

## Reflections On The COVID-19 Pandemic

**David C. Grabbe**

**Given 20-Nov-21; Sermon #1626**

Today I will speak on a topic that is quite near to all of us, though not very dear. Today's topic is the pandemic. You may be tired of hearing about COVID-19, but please know that I will be approaching this subject differently from the coverage by either the mainstream or alternative media.

As a reverse SPS, here's what I won't be talking about. I won't be talking about the origins of COVID, at least not in the typical way. I won't be talking about government mandates or corporate responses. I won't be talking about the machinations of evil men, nor the official narrative, nor any of the alternative narratives. I won't be talking about vaccinations or boosters, and this is the only time in the message you will hear me say, "ivermectin." You already have your own opinion on such things, and far be it from me to attempt to change it.

So, I will not be speaking on those details, but rather on what the pandemic signifies for God's church. And I will tell you the conclusion ahead of time, which is that I won't be giving you a conclusion. Instead, I will present a series of reflections. This will be a collection of lessons, principles, and scenarios, drawn from the Bible, that may apply. Think of these as lenses through which to view the pandemic, or perhaps shoes to try on to see if they fit.

### **First Reflection**

The first reflection is a lesson that is illustrated in I Kings 20, if you would turn there. I Kings 20 contains the account of a war between Ben-Hadad, king of Syria, and Ahab, king of Israel. We won't go through it all because we are only after Ahab's statement in verse 11:

**I Kings 20:11** So the king of Israel answered and said, “Tell him, ‘Let not the one who puts on his armor boast like the one who takes it off.’”

Ahab’s words are a veiled but perceptive warning against speaking with confidence before one has experience, or before an event has occurred. It is easy to imagine a day of victory and to speak with assurance of a glorious outcome. However, it is another matter altogether to survive the field of battle and still be strong enough to take one’s armor off at the end. All the words ahead of time are just so much noise until one has gone through the heat of the experience and been rigorously tried. Only then will one’s words have weight, because only then will one truly and personally know what one is talking about.

I have been guilty of “knowing” things too soon, and of speaking based on impressions gleaned from what I’ve read and heard. I’ve been guilty of having answers before having experience, and of not being circumspect enough to keep in mind that the things I think I know may not be correct. It is easy to search the Internet and find reinforcement for the perspective one is already inclined to believe. It is easy to have confidence in treatment protocols that a doctor assures us will work. It is easy to believe in one’s innate ability to withstand what surely could not be worse than the flu, and all those people claiming to be miserable are either whiners or media stooges.

Now, I am not saying the media don’t have stooges. But Ahab had a rare flash of wisdom we should keep in mind. Our perspective when we only have second-hand knowledge is quite different from our view after the battle, after the painful losses, after the grueling experience in which our weapons and our armor and our strength were not as dependable as we imagined. Until we have come through the battle, we should remember that we are only speaking theoretically. We may even scoff, until the battle touches us personally.

So, this first reflection is a lesson that many of us have learned: to be circumspect about what we think we know, about our answers and our advice, and the confidence with which we pontificate about things we have

not experienced. In the words of the great warrior-philosopher, Mike Tyson, “Every man has a plan—until he gets hit.” So, lesson learned.

## Second Reflection

The second reflection is on the tendency to limit God in our minds as to what He will or won't do, or how He accomplishes His purposes. Please turn with me to Deuteronomy 28:

**Deuteronomy 28:21-22** The LORD will make the plague cling to you until He has consumed you from the land which you are going to possess. The LORD will strike you with consumption, with fever, with inflammation, with severe burning fever, . . .

While everyone's symptoms will be somewhat different, many COVID veterans can relate to severe fevers, and inflammation in the joints and maybe kidneys. Fever is perhaps the foremost symptom of a viral infection. A loss of appetite and subsequent weakness, which is what the word “consumption” describes, is very common with COVID. It basically means “emaciation.” It could also be translated as “weakness” or “wasting.” When you go for a week or two without eating normally, you experience weakness and wasting. But what I want you to see from Scripture is that many of us experienced a form of what God said He will do.

This mention of pandemic symptoms is also found in Leviticus 26:

**Leviticus 26:16** I also will do this to you: I will even appoint terror over you, wasting disease and fever which shall consume the eyes and cause sorrow of heart.

Here again, God promises wasting disease and fever. Interestingly, the part about conditions “which will consume the eyes” does not have to mean blindness. It could also mean that the things that our eyes look upon are consumed, like our loved ones. That fits with the next phrase, which is about sorrow of heart. This verse can indicate not only experiencing the wasting

disease and fever personally, but also watching others be consumed by it, and then sorrowing for them. Most of us have experienced this as well, some in person and others from afar.

There is a related curse in the middle part of verse 25:

**Leviticus 26:25** . . . when you are gathered together within your cities I will send pestilence among you;

By definition, a pestilence is a devastating contagious disease. In mentioning “gathering,” this verse shows that proximity to one another is a critical factor, which should sound familiar. What has happened in the last year or so, and especially around the Feast of Tabernacles, is at least a strong echo of this series of verses. We certainly did not experience the full strength of these curses, because in their full form, the people are completely consumed from the land. Furthermore, Ezekiel 5 prophesies that when God gets serious about pestilence, one-third will die from it. We haven’t seen anything like that. Whatever that pestilence is, it will make COVID-19 seem like a pretty good time.

