

## **What Should Christians Work Toward after COVID-19?**

Dr. Michael A. Milton

On Sunday, November 20, 1983, 38,550 households in the United States stopped what they were doing to tune in to an ABC television film, *The Day After*. The film was made in some of the most nervous times of the Cold War (1947-1991). *The Day After* depicted a nuclear first strike by the Warsaw Pact nations (the Soviet Union controlled countries) against NATO (Britain, Western Europe, and North America). The apocalyptic event happens near Fort Riley, Kansas. The film, which generated extraordinary responses around the country, centered on what life would look like in the American Midwest—thus, “the day after.” The “Day After” became, then, a recognized expression about those epochal moments in time that transforms human society. In such events, there is a juncture inserted, usually, with unwanted disruption, into our lives. This disruption causes us to know life before the event, and life after the fact.

We have lived through several such real-life events that carried a “day after” effect. Notably, September 11, 2001, remains a significant turning point in Western culture. There are others. Generations living in community will undoubtedly point to the significant milestones in their own respective group: Pearl Harbor, or, perhaps, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. These days became points of reference: life before, life after. So, yes, if the Lord tarries, I do think COVID-19 is going to have “a day after.” In fact, I think most of us intuitively understand that something has now changed. That we are asking the question proves the point.

### **Our New Watershed Event: The Coronavirus Pandemic**

The coronavirus has already altered many aspects of our everyday lives. The coronavirus that caused us to learn the phrase, “social isolation” will undoubtedly cause us to also learn new ways of living. Social isolation is, now, sadly, a necessary way we must live. Soon, we pray, the precautionary measures to stop the threat of further contagion will no longer be needed. Then, what? What have we learned? What will change? How will we change? These are questions being asked by scholars, educators, medical experts, business owners, corporate executives, trade workers, and government officials. It is also a question that Christians might ask about their lives as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. How will the COVID-19 event change our lives as disciples of Christ?

### **There Will Be Lifestyle Implications**

First of all, we will all experience some degree of change, whatever one’s faith or lack of it. Medicine, the field at the forefront of this crisis, has, by now, adopted new modalities that will likely not go away when the virus dies under the summer sun. I think all of us would agree that the introduction of telemedicine is a powerful resource to reach more people with fewer costs. Other sectors like higher education have been on a ramp towards online course delivery. COVID-19 pushed higher education into a full embrace of technology in the service of learning. If any were lagging behind the trend before, they are now doing penance. For, hereafter, online education is probably the new norm. On and on, we could go. Some modifications will be temporary. Other new behaviors we learned in a crisis will become valued lifestyle changes in a renewed economy. Still, additional adjustments will quickly be dispatched with good riddance. Of course, some lessons will be lost. We will repeat the mistakes we made before the virus outbreak. Soon, we will forget why we do the things we do. This, too, is inevitable. But what of faith?

### **What Does the Bible Say about Change?**

There is an equation that appears in several places in Scripture. The formula is put forth in a *conditional clause*: “If this, then what?” The simple grammatical calculation is always based on a prior or antecedent event. Since some are so (e.g., “Since we know that it rained yesterday, then . . .”) Or, since you have

experienced falling in love, then . . . ?"), then something else is possible. In the arsenal of a teacher, the conditional clause is a powerful instrument. In the context of the inerrant and infallible Word of God, the conditional sentence becomes a powerful moral possibility.

*"Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness"* ([2 Peter 3:11](#), NKJV). In this passage, the Apostle Peter teaches about the limitations of time. Christ is coming again as Savior and also as Judge. So, Peter inserts a transitional word: "therefore." And he asked Christians in Asia Minor, "since these things are coming, what matter of people are you to be?" Do you see the equation? "Since this, then what?"

The equation appears in the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. Dr. Luke writes about the event in [Luke 13:1-5](#). The great missionary physician writes that there have been a notable and horrible incident that it happened with Galileans. Pilate, the notorious political beast, a Machiavellian figure if there ever was one, had apparently mingled the blood of the Galileans with their sacrifices. Luke says that "there were some present at that very time who told him" about the incident. Jesus's response is to refute and preclude any idea that human catastrophe should necessarily be linked with God's judgment. The Lord then moves to the equation before us: "no, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" ([Luke 13:3](#) ESV). Immediately after saying this, Jesus adds another localized news account of a tower that fell in Siloam. Eighteen souls perished in this accident. Once more, the Lord responds that one must not deduce from this calamity that the 18 souls "were worse offenders and all the others who lived in Jerusalem" ([Luke 13:4](#)). Jesus then raises the equation: "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" ([Luke 13:5](#)). And there is the "Since this, then what?"

## **The Christian Life the Day After COVID-19**

We are now faced with a "since this, then what" time in our lives as believers. Since the pandemic, how now should we live? How shall we change? I believe that at least three responses are before us. The first response to the coronavirus might be this:

### **1. Since COVID-19 produced isolation, let us pray for community.**

As I write this, I am preparing for a Sunday service. The truth is, though, that I will conduct a worship service and preach from my library—just like a thousand other preachers. We can do much through the means of distance technology. However, when it comes to the "passing of the peace" (or "the greeting"), we know something important is missing. For we worship not as individuals, but as the Body of Christ.

