holding at the time when they needed correction, but that's a story for another time, isn't it? The point is that if an earthly father disciplines his children in love, much more will God discipline the children that he's brought into his family, and we need to understand that this kind of discipline for us is a mark of his love. It's a mark of his care for us. It's a mark that he is seeking our

best interest. Look at the passage there in verse 6, it's those whom the Lord loves that he disciplines. It's because God is seeking our best interests that we face this discipline, and it's a mark of the fact that we are under his fatherly care, that he is seeking what is good for us. And so the Lord sent this distress to us, this distress of the current day, and because we feel the affliction and it affects our lives, we are to understand that he has afflicted us with the goal of chastening us, of correcting us, of training us in the righteousness that he desires for us.

So God has sent this trial to us as part of his discipline and training of us, as part of conforming us to the image of his dear Son which, after all, is the goal of our salvation. He is making us like Christ and if our Lord suffered affliction in his earthly life, and he did, then we who are his disciples, we who are his children should understand that affliction is going to come to us as well. Christ needed no affliction to cure him of sin because he was always without sin. For us with the remnants of our carnal flesh, with the remaining wicked inclinations of our heart and the sinful habits and patterns that we develop, beloved, we need to humble ourselves enough to realize, "Yes, do you know what? There are things in my life that need to be corrected." That's true on an individual level, true at a corporate level, true at the broader universal church level whom we generously call all professing believers.

Now I want to peel another layer of the onion back as my former boss in Chicago used to say. Let's peel this layer of the onion back and ask this next question: why would God intervene so dramatically in our lives, something that has worldwide implications, something that is affecting virtually every person in the world, and certainly almost every person in our country affected in one degree or another by this? Why at the cost of thousands of lives? We covered that some last time and I'm not going to repeat it here, but people are dying. People are going to the hospital. People are losing their jobs over this. The consequences of this are significant and we are foolish or blind to deny it, and what we need to be asking, then, in the context of all of this is why would a holy God, why would our heavenly Father go to such great lengths to stop not only the world but to stop his church? I thought we were his children? I thought he loved us? Why this severe discipline coming upon us? Why am I speaking to an empty room again for about the ninth time, I didn't count, it may be seven times since this all started, but why that? Why would God intervene so dramatically with those who profess to be his people?

Well, I want to call a bit of a time out here. I want to pause the exposition just a bit and take a quick survey around the broader world of evangelicalism, you know, those who profess to be part of the church and, you know, and claim to know Christ. Let's take a look, let's survey different aspects of the church with that thought in mind, why would God stop the church, why has God stopped the church? Why would he do that? Well, let's just consider a few things. Let's think about the so-called mega churches that are scattered throughout our country. What's the nature of the teaching that comes from their pulpit? Well, there's a term for it. We taught about it a year or so ago, moralistic therapeutic deism. They teach the idea that God wants you to be happy and God exists to make life go well for you. Well, do you know what? They say that but they never get around to saying what Jesus said, that the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to eternal

life. Why would they say that? Why are they saying those things? But this is the teaching that is sounding from a numbers perspective, the most influential pulpits throughout our land. Moralistic therapeutic deism, God wants you to have a happy life and he wants to take care of you and he is there to fix all of your problems. Well, do you know what? God isn't fixing this problem right now and we are in the midst of a severity of situation that undermines the very premise of all of their teaching, and it should embarrass them to realize that this is what they've been teaching because it's contradicted by the affliction that God has sent onto the world right now.

Well, let's look further at the prosperity gospel, just making our rounds rather quickly. We're kind of like a doctor making his rounds and checking with his patients. Do you know what? The prosperity gospel sure seems awfully empty right now, doesn't it, as men are dying and as the economy collapses. That doesn't fit.

Let's look further at the charismatic movement, shall we, just for moment? Why is it, why is it that their faith healers aren't flying on their private jets to New York City and other hotspots of the coronavirus and waving their hands and making this virus fall over like they do their manipulated crowds during their great services? Why aren't these faith healers just solving the problem for us? You know, if you have the ability to heal, then heal. Heal. Do you know what this coronavirus is showing? It's showing what we've said elsewhere and at other times from this pulpit, they are not doing that because they cannot do that. If they could do it, if they could stop this pestilence that is spreading throughout our land, their fortunes would triple and exponentially grow, and don't you think that's what they would like is to expand their fortunes even further? If they could only do what they claim to be able to do, they would do it. The fact that they are not doing it, the fact that this virus is continuing to spread is an obvious refutation of every claim that they make. They should be slinking off the stage with their tails between their legs, crying out to God for mercy upon them in light of what is happening.