Even so, the critical point is that God Himself claims the pestilence, the plague, the fever, the inflammation, the weakness and wasting. Notice, though, that He does not say how He will send these things, only that He will send them on a disobedient people. This is one reason why it makes little difference whether a pestilence comes from a bat, or is accidentally released from a lab, or is purposefully released as a plot. What matters more is that it lines up with what God says He will do when His people reject Him and His commands.

Scripture shows that God uses the tendencies of people—both good and bad—in the outworking of His will. He even uses evil leaders and nations to chasten His people. In this regard, we may be limiting God in our minds if we fixate on the possibility that COVID is man-made. I don’t discount that scenario, but I believe there is a larger concern.

Since God promises pestilence when His people reject Him, and we live in nations of His people who are rejecting Him, then the means by which He sends the curses are less important to me than the fact that He says He will send them.

This difficulty that we sometimes have with the way God works is a significant theme in the book of Habakkuk. The prophet had a very hard time accepting that God would use the insufferable Chaldeans to punish His people. God Himself identifies the Chaldeans as being fierce, impetuous, dreadful, and terrible, and yet God chose that wicked nation as His means to punish. But God's means seemed out of bounds to Habakkuk. God's means didn't fit into the mental box that Habakkuk had constructed, and God corrected him.

The book of Daniel teaches that God raises up the basest of men and gives them the power to bring His will to pass. In Daniel's day, it was Nebuchadnezzar. In our day, it could be political or business leaders, or scientists, or your favorite evil billionaire. But Who allowed or caused these men to rise to the positions in which they now wield power? When it is God's will to chasten, He may use men who reflect the evil in His people.

The Israelites blamed their problems on the nations God sent to punish them, while the real issue was the rebellion and disobedience that precipitated the scourge. But it is easier to focus on the scourge than on the root cause, which is sin.

We can add to this what it says in Amos 3:6, that "If there is calamity in a city, will not the Eternal have done it?" In Isaiah 45:7, God says, "I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity; I, the Eternal, do all these things." This nation rejects the thought of God creating calamity. After 9/11, the few prominent figures who dared to suggest that national immorality might have caused national calamity were shouted down so fast that they regretted opening their mouths. That perspective could not be tolerated by the tolerance crowd.

Yet even we in the church can fail to accept what God plainly says He will do. It is still unpalatable for many to acknowledge that God would scatter the

church. But God also promises and claims scattering. You can find one instance in this very chapter: Leviticus 26:33. God's scattering is part of the biblical record and pattern. In their personal places of judgment, some can allow that God scattered Israel, but not that He would scatter the church—only Satan would do that.

Yet the church is accountable for so much more than Israel was because of what we have been given. If God promises and claims certain outcomes, we would do well to take Him at His word and not assume that all trouble comes from Satan. As the book of Job shows, the Almighty holds Leviathan's leash.

So, to summarize this reflection, we must be careful not to assign adversity or calamity to the wrong source, particularly when the adversity or calamity line up with what God promises to do if His people turn away.

### **Third Reflection**

Now, the third reflection is the possibility that the pandemic is a warning because we in the church are out of alignment with God. I will relate something that happened at the Feast when I was in the depths of my COVID experience. Distressing news was filtering in of the number of members in the church of God that were afflicted, and that entire Feast sites were being dramatically affected, including ours. During the cycles of fitful sleeping and waking, a phrase kept running through my mind. It was the phrase, "to us belongs shame of face..." I would wake up, and remember what was befalling the church, and that phrase would start running through my mind again: "To us belongs shame of face..."

Maybe you recognize that phrase. It is from Daniel's prayer of repentance. When it finally dawned on me where the phrase came from, I asked Mikele to read that prayer aloud, which she did. It is a very moving prayer, and hearing it brought me to the point of tears, which does not happen all that often with me, as you might imagine.

But I will tell you something: After hearing that prayer read aloud, and feeling the chord that it struck, and agreeing with it, something changed. I

felt noticeably stronger, physically and mentally. Now, it wasn't a case of instant healing. The illness still ran its course. And while I don't know the full significance, I do know that prayer caused something to lift.

So, we will read that prayer, which is found in Daniel 9, and perhaps it will strike a chord with you as well:

**Daniel 9:1-19** In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, of the lineage of the Medes, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans—in the first year of his reign I, Daniel, understood by the books the number of the years specified by the word of the LORD through Jeremiah the prophet, that He would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem. Then I set my face toward the Lord God to make request by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes. And I prayed to the LORD my God, and made confession, and said, “O Lord, great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant and mercy with those who love Him, and with those who keep His commandments, we have done wickedly and rebelled, even by departing from Your precepts and Your judgments. Neither have we heeded Your servants the prophets, who spoke in Your name to our kings and our princes, to our fathers and all the people of the land. O Lord, righteousness belongs to You, but to us shame of face, as it is this day—to the men of Judah, to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and all Israel, those near and those far off in all the countries to which You have driven them, because of the unfaithfulness which they have committed against You. “O Lord, to us belongs shame of face, to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, because we have sinned against You. To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, though we have rebelled against Him. We have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God, to walk in His laws, which He set before us by His servants the prophets. Yes, all Israel has transgressed Your law, and has departed so as not to obey Your voice; therefore the curse and the oath written in the Law of Moses the servant of God have been poured out on us, because we have sinned against Him. And He has confirmed His words, which He spoke against us and against our judges who judged us, by bringing upon us a great disaster; for under the whole heaven such has never been done as

what has been done to Jerusalem. “As it is written in the Law of Moses, all this disaster has come upon us; yet we have not made our prayer before the LORD our God, that we might turn from our iniquities and understand Your truth. Therefore the LORD has kept the disaster in mind, and brought it upon us; for the LORD our God is righteous in all the works which He does, though we have not obeyed His voice. And now, O Lord our God, who brought Your people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand, and made Yourself a name, as it is this day—we have sinned, we have done wickedly! “O Lord, according to all Your righteousness, I pray, let Your anger and Your fury be turned away from Your city Jerusalem, Your holy mountain; because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and Your people are a reproach to all those around us. Now therefore, our God, hear the prayer of Your servant, and his supplications, and for the Lord’s sake cause Your face to shine on Your sanctuary, which is desolate. O my God, incline Your ear and hear; open Your eyes and see our desolations, and the city which is called by Your name; for we do not present our supplications before You because of our righteous deeds, but because of Your great mercies. O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and act! Do not delay for Your own sake, my God, for Your city and Your people are called by Your name.”

When Daniel confesses Judah’s unfaithfulness to God, he includes himself with the nation, even though there is no record that he was guilty of the things that led to the exile. He understood that God judged the nation as a body. He acknowledges that the nation is in its humbled position because of rebellion and unfaithfulness and sin, and also that God is faithful to carry out the curses written in the Law of Moses, some of which we read earlier. In this prayer, there is no self-justifying or equivocating, only a plea for God to forgive for the sake of the people who are called by His name.

We are generally familiar with the sins that led to Judah’s subjugation, and I am not suggesting that the church of God has fallen into the same depths of spiritual depravity. However, we don’t have to descend to the depths that Judah did for God to respond to our spiritual condition. We have been given so much more than Judah, and thus, we invite our Father’s chastening much sooner if we start to go astray.

Again, the essence of this third reflection is that the pandemic may be God's way of getting our attention because we are off course in some way, whether as a Body or as individuals.

Before reviewing the sins that tend to crop up with God's people, we will take a step back to see why this reflection should be considered. We have just come through a Feast that was significantly disrupted. We still kept the Feast, thankfully, and we saw God's providence in the way He arranged things. But the disruptions were significant and unprecedented in the history of this little group.

Now, other places where we believe God placed His name were also disrupted, and in some cases, even more severely. There were reports of a Feast site being cancelled because so many elders were sick, and of another site having to go completely virtual because of all the sickness. And even where Feast sites were not disrupted, there were countless instances of members cancelling or drastically changing travel plans, and of many members spending much, if not all, of the Feast sick, whether at home or in a hotel room. I believe the timing was more than coincidence. COVID could have swept through at any time of the year, and yet it affected the church most during the fall holy day season. The Feast is a commanded and sacred assembly, and yet God at least allowed, if not caused, His Feast to be significantly disrupted in numerous ways.

But there is more. There was an event last year that seems to have slipped below the radar for all except those directly affected by it. Last year, a hurricane forced the closure of a Feast site during the middle of the Feast. This wasn't a matter of brethren choosing not to assemble because of fear, but of already-gathered brethren being forced to find another place to keep the Feast. So, if you are doing the math, last year, one Feast site was cancelled in the middle of the Feast, and this year, multiple sites were disrupted (to varying degrees) with several cancelled. Some may chalk this up to coincidence or just the times in which we live, but for my part, it is starting to look like a trend.

This is especially significant when compared with well-known interventions by God to spare Feast sites from similar fates by hurricanes in decades past.

This surely invites the question of what has happened such that we have not seen the same corporate deliverances. We know God has not changed. However, our relationship with God is reciprocal, meaning He responds to what we do or don't do in relation to Him. This is why I believe it is prudent to consider whether our spiritual walls are down somewhere, such that God is responding in unexpected ways, and allowing or causing things to befall His people that He has spared us from in the past.

God told King Asa that “The Eternal is with you while you are with Him. If you seek Him, He will be found by you; but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you.” If we are seeing what looks like God not being with us in the way He has been in the past, it is only reasonable to consider whether we have moved away from Him.

Now, this is still part of the possibility that God may be drawing attention to our spiritual condition or direction, but we will make a digression to see something about God's judgment. A question concerning judgment came up during Christ's ministry:

**Luke 13:1-5** There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered and said to them, “Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.”

Jesus points out that those directly affected are not necessarily more guilty than those unaffected, but that regardless of the degree to which we are affected, we should respond to calamity by considering our own ways and repenting. We also see the way Jesus groups people together, which reinforces the fact that none of us is independent. He groups all the Galileans together, and He groups all the citizens of Jerusalem together, whether they were directly affected or not. In the same way, we are not separate from what befalls another part of the Body—we are still grouped together in God's eyes.

