

Penitence in a Pandemic: What is God Saying through COVID-19?

Luke 13:1-5

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Introduction

Well we are over a month in to our sheltering-in-place on account of the Coronavirus, and here in California we are at least another month out until things might return to normal. In the last four weeks, we've seen both the number of cases and the death toll of the Coronavirus rising. As of today, the reports say that in the United States there have been over 780,000 positive tests for Covid-19, and nearly 42,000 deaths from Covid-19—both of which lead the world. We've seen reports from healthcare workers assuring us that this virus is not something to be cynically downplayed or dismissed. A friend of mine who is a traveling nurse in Virginia took to Facebook to share what he had been seeing on the front lines. He wrote, "This virus is serious. This is not seasonal flu. 'Young' people are contracting this too. The damage that is being done to the patient's lungs is significant. [It's] basically rendering the lungs useless despite being on very high ventilator settings. The progression is quick: from severe viral pneumonia, to septic shock, to kidney failure, to acute respiratory distress, to death. ... One of my patients, who was not considered 'high risk,' died suddenly this week. We didn't even have time to call the spouse until after they were gone. As an ICU nurse, I have seen a lot of people die. *This* one left an impression on me and the other staff." Another report came from a nurse who recorded what she's witnessed of the Coronavirus. She said, through tears, "I'm not used to seeing this. One minute people are here, and the next they are gone. They can't see their families [because of the visitation restrictions]. I'm all they've got. People are dying alone. This virus isn't anything to play with."

People are afraid. And with good reason. It's natural to think, "What if it hits *us* next? What if it's my wife? What if it's my kids? What if it's my mom or dad? What if *I'm* the one locked away in the intensive care unit, barely able to speak because I can't catch my breath, wondering if I'll ever go outside again? What if my wife and my kids and my parents couldn't come see me before I died, because of the visitation restrictions? I feel fine now, but what if in a month from now I'm dying alone in hospital bed?"

This virus has no known cure. It has no proven treatment. And apparently it can take the lives of otherwise entirely healthy people without warning. It's no wonder, then, that entire counties, entire states, entire countries—by some measure, the entire world—have so eagerly and voluntarily given up their most deeply cherished freedoms in the hopes of being spared from this

disease. Think of the lengths we've been willing to go to. No access to our workplace, no schools, no restaurants, no gyms, no beaches, no hiking trails, no parks. No leaving the house even for essentials without masks—masks which are in so much demand in the medical field that we've had to make our own. We've basically accepted being consigned to house arrest!

More than that: People of all faiths are voluntarily surrendering their right to peaceable assembly and the free exercise of their religion. And even more than *that*: virtually the entire economy has willingly shut down. The reports are that this single month has cost America twenty-two million jobs. The entire country is gambling that the economy can bounce back from such a loss. And it's not just our country; it's multiple countries across the world.

People are sick. People are dying. Families are being torn apart. Lives are being turned upside down. Entire countries are virtually shutting down. And the question that I think is on everybody's mind to one degree or another, at some point or another, is: Why? Why is this happening? What lessons are we supposed to learn from this? What is God saying to us by shutting down the entire world with this Coronavirus?

Some people balk even at the question. The suggestion that God is doing this is absolutely repugnant to them. "A loving God would never do this! He would never send a disease upon the earth that would claim tens of thousands of lives!" I saw a fairly well-known Jewish person make that claim on social media, and I thought, "Exodus 12? The redemption of Israel from Egypt by the ten plagues? The last of which was the slaughter of every firstborn child in Egypt? Or Numbers 16, Korah's rebellion, where 14,700 people died as a result of the plague the Lord sent? Or Numbers 25, the scene with Phinehas, where the plague killed 24,000?" This is not new!

And God is not shy about His role in things like this. In Deuteronomy 32:39, He says, "See now that I, I am He, And there is no god besides Me; It is I who put to death and give life." In Isaiah 45:7, He says, I am "the One forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating calamity; I am Yahweh who does all these." And He gets even more explicit in Amos chapter 3 verse 6: "If a trumpet is blown in a city will not the people tremble? If a calamity occurs in a city has not Yahweh done it?"

And so if Scripture makes clear that God is sovereign over all things, and that if a calamity occurs in a city—let alone thousands of cities—He has done it, why in the world is He doing it? What is God saying to us by turning the world upside down by this Covid-19? And I want to answer that question, while particularly addressing those of you who do not believe in Christ—those of you who have not yet placed your trust in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for your righteousness before God. Because the Word of God answers that question with a special focus on you who yet remain a stranger to the grace of Christ.

