

# Disinfecting Fear

## Romans 8

March 15, 2020  
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### Disinfecting Fear

These are probably the two most common activities in our world today. Everybody's *disinfecting*. And most people are *afraid*. Where has that got us? To a Sunday like a today. Did I ever think we would have a Sunday where this Auditorium is empty, and you all are watching from your family rooms in your pajamas? Who could have? And what a crazy week! Just this week all travel from Europe was cancelled. The stock market lost trillions of dollars in value. The President declared a national emergency on COVID-19. The governor of Indiana mandated no gatherings of 250 or more. Bethel Church is forgoing our normal eight worship services for a morning of livestream. And tomorrow, who knows? There is a lot of disinfecting and there is a lot of fear. *It's much easier to wash your hands than to wash your heart, wash your fear.* Let's talk about how to disinfect fear.

Is it a coincidence that "pandemic" and "panic" start with the same three letters? *Pan* comes from the Greek. "All." Pandemic. Everybody's got it. Panic. Everybody's freaking out. Thankfully, not everybody's got it. In fact, at this point, relatively speaking, few have it. But what about panic? Almost everybody's got that. Fear is an infectious disease and it is spreading rapidly. Universities are shutting down. The NBA is suspended. No March Madness. Local schools are all closed. Nobody is shaking hands, if not because of Coronavirus, then because there seems to be a shortage of toilet paper. Either reason is good enough NOT to shake hands.

Pastor Steve, what's going to happen? I'm a pastor, not a prophet. How about we just talk about what's already here? Fear. What is fear? Fear is anxiety over the potential loss of something very important to us. We especially fear the loss of ultimately important things. The Bible says these ultimate things are the true functional gods of our hearts. There is a direct connection between the true gods of our hearts and the terror we feel at the possibility of losing them.

Our last good look at these functional gods was 9/11. Some of you were here back then. Different circumstances for sure, but the distress felt the same. Many people feared further *violence* and wouldn't fly on an airplane. Some feared *financial loss* and watched in horror as the stock market plunged. Some people feared *war* and we watched sons and daughters of our church deployed to the Middle East. On and on. To love is to fear the loss of the beloved. Love money and we fear losing it. Love your health and we fear losing it. Love our children and we fear losing them. Love your life and death is your ultimate fear. Love whatever and the panic we experience shows just how important that is to us.

Now don't get me wrong here. Do any of us wish ill health, financial ruin, loss of life, job, or school, on any of us? No. Nobody wishes those things on us or anyone else.

But our response when they are threatened is very revealing. We can live decades in prosperity and general good times without ever realizing how idolatrous our hearts actually are. Then we get the cancer diagnosis, or the market corrects, or a pandemic threatens at our doorstep and what bubbles up is what has been there all along, secretly stealing our joy but so subtly we never realized it. It takes a crisis to unmask them and here we are.

David Foster Wallace is not a Christian, but writes that worshipping God has this benefit:

*"The compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of God or spiritual-type thing to worship...is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never feel you have enough. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you. Worship power, and you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect...and you will end up feeling...a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. Look, the insidious thing about these forms of worship is...they're unconscious. They are default settings."<sup>1</sup>*

Well said. So, what is this really all about? Control. Humans crave gods we can control. **Pandemics put the modern man out of sorts because pandemics put the modern man out of control.** In calmer times, our technologies make us feel like we are in total control. I can change my thermostat from my phone and trade stocks in Hong Kong too. I'm in total control. I'm awesome.

That's why we freak out when we can't find our phone for like two minutes. Suddenly our world feels out of control. Pandemics, on a much grander scale, remind us we can't control the one thing that's more important than anything else—our health and our very lives. We all assume that our modern healthcare and a reasonably healthy lifestyle will mean living into old age, walking our kids down the aisle, eating our grandkids' wedding cake, and at least one absurd late-in-life purchase like a decked-out Harley. We expect it. We feel entitled do it. Pandemics remind us that things don't always work out this way. Simply being near the wrong person or touching the wrong door handle might cost me my life. My ultimate thing is out of my control.