There are numerous examples of relative innocents bearing the consequences of the decisions of others. In Jonah's story, he risked the lives of all onboard his ship because he turned his back on God and resisted God's will. The sailors were caught in the storm that God sent to change Jonah's mind, even though they were innocent of Jonah's sin. It was only when Jonah removed himself from the situation that the sailors were safe again.

Similarly, in the battle for the city of Ai, 36 Israelite men lost their lives because of the greed and deception of one man. God's judgment fell on more than just the perpetrator. The 36 were innocent of Achan's transgression, and yet God judged the congregation as a whole. This lesson is significant enough that God devotes a whole chapter to it.

**Joshua 7:1** But the children of Israel committed a trespass regarding the accursed things, for Achan the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took of the accursed things; so the anger of the LORD burned against the children of Israel.

Notice how God accounts this. God says the children of Israel committed a trespass, but it was "just" one man. Because of what one man did, God's anger burned against the whole nation. God views the nation as a whole, and thus, any individual may become a sinful representative of the group. That should sober us, because we are part of a spiritual nation—the church.

We see this again in verse 11:

**Joshua 7:11** *Israel* has sinned, and *they* have also transgressed My covenant which I commanded them. For *they* have even taken some of the accursed things, and have both stolen and deceived; and *they* have also put it among *their own* stuff.

Again, the theft and deception were committed by one man, and yet God says that "Israel has sinned," and that they have stolen and deceived. The action of one can lead to calamity for the group.

This may be an area that we Americans, especially, have a difficult time accepting because of our tradition of individualism. Because of our history

and culture, we may have a hard time accepting a judgment for something we didn't do. We think, "Well, *I* wasn't involved with that, so it's not my problem"—and yet, God may involve us in group chastening.

On the other hand, because of our individualism, we may also have a hard time remembering that what we do affects others, sometimes very adversely. If we make poor choices, it is not just our own well-being that we risk, but we also gamble with the well-being of others that God associates with us, such as our family, our congregation, our corporate group, or the whole spiritual nation.

Now, I am not suggesting that we cast lots to see if there is a Jonah or an Achan among us. Instead, this principle should motivate us to take stock of our own lives, and make sure that we aren't a Jonah or an Achan, and thus, harming others through resisting or ignoring God's will in some way.

This fits right into Daniel's prayer. Daniel recognized that God viewed the nation as a whole, which is why Daniel included himself in the prayer. Even as God said that Israel sinned when there was only one perpetrator, so Daniel said, "we have sinned and committed iniquity," even though he may not have been involved. Just as Achan was a negative representative of the whole nation, so also God accepted Daniel as a positive representative of the whole nation and responded to his humble prayer.

Applying these examples to the Feast disruptions, not only does Jesus warn against judging those most affected as being worse, but it could have been the sins of any of us that resulted in elders being unable to give their messages, and Feast sites being cancelled. Now, this is not to say that elders can't have failings, or that Christ views all congregations the same, because Revelation 2—3 shows otherwise. But these examples illustrate that the effect that we see doesn't always tell the whole story, and that God's judgment can be complex, especially when large parts of His Body are involved.

Now, getting back to this third reflection, the fact that God's annual Sabbaths have been disrupted for a couple of years, as well as Passover gatherings being affected by mandates, may indicate that there is something in our approach to these set-apart times that has inclined God to shake things

up to see if our focus is still on Him, and how much we value the spiritual significance of these special times.

God gave us a record of the perennial problems that cropped up in Israel and Judah and which led to their scattering, and these same problems showed up again in recent church history and were aspects of our scattering as well. They are part of a well-established pattern. So, in our evaluation of whether this shoe fits us, we will turn to Ezekiel 20.

Most of you are familiar with the contents of Ezekiel 20, so we will not go through each verse. But Ezekiel 20:23 shows this section contains the reasons for God scattering His people. When we look at the chapter in aggregate, God's controversy with His people is because of rebellion and disobedience, and He specifically identifies idolatry and Sabbath-breaking, so we will focus on those two.

Mainstream Christians consider the Sabbath to be the least of the commandments. Even as they substitute the first day of the week for the day that God sanctified and made holy, they won't even set aside their counterfeit day for a full 24 hours. For human nature, time is too personal, and it recoils and bristles at the reality that one day a week belongs to the Almighty for His purposes. And as these and other verses show, plus what happened to the Worldwide Church of God, Sabbath-breaking always seems to be a part of apostasy.

Apostasy probably will not start with deliberate working on the Sabbath, because if one has been a Sabbath-keeper, habits die hard. Instead, falling away begins with laxity and carelessness. It begins with letting down and finding excuses and justifications for not upholding the sanctity of the weekly or annual Sabbaths.