A pastor called me just a few days ago. He was feeling lonely. He missed the flock of Christ. I told him that this season is a unique time and that his yearning for others is a sign of the power and presence of the Holy Spirit inside of him. I told him that his vocation was strong. We should desire to be with each other. The Bible reminds us that we should never give up the meeting together. We cannot learn forgiveness and isolation. We cannot practice love while we are always apart from each other. We might even come to learn that the occasional pain we experience in church life because of some thoughtless statement or controversy will decision is just a sign of fire humanity. We might discover that it is for these very reasons that we truly need each other. We've got to work through the residue of sin runs through our spiritual veins. On "the day after" COVID-19 I pray that our longing for community will result in overflowing churches, new churches, and revitalization of formerly cold churches. If we've learned anything we've learned that we really need each other. Maybe we will read the passage from Hebrews with a new sense of urgency:

*"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet*

*together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near"(Hebrews 10:23-25 NKJV).*

I have another prayer. It is this:

## **2. Since COVID-19 caused social distance, let us pray for Christian unity.**

Since our lives have been affected by the coronavirus we have seen the value of the unity of all believers. COVID-19 created social distancing and self-isolation. However, we learned that through technology we could connect with other believers. Finding Christian community in an adverse climate is nothing new. Christians in communist countries had to find Christian community in times of persecution. The same is true for believers in many parts of the world. One of the things that you learn is that we have more in common than not. Rather than seeking the differences in each other, we look for the similarities. This is absolutely necessary in an age of anxiety. Many of us will be tempted to forget these truths in the months ahead. We will be tempted to go back to the way things were before. There is nothing wrong with the expression of diverse traditions and backgrounds and even organizations within Christianity. However, to find our identity in these differences is to deny the catholicity that Jesus urged upon us: "*For he who is not against us is on our side*" ([Mark 9:40](#)). We cannot forget the prayer of Jesus which became necessarily fulfilled in our lives during the COVID-19 crisis: "*That they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me*" ([John 17:21](#) NKJV).

Finally, I pray this pandemic, and the innovative ways we learned will not be wasted. I think I would put it like this:

## **3. Since COVID-19 forced innovation in communication, let us pray that technology will be used for evangelization.**

Haven't you just been amazed at how churches and other ministries have been able to *leverage technology* to bring the life of Jesus to the world? And we all know that in difficult and desperate days, people are more open to hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ. Have we not been shown a new "Roman Road" over which we can bring the gospel to the ends of the earth? Someone told me, "Technology is the main culprit of so much of the sin that is going on today. It carries the disease of sin." Naturally, I agree; yet, the power of the cross is that the very things that seek to destroy us become in the hands of a loving and sovereign God the very things that say this. This is the gospel story — the old, old story of Jesus and his love — that is told in the lives of men and women, boys and girls, throughout history. We can see that the ruling motif of the powerful paradox of the cross at work in the stories from Scripture. Consider this one text from Dr. Luke's account of the "Acts of the Apostles:"

*"At that time, a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. And devout men carried Stephen to his burial and made great lamentation over him. As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word"* ([Acts 8:1-4](#) NKJV).

This text of Scripture is filled with the paradoxical power of the gospel. Consider these ways we see the upside-down, enigmatic, divinely arranged, glorious, transformative power of the cross activated like yeast in the dough:

**1. "At that time..."** God used an extraordinary time to bring about the fulfillment of Jesus's promise that the gospel would be preached and to the ends of the earth. The coronavirus crisis did not surprise God. Though God is not the author of evil, and God is a loving God, nevertheless, he is God and ordains

whatsoever comes to pass. Without being culpable for any of the sins of a fallen world (including its virulent diseases of body and soul), the Lord is absolutely sovereign. He can use the very things that would hurt us to bring about good for us. As he did in the days of the apostles God will do so today.

**2. "A great persecution arose..."** It has been said before that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. Once again, our sovereign God is in no way caught off guard by the diabolical plotting and persecution against his people. He cannot be charged with hurting his own little lambs, and yet he knows in some Mysterious Way, God knows. And again, it was this persecution against Christians that led to the believers being scattered throughout the Roman Empire. The Roman roads that were constructed to withstand the weight of chariots and troops that marched into Jerusalem to crucify Christ and to persecute his people became the very highways that God used for Christians to travel throughout the Roman Empire. There is nothing inherently good about the pestilence of COVID-19 or the economic and social catastrophe that it brought. However, God is able to use all things, even bad things, to bring about his will. Just as he used persecution to bring about the evangelization of the world, God is using this health crisis to bring about His mission in our generation. God is already redeploying the innovations we learned to battle a virus in the service of His mission in the world today.

**3. "They went everywhere preaching the word."** As persecution of Christians led to the proclamation of Christ, so, too, the Lord will use a time of crisis to bring in a time of refreshing.

But of course one of the things it will not change will be human nature. Some of us will file away the lessons learned. Some of us will put away the innovations developed. And some of us will waste away in spiritual isolation from each other and from God. The Bible says that greater is he who is in us than he was in the world ([1 John 4:4](#)). The Lord declares that he is doing "a new thing" ([Isaiah 43:18-10](#)). The Bible clearly teaches us that we are new creations in Christ ([2 Corinthians 5:17](#)), "The old has gone, the new is here!" The story of the gospel is the story of an empty tomb and a new life. What if we begin to emerge from this long winter of isolation into a new sunlit season of *community, unity, and outreach?* And what if all of this happened during the season of Easter—when we recall the resurrection of Jesus? Or what if "the day after" came during the season of Pentecost—when we proclaim the empowering of the Holy Spirit to reach the nations for Christ? Well, we might just conclude that *God was with us, after all.* We might just embrace "the day after" as a new opportunity for living, for serving, and for living life *together.*

With this prayer, I offer you a closing benediction: That you and your family may know the grace, mercy, and peace of the One true God: Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Yours Faithfully, Dr. Milton

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