And that answer comes in a section of the Bible in which the Lord Jesus is responding to tragedy. It comes in the opening verses of Luke chapter 13. Luke chapter 13, verses 1 to 5. Luke says, “Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. ²And Jesus said to them, ‘Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate? ³I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. ⁴Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? ⁵I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.’”

Jesus has been teaching the crowds. At the end of chapter 12, He was teaching them about being ready for His Second Coming. He was teaching them about the certainty of God’s judgment coming upon them, and about their need of settling out of court with the judge, lest they come to that Day of Judgment and be thrown into the prison of eternal punishment because of their sins.

And as He was teaching the crowd who was traveling with Him to the city of Jerusalem, some who were present brought Jesus some news. There was news that Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea—the very governor who would preside over the crucifixion of Jesus just a short while later, the governor who was reputed throughout Israel to be a cruel and sadistic man—this Pontius Pilate had once again been persecuting the Jews. And you could imagine some in the crowd interrupting Jesus and saying, “Jesus, have you heard about what Pontius Pilate has done *now*?” Well, what had Pilate done? Verse 1: Pilate had killed a group of Galileans—those who were from the same region in Israel where Jesus had grown up. “Jesus, have you heard about that group of your townspeople that Pilate killed?”

And he didn’t just kill them, but, again, verse 1, he mixed their blood with their sacrifices. These Jews were seeking to worship God according to the way He had commanded them, by offering sacrifices on the altar of God in Jerusalem. By these sacrifices, the worshipers of God confessed that they were sinners, and that their sins were deserving of death, but that they trusted in the provision made by God—that they could be forgiven of their sins if a substitute died in their place. And there were strict stipulations in the law of God about the proper approach to sacrificial worship, stipulations that were to be followed to the letter. And one of those stipulations was that every animal that would be offered in place of the lives of sinners had to be blemishless. There was to be no defect in this animal. It symbolized that God required perfect purity for all those who approach Him. And if sinners were not perfectly pure, their substitutes had to be.

But what had Pilate done to these Galileans? He had killed them and mixed their blood with the blood of the sacrifices they were offering. That was a heinous desecration of the temple worship of the God of Israel. And it would have scandalized every Jew who heard of it; it would have

made their ears tingle. If we tried to put it into our contemporary church experience, it would have been something like, if terrorists burst into our church during a communion service, slit a bunch of people's throats, and then poured the blood into the communion cups. I mean, this was just a wicked thing for Pilate to do. And so the crowd says to Jesus, "Did you hear about this terrible disaster? The murder of your townspeople and the desecration of the temple worship?"

The second tragedy, Jesus Himself brings up in His answer to the crowds. He speaks of eighteen Israelites who were killed in an accident. They were building a tower near the town of Siloam. And apparently, as they were constructing that tower, a freak accident had occurred, and the tower collapsed on eighteen people—whether they were the ones building it, or maybe were bystanders, we're not sure. But the point is: here was a seemingly senseless calamity. And so we've got two tragedies: one was the result of the wickedness of Pilate; an evil ruler murdered ostensibly innocent people. And the other had no good explanation; it was just a freak accident.

And so the crowds come to Jesus, and they're saying, "Jesus, why did these tragedies happen? Why were those Galileans murdered? Why were those people crushed by the tower? Make sense of this for us!" And Jesus' response tells us something of what was in their hearts. He says, verse 2, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were *greater sinners* than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate?" And then in verse 4, "Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were *worse culprits* than all the men who live in Jerusalem?" So you see what their default explanation was. If bad things happened to these people, they must have been especially bad people. They were greater sinners than the rest of us, and so God smote them with judgment! And while we might not put it quite like that, that's not too far off from our own thinking, is it? That there at least ought to be some direct proportion between what you deserve and what you experience? When someone whom we regard to be a "good person" dies in a plane crash, we might ask ourselves, "What did *he* do to deserve this?" Almost as if we understand, somewhere deep down in our souls, that we live in a moral universe, governed by a principle of justice, that sovereignly orders the world.