Coupled with that, because of the principle in Ecclesiastes 8:11—that when a penalty for an infraction does not come quickly, it allows the heart to become set in its ways—we may be well down the road of Sabbath-breaking before we run into consequences. At that point, it may be difficult to connect the dots between our neglect of God's holy times and the fact that our lives seem to be breaking down. It might dawn on us that we are floundering, but we may not be able to see how our choices over the years have been the

cause. God may have given us so much time to repent that we can no longer see what we need to repent of, because we have adjusted. If this continues, in time, it will seem ridiculous that something in the Old Testament could have any bearing on our lives today.

Ezekiel 20:12 identifies God's Sabbaths as being a sign between God and His people. They are a critical part of our connection with Him. Verse 12 also shows the link between the Sabbaths and sanctification. Keeping the Sabbaths as God intends is part of remaining sanctified. It is part of remaining set apart by God.

Ezekiel 20:20 again points out the Sabbath as a sign and ties it to knowing God. Knowing God is eternal life, as Jesus defines it. It is foundational to our relationship with Him. Those who love Him want to do things His way, and keep His commandments, and the Sabbaths are a vital part of that relationship. They are not the only part, but if we are willing to accept the patterns and examples of Scripture, clearly, this is no minor matter to God. He never took away the holiness that He bestowed on the seventh day. He hasn't changed His regard for the times that He set apart. But the carnal mind is unconcerned about what He thinks.

Now, much has been said about the Sabbath over the years, far too much to review now. On our website, you can find Bible studies on the fourth commandment, and sermon series on the fourth commandment, and sermon series on the specifics of Sabbath-keeping. Those may be good to review. However, two things have arisen since the time much of that material was given. A great many advances in technology have arisen in recent decades, and with that, a new generation has arisen that has only known a digitally-connected world.

As we understand, technology by itself is neutral. It can be used for good things or for evil. Technology allows us to broadcast our services in real-time to distant locations, such as Trinidad. We even have dedicated souls in South Africa, Europe, the Philippines, Australia, and other places, who don't mind the time difference. Technology allows for feeding the flock in unprecedented ways.

But on the other hand, technology can also consume us and turn us into its slaves, because of convenience and because we depend on it more all the time. And it can interfere with the Sabbaths and with our relationship with God in subtle ways.

In earlier days in the church, we understood that entertainment media was not “Sabbathful,” as Megan, our 6-year-old, says. But with an always-connected, always-on digital world, the types of media have expanded, and the lines of what is appropriate for the Sabbaths may need to be evaluated as to their effect on our personal spiritual growth.

If we are inclined, we can lose ourselves in the news media of whatever flavor we prefer. We may justify our news watching as keeping up on current events and looking for prophecy to be fulfilled, but it may also be that we have an addiction to the flood of new information, and we don’t know what to do with ourselves until we get our fix. That could be something to evaluate.

Not only is there more news coverage and analysis than ever before, but there has also been a serious misunderstanding over what Christ means when He says to “watch.” It is easy to assume He means to watch world events. Yet we can spend His precious, holy time doing that and not receive any true spiritual benefit.

The command to watch is about taking heed to ourselves, not being focused on all that is going on in the world. It has to do with being faithful to our responsibilities and maintaining a state of spiritual readiness, as opposed to being distracted by events around us. There is no profit in having end-time events all figured out if we are on the wrong side of them because we have given them more attention than our calling and spiritual edification.

All that information does not truly help us to take on the image of Jesus Christ and deepen our relationship with Him. Having our finger on the pulse of a world that we know is dying can distract us from the life that has been offered to us. But that life requires our time, attention, and devotion, which means we must prioritize and sacrifice what is less important.

Frequently, the news steals our peace, and thus our rest, which is a basic purpose of the Sabbath—to set aside the cares of this life to focus on the things that really matter. The news reports and analyses are often empty calories for our mind. A few may be worthwhile, but even they cannot give life like God and His word do. We have been given understanding of God's word of life—eternal life. God has set apart time for us to grow in spiritual understanding, but we must choose to make the best use of that gift of time.

Social media is similar. It can be used to connect with brethren, but it can also serve to fuel idle speculation and gossip. It has been shown to cause friction, to pull our focus into rabbit-holes, and to pull us away from the One who set apart the time to connect with Him.

Imbibing of the various forms of media on the Sabbaths can be like drinking from the firehose of the spirit of the age. They cannot provide spiritual nourishment or strength for the times we are enduring, only a buzz of dopamine, along with a good possibility of distraction, discouragement, and maybe depression. In response, some brethren do a media fast on the Sabbaths to guard against things that do not fit with God's intent for His day.

God gave the Sabbaths, in part, to remind us of His deliverance from slavery. Keeping the Sabbaths properly is a primary way to remain free and to keep from going back into slavery. And yet, if we are unable to stay away from the firehose for 24 hours, we must ask ourselves if we are really free. God delivered Israel so they could worship Him, but Israel preferred slavery because it was familiar. It was a habit. In a similar way, God delivered us from the world so we could come to know Him, and yet we, too, may be recaptured by the world through what we give our time and attention to.

