

We are living in frightening times and we are faced with news of the coronavirus spreading through the world at an alarming rate. This has all happened so quickly and who among us could have predicted a month ago that countries such as Italy, Spain and the United States would have closed their borders in the hope of containing this deadly virus. Sports events and public gatherings have been cancelled. We are to avoid shaking hands and touching our faces. Some of the shelves of Sainsbury's were empty on Friday and I tried to get paracetamol for Mary who has a bad back, but they were sold out. They were also sold out of handwash and there weren't many toilet rolls left either. For a minute, I thought the world had gone mad but then I heard our government telling us that we can expect to lose loved ones and friends to this virus. We really are living in a state of emergency and I don't think I have experienced anything like this in my lifetime.

And when we face emergencies, there are always those who predict end times which I don't think is helpful, to say nothing of being inaccurate. I've had two calls from people who were asking me if we are living in end times because they had read an article or listened to a speaker on television proclaiming exactly that. The coronavirus is frightening enough without us having to think about facing end times as well. I looked at the internet and typed into Google end times, and I found countless self-proclaimed prophets assuring me that the coronavirus was a sign of end times, and I was left furious because of the fear they are spreading. If the people writing this stuff had a gospel message of Christ as Saviour, then I would have been delighted because that's what people need to hear at this time. But I read little of the gospel, only predictions of widespread doom.

I shouldn't have been surprised as there have been self-proclaimed prophets predicting end times since about five minutes after Jesus' ascension and His return to heaven, and this would have been around 33AD. I looked up Wikipedia and I counted at least 60 predictions in the twentieth century alone. One of the favourites would be that the world would end at the millennium in 2000.

I even remember sitting with Mary as the bells chimed in the new-year of 2000, and opening one eye to see if we were still here, and of course we were. Pat Robinson who is an American television evangelist said that God spoke to him and told him that *mass killings* were to come during 2007, due to a terrorist attack on the United States. When a terrorist attack failed to happen in 2007, Robertson said, in January 2008; *All I can think is that somehow the people of God prayed and God in his mercy spared us*. Ronald Weinland, the founder of the Church of God Preparing for the Kingdom of God, stated Jesus would return on the 29th of September 2011. After his prophecy failed to come true he changed the date to 27 May 2012.

Then there are those who proclaimed with great certainty that AIDS was a punishment from God in the mid 1980s. When the Tsunami hit in 2005, I remember people saying that it was a punishment from God because of the decadent behaviour of many who lived in the Indonesian area that was worst affected. And now we have people saying that if we look at the state of the world's governments, if we look at Brexit and the European union, and now if we look at Coronavirus, we see signs of end times. We have always had, and will always have those who will predict end times, and many will claim their prophesy comes from God. Now please, don't think I am mocking these individuals because nothing could be further from the truth. I accept that they honestly believed their predictions but I want to say that if we want a prediction, we should turn to the Bible and discover what God has to say about end times.

And just to put the current situation regarding Coronavirus into some context, there was a pandemic called Spanish Flu that occurred from January 1918 to December 1920. Spanish Flu infected 500 million people around the world, which was about 27% of the then world population. The death toll is estimated to have been anywhere from 17 million to 50 million, making it one of the deadliest epidemics in human history. This was in the middle of the First World War when millions were also dying on the battlefields. If this wasn't a sign of end times I don't what else is, but here we are a hundred years later!

People will always want to predict end times because we want to be in control of our destiny. But the Bible is clear on this matter which is only God knows the time for Jesus' return and start of Armageddon. I've listed some scriptures that I want us to read to help us see that when it comes to end times, only God has the answer and that we should be wary of listening to those who want to predict what only God knows:

Matthew 24:36 - But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.

Luke 12:40 - You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

1 Thessalonians 5: 1 to 3 - Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

Joel 2: 28 to 32 - And afterwards, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.

I could go on quoting dozens of scriptures which all say the same: Only God knows the day and hour when He will return. And while this may answer some of your questions over those who predict end times, it's hardly a comfort or an antidote against the coronavirus. And I don't have much to offer you in way of physical comfort.

The Church of Scotland has issued a statement to ministers that I will read to you but it offers little in the way of security or comfort. I've two copies of the statement and I'll put them on the notice boards should you want to read them. For ourselves, we are suspending the informal communions and our next communion will be in June unless we are advised otherwise.

What does God say to a world in chaos? What can we then take hope in during times such as these? There are scriptures that we turn too in times of crisis such as:

Deuteronomy 31:6 – Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you. He will never leave you nor forsake you.

Isaiah 41:10 – Do not fear for I am with you, do not be dismayed for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

Philippians 4:6-7 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

You may have noticed that I said I don't have much to offer you in the way of physical comfort and that was deliberate. With this worldwide pandemic, this is the time for us to pray. We should be praying for ourselves and loved ones, our friends as well as people throughout the world. What people need just now is hope!

Perhaps this is the greatest opportunity that we have to speak to others, those we know who have no faith, and to share the reassurance of hope in Christ that we have. I often say that Christmas and Easter presents us with opportunities to share our faith because these festivals are so much part of our society. But with fear of coronavirus, now is the time to pray for others, and tell them about Christ. If we don't, who will?

We are living in dangerously uncertain times and its scary. Who among us can be complacent about this pandemic? But remember, previous generations have been through similar pandemics, and we are here to attest that they survived. And remember also, a truth that we can place our faith in, and this is found in *Hebrews 13:8 - Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever*. Let us place our trust in our Lord, and keep praying! **Amen**

(1638 words)

Amen

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