Well, Jesus responds to the crowds' suppositions, with a reply that He repeats both in verse 3 and in verse 5: "I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. . . . I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." The crowds came to Jesus expecting Him to speak about the sins of the people who died. And yet Jesus draws meaning from the deaths of these people that has to do not merely with them, but that has to do with *all the other* Galileans, verse 2; with *all the other* people who live in Jerusalem, verse 4. Jesus explains that the meaning of these tragedies has to do with everyone, even you and me. The crowds thought Jesus was going to discuss the sins of the dead, and Jesus seizes on the occasions of these tragedies to talk about the sins of the living. What that teaches us is: the message of disasters—whether a tower killing eighteen people or the Coronavirus killing 180,000—the message of disasters is for everyone. And that message is: You need to repent, or you will all likewise perish.

Why is this happening? What is God saying to the world through this Coronavirus crisis? He's calling us to repentance. He is calling you, my dear unbelieving friend, to repentance. And I want to unpack that from this passage, along the lines of **four things God is saying through the Coronavirus**.

I. Death is Certain

Number one: through the Coronavirus, God is awakening in our consciences the reality that **death is certain**. The crowds come to Jesus for an explanation of these tragedies. But rather than speak about the dead, He turns to address the living. And He says, "I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." He turns to the crowds, and as it were He turns to us, and He says, in effect, "These have already died. Time is up for them. What about you? Don't you realize that your **death is certain**? Are you ready to face it?"

Many of you listening to this will have had the privilege of being parents. And many of you, like me, have known the joy of seeing your child be born. After months of happy anticipation—"Is it going to be a boy or girl? Will he have my eyes? Will he have your smile?"—finally the day arrives. And after hours of labor and the emotional turmoil of the birth, you hear that first cry, and you breathe that sigh of relief. And they clean him up and you bring him back to the room and you wonder, "What's he going to be like? What will his voice sound like? How tall will he be? Will he be love baseball like me, or will his hobbies be totally different than mine? Is he going to be more analytical and logical, or will he be artistic and creative? What'll he be interested in as he grows up? What job might he eventually want to do? There are just so many unanswered questions! So much uncertainty about what is in store for this little life that has just been welcomed into the world.

But amidst all that uncertainty—some of it wonderful, some of it unsettling—amidst all that uncertainty: one thing is certain about that little life that you hold in your hands. And that is, that there is coming a day when that life will be over. The one thing certain in life is that life will come to an end in death. We will all likewise perish.

We don't like thinking about that. Our society does everything we can possibly do to shut out the reality of death from our minds, from our consciousness. We pile up endless distractions in our lives that divert our attention from the one reality that we know we're certain to face but which we can't bear to think about. Endless entertainment! Anything to keep our minds occupied, so we don't have to ponder what waits for us for eternity after these 80 short years are over. We've stuck our heads in the proverbial sand. But friend, will you dispute it? Will you not die? Is your **death** not **certain**? Is anyone so deluded—is anyone out there possessed by such delirious conceit—to suppose that you will cheat death? You may want to stuff it and put it out of your

mind and refuse to consider it. But man, woman, boy, girl: face the facts! You will all likewise perish! Hebrews 9:27 says it is appointed for men to die. “It is appointed for men to die, and after this comes judgment.”

For those of you out there listening, I wonder if you’ll indulge me. Hold up your right hand. Just right where you are: hold up your right hand, and place it over your heart. Feel your heart beating. Now take your left hand, and press it up against your carotid artery just under your jaw, and feel your pulse. Friend, there is coming a day—a day which in the grand scheme of things is not very far off from today—when that heart will stop beating. There is coming a day, soon, when someone will come to your bedside and press their fingers to your neck, and they’ll feel no pulse. And they’ll look up and say in a hushed tone, “He’s gone.” “She’s gone.” Friend, the day is coming. For each one of us. And what miserable fools we would be to not face the facts: that **death is certain!**

Now some of you say, “Mike, I get it. I’m not so deluded as to think that I’ll somehow cheat death. I’ve been to enough funerals. I’ve stood at enough bedsides. I’ve lost enough grandparents, and parents, and relatives to know that **death is certain**. But Mike, why? Why, if there is a good God—a loving, all-powerful God who created the world—why is there sickness and disease? Why are there worldwide pandemics? Why is death inevitable?” And the answer to that, friend, is that the world did not start out this way. God did not create the world with decay and disease and death. No, Genesis chapter 1 tells us that “God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was *very good*.” God designed that human beings would live in perfect fellowship with Him, and that they would never experience death.