As mentioned, our technology allows us to be a part of Sabbath services virtually when we cannot attend physically. However, if we are not careful, this convenience may also encourage us to treat a formal worship service just like any other channel. So, we may feel free to text and message during services, rather than focusing on what God is providing for us. We may feel free to skip the songs and the prayers, even though they are integral parts of worship. We may feel free to skip the sermonette, even though that short message may contain something God wants us personally to hear. We may tune in for the sermon, but only if it is given by a speaker that we like. And if

the sermon that day isn't engaging enough or maybe encouraging enough for our tastes, we can always find something else to watch. The technology makes it all very convenient—we can pick and choose what works for us. But if we do this, who are we really worshipping?

Truly, times have changed, but not necessarily for the better. It is easy to forget that an Internet stream of a formal worship service is still part of God's sacred assembly or holy convocation. Yet our approach to God's Sabbaths is an indicator of our overall esteem of Him and His ways, because what is in our heart is revealed by what we do, not by what we profess. This includes dress and decorum when we assemble before Him. Details matter, and little things count. I am not advocating straining at gnats, but rather searching for areas where we can bring more glory to God through coming into better alignment with His word and His will.

The feeling we sometimes get of things breaking down may be correct, but what may be breaking down is our relationship with God, such that He draws back in response to our drawing back. If we are not seeking God with our whole being throughout the year, and if we don't regard the Feasts as He does, but instead prioritize activities and nice locations and fellowship above the Object of the holy days—Jesus Christ—why should He continue to uphold His Feasts and His servants as He has in the past?

Israel neglected God's Sabbaths, and Lamentations 2:6 says God caused His appointed feasts and Sabbaths to be forgotten. That same verse says God spurned the leadership, including the priests. These things are written for our admonition. I'm not suggesting that God is going to cause the whole church to forget the Sabbaths—He always has a faithful remnant. However, this can happen on an individual basis, and many of us know people who used to understand the Sabbaths but have lost that understanding. Understanding is maintained by correct practice, but forgetting comes through neglect.

In Ezekiel 20, the other identified sin that led to scattering is idolatry. We won't turn to it, but in Jeremiah 18:15-17, God says He will scatter His people because they have forgotten Him. When God is forgotten, something else moves in to take His place. For Israel and Judah, it was the gods of the surrounding nations. But we don't have to possess graven images in our homes, or burn incense to the queen of heaven, to be guilty of idolatry. It can

be much more subtle, but it always begins with forgetting God in small ways. There is a parallel to this in Hebrews 2:

**Hebrews 2:1-3** Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him . . . ?

As this says, the stakes are much, much higher for us than for those under the first covenant. Let's plug some examples into this passage to illustrate it: if Nadab and Abihu didn't escape ... if Uzzah didn't escape ... if Miriam didn't escape ... if the man gathering sticks on the Sabbath didn't escape ... if a whole generation died in the wilderness ... if the whole nation was killed, scattered, or taken captive ... how can we expect to escape if we neglect the overwhelming gift that has been given to us, a gift that is so much greater than anything offered to Israel? We must guard against drifting, against floating, against letting days slip by without making the very most of the access we have to God and the understanding He has blessed us with. We must guard, not only against transgressions, but against the neglect that leads to them—neglecting continual prayer, neglecting Bible study, and letting something—anything or *anyone*—become a higher priority than God.

The book of Hebrews does not address specific sins the way some of the epistles do because the audience does not appear to have been sinning rampantly. It does contain warnings against sin in general, and interestingly, the author weaves the Sabbath into chapters 3, 4, and 10. However, the book's strongest language—indeed, some of the strongest language in the Bible—is reserved, not for a specific sin, but for what happens when we do not keep God at the forefront of our minds and the center of our lives. In other words, it is about subtle idolatry. Hebrews 3:12 warns of a heart of unbelief that departs from God. Chapter 6 warns against falling away, and chapter 10 warns against thinking so little of Christ's sacrifice that we sin without compunction. It takes time for those conditions to develop, and part of the reason for the book was to arrest the spiritual slide the author was witnessing

in the Hebrews. Theirs was not a blatant idolatry of burning children to Molech, but a subtle idolatry of allowing other things to obscure their view of Jesus Christ, which can only end in spiritual desolation.

Apostasy does not begin with determined rebellion. It begins with carelessness and letting down. It begins with choosing what is convenient over the precious revelation that requires a measure of sacrifice. And in His mercy and faithfulness, God allows or causes things to break down to get our attention, and to encourage us to think about the path we are on.

Now, maybe this third reflection isn't for you. Maybe you have already consulted with your Father about this particular shoe, and He confirmed that it does not fit because He already has your undivided attention and devotion. So, we will try another shoe in our search for understanding these times.

#### **Fourth Reflection**

The next shoe—the fourth reflection—is the Job scenario. In the book of Job, a righteous man was overwhelmingly afflicted with a trial far greater than COVID, and yet sin was not the cause. Job's trial revealed that he did have a shortcoming, but his affliction was not a punishment for sin.

Three times in the first two chapters, we are told that Job was blameless and upright, a man who feared God and shunned evil. Two of those times are by God Himself. Job's trial, which God instigated through Satan, was not a punishment, nor a response by God to a poor spiritual condition. Something else was happening.

There are two overall lessons we will extract from the book of Job that may help us in understanding severe trials.

**Job 40:6-8** Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said: "Now prepare yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer Me: "Would you indeed annul My judgment? Would you condemn Me that you may be justified?"

