**The Quarantine of Saul of Tarsus**

April 5, 2020

San Angelo, Texas

At the time of this writing, April 4, 2020, we are set to enter Week 3 of the Coronavirus pandemic here in the great state of Texas. This has been a very fluid situation, with things changing almost by the minute. The purpose of this study is to look at the response of the Lord’s Church to the crisis, as well as our judgment of the decisions being made. Obviously, this is not the first crisis the church has faced in its existence, nor will it be the last. I honestly believe that the church, our nation, our communities and individuals can be made stronger than before.

For our study this morning, I would like to outline three specific examples from the New Testament were the followers of Jesus were forced into tough decisions of conscience. As we look at each instance, please consider the following questions:

 1) Did the decision represent a lack of faith in God?

 2) Did the decision express fear?

1. THE DISCIPLES AFTER THE CRUCIFIXION: John 20

 **(John 20:19)**

Then, the same day at evening, being the first *day* of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, “Peace *be* with you.”

This was the day of the Resurrection, the most important event in the history of the world. The disciples were firsthand witnesses to the event and had opportunity to be rejoicing over the fact that Jesus escaped the grave. Yet where were the disciples? They were silent and shivering behind a locked door out of fear of the authorities. Should they not have been spreading the fantastic news of the Resurrection? Did they lack faith? Were they paralyzed by fear? Yes, yes and yes. Yet Jesus quietly said “Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.”

The decision was made for the disciples to **hide** from the crisis.

 1) Did the decision represent a lack of faith in God? DOUBTING

 2) Did the decision express fear? SCARED

2. THE DISCIPLES AFTER THE ARREST OF PETER: Acts 12

 **(Acts 12:13-14)**

 And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer. **14**When she recognized Peter’s voice, because of *her* gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate.

Talk about a time of great persecution of the Lord’s Church in Jerusalem! King Herod had just recently executed James (the brother of John) and saw the great joy that it brought his Jewish constituents. He then arrested Peter and was planning on his execution after the completion of the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Yet God had other plans, and an angel was sent to the prison to release the chains of Peter. Peter knew right were his fellow believers would be, assembled at the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark.

Peter knocked on the “door of the gate”, but was unable to gain access to the house. Rhoda recognized the voice of Peter and ran off in excitement to tell the others. So Peter remained at the locked gate unable to enter the house!

**(Acts 12:16)**

 Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened *the door* and saw him, they were astonished.

Again, we see the Christians hiding behind locked doors because of imminent danger. How was the gospel being spread if they were all trying to remain inconspicuous and invisible to the world? Where was their faith that God would protect them? Why were they so fearful?

The decision was made for the disciples to **hide** and pray in secret behind locked doors.

DOUBTING. SCARED.

3. THE QUARANTINE OF SAUL OF TARSUS: Acts 9

 **(Acts 9:26)**

And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple.

In our final example, the man that eventually would be known as the Apostle Paul has come to Jerusalem THREE years after his conversion. We do not learn this from the account in Acts, but rather from Paul’s own account in the book of Galatians.

 **(Galatians 1:18-19)**

 Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days. **19**But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord’s brother.

After the incident on the Damascus Road, Saul of Tarsus spent three years preaching and worshipping in Arabia and later Damascus. It was after this time period that he returned to Jerusalem, but was rejected by the congregation out of fear. Many were concerned he was not a true disciple, and his motives were questioned. I think of the old expression of the fox guarding the henhouse. Who in their right mind would have allowed the infamous opponent of the Lord’s Church to enter amongst its congregation?

The decision was made for Saul of Tarsus to remain **isolated** from the congregation.

Saul was not allowed to have contact with the congregation, and was only exposed to Peter and James. In essence, Saul of Tarsus was quarantined for 15 days! Why? His presence was deemed too dangerous for the congregation. It was only after the verification from Barnabas that Saul was allowed to be “coming in and going out” with the church at Jerusalem. This decision must have caused quite a stir among the leaders of the church at Jerusalem!

Did the Apostles show a lack of faith that God would protect them in the event that Saul of Tarsus was just a wolf in sheep’s clothing? Were they responding out of fear? Probably yes on both accounts, but they had to do what needed to be done to protect the disciples from harm.