So what happened? The answer is that *sin* happened. God gave Adam, the first man, a command. He told Adam to eat freely from every tree in the bountiful, lush Garden that God had placed him in. But as his Creator and Lord, God reserved one solitary tree in the Garden and told Adam he was not to eat from that tree. And God promised that disobedience to that command—man’s rebellion against God, man’s saying no to God—would bring alienation between God and man. And that alienation would be expressed first of all in death. God said in Genesis 2:17, “In the day that you eat from it you will surely *die*.”

And that’s exactly what happened. The serpent came and deceived Eve, and she ate from the tree that God had commanded them not to eat from. And Eve also gave the fruit to Adam, and he ate. And in that moment, just as God promised, they both died, spiritually. They were separated from the God they were created to know and enjoy. In Romans chapter 5 verse 12, the Apostle Paul says, “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, *and death through sin*, so death spread to all men, because all sinned.” Death has come into the world through sin. Death is divine punishment for sin.

And it's not just that we're all guilty of Adam's sin—though that's true. Adam was our representative in the Garden, and humanity became sinners by *nature* as a result of His disobedience. But we're also sinners by *choice*. We've all followed in the footsteps of Adam. We've all broken God's law. None of you would be so deluded as to regard yourselves as a perfect person. No, you're a sinner like the rest of us. We have all sinned. And therefore, we all die. Ezekiel 18:4 says, "The soul who sins will die." Romans 6:23 says, "The wages of sin is death." God is so holy that disobedience to His law—rebellion against Him—is so severe an infraction that it merits death.

And so decay, and disease, and death are intrusions upon God's good world as a result of human sin. You say, "Wait a minute. I thought Jesus said that it *wasn't* because they were worse sinners than everyone else that the Galileans were murdered by Pilate, or that the men in Jerusalem were killed by the tower." And that's true. It wasn't as if those people were more *especially* sinful than the rest of humanity. Their tragic death was not necessarily an immediate result of personal sin. Sometimes God does bring judgment in response to personal sin. But we don't need to be a special sort of sinner to be rightly deserving of sickness and death. We deserve sickness and death and even eternal punishment for the sins we commit every day.

But none of us wants to hear that. As I said, we fill our lives with distractions and diversions and endless entertainment to snuff out the testimony of our conscience that we are accountable to God as our Creator, that we have rebelled against Him, that we deserve to die, and that we *will* die. And the Coronavirus is, in part, God shaking us out of our stupor and saying: **death is certain**. It is a picture, a parable, a dramatization of how heinous and horrible sin against God is. And we need these pictures, because our sin blinds us to the dreadfulness and ugliness of sin! Here's how Pastor John Piper put it: "Hardly anyone in the world feels the horror of preferring other things over God. Who loses any sleep over our daily belittling of God by neglect and defiance? But, oh, how we feel our physical pain! How indignant we can become if God touches our bodies! We may not grieve over the way we demean God every day in our hearts. But let the coronavirus come and threaten our bodies, and he has our attention. Or does he? *Physical pain is God's trumpet blast to tell us that something is dreadfully wrong in the world.* Disease and deformity are God's pictures in the *physical* realm of what sin is like in the *spiritual* realm. ... Calamities are God's previews of what sin deserves and will one day receive in judgment a thousand times worse. They are warnings. They are wake-up calls to see the moral horror and spiritual ugliness of sin against God. Would that we could all see and feel how repugnant, how offensive, how abominable it is to treat our Maker with contempt, to ignore him and distrust him and demean him and give him less attention in our hearts than we give the style of our hair."

What is God saying through the Coronavirus? He's saying that the sin that has cursed the earth is dreadfully disgusting, and the **death** that it leads to is **certain**.

II. Life is Uncertain

And then, corresponding to that, secondly, He is saying that **life is uncertain**. Those Galilean worshipers whose blood Pilate mixed with their sacrifices were all making plans for tomorrow. They were all making plans for how they were going to spend their time once they got back from temple worship. The men in Jerusalem that the Tower of Siloam fell on and killed—they were all making plans for the summer. They expected to live long enough to get married, to have kids, to see their kids get married, to grow old with their spouse, to be grandparents. To be sure, they all knew they were going to die, *someday*. If you asked them, “Do you realize that death is certain?” every last one of them would have said, “Yes, of course.” But what was their problem? They all thought that death was *out there*, somewhere in the distance. They all flattered themselves that they had plenty of time before they had to think about that—plenty of time to make preparations, plenty of time to clean up their act, plenty of time to get right with God. And then the day came, and they found themselves in the presence of God their Judge.