This is in the midst of God's answer to Job, which begins in chapter 38. The flaw in Job that his incredible trial revealed is that, because he could not

identify a shortcoming that would justify his present misery, he entertained the terrible thought—perhaps not in so many words—that God was unfair, or that God had made a mistake. But the fact that Job couldn't see a reason didn't mean that there was a problem with God. It simply meant that God was God and Job was not.

That is the first overall lesson—that God does not answer to man, nor is He obligated to give an answer to anyone. As God says later in Job 41:11, "Who has preceded Me, that I should pay him? Everything under heaven is Mine." We can ask and try to understand God's reasons, and indeed, that is a good thing to do, especially now. But our conclusions should never involve justifying ourselves with the implication that there is a fault with God or how He does things. It could never be so. God knows exactly what He is doing, and He is doing it perfectly.

Yet there is another theme running through God's extended answer to Job. God does more than declare His right to do with His creation as He sees fit. When you read the rhetorical questions that He asks of Job, there is a commonality that reminds us that He is not capricious or cruel, but that He has a purpose. His questions draw attention to the fact that He is the Creator. He points to laying the foundation of the earth and setting the boundaries of the oceans. He highlights the weather patterns that have their genesis and oversight in Him. He showcases the beauty of the animals, and why they behave the way that they do. In short, everything in the creation is the way it is because God has made it that way. And if you carry the trajectory of God's answer through, it silently highlights that God was Job's Creator, too, and that God's creation of Job was continuing. Job was blameless and upright, but he was not yet perfect. He needed more work, which is exactly what God was doing—He was perfecting Job, and that perfection required suffering.

Now, this shoe may seem more attractive than the last one because it could mean that the pandemic is more about being perfected than about being punished, and maybe we don't have to look too closely at our lives. But consider how expensive this shoe is. Remember God's evaluation of Job before He unleashed Satan. God had already worked with Job so extensively, and Job had responded so admirably, that God could boast that His creation was blameless and upright, and even the accuser did not accuse Job. So, before we snatch up this shoe of suffering for the sake of being perfected

(like Job), remember Job's sterling character before his trial, and consider honestly whether God would say the same thing about us. If not, this may not be the right shoe for us.

Before we leave Job, there is another aspect of his story we should keep in mind. After God answered Job, and Job caught a glimpse in his mind's eye of the power and the majesty and the perfection of God, Job said, "I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." That was the response of a man whom God called "blameless" and "upright." After having his eyes opened to spiritual reality, Job was demolished, and his self-justifying was stripped away. Job's experience teaches us that even a blameless and upright man cannot feel good about himself when he sees himself in relation to God. Isaiah experienced something similar. Peter told Christ, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" when he saw one of Christ's miracles—and Jesus was still in human flesh.

This doesn't mean that we should walk around in an attitude of self-hatred, but if we find ourselves satisfied with our condition, it is because haven't clearly seen, or have lost sight of, the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. And sometimes when we lose that focus on God's righteousness, He moves to shock us out of complacency, which is what the third reflection was about.

## **Fifth Reflection**

We will move on to the fifth reflection. The fifth reflection is about affliction in general, and the benefit that comes from it. Please turn to Psalm 119. Psalm 119 is one long praise of God's instructions, and the psalmist brings up affliction seven times. We will look at just a few of them, but I want you to notice the linkage between affliction and God's standard of righteousness and conduct:

**Psalm 119:67** Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word.

**Psalm 119:71** It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes.

**Psalm 119:75** I KNOW, O LORD, that Your judgments are right, and that in faithfulness You have afflicted me.

The word translated “afflicted” in these verses is *‘anah*, which is the same word used for afflicting ourselves on the Day of Atonement. The word does not mean “fasting,” although fasting is a common application. The word means, “to be bowed down, to be humbled, to be meek,” and it can include harsh and painful treatment. Here, the psalmist paints God’s affliction of him as a necessary part of the process of learning His way of life.

**I Peter 4:1-2** Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.

Psychologists today call this “classical conditioning.” It is the reason that physical discipline works with children, though the psychologists balk at that application. When we associate a given behavior with pain, suffering, or some other unpleasantness, we become much less inclined to repeat the behavior. Our minds and nervous systems make an association, and we start to develop the same aversion to the behavior that we have to the suffering.

In this regard, there is a benefit to being afflicted. Affliction not only encourages us to reflect on where we fall short, but it also allows us to associate how badly we feel in our suffering or affliction with a wrong behavior. Like touching a hot stove, we don’t have to do it very often before we become extra careful. The opportunity to make such an association is a blessing because it helps to stop the behavior that misses the mark.

Regarding the pandemic that has laid low so many in the church, that feeling of wretchedness can be a literal God-send, if we can make the connection in our mind with specific aspects of our life that we know falls short of God’s glory. We can use the memory of how bad the affliction was for us to develop a “never again” conviction in our character against the sin which so easily ensnares us. As Peter says here, suffering in the flesh is a key to ceasing from sin. And God will supply even that need to help us make better decisions regarding living for His will instead of for ourselves.