We can disinfect doorknobs, but how do we disinfect fear? Did you know the words repeated more than any other from the lips of Jesus? *Do not fear*. Do not fear. I've always found that truth comforting. God tells us many reasons NOT to fear. This is not exhaustive at all, but Romans 8 is a fear-killing chapter of the Bible. If you are a part of Bethel Church, this is a familiar portion of Scripture. We taught through this chapter a year ago. Perhaps the greatest chapter in the Bible. Its true greatness shines through when our hearts are afraid, like right now. I won't read the whole chapter, but there's plenty of disinfectant here.

### **The Gospel Eradicates our Ultimate Fear**

*"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death."* (Romans 8:1-2)

There is a common thought out there that goes like this, we don't want to panic. A former president famously said, *"The only thing we have to fear, is fear itself."*<sup>2</sup> Another great leader named Jesus contradicts that by telling us, *"And 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)

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<sup>1</sup> David Foster Wallace, "This is Water," Commencement speech delivered at Kenyon College, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1933.

There is something we should greatly fear—the judgment of God against us and our sins. So, let's make sure we fear the right things. We are in terror of a virus that can kill the body but not the soul. At the same time, we have little fear of Almighty God who will punish forever in hell. Jesus says, *don't fear the virus, or the cancer, or the car accident, fear the judgment of God forever.* If our society had half the fear of hell that it has for this virus, a great revival would spread.

So, we see in this one of the keys to disinfecting fear. We must fear the right things, the ultimate things. For this God provides eternal disinfectant; *"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."* (Romans 8:1)

If God's condemnation is our greatest fear, then Jesus is our greatest comfort and hope. No matter what happens, my soul is safe in Jesus. See that this promise is for those who are *in Christ*. This is Bible language for those who are true followers of Jesus. Those who have recognized their sin before God and trust in Jesus as the Savior of the world who died on the cross. His death for our sin. His resurrection for our eternal life. Jesus promised to save from judgment by forgiveness all who trust in Jesus.

Jesus said to fear God more than a virus. Is that you today? If not, might a pandemic fear lead you to faith? There's no condemnation for those in Christ. We disinfect our biggest fear by faith in Jesus. Trust in him today.

### **Where Did this Virus Come From?**

*"For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now."* (Romans 8:22)

There's a lot of speculation online. What animal or market did this come from? The Bible's answer was around a long time before COVID-19. Romans 8 says the whole creation has had a virus ever since Adam and Eve sinned. Death came into the cosmos along with every disease and pestilence and cancer you can list. COVID-19 is the latest scary one, but it follows centuries of bubonic plague, Spanish flu, typhoid, cholera, and on and on we go. The point is that we live in a scary jungle. In the day-to-day we don't think about pandemics, so when one comes, we think it's unprecedented and no humans have ever had to live under such conditions. We just don't know our history.

I came across a longer quote by my favorite author, C.S. Lewis, who wrote this in the 1940s when the atomic bomb threat was first felt. You can replace "atomic bomb" with "Coronavirus." Bear with a longer quote here.

*"In one way we think a great deal too much of the atomic bomb. 'How are we to live in an atomic age?' I am tempted to reply: 'Why, as you would have lived in the sixteenth century when the plague visited London almost every year, or as you would have lived in a Viking age when raiders from Scandinavia might land and cut your throat any night; or indeed, as you are already living in an age of cancer, an age of syphilis, an age of paralysis, an age of air raids, an age of railway accidents, an age of motor accidents.'*

*In other words, do not let us begin by exaggerating the novelty of our situation. Believe me, dear sir or madam, you and all whom you love were already sentenced to death before the atomic bomb was invented: and quite a high percentage of us were going to die in unpleasant ways.... It is perfectly ridiculous to go about whimpering and drawing long faces because the scientists have added one more*

*chance of painful and premature death to a world which already bristled with such chances and in which death itself was not a chance at all, but a certainty...the first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things—praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts—not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs. They may break our bodies (a microbe can do that) but they need not dominate our minds.”<sup>3</sup>*

The world is a scary jungle and this virus serves to remind us of this fact.