We were all making plans for March and April of 2020. We were looking forward to March Madness, or the Opening Day of the baseball season, or taking that trip we planned, or going on that family vacation. The people who have contracted the Coronavirus were not planning on spending their spring in a hospital bed, sequestered away from their family, gasping for their next breath.

What is God saying through the Coronavirus? Not just that death is certain, but that **life is uncertain**. Not only that death is coming, but that we don’t have any idea when it’s going to come. God is saying to us now in the Coronavirus what He said to Israel in Proverbs 27 verse 1: “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.” Don’t flatter yourself by speaking about your future plans—even for the next day! You have no idea what tomorrow will bring! God is saying to us now in the Coronavirus what He said in James 4:13–15: “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.’ Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.’” You know what your life is like? It’s a vapor, a mist that vanishes in a moment. Your life is like a breath of air on a winter day. You exhale, and you see a puff of steam, and a moment later it’s gone. What folly it would be for that puff of steam to boast of its longevity! To say, “Hey, what’s the rush? We got plenty of time for all of that!”

And God says, “That’s what your life is like!” And the Word of God reasons with us! It says, “Come now, you who are making plans for tomorrow, you whose life is a vapor! You don’t have any *idea* what tomorrow will bring forth! You are entirely dependent on the will of *God* to

continue your life and to carry out your plans! You are so temporary! Don't live your life as if you're immortal, giving no thought to how *suddenly* death can come upon you!"

What is God doing by this Coronavirus? For those with eyes to see, He is stripping away the illusion of *control*. Do you think you are in *control* of your life—let alone your eternal destiny? Friend, be reasonable! Open your eyes! Has not this crisis torn off the mask of the foolish notion that you're in control of your life? You can't even get toilet paper! You can't even get the masks and gloves by which you would seek to protect yourselves from exposure to this virus!

You can take precautions, but you can't control whether or not you contract the Coronavirus. You might stay in your house for six months. You might conduct all your business electronically. You might have people do your grocery shopping for you, or do your shopping online. You might take every precaution known to man, and you know what can happen? You can contract the virus from the germs on your mail or your groceries by the asymptomatic delivery driver who doesn't even know he has the disease. Are you in control over whether the hospital nearest to your home can get access to ventilators? Are you in control over whether your healthcare facility can get the appropriate antibiotics and treatments? And are you in control over whether the ventilators will work—whether the antibiotics will destroy the cells of the coronavirus in your lungs in particular?

And friend, even if you do manage to avoid the Coronavirus, you *will* die someday. A short 100 years from now, each and every one of us will have passed from this life into eternity. And we'll be in one of two places: in eternal rest and blessedness with Jesus Christ in heaven, or we will be in eternal punishment and torment, separated from God in hell. And I just plead with you, friend: don't delude yourself with the notion that you're the master of your fate and the captain of your soul. This crisis is the loud testimony of Almighty God that you are *not* in control! that your life is a vapor! like a breath on a cold day that vanishes in a moment! You are not in control, friend. God is in control. As soon as He wishes, He can wipe out hundreds of thousands of people within weeks through a virus that no one had ever heard of just a few short months ago.

What is God saying through the Coronavirus? He's trying to wake you up from your fantasy-land of autonomy and control, by painting a vivid picture right in front of your eyes that **death is certain**, and that **life is uncertain**, that death is coming, and you don't know *when* it's coming. And so you ought to order your life as if death may come at *any* time, rather than by living as if death will never come at any time.

III. Judgment is Coming

But there's a **third message** from God in the Coronavirus. Not only that **death is certain**, and that **life is uncertain**. But also, number three: that **judgment is coming**. Where is that in the text?

Well, look at verse 1. Luke 13 begins with the phrase, “Now on the same occasion.” On what occasion? In the same setting as He was teaching what He was teaching at the end of chapter 12. And what was that?

Look at Luke 12, verse 54: “And He was also saying to the crowds, ‘When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, “A shower is coming,” and so it turns out. And when you see a south wind blowing, you say, “It will be a hot day,” and it turns out that way. You hypocrites! You know how to analyze the appearance of the earth and the sky, but why do you not analyze this present time?’” You know how to predict the weather! You see a cloud, you predict rain. You see a south wind, you predict heat. But how is it that you can’t interpret—what the parallel passage in Matthew 16:3 calls—“the signs of the times”? How can you get the weather right, but you ignore the blinking neon lights of God’s providence? How can you get God’s message of the clouds and winds, but you *don’t* get God’s message of these extraordinary circumstances of our day?