Well, we've looked at the mega churches, the prosperity gospel, the charismatic movement, let's keep going, shall we, as we survey, as we're like a doctor checking in on different patients. Let's look a little closer to home maybe, let's look at denominational conventions. Let's look at men who form coalitions to work together for the Gospel. What can we say about that? Well, many of them are promoting or at the very least permitting the dead-end of the social justice gospel and critical race theory teaching that is wreaking havoc and being so destructive on the body of Christ. Why would God send a coronavirus and stop them in their fundraising and all their great conferences in the midst of it? Well, you can see these men in the past, you could see them visibly angry on the stage when they're asked about these matters, you can see it reflected in their writings, and they self-righteously deny how Christ broke down racial barriers among men. Ephesians 2:14, Galatians 3:28.

So we take this survey at the mega churches, the prosperity gospel, the charismatic movement, you know, our friends closer to home, remember what we're doing here, we're stepping back and we're asking why would God stop the church? Why would God send an affliction that disrupts the whole operation of the visible church? Why would he do

that? Well, you know, I guess I would turn the question around, I would turn the question around. Honestly as, you know, as we contemplate these things, I'm not asking myself why God has stopped the church, my question is this: why didn't he do it sooner? Why didn't he intervene sooner to expose things? Why didn't he intervene sooner to slow down the momentum of all of these things that are anti-biblical and destructive to his people and such an awful testimony to the world around us in denying the glory of Christ? Why didn't he do it before now?

I can't answer the timing question but I can sure see why God would stop the church in light of those things that are a matter of common knowledge within anyone who observes the evangelical scene, but I need to go further, beloved, I need to speak more to us, you know, within the body of Truth Community Church and those that are like-minded with us, not just within our church but those churches that would identify with us in doctrine and in practice. Why would God stop us? Well, we need to have enough humility to ask this question: is it possible that our own lives have somehow invited a time of discipline from God? Is it possible that the way that you and I think and believe and act and speak has brought a measure of discipline from God to us? You know, he's able and he has such vast wisdom and such vast power that he can send a message to the world that they need to repent in fear of eternal judgment, he can send at the same time using the same means a message that speaks broadly to the evangelical world, and at the same time using the same means he can speak to something that provokes self-examination in us as well and I think we need to consider that if we're going to follow this all of the way through. You see, beloved, you see, my brothers and sisters in Christ, you see, my friends, that we can't simply hold this at arm's length. God has sent discipline to his people. We need to receive it, we need to take it in, we need to regard it and ask questions about what it means for us in the circles in which we ourselves move and live.

Well, let me speak to that with as much candor, hopefully, as I spoke on my doctor's rounds to other segments of evangelicalism. Why would God stop us? Well, here's just a few things to stimulate your thinking and your own self-examination in this time. First of all, I want you to know to the best of my ability by the help of the Holy Spirit, I'm saying these things gently, I'm saying these things pastorally, I'm saying these things with a constructive spirit what I believe are the objectives of God to increase our holiness and the sanctity of our own lives. That's why I need to say these things even though they may be hard for us to hear. Now with that understood and shaping and framing everything that I'm about to say, let's be honest, some Christians have the same commitment to their local church that they have for their favorite fast food restaurant. They come and go not out of love but according to their appetite. Their commitment begins and ends with their own interests and when it serves their purposes to go, they go, and they leave their fellow believers behind. That's a matter that would call for the discipline of God.

What about the corporate life of a church like ours, like Truth Community Church? You know, one of the advantages that I have standing here when we're gathered together is that I get kind of a broad survey and you see people, I'm not talking about members here but you see people who come for a few weeks and then you don't see them for two or three months, and then they drift back in for a little while and then they go. You know,

members themselves are not entirely innocent of that observation, but what is it that people drift and come and go like that and don't submit themselves to any kind of transparency or accountability in the life of the body of Christ? Didn't Jesus say that the world would know that we were his disciples by our love? Well, isn't love some kind of an expression of commitment, of care for others in the body of Christ? I honestly, I honestly don't understand, I honestly don't understand that nomadic spiritual existence that just drifts and moves around from place to place.

