



# What Courage Might Corona Unleash?

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Over the last several days, fear over the coronavirus has spiked as the number of cases and infected countries has multiplied.

Nearly 170,000 cases have now been reported, across more than 100 nations. Thousands have died. The nation of Italy has been almost completely shut down, after being hit hardest after China. Major universities

have moved online. Disneyland has closed its gates. The NCAA has canceled its much-anticipated March Madness tournament. The NBA, NHL, and MLB all have suspended league play, to the tune of millions and millions of dollars. The United States has banned travelers from most of Europe for thirty days. By some estimates, some 200 million Americans eventually may be infected. If that prediction becomes reality, and the current 3 percent death rate holds, that would mean more than 6 million deaths in the US alone.

While we are learning more by the hour, there's so much we still don't know (and may not know for some time, if ever) about the virus. Which is part of its staggering power: the awful fear of the unknown.

## Fear of Fears

Underneath our fears about COVID-19 crawls the pervasive fear of death, which enslaves much of the world, often subtly, for their whole lives ([Hebrews 2:15](#)). For such days, C.S. Lewis's comments on war are every bit as relevant in a pandemic:

What does war [or the coronavirus] do to death? It certainly does not make it more frequent; 100 percent of us die, and the percentage cannot be increased. It can put several deaths earlier, but I hardly suppose that that is what we fear. . . . Yet war does do something to death. It forces us to remember it. . . . War makes death real to us, and that would have been regarded as one of its blessings by most of the great Christians of the past. ("Learning in War-Time")

The reality of death has not changed. What's changed over the last several weeks, at least for some of us, is that we now are consciously considering what will inevitably happen to each and every one of us. And if we're willing to hear and receive what God is saying through COVID-19, even an awful, deadly virus might become a strange and bitter mercy.

While Christians, as advocates for life, take the pandemic seriously, and educate ourselves accordingly, and take appropriate precautions, COVID-19 serves as a warning to us all, as well as a reminder and commission for all who love and follow Christ. Will those who have been freed from the fear of death take the risks many in the world will refuse to take, and display our hope among the fearful, infected, and dying?

## What Cannot Destroy the Body

Most of the world may be deaf to the divine warning in a global pandemic. But the Lord of heaven, who governs every germ and molecule in the universe, says to anyone with ears to hear,

Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. ([Matthew 10:28](#))

While projected mortality rates are lower than in previous epidemics, like SARS or MERS, the virus has spread much farther and wider, meaning that even while the percentages may look small, many millions may die, especially from the weaker and more vulnerable among us.

The warning in Matthew 10, however, comes with a remarkable promise for those who fear God and find refuge in him. In the very next verses, Jesus says,

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. ([Matthew 10:29–31](#))

While the Center for Disease Control (CDC) races to contain COVID-19, your Father in heaven is attending to every hair on your head. He rules over a worldwide pandemic, and still cares for your every need. If you or I die, in Christ, it will not be because he has forgotten or forsaken us.

## Christ Is Better by Far

Anyone who has been given the gift of life has known the fear of death. And anyone who has found the narrow path that leads to true and eternal life has watched Christ turn the fear of death on its head. The apostle Paul, who nearly died many times following in the footsteps of his crucified Lord, declares,

For to me to live is Christ, *and to die is gain*. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, *for that is far better*. ([Philippians 1:21–23](#))

Times like these test whether we can say the same. It can be easy to say *to live is Christ, and to die is gain* when living for Christ costs us little and death seems far off. It is another thing to say the same when disease is spreading and we, or someone we love, might die imminently. Is death really good news for those who love Jesus? COVID-19 presents a new and darker canvas on which God says again, *Life after death is better, by far, than even the sweetest life on this earth*.

Death itself, of course, is not better. It is a horror and enemy to be hated. But with Christ, death also becomes a servant — a door into the thoroughly satisfying and utterly safe presence of Jesus, *forever*. Death is gain, not because the experience of death is any less likely, or any less miserable, but because of what death gives us — because of *Who* death gives us. Will we face the uncertainty of these days with courageous love because of what death now means for us?