And what’s the message? The message is that **judgment is coming**. Look at the next verse, verse 57: “And why do you not even on your own initiative judge what is right? For while you are going with your opponent to appear before the magistrate, on your way there make an effort to settle with him, so that he may not drag you before the judge, and the judge turn you over to the officer, and the officer throw you into prison. I say to you, you will not get out of there until you have paid the very last cent.” What’s the point? It’s that someone who is going to court to settle a matter, and who knows that he’s guilty, would be a fool not to settle out of court with his accuser. Because then he’s going to have to face the judge, and the judge is going to expose him as guilty, and hand him over to the court officer, and the court officer is going to throw him into prison until his debt is paid.

And friends, what Jesus is saying is: our court date is coming! You might say our entire life is lived on the way to our appointment at the Judgment Seat of God. And each and every one of us is guilty. We’ve all sinned. We’ve all broken God’s law. We’ve all lied, we’ve all stolen, we’ve all blasphemed God’s name, we’ve all looked with lust, we’ve all been unjustly angry and committed what Jesus says is murder in our hearts. Friend, here you are on the way to Judgment Day, and you know that you’re guilty! Settle out of court! Settle your case with God before you ever get to the judgment, because when you stand before Him as your Judge, clothed in the filthy rags of your own sins—devoid of the pure robe of the righteousness that God requires of all those who would stand in His presence—He is going to cast you into the prison of hell until you’ve paid what you owe.

And the reality is, friend, that you’ll never be able to pay what you owe, because every sin you and I commit is perpetrated against an infinitely holy God. And so every sin is an infinite crime. It makes you infinitely guilty, and therefore it merits an infinite punishment. And Scripture

speaks about that as eternity in hell—eternity in a place which Jesus Himself describes as “the furnace of fire [where] there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” That *horrible* place is the just punishment that your sins deserve, that my sins deserve. It would be right for us to go there.

And so you see, Coronavirus reminds us not only that death is certain, and not only that life is uncertain, and so the death that is certain to come may come at any time. It also reminds us that **judgment is coming** along with the certain death that may come at any time.

Death is not the cessation of existence. It is not the peaceful escape to tranquility and rest that so many suppose. Death is not an escape from the suffering of this life. For those who stand before God without a Mediator, for those whose sins have not been forgiven through the atoning work of Christ, for those not united to Jesus Christ by faith, death is the *beginning* of a kind of suffering that you cannot begin to fathom—an intensity of torment that dwarfs all the pains of this life. If you’re outside of Christ, don’t think that death will bring rest. Death will bring the *beginning* of torment. Hebrews 9:27: “It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment”—a judgment ten million times worse than mandatory quarantine, and a collapsing economy, and even dying alone in a hospital bed gasping for breath.

And we respond to this Coronavirus with empty platitudes of ego-stroking arrogance: “We are strong! We’re going to beat this! The American spirit will conquer Covid! We will triumph so long as we can all pull together! We *got* this!” That is pure paganism! And it is the exact opposite of the purpose of God for us in this tragedy! God has sent the Coronavirus to *humble* us! to show us how *small* we are, how *powerful* He is, and how *able* He is to make good on His promise that He will not leave the guilty unpunished! And like madmen, like senseless animals, we puff ourselves up with delusions of our own grandeur.

God is saying—in fact, He might as well be screaming at us—“Look at the signs! Discern the signs of the times! If I can stop the *world*, don’t you realize that the **coming judgment** for sin is as bad as I promise it to be? You’re guilty. Settle out of court before you come into judgment.”

IV. Repentance is Necessary

And you say, “How do I do that? We’ve already established that I’m guilty. And God is holy. And if He is a good and just God, He must punish sin. How can I settle out of court with God before I face His judgment?” And the answer comes in Jesus’ repeated phrase in verses 3 and 5. He does not merely say, “You will all likewise perish.” Praise God that that’s not all that Jesus says! He says, “*Unless you repent*, you will all likewise perish.” There *is* a way to escape from perishing under the just judgment of God against our sins! “You will perish, *unless!*” That means there’s a way out! And what is it? “Unless you *repent*.” Death is certain, life is uncertain, judgment is coming, but number four: **repentance is necessary**.

