

Two Years Later: Where Are We Now?

(Part 1)

By PAUL J. SCHARF

I will never forget the third Sunday in March of 2020.

On Saturday, March 14, I attended my first Prophecy Up Close event hosted by The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, in the Milwaukee area. That night, we drove down to Mendota, IL, to prepare for our ministry at Mendota Bible Church.

The fear of coronavirus was spreading quickly, as was the talk of *locking down* society—a term previously reserved for situations involving either extreme weather or an impending attack. I spoke about Biblical prophecy that day, and told the congregation that this would be a day that none of us would ever forget. And, indeed, it was. I remember reading news stories that afternoon about the emergency rules that would shortly be going into place in Illinois—all the while wondering how they related to our United States Constitution.

We stayed in our hotel that night, planning to meet a pastor for lunch on Monday. We walked over to McDonald's for a snack to eat while we watched the final presidential primary debate, and there we caught a glimpse of what life would look like under lockdown.

The next day, as we left, our hotel clerk cried. At lunch at our restaurant, our waitress cried. Both of them feared financial ruin. We drove home, relieved to get back to Wisconsin—only to learn that the lockdowns would very quickly be following us north.

That would be our last Sunday of public ministry for roughly three months. As we drove home, I remember thinking that this could well be the end for us in our ministry with The Friends of Israel, apart from God's mercy and grace. I remember praying that the Lord would, somehow, bring us through whatever was coming stronger and better prepared to expand our ministry. And I remember so clearly the virtual staff meeting that we held the next morning—each of us wondering what would come next.

Looking back now, I can say without hesitation that God graciously answered my prayer. I praise Him for that, and I also want to express my utmost gratitude to The Friends of Israel and to our leadership, which remained so steady and faithful to every member on our team all throughout this crisis.

It is abundantly clear now, looking back, that God was essentially giving us an opportunity to shore up weaknesses in our ministry—particularly in the areas of communication and technology—and forcing us, of necessity, to take advantage of that opportunity.

Indeed, this column was born of out that unique time of opportunity, after I opened my own web page at SermonAudio.com/pscharf and began to focus on producing online resources. I would never want to go through another lockdown—but I would also not want to go back to operating the way that we were before that time.

Some of my earliest columns were on what I saw then as, essentially, the collapse of our American way of life.

It's now been two years, and I am still basically comfortable with the things that I wrote back then, and still do not believe in my heart that we will ever return to *life as normal*.

Here are a few other things that I think about *where we are now*—two years later:

- I am firmly convinced that I had COVID-19 in February of 2020, following our trip to Dr. John C. Whitcomb's funeral. (I definitely know that I had it a second time this January, when I was tested for it and received the antibody infusion.)
- I am firmly convinced that government-imposed lockdowns—quarantining the healthy—produced results that were incredibly destructive and disastrous to our culture, and specifically to our economy.

I want to say here that this series will focus on ministry, not the virus itself, politics or public policy. The above comments are the closest that I intend to get to those themes. I have written another series called "Get Ready for the Great Reset," which I never completely finished, and needs to be brought up to the present. But here I will be focusing specifically on the state of the church.

- I am firmly convinced that many in our churches have become much more sober-minded over the past two years. It has become something like another "9-11" moment—but exponentially more significant in terms of its impact.

As I speak in churches, I regularly ask this question: How many have seen things over the past two years that you never thought you would see ... in America, in your lifetime, before the rapture? Hands usually go up throughout the congregation. For the first time in my lifetime, people are seriously wondering—literally asking—*What in the world is happening?* Many seem less intent on making it home in time for the kickoff, and some are burdened as they have never been before.

But how did the church handle this crisis overall? Where are we now? And are we now more, or less, ready for any future crises that will threaten the very core of our ministries?

We will begin with these topics next time.

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