## Free to Risk

Paul knew that death was better, by far, than a few more years on earth. But he also knew what to do with whatever days he had left. “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary *on your account*. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, *for your progress and joy in the faith*” ([Philippians 1:23–25](#)). As much as he wanted to be with Jesus, he still poured himself out for the souls around him, working and sacrificing and risking for their progress and joy in believing.

Will the church, at the right moments and with great wisdom, rally to meet the needs around us, and in doing so, serve the progress and joy of others’ faith in Jesus? This kind of courage will not be reckless or dismissive, ignoring wise public precautions. One of the most loving things we can do *now* is limit and slow the spread of the virus. But this kind of courage also will be ready, in the days to come, to step in where needed when few others will.

David Brooks reminds us that during

the Spanish flu pandemic that battered America in 1918 . . . as conditions worsened, health workers in city after city pleaded for volunteers to care for the sick. Few stepped forward. In Philadelphia, the head of emergency aid pleaded for help in taking care of sick children. Nobody answered.

If such times are ahead, Christians, freed from the fear of death, could be the first to step forward. Will we answer if that call comes, if clinics and hospitals, filled and overflowing, cannot care for everyone?

## ‘I Fear No Loss’

In 1519, when the Black Death reached Zurich, Switzerland, home of pastor and Reformer Ulrich Zwingli, the disease eventually wiped out a third of the population. Zwingli had been on vacation. While everyone else fled the city, however, he courageously dove back in to care for and comfort the sick, and to tell them about the hope he had in Jesus.

As he risked his life, believing Christ still had many in his contaminated city (Acts 18:9–10) and would be with him in the perils (Isaiah 43:1–3; Matthew 28:20), he caught the disease and nearly died. But not in vain, and not without hope, for he suffered in the path of Love.

He wrote several poems in the throes of the sickness, with lines like these:

In faith and hope  
Earth I resign.  
Secure of heaven.  
For I am Thine.

And then later, as his symptoms worsened:

He harms me not,  
I fear no loss,  
For here I lie  
Beneath thy cross.

Zwingli’s hope in heaven did not make him reckless or selfish in the face of sickness and death. It filled him with courage and unleashed him to see, and seek to meet, the needs of others. Knowing what was at stake, and what was waiting for him on the other side of death, he accepted the danger, at enormous risk to himself, to care for the suffering, especially those destined for eternal suffering.

May the same be true of us, as Christians move toward, not away from, neighbors in need; as churches open our arms and doors of hospitals become full and overwhelmed; as we embrace the right risks, at the right times, and so fill our fearful cities with the name of Jesus.

## Now Is the Time

The gospel is always drowned out more easily in peacetime. *What is there to fear?* But not in a pandemic. When a cholera outbreak came to London, Charles Spurgeon admonished everyone in Christ,

Now is the time for all of you who love souls. You may see men more alarmed than they are already; and if they should be, mind that you avail yourselves of the opportunity of doing them good. You have the Balm of Gilead; when their wounds smart, pour it in. You know of Him who died to save; tell them of Him. Lift high the cross before their eyes. Tell them that God became man that man might be lifted to God. Tell them of Calvary, and its groans, and cries, and sweat of blood. Tell them of Jesus hanging on the cross to save sinners. Tell them that —

“There is life for a look at the Crucified One.”

Tell them that He is able to save to the uttermost all them that come unto God by Him. Tell them that He is able to save even at the eleventh hour, and to say to the dying thief, “today shalt thou be with Me in Paradise.”

God has prepared good works for us ([Ephesians 2:10](#)). He has prepared us for days like these. He plans to show the immeasurable riches of his kindness through simple acts of Christian courage in a world paralyzed and consumed by fear. Father, in the name of Jesus, use your church.