Well, if the only way we can escape from perishing under God's just judgment of our sins is to **repent**, we need to ask: what is repentance, exactly? Well, the word repentance means a *turning*. And it involves both a turning *from* something, as well as a turning *to* something else. Simply put, to repent means to turn from our sin and trusting in ourselves, and to turn to Jesus Christ and trust in Him for rescue from divine judgment. Let's think more about both of those.

First, repentance means turning *from* sin. And that means that, first of all, you need to acknowledge what you know: that you are a sinner. It means going to God and confessing to Him, "God, I *have* broken your law. I *have* belittled Your glory. I've treated you as if you were insignificant and inconsequential, rather than as my Creator, my Lord, my Savior, my friend, the One who is lovelier and worthier than all else. God, I stand guilty before perfect standard of your righteousness, and if You were to give me what I *deserve*, I would perish forever in eternal punishment." See, repentance begins by apprehending the truly wicked nature of your sin, and humbly confessing your need for grace and mercy and forgiveness.

Along with that intellectual apprehension of the wickedness of your sin, there's also an emotional component to repentance. It's sincere sorrow, remorse, and even mourning over your sin. Someone who is repentant has a broken heart. In fact, in Psalm 51, David's classic song of repentance for his adultery and murder, he says, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise." Now, this is not sorrow for getting caught; this is not regretting your actions because of their consequences. This is a spirit that is broken by the sense of having sinned against a God so glorious, so lovely, so beautiful, that you just say, "Lord, I'm sorry. I'm ashamed that I am this way." One way that Job expressed his repentance was to say to God, "I *despise* myself." That's repentance: "Lord, I *hate* myself because of my sin! I don't want any more to do with myself!"

But repentance is not merely thinking differently or feeling sorry about your sin. It also involves a change of direction, a transformation of the will. More than just a change of mind and feeling sorrowful, repentance says, "No more! I am not going to live like this anymore! I'm done trying to be the lord of my life! I determine—I resolve—to surrender my will to the will of Jesus Christ for the rest of my days. I want *Him* to be my Lord! I want *Him* to set the agenda for my life! I'm going to stop following my own heart and I'm going to start following Jesus." And so one description of repentance comes in Isaiah 55:7, where it says, "Let the wicked *forsake his way* and the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return"—same word for *repent*—"to the Lord, and He will have compassion on him, and [He] will abundantly pardon." So a repentant person determines to forsake his way. This is a self-repudiation—a resolute disowning of yourself and your sinful way of life and an embrace of Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord.

That brings us to that second element of repentance. Repentance is not only a turning *from* sin, but it is a turning *to* Jesus Christ for salvation. Even though we are guilty, even though our sins earn us eternal punishment from God, even though we are helpless to earn forgiveness with God and establish our own righteousness before Him, even though God is a just judge who must punish sin, God is gracious to sinners! And He has devised a plan to graciously save sinners like us who don't deserve it! And what is that plan? God the Father sent His Son, the eternal second person of the Trinity, to be born as a man, to take on our human nature, with all of its frailties and weaknesses (apart from sin), and to live life in this sin-cursed world, fully God and fully man. And the Lord Jesus Christ is born of a virgin, and he grows up a boy in Israel, and is subject to the law of God, and, get this: lives thirty-three years of our life without ever having sinned!

Jesus Christ lived a perfectly righteous life. He never had an evil thought. He never uttered a careless word. He never indulged in a sinful pleasure. A man! Like you and me! With a nature like ours! Perfectly obedient to the law of God! I'll put it this way: Jesus lived the perfect life of obedience that you and I were commanded to live, but that we failed to live.

But He didn't only live for us. He died for us. We saw it before: sin demands death. "Death spread to all men because all sinned." "The soul who sins will die." "The wages of sin is death." And not just a physical death, though that is certainly a part of it. But the death that sin earns is a *spiritual* death. Our sins deserve the holy anger of God being poured out on us for eternity in that horrible place of torment called hell. And yet here is Jesus Christ, the blemishless Lamb of God, who willingly stands in our place, and goes to the cross to lay down His life for our sins! Galatians 3:13 says, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us"! Second Corinthians 5:21. "[The Father] made [Christ] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that *we* might become the righteousness of God in Him."

What does that mean? It means that on the cross, the Father treated Jesus as if He had committed the sins of His people, though in fact He committed none of those sins. The Father charged the sins of all those who would ever believe to Christ's account, laid the burden of the guilt of our sin upon His shoulders, and caused Christ to pay the penalty that our sins deserved, to bear in His own person the full fury of the Father's anger against our sin. All the bitterness of hell—all the pain of the Father's consummate displeasure and rejection and wrath that is the substance of the punishment of hell—broke over the head of the innocent Son of God on the cross.

