

“Conversations on this Present Distress
with Harry Reeder and Bruce Stallings”
Program Two
March 29, 2020 • Sunday Evening

This is our second program of *Conversations on this Present Distress with Harry and Bruce*. We appreciate all the questions that have been sent for some have been very challenging, encouraging and insightful. One of the things that is abundantly clear in the Scriptures is that we are to be anxious for nothing. Philippians 4:6–7 says [6] *do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. [7] And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus*. So I would like to give just a couple of thoughts as we step into these questions, continue to face this present distress and the various dynamics associated with it throughout our country and because it’s a pandemic, throughout the world.

First, the Bible wants us to get rid of fear and the baby sister to fear which is anxiety which leads to fear. There is only one fear the Bible calls us to have and that’s the fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom. It is God alone who is to receive our unmitigated adoration, awe and allegiance. We do not allow the world to control us with the fears of this world or the fear of man. All the fears of this world will paralyze us whereas the fear of the Lord motivates us. That’s why a lion roars for he knows it will paralyze his foe, his prey for that moment to freeze them. We want to say ‘no’ to those fears and anxieties that leads to them but remember the Apostle Paul said he had concerns for the churches so there is a place for concerns to be addressed but not out of fear. We want to walk in the peace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

When you cast all your cares upon Him because He cares for you then He promises to stand guard at your heart. He is the Century of our heart so that when the Prince of Peace who has given us peace with God promises us the peace of God then we can walk confidently in this world. So let’s get into addressing the questions we have received.

Bruce: We have received numerous questions since our first program. We won’t be able to answer all of them but we’ll get to as many as we can. The first one has to do with looking for worship tools and tools for our quiet time during this time of distress which specifically focuses on hymns. The question is are there any hymns particular to and directed toward times of distress? Can you give a brief history of hymn you would recommend?

Harry: I would really encourage you to meditate on the hymn *A Mighty Fortress is Our God* written by Martin Luther which I gave a brief history on in the March 29, 2020 morning worship service which you can view on our website at briarwood.org/archivetv. I would encourage to get a good hymnal and the best that I know is the Trinity Hymnal and use it to meditate on.

It does not matter whether you are going through a period of challenge or anxiety or celebration, I always come back to the hymn *For All the Saints* written by William W. How. It was written as a processional to begin worship of what we’d call the psalms of accent. It was written as a hymn of accent to come into the presence of the Lord to praise Him and it covers the gamut of the Christian life all the way from God as our confidence to being with the Lord in eternity. The original hymn was 12 verses. Now some hymnals will have eight or seven verses and the one we use at Briarwood has six verses. I