What else could we say about the corporate life of a church like ours? Well, I'm going to ask a question here. Could someone explain to me why a church with 326 people in its active database only needs the smallest classroom in its building to host a mere monthly prayer meeting with its elders on a Sunday morning? Can someone explain that to me how a prayer meeting called, regularly established, generates such little interest from the congregation? I have to ask is that the mark of a church that corporately is humble and is dependent on God? Now look, I understand what the common answer to that would be. It's not that I haven't heard it, "You know, it's just so hard to get there at 8 AM." Well, okay, I get that and for those with young children, I'm especially sympathetic to that. But friends, we need to be honest with each other here. If any of us had a family vacation that we were going on, we were going to fly someplace to Southern California or Florida or Cancún or Hawaii or Prince Edward Island, something like that, where we were going to take a really special trip with our family and the flight left at 6 o'clock from CVG, our local airport, do you know what? Every one of you would make that flight. You'd be at your gate early, at 6 o'clock for a 6 o'clock departure.

So we can do it, it's just that we don't and it's hard to understand that and to reconcile that with a church that is consciously humble, consciously dependent, consciously seeking the blessing of God on its corporate life, on its witness and its desire for evangelism. We cannot reconcile these things together. These are just indicators, okay? I'm not being comprehensive here. I hope and trust that you hear in my voice I'm not angry as I say these things. We are humbling ourselves before the text. We are humbling ourselves in the presence of our heavenly Father and examining our lives and regarding with care the discipline that he has sent to us and asking where there might be a sanctifying influence for us to take and to derive from it.

Let's go a little further here. Let's consider our personal lives. Forget the corporate dimension, we've kind of covered that. Let's consider our personal lives and here I'm going to quote Charles Spurgeon again from the sermon that I quoted from on Sunday, "The Voice of Cholera." Spurgeon said this back in 1866 as he probed in similar ways to what I'm doing now with the believers that were listening to him. He asked them this question, these questions I should say, and I quote, "What have you had to do, professing Christians, with the drunkenness of this city? Have you both by your teaching and by your example shown to men that the religion of Jesus is not consistent with drunkenness? Are you in some degree a fellow criminal? When humor is based on sin, do you join in the laughter? Who among us must not confess to some guilt when we remember the Savior's words. 'Everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart?'" All kinds of matter of carnality, worldliness, things that

you would not want known publicly within the body of Christ, and yet you cherish somehow within your own private life in the corner of the darkness of those aspects of your life. Friends, I'm not questioning your salvation. We're talking about your sanctification and how earnestly you are seeking Christ in your life and seeking to be conformed by his Spirit to his image, and so I won't even explore our time, the time that we spend privately, personally, individually in our prayer closet, reading God's word for ourselves. I won't even go there. It's humbling, isn't it? On Sunday, Scripture sifted the world, now tonight Scripture is sifting us and we all say ouch. Ouch.

God in the discipline that he has sent us is exposing in our spiritual lives areas of sanctification that we need to take seriously and to pursue. You see, this coronavirus and the implications of it have far-reaching consequences, far-reaching implications for the way that you live life in light of this passage that we are seeing here this evening. God has sent discipline to us and the point of discipline is to chasten us and to correct us and to make us think so that would change in response; that we would come to God confessing our sin, come to God ourselves with a believing repentant heart that is turning away from those carnal aspects of our life to pursue a greater degree of Christ-likeness and obedience to his word.

Well, in light of that, there's only one thing for us to do and for the wider church to do. I realize the restricted nature of the audience of messages like this, but everything that I've said I proclaim to the entire church of Jesus Christ to hear. This applies to the entire church of Jesus Christ in one degree or another as we've shown, and as a result of that there is only one thing for us as individual Christians to do, there is only one thing for us corporately as the body of Truth Community Church to do, there is only one thing for like-minded churches to do, there is only one thing for the broader visible church of Christ to do. That brings us to our third point and that is this, it is the submission of our affliction. The submission of our affliction.

God has stopped the church and what shall we think in response to that? Beloved, as I have shown throughout the time here tonight, we should not be thinking about this coronavirus distress in medical terms. As believers in Christ, that's secondary to us. We should not be worrying about any political intrigue that is happening around the authorities and what's going on in that political realm. We should not impatiently complain about the inconvenience of it. It's not that those matters are an improper consideration for Christian thinking, but they are secondary. They are tertiary to the greater primary significance to us as believing people. My friends, my Christian friends, oh, by the grace of God I implore you, I ask you, I exhort you, I encourage you, I beg you to understand what our response should be. Those of us who name the name of Christ and see this affliction in light of the passage that we are seeing, there's only one response for us. You and I should mourn our lack of holiness and humbly repent. We should mourn our lack of holiness and humbly repent of our own sins.