## Sixth Reflection

The sixth reflection is another lesson learned, hopefully:

**Hebrews 10:25** not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

This verse is but one sharp edge of a two-edged sword. Our assembling together is a strong defense against the neglect and apathy that eventually gives way to the willful sin that is mentioned in the verses that follow. Notice that the author says at the end, “. . . so much more as you see the Day approaching.” We are told in prophecies what will be happening as that Day approaches. The lead-up to that Day will include false Messiahs and widespread deception. There will be wars, rumors of wars, famines, pestilences—yes, pestilences—earthquakes, persecution and martyrdom. And it says we should not forsake our assembling, especially as we see these things. As the days grow darker and less certain, we need the strength that can come from fellowship even more.

However, we must also consider the other edge of this sword, because this verse does not trump everything else. As much as possible, we should strive to assemble, but this verse does not override the principles of self-quarantine in Leviticus 13. One of the principles found in that chapter is that self-quarantine extends past the last symptom, and specifically, for seven days. If you are thinking this through, that seven days means that self-quarantine will include the Sabbath. That, in turn, means that the law of self-quarantine supersedes the commanded assembly in importance.

Quarantining when one is contagious, or has recently been contagious, is an act of love, not an act of forsaking. The word translated “forsaking” does not mean “temporarily missing,” like when one is sick. The word indicates leaving an assembly altogether and going it alone, as some have done. But if we are contagious and we still fellowship like normal anyway, we may not have an assembly with which to fellowship.

This is a lesson we need to take to heart, because we have not seen the last of pestilence. The nations of Israel are not returning to God, and the next

pestilence may be even worse, especially if it is the one in Ezekiel 5. And as we know, even the current pestilence can be extremely debilitating to members, and even deadly. So, it is an act of self-sacrificial love to protect the assembly from contagion when we have symptoms, or when we know that there is a high probability that we are a carrier. Both the assembling and the self-quarantining are extremely important, and the right application may be difficult to discern. But God will help us to make the correct choice if we seek Him.

## **Seventh Reflection**

The seventh and final reflection comes from an observation made by a good friend. He said that COVID felt like a perpetual Day of Atonement, and I will add that it was like an amplified Day of Atonement. On Atonement, we afflict ourselves through voluntarily fasting. COVID, on the other hand, was an affliction imposed on us, during which many of us had to force ourselves to eat. If it weren't for the recognition that we needed to eat and drink to stay alive, it would have been easy to just keep fasting. And rather than one day of humbling ourselves, we had a week, or two, or even more of a humbling that was completely outside of our control. And even as the Day of Atonement is a day without work, so most of us couldn't have worked if we wanted to during the worst of our affliction. It was like a Time of Atonement was imposed on us.

In COVID, we were powerless to rise above how we felt. In the depths of the affliction, it simply didn't matter how much self-will we had, we could not *will* ourselves to get better. This, too, is another benefit if we use the experience in the right way. When we are that weak and powerless and perhaps despairing even of life, we also become acutely aware of our need, and that we cannot supply it. This is a perspective that we desperately need far more than once or twice a year.

A day of fasting reminds us of our dependence on God, but the extended weakness and wasting of COVID underscores just how precarious life can be, and how much we take for granted in terms of normal functioning. Similarly, because we are so limited spiritually, we need God to reveal our

secret sins to us. We may also need Him to reveal obvious sins to which we have become desensitized, such that they no longer register as transgressions like they once did because our conscience has adjusted.

It has been said that our greatest weakness can become our greatest strength. For us, it is when we acknowledge our weakness, our powerlessness, our inability to function, that God steps in to supply what we cannot do. Paul wrestled with a thorn in the flesh that God allowed to continue, and Paul's conclusion was that when he was weak physically, then he was strong spiritually, because God was supplying a strength far greater than Paul could ever have on his own. Paul's strength came through that relationship, but it was precipitated by physical weakness. The benefit of weakness is that it destroys self-sufficiency, and self-sufficiency is a deadly foe of spiritual growth.

And so it is with us. The young among us may not have experienced the same debilitation, but the older COVID veterans experienced great weakness, and were reminded of our own pitifulness apart from God's sustaining of us. This is another lesson we should not soon forget, because the memory of that wearied and hobbled condition puts us in a positive state of mind to approach God, realizing that He is everything, and that we are dependent on Him for every breath of air. It was a wretched experience for many, but it can also bear positive fruit if we choose to use it that way, recognizing God's involvement and mercy.

We have heard Christ's words that "without [Him], we can do nothing" (John 15:5) quite frequently, so much so that they may have become cliché. However, now we have something tangible we can tie to that verse, such that it becomes even more meaningful the next time we hear it. We have experienced what it is like not to be able to do anything at all on a physical level. But we can apply that spiritually and get some sense of just how weak and powerless we are there, too, and how much we need what only Christ supplies in order to do anything of spiritual value.

So, in summary, we have looked at some common lessons, and some possibilities, and some principles that may apply, but as I said at the beginning, I cannot give you a conclusion. Instead, consider this a starting point for your own reflections and seeking. Unprecedented times call for

extraordinary consideration. I urge us all not to let these noteworthy events and circumstances pass by unexamined, but instead, to pour ourselves into seeking God to understand His thoughts and what He would have us do.