I have a few more thoughts concerning the quarantine of Saul of Tarsus. During his 15-day isolation from the congregation at Jerusalem, how did Saul worship? Did he worship by himself? Possibly did he worship in a small group with those he travelled with? Did he worship with Peter and James in the apostle’s house? He was not worshipping with the brethren at Jerusalem, so would we claim that Saul was out of duty? What about the audacity of Peter, James and the other church elders refusing to allow a faithful member of the Lord’s Church to assemble to worship? Were the leaders in Jerusalem out of line for the hard line stance they took with Saul of Tarsus? I have no answers for any of these questions, but hopefully you can see parallels to our current situation. It is always easier to sit in judgment of another’s decisions after the fact.

 Today, church elders and leaders are being put into situations where the welfare of the congregation is at stake. There are no easy decisions! The church is being pressured by federal, state, county and local authorities. We also worry about the health of individual members, as well as the chance that we might be unintentionally spreading the virus across our own communities. Public perception also has to be considered, as we attempt to worship without appearing to be unsympathetic to the plight of others. Yet first and foremost, we have a duty and a responsibility to worship God in a Scriptural manner.

Again, though, consider our two questions in relation to our current decisions concerning worship and the Covid 19 pandemic:

1) Did the decision represent a lack of faith in God?

2) Did the decision express fear?

Just like each of our three examples, the answers are most likely “Yes and Yes”. We have a responsibility to the spreading of the gospel, yet churches are shutting their doors all over the nation. We claim to have faith in God, but we worry about contracting an airborne virus. We sing “Stand Up for Jesus” but we cower in fear at the aspect of having our services shuttered by the local authorities. This is not the first crisis of faith the church has faced, but for many of us it is. That being said, decisions have to be made concerning the assembly of the Lord’s Church. It is at this time of great uncertainty that church leadership takes priority. Each congregation has elders or leaders that have the responsibility of providing for the general well-being of their congregation. Think of the duties of an elder and its connotation to a shepherd and his flock. No shepherd worth his salt would place his flock in harm’s way.

 **(1 Peter 5:1-4)**

The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: **2**Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; **3**nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; **4**and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.

What makes things tricky is that the shepherds of the congregation have to consider two distinct dynamics: 1) the physical well-being and 2) the spiritual well-being of the congregation.

It might be easy to say “cancel all services so that no one will be infected by the virus”. Certainly this addresses the physical needs of the congregation, but what about the spiritual side of the equation? As Christians we have been commanded to assemble upon the first day of the week to worship. Any variation from this divine command is going to cause a weakening of the spiritual nature of the congregation, despite what Facebook says.

It is our desire to maintain the decrees set forth by the Scriptures as well as be good law-abiding citizens. When this crisis is over – which it will soon be – we will be able to look back with a sense of greater understanding. My fear is that divisions will be created and walls established over who did what and how the pandemic was handled by congregations and individual Christians as well.

Here at the 19th Street Church of Christ in San Angelo, Texas we have made the decision to follow the command of God first and foremost, and continue to assemble for worship on the first day of the week **(Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 16:1, Hebrews 10:25)**. It is not within the Scriptural powers of the leadership of the congregation to “suspend” worship on the first day of the week, at least as far as I know. However, we have taken consideration of the situation and have tried and will continue to be good citizens and neighbors as well. Our assembly will not be long, and we will attempt to follow the guidelines from the powers at be so long as they do not interfere with God’s commands **(Acts 5:29)**. That being said, if an individual member feels uncomfortable with assembly that is very understandable, and they will have to make a decision of conscience that is between them and God. I will not stand in judgment. If individual members are high-risk for infection and sickness, they will have a decision of conscience to make whether or not to attend the worship service. If individual members want to practice the 6-ft social distancing rule during worship, that is fine; if members feel the need for facemasks and avoid shaking hands or being too close to others, again that is fine. These are all decisions of conscience between the individual Christian and God.

Other congregations across the brotherhood might not see things as we do, and that is certainly their prerogative. We all have the same goal – to be found as faithful followers of Jesus Christ at His coming. It is with this in mind, that I encourage all of us to notice three reoccurring words of the New Testament. Pick just about any epistle, check the introduction (salutation) and then read the conclusion (benediction). There are three Christian attributes that are usually mentioned in some combination:

1) Grace

2) Mercy

3) Peace

 **(2 Timothy 1:1)**

 To Timothy, a beloved son:

 Grace, mercy, *and* peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

At this current time in the history of the church, it is of utmost important that we extend these virtues to congregations and fellow Christians. Decisions of conscience are being made that you and I personally might not agree with. However, it is my prayer that as a brotherhood of believers we will not be too quick to judge others for their decisions. Instead, we should extend grace, mercy and peace to all. Church leaders are being forced to make snap judgments in difficult situations, and I trust that the decisions are made after careful consideration and with honest intentions. God bless the church.