

How the crisis strengthens the church

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Good morning, I hope you and those with you are doing well.

If we were to go to IBC this morning, this is what we would find: Locked gates with signs on them. The signs tell that the church activities and Sunday services have been cancelled until further notice. Who would ever have imagined it? When you enter the church, in the foyer there are no ushers to greet you and give you a bulletin. There is no one looking at books in the library. There is no one drinking coffee in the kitchen. There are no songs being sung in the choir room. No Bible studies or children's classes in the basement. The auditorium, the center of our church life on Sunday mornings, is silent and completely empty.

Some might see this as a very bad time for churches, and in some ways it has been difficult, but if we will look closely we will see how the church can be strengthened in the midst of this crisis and quarantine. That is what we are going to talk about today.

There is a story that we find in the book of Jeremiah that has something to say to our present situation. Jeremiah was a prophet of God who lived around 600 years before Christ. He was called by God to warn the people of pending doom. In Jeremiah 22:1-5 we find this story.

Jeremiah was commanded by God to go to the king of Judah and warn him of coming judgment. If the King and the people of Judah lived rightly before God, then they would be blessed. God then spoke these words through Jeremiah to the king: ***“But if you will not obey these words, I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that this house shall become a desolation.”***

The scriptures go on to tell us that the King and the people of Judah did not heed God's warning. Jerusalem and the temple were eventually destroyed and many of the people of Judah were taken away into exile in Babylon.

In the years leading up to the Babylonian exile, we can see in Jeremiah's writings that he came to understand that the true essence of religion was not based on the law of Moses, the temple and all of the rituals which came with it. True religion was a matter of the heart.

We find these words in Jeremiah 31:31-34:

³¹ Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. ³³ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

In the midst of their situation, where God seemed to be absent, God was working. God was bringing about a drastic change. Up until this point, the people had lived under the covenant of the law that had been given to Moses when the descendants of Abraham had come out of slavery back in Egypt. It was a covenant that required obedience and in return promised protection and blessing (Deuteronomy 30:15–18; 1 Samuel 12:14–15). If they did their part, God would do His. But no one had lived up to it. No one was able to walk in perfect holiness. Because their hearts were sinful, the law was more of a curse than a blessing. This prophecy is pointing the people towards a new covenant where God would one day grant unconditional salvation and blessing. Where God would do for His people what they could not do for themselves. He would forgive their sins, grant them righteousness, and give them hearts that would obey God.

The prophet Ezekiel also described this new covenant:

“And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” (Ez. 36:26-27)

We, too, are caught in this same struggle. We desperately need a new heart. None of us can live up to the old covenant of the law. If God’s blessing depends on our perfect obedience, we will never be reconciled to God. Because of this, God gave the new covenant. We have sinned. The wages of sin is death. Jesus Christ died on the cross to pay for our sin. If we put our faith in Him, our sins are forgiven and we are counted as righteous and given a new heart to follow Christ. It is unfathomable that God could be this good to us, but He is. This is the covenant for which God was preparing His people.

One step that God took to begin to change Judah’s perspective of religion was to allow them to be sent into exile. Under the old covenant the daily sacrifice of animals was required at the temple, but now they would have to experience a faith and forgiveness without temple sacrifices. Under the old covenant, the presence of God was associated with the temple and the Holy of holies in the temple, but now they would seek the presence of God in Babylon.

This time in exile stripped away all the trappings of an outward religion and left the people with nothing more than their personal faith in an omnipresent God. Their God, Yahweh, was just as present with them when they were alone in Babylon as He had been when they had congregated with so many other Jews in the temple courts in Jerusalem.

As the temple was desolate and many Jews were exiled far from home, their hearts were turned towards an inward expression of faith. Under these circumstances, the exiles turned their religious focus from what they had lost to what they retained. Judaism became a faith that could be practiced wherever God's Word could be carried. The emphasis was on personal holiness and a personal faith in God, instead of corporate religious ritual and the temple. This was a huge step forward in religious thinking. This is what kept the Hebrew faith alive. These common hardships and solidarity built even stronger faith once the Jews returned to Jerusalem and could worship together in the temple once again. This was one more step in God's preparing His people for the coming of Christ.

During our days, we, too, are faced with similar truths. God is working, even though sometimes we are not aware of it. When Sunday services, ministries and events are stripped away, we find ourselves separated from the outward, corporate expression of faith, and forced to turn inward towards prayer, God's Word and other individual believers to strengthen our faith. It is during these times that we are reminded once again that faith is personal and the church is the people, not the place.