You see, as I've said often, it's not incumbent upon us to repent of the sins of the world. That's not what God is calling you and me to repent of. He is calling us, he is disciplining us to repent of the sin in our own lives and in our own congregation. That is what our

concern must be, we must take a vertical perspective on it that says the source of this affliction is my heavenly Father. "The reason God has sent this is to chasten us. What is there in my life that might need chastening? Oh, I see all manner of things that need chastening. Father in heaven, I confess my sins. Forgive our transgressions. Forgive our debts as we forgive those who are indebtedness against us."

Look at verses 9 and 10 from the passage. There is no other way to see this in light of the text that I'm about to read. In verse 9 it says,

9 Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live?
10 For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness.

I just want to point out there is a lot in this text, it's worthy of an hour message all of its own, but I just want to point out for tonight what it says there at the end of verse 9, that we are to be subject to the Father of spirits and live. In the midst of this discipline, we are to come to God and submit to his hand in it; to humbly yield to the work that he is doing in us, and to recognize that the goal of what he is doing in this discipline is to make us more holy, to shape us more after the image of Jesus Christ. And the writer of Hebrews gives us a very helpful analogy. When our earthly fathers disciplined us, we respected them, we accepted their discipline. Obviously we're talking in a general way here, realizing that there are individual rebel children; that's not the point of this passage. But we responded to our earthly fathers in the instruction and the training and the discipline that they brought to us, and when we consider their discipline, we realize that it was temporary, we realize that it was marred by their own sinfulness and failures, sometimes they disciplined us in anger, sometimes they didn't discipline us at all when we needed it, but we looked at our earthly fathers and we respected them and we submitted to them even when they were exercising a temporary discipline that was marred with inadequacy.

Well, beloved, if we understand that God, our heavenly Father is disciplining us and that he is doing so in love, seeking our best interest as he does, he is disciplining us according to perfect wisdom and with the intent to accomplish his perfect purposes in our lives, he's doing this for our good always and without fail and without exception, then all the more should we be able to look at circumstances like this and adopt the posture before God that says, "Yes, Father, I submit to what You are doing. I accept these circumstances for however long You allow them to continue. And Father, in the midst of them, my prayer is this, not my will but Thine be done. Your will be done. May You work out the spiritual purposes that You are accomplishing in my life, work out those purposes, Father, and I pray Thy will be done, as it is in heaven, so also upon earth, and as it is in heaven, so also in me. Father, that's the posture that I want to adopt here and however long You allow this affliction to continue on our land, however long You allow it to continue to imprint its effects on me, Father, I will not complain against it, I will simply ask You to sanctify my mind in the truth, to shape my will and my character after Your own so that I might share in Your holiness which is the goal of all of this discipline anyway."

You see, beloved, it's in his love and in his wisdom that God has sent this discipline to us. It is for our good that he has sent this. It is in his holiness in which he can do no wrong nor bear any ill will to those that have been reconciled to him through faith in Christ, it's in that degree of holiness that God has sent this to develop us in our holiness. Scripture is pretty clear on this and so, my friends, indifference to this discipline is not an option. Grumbling in response to this discipline is not an option. Fear and anxiety and panic in response to this discipline, not an option. We simply bow before it and in confidence in our Father's wisdom and goodness and his intentions for us, we pray, "Father, not my will but Thine be done. Have Your own way, Lord. Have Thine own way. You are the Potter, I am the clay. Make me and mold me after Thy will while I am waiting, yielded and still," as the hymn writer said.

And that will bring us to our fourth and final point here this evening: the sorrow of our affliction. The sorrow of our affliction. All that we have said we need to understand, doesn't make it easy. It doesn't make it an entertaining season in life. It doesn't make it fun for us. No, there is a degree of heaviness and sorrow that will be accompanied to it. There is a present reality to this that the writer of Hebrews recognizes plainly.

Look at verse 11 where he says,

11 All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful;

We understand that this is not going to be one of the times of elevated joy in our conscious experience and in our emotions and in our feelings about this. This is not the time for that. This is the time for reflection. This is a time for self-examination. This is a time for the spiritual mourning that Jesus talked about in Matthew 5:4, "Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted," future tense, it will come in time but for now there is this season of mourning over our sinfulness and the fact that God has been provoked to discipline the world and to discipline his church, and we realize that there is a serious aspect to this that we cannot trifle away, that we cannot laugh away, that we cannot schedule a Super Bowl of preaching and have all kinds of silliness and diminish the significance of what is happening in our lives.