And then, since the Father treats Jesus as if He lived our life of sin, He then can justly and legally and righteously treat us as if we lived Jesus' life of perfect righteousness. Jesus is clothed in the rags of our sin and is punished like *we* deserve, and we are clothed in the spotless robe of His obedience, and are declared righteous, like *He* deserved! What glorious news!

You say, “How can I make that exchange? How can my sin be hidden in Jesus, and His righteousness be counted to me?” And the answer is: it’s free! It’s received by faith in Jesus Christ alone. You can’t earn it. You can’t work for it. You must turn away entirely from putting any confidence in your own righteousness before God, and trust entirely in Christ’s righteousness. You say, “Lord, I believe! I believe that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is perfectly sufficient to pay my debt, to forgive my sins, and to make me right with You! I trust Him! I turn away from my sins, I turn away from myself, and I turn to Jesus Christ in faith for salvation! I trust Him! I believe you!”

Conclusion

Dear sinner, heed this message. Pray that prayer from the depths of your heart. Trust in this Gospel. *This* is what God is saying through the Coronavirus!

Because if you reject this Good News, you will die in your sins. You will go into the terrors of eternal punishment. And the bewilderment and the dread and the agony that will confront you in that place will be horrific. It will be unspeakable. And you will curse yourself for how foolish you had been to sit within earshot of the message that leads to life—the message that would have safeguarded you from coming to such a wretched place as that. And you will remember March and April of 2020, when March Madness was canceled, and the baseball season was delayed, and churches were closed, and restaurants were shut down, and groceries were scarce, and everybody walked around in masks and gloves. You will remember.

And you will think about this time when the threat of disease and death was so real, so palpable, so thrust from the realm of the merely theoretical into the realm of reality and into the forefront of your mind. And friend, you will curse yourself. You will curse your carelessness and your foolishness. You’ll say, “Oh, miserable wretch that I am! Oh, naive and heedless fool that I was! All the signs were there! The reality of my mortality was thrust upon my consciousness! Coronavirus taught me that death was certain, that I was not in control of when death would come! And yet I put it out of my mind! I medicated myself into a stupor with drugs or alcohol! I distracted myself and numbed my mind with ceaseless unprofitable entertainment! I ignored the warnings! I mocked the preachers! Damned fool!—I rejected Jesus Christ! And now I’ve come to this place of bitterness and agony and torment—and oh, what I wouldn’t give now just to hear one word of that blessed Good News that I so despised in my life!”

Dear friend, what can I say to you, but that I do not want that for you! that God Himself does not want that for you! And so He has sent physical, tangible, unmistakable reminders like worldwide disease to remind you that **death is certain**, that **life is uncertain**, that **judgment is coming**, and that unless you **repent**, you will all likewise perish.

Turn from your sins. Confess your guilt before this Holy God. Own that you have broken His law, that you have offended His holiness, that you deserve the prison of eternal punishment for your crimes. And abandon every hope of paying that debt in your own strength, out of your own resources. Turn away from all your so-called “good works” by which you would seek to bribe the Judge for entry into heaven—realizing that all your righteous deeds in the sight of God’s perfection are like filthy rags, Isaiah 64:6. And put all your confidence, all your trust, all your hope for righteousness in the courtroom of God in the doing and the dying of Another. Put your hope and confidence for righteousness in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, the world’s only Savior, the only Mediator between God and man!

Trust not in your righteousness to avail with you before God; trust in Jesus’ righteousness. Put off your filthy rags of sin. Be done with the fruitlessness of sin. And put on the pure-white robe of *Christ’s* obedience, offered to you freely who would just receive it with an empty hand. Cease from all your self-efforts to atone for your sins, and trust in *Christ’s* atonement for sins, when He bore the wrath of God in the place of His people on the cross. And if you do that, dear friend, you will be saved! You will be rescued from the coming judgment! You will have eternal life—free from the curse of sin! free from the decay of disease! free from the scourge of death—in eternal blessedness on a new earth, where there is no more death, no more mourning, no more tears, no more pain (Rev 21:4)!

Dear friend, Almighty God has sent this virus, and has shut down the world, to bring you this message of salvation. Don’t squander this opportunity. Don’t waste the Coronavirus. Don’t delay another moment. Come to Christ in repentance and faith, and live.