During their time of exile, the Jews were stripped of everything in which they placed their trust, and were left with nothing but God for their well-being.

We see this stripping away throughout scripture. Job, a great man of God, had everything. God allowed it all to be stripped away so that Job would see God as never before. Moses was stripped of his royal power and riches and was made an unknown shepherd for forty years, until he was ready to be called by God to lead His people out of slavery in Egypt. Esther was the queen, but all her riches and power could not save her people. She had to trust God as she risked her life to present her need to her husband, the king. Matthew, the tax collector, had to be willing to be stripped of his lucrative job and authority to follow Christ. The Apostle Paul was stripped of all the accolades of a Jewish Pharisee to follow Christ. It is much like us.

Many of us at times trust in ourselves instead of God. We trust in our resources, our personalities, our abilities, but throughout scripture and church history we see how God steps in, time and again, to strip it all away. He then reclaims our devotion, our dependency and the glory for the kingdom's advance in this world. He may do it with a loss of a job, a loss of a relationship, an illness, an accident, or a failure. Then we are reminded of how much we need Him.

God does this on the personal level and the church level as well. We can be tempted to take the credit for the advancement of our churches, and then the "stripping away" comes. It is an expression of God's love. May we not be delusional for another moment. May it be clearly seen that all that is truly good in our lives and in our churches is a work of God. We desperately are dependent on Him.

One of the best, most recent examples of this blessed "stripping away" is found in the story of Christianity in China in the last century. When the missionaries were forced out, the church buildings taken, and the church meetings prohibited, all they had left was faith, scriptures, prayer, the Holy Spirit and each other. God then grew the number of Christians from 4 million to 60 million.

In Cuba, in the 90s, in many parts of the country they would not give permission for new church buildings. What seemed like a problem turned into a blessing. It forced the believers to meet in homes, and the house church movement grew exponentially in ways that would not have been possible if they were trusting in church buildings.

When the church building is no longer accessible, the church is once again seen as the people. One of our strengths here at IBC is our Sunday morning worship services. So, what will happen to our church since we cannot meet on Sunday mornings? That is the question that we are now facing. Will we submit to God and let Him raise up in us a heart for private devotions, for carrying each other's burdens, for sharing our faith, for reaching out to other believers, for ministering to those with whom we live, for spending more time in prayer, for turning to Him when facing private temptation, for pointing people to Jesus on social media, for helping those in need, for joining with others for Bible study? The church is the body of believers, but it is only as healthy as its individual parts.

Like the exiles of Jeremiah's day, we too must choose how to respond. God sovereignly stripped away all that they trusted in and turned their hearts back towards Him. This is our opportunity. It is our turn. Will we, as a church, receive this "stripping away" as a blessing from God and be purified for His purposes, or will we miss this opportunity and just long for church as it used to be?

Some of you may have heard of recent stories of the cities in Asia that traditionally have some of the worst air pollution. Air pollution has decreased dramatically as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown. Some in northern India have reported seeing the snow-capped Himalayas, that are 200 kilometers away, for the first time in 30 years.

May we allow a similar effect to happen in our spiritual lives during these days. As things are stripped away, may we return to a pure, simple, clear, vibrant spiritual life that we have not experienced for a long time. And may our church be strengthened because of this crisis.

Some of you might have heard of the name Matt Redman. He wrote some of the worship songs that churches sing nowadays. He tells the story of his church in the late 1990s. The pastor of the church in Watford, England, sensed that their worship services were merely an act of ritual and going through the motions and not coming from the heart, so the pastor made a decision. They removed the instruments and sound system and sang with just their voices. His point was that they had lost their focus in worship. Redman's pastor put it in these words: *"The way to get back to the heart would be to strip everything away."* The pastor then encouraged the people to come prepared to be participants, not just spectators. Ready to relate to God from the heart. The church learned an incredible lesson and was drawn back to the heart of worship.

In a moment we are going to sing one of the songs that was birthed out of this period in the life of Redman's church. But just listen to some of the words:

"When the music fades all is stripped away and I simply come. Longing just to bring something that's of worth that will bless Your heart."

I'll bring You more than a song, for a song in itself is not what You have required. You search much deeper within, through the way things appear, You're looking into my heart.

I'm coming back to the heart of worship and it's all about You, it's all about You, Jesus. I'm sorry, Lord, for the thing I've made it, when it's all about You, it's all about You, Jesus."