



REFORMED THOUGHT FOR CHRISTIAN LIVING

Pressing On or Treading Water? Moderator's Comments Posted 20 April 2020

By Rev Dr Peter Barnes

There is still a strange eerie feeling about the community at the moment. It was present during the bushfires, and it is still here with the coronavirus. If normal life was all about parties, crowds, and living it up, then normality has yet to return. Everything remains disrupted, although to varying degrees. To some, it all seems rather exaggerated, even manufactured, perhaps a plot concocted by political powers who are seeking to exercise yet more power. To others, it seems that the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse have been let loose, and the end is nigh. If we are Christians, we are called upon, in the first place, to be faithful, and seek God's Word for our hearts and minds.

GOD'S WORK CONTINUES WITH OR WITHOUT US

When Paul was imprisoned, probably in Rome, he wrote to the church at Philippi: 'I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel' (Phil.1:12). When Paul was thrown into prison, many Christians must have felt that was a real dampener on the cause of the gospel. Not so, says Paul, God's arm is not so short that it cannot save. Indeed, a successful ministry may mean prison, not conferences and evangelistic events.

To be specific, Paul says that his imprisonment meant that the palace guard and others came to know of the gospel (Phil.1:13) and that most of the brothers had become much bolder to speak the word (Phil.1:14). As we profess – even if we do not readily recognise – God works in adversity.

In 1935 Mussolini's fascists invaded Abyssinia (Ethiopia), and the Protestant missionaries were expelled. Morale was low, and the general view was that the fledgling church would struggle to survive. Yet when the missionaries returned after the war,

they found that the church had grown. Something similar has occurred in China. The Communist revolution of 1949 saw missionaries expelled and Christians persecuted. Marion Andrews' father, Frank White, was one who was forced to flee. In 1960 in Queensland he was almost overcome with grief at the thought that there were no Christians left in China. He could not have known how the gospel had survived, and, in fact, advanced.

John Bunyan wrote his masterpiece Pilgrim's Progress while he was in prison for refusing not to preach. The turning point in the English Reformation was the burning of the Protestant martyrs under Queen Mary in the 1550s. This sealed the Reformation in blood. The nation saw that people were prepared to die for their faith in Christ alone through grace alone, as revealed in Scripture alone. Cranmer, Ridley, Latimer and nearly 300 others were burnt at the stake rather than renounce this evangelical understanding of the faith. The true gospel was stronger in 1558 at the end of Mary's bloody reign than it was at the beginning. Robert Murray McCheyne exercised a godly ministry at St Peter's Church in Dundee, and when he left in 1839 for a brief visit to Palestine, W. C. Burns took over the preaching. Revival broke out – which would have been a nightmare to any egotistical preacher on his way home. Not to McCheyne. There is the lesson for us all: God does not need us (Acts 17:25) and any glory must go to Him (Psalm 115:1).

The hindrances we experience may be the means whereby God teaches us to see more clearly that it is God who calls and saves His people, from beginning to end.

GOD'S WAYS ARE BEYOND US

We have just looked at the apostle Paul in chains. If God praises

those who receive the word and pass it on (1 Thess.1:8), then why does God Himself have the great apostle taken out of the game, as it were. The God who rescued Peter (Acts 5:17-20 and 12:6-19) could surely have rescued Paul. And if Samaria has received the gospel, why is Phillip sent down to Gaza, which is described as 'a desert place', in order to bring the gospel to just one unnamed man, the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40)? Has the Lord no regard for sociological studies? 'Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways!' (Rom.11:33)

The terrible Babylonian exile of the sixth century B.C., lamented in Psalm 137, led to synagogues across what became the Roman Empire. The military megalomaniac, Alexander the Great, conquered the Mediterranean world in the fourth century B.C., and led to Koine Greek being widely spoken. Later this was a boon to the apostles who could travel from one part of the Roman Empire to another, and be understood, at least at the linguistic level.

So often God achieves two things at once – in terms of chastening and of future blessing. And so often our first thought is: 'I wouldn't do it that way!' Only later do we see more clearly that 'His way is perfect' (Ps.18:30). Drawing on Mark 7:37, blind Fanny Crosby wrote of her Saviour leading her, and doing all things well. That is true, even if we do not fathom how it all works exactly.

RECOGNISE WHAT IT MEANS TO BE FAITHFUL IN DIFFERENT CIRCUMSTANCES

The New York Times has published an article: 'If life is a movie, it's called "Closed Until Further Notice"'. That is not the Christian mindset. Life has its seasons (Eccles.3:1-8). Quite frequently God's people are to 'stand still' (Ex.14:13), 'be still' (Ps.46:10), to 'wait' (e.g. Ps.62:5) and 'rest' (Isa.30:15). When John Milton went blind, he was very aware of the bustling, busy world around him, and had to think through his God-given duties. They could not be the same as others, but thankfully, as he said: 'They also serve who only stand and wait'.

Our default position is to trust in what we do. Even as believers highly trained to recite 'salvation by grace', we tend to carry on as though we are God's hands and feet. There are a multitude of verses which tell us to be active, but a time of frustration may also become a time of reorientation and renewed trust. Whatever we have been doing during the COVID restrictions, God has not been treading water. The Father is always working and so is the Son (John 5:17). God will not recommence His activities as restrictions are lifted. We need to recognise what He has been doing while we have been constrained. We will surely see something of why Jonathan Edwards wrote of 'the surprising work of God'.

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