*Pastor Steve, you said you were doing to disinfect fear. This jungle talk only makes me more fearful.* Exactly. Because when we realize we live in a scary jungle world, we realize our need for very strong assurances.

### **God Assures Us of His Control and Ultimate Purpose in Everything**

*“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”* (Romans 8:28)

This verse applies to those who love God. This is not a blanket statement for all humanity. Loving God is code for loving God through faith in his Son Jesus. If that is true, then for us, God guarantees everything works together for good.

I’ve told the story before of some years ago when a man who only had a few weeks to live spoke to a men’s group I was a part of. Everyone listens to a dying man. He said, “I’ve read Romans 8:28 over and over and wondered, how can my cancer possibly be good?” Then he said, “It dawned on me that I don’t get to decide what’s good.”

How true. We could ask God, *how are people dying and markets crashing and schools closing and fear gripping the whole world good? How is this possibly good?*

God’s answer is not that these things by themselves are good, because they clearly are not. God works everything together for an ultimate good. God works through the bad things and the evil things and the devastating things to produce a good that he defines and is directing all these things toward.

To paraphrase C.S. Lewis’ good friend, J.R.R. Tolkien, *Someday, all the sad things will come untrue.*<sup>4</sup>

The Christian rests in this with this virus or a thousand other unpleasant realities in life knowing that if God can take the worst thing ever, the crucifixion of the Son of God, and make it the greatest thing that ever happened, he can take these smaller unpleasant things and direct them into a final goodness forever. For now, he says, *Trust me. Disinfect the fear by faith that nothing ultimately bad will ever happen to anyone who loves me.*

This leads us to one of the greatest truths in all the Bible.

### **The Logic of the Gospel Disinfects our Fear**

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<sup>3</sup> C.S. Lewis, “On Living in an Atomic Age,” *Present Concerns: Journalistic Essays*, (1948).

<sup>4</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *Return of the King*, p. 246.

*"He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32)*

The internal logic here is the best disinfectant to fear we can have. Do you follow it? God didn't spare even Jesus, his own Son, but rather gave him up for us all. The Son of God is the most treasured and valued person or thing in God the Father's heart. Yet, he did not spare him. If he had, he wouldn't have spared us, so this is a little picture of Jesus' substitutionary atonement. God didn't spare Jesus so that he could spare us.

So, here is your Clorox disinfectant wipe for fear today: if God gave us his best, will he not also give us the rest? He gave his best; he'll give the rest. Give what? All we need even for this crisis. Does that include this crisis?

Let that trust just marinate in your soul and the result will be more confidence and less fear.

### **The Conclusion of the Gospel is Unshakeable, Unending Life and Love**

*"For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39)*

Here Paul lists 10 scary powers that threaten our confidence in the inseparability of God's love. He starts with the big one – **Death**. Death is our ultimate separation. Does Christ's love extend past the grave? **Life** – life is filled with uncertainties and dangers. Can anything in life separate Christ's love from me?

And all the rest. The answer is, there is nothing in all creation that will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Does that include COVID-19?

So, let's say that tomorrow you find out you have the Coronavirus. The mathematical likelihood is high that some in our church will get this. It might be me or my family. What should we do? Pursue all the medical help you can get. But as you do, how do we disinfect fear? As a Christian, I think, *no matter what happens, I don't have to fear judgment. I'm in Christ. No matter what happens, God has a purpose in this, which someday I will agree with him was really good. No matter what happens, God's in control and has guaranteed to provide all I need. No matter what happens, this virus can't take from me my most treasured possession which is God's eternal love. Nothing in all creation including this virus can separate me from God's eternal love.*

None of us want to be sick. None of us want our lives threatened. But no matter what, God's got this for us, and he has us forever and ever life without end.

So, wipe away fear with the disinfectant of the sure promises of God that cannot and will not fail us. Activate your faith. Ask God to increase your faith. Be confident that nothing—including this virus—can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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