So there is a present reality of this and we recognize that God's hand of discipline brings sorrow for the moment, sorrow for the time, and the writer of Hebrews recognizes that it is a painful experience but, beloved, you and I cannot live by our feelings now. This is not the time for that. It's never the time to live by your feelings and have your life guided by the way you feel on things from day to day. That's not the Christian worldview. That's not how we live as believers in Christ, but all the more in this time we cannot trust the feelings of sadness or difficulty that we encounter in this. We must trust the promise of God that he is disciplining us for our good, he is disciplining us in love, he is disciplining us that we might one day share in his holiness.

And the writer of Hebrews, look at there at the end of verse 11, has this promise for us. What is the ultimate outcome for us in this? He says there at the end of verse 11,

yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

God sends these afflictions for a time, we don't know in advance how long they will last. During that time, during that season, it's painful. There is sorrow attached to it as we examine ourselves and realize that there is much in our lives that has been displeasing to God that we need to confess, and our spirits and our hearts are broken before him as we go and confess these things before him. But we have this promise from the writer of Hebrews that there is a longer term goal that after the affliction awaits blessing from God in it; that there will be a greater perspective and a greater depth of peace even in this life if God grants us life to experience it, a greater expression of his righteousness in our lives, and ultimately when we are in heaven, sin left behind, sorrow left behind, every tear wiped away and brought into that presence of perfect peace, perfect bliss, perfect holiness where God has achieved his final objective in saving us originally to bring us to be in his presence, in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ and to be like him because we will see him just as he is. There is ultimately a glorious outcome to all of this, for now though we need to submit ourselves to the process of discipline that God has seen fit to bring into our lives.

God will sanctify this ultimately to the good of our souls, how we respond now, I would have you turn to Psalm 51, David's confession of sin, to find both the spirit and the spirit of our confession and the hope that lies beyond it, and to sanctify and deepen our trust in our Lord as we come to him in this spirit of confession. Psalm 51:14. David, guilty of adultery, guilty of murder as he is confessing his sin here in Psalm 51 says this, he says, "Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation; Then my tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness." The confession followed later by joy. The confession followed later by songs of deliverance. Verse 15, "O Lord, open my lips, That my mouth may declare Your praise. For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it You are not pleased with burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise."

So my friends, in response to this text from Hebrews 12, we repent in the present while we look to that future joy that God has promised to us.

Let's pray together.

Father, this is a significant text and our hearts have been probed deeply by Your word and by Your Spirit. I pray, O God, that You might have mercy on us, that You would indeed cleanse us from our many sins as we confess them before You. Father, to the extent that we recognize sin in our lives, we turn from it, we confess it, we forsake it, and we ask You to fulfill Your promise of compassion upon those who do. We pray for this body of believers, Father, that this time of separation and isolation might have a sanctifying impact upon each one of us as well, and have a sanctifying impact on the corporate nature of our body that we might learn to cherish the fellowship of the church and cherish the opportunity to gather together on a consistent basis, and that we might

come out on the other side corporately more committed to that than we were before we were sent on our separate ways.

Father, for the broader church that names Your name, we simply ask You to do Your will, to have a sanctifying work in all that are afflicted by this. Father, where teaching needs to change, we pray for that. Where lives need to change, we pray for that. Where goats that are within the sheep, Father, that You would work in that and convict them of their false profession of faith and lead them to a true repentance, a true saving faith in Jesus Christ.

Father, we humble ourselves. We see that You're calling the world to repent and yet we see amongst ourselves as believers in Christ, that there is plenty of room for our confession as well, and so we offer it to You now, Father, and pray that Your Spirit would continue the work of sanctification, of humility, of brokenness that You have started here this evening, continue it in all of our lives so that, Father, You would fully accomplish the purposes for which You sent this, the purpose of doing good to us and causing us to share in Your great and majestic holiness.

Father, we thank You for the Lord Jesus Christ who began a good work in us. We thank You that despite our sin, despite our transgressions You have not abandoned us, You have not left us behind, You are simply completing the work that You began and we thank You from the depths of our heart that You are such a loving and gracious Father to us in our Lord Jesus Christ. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to the glory of God we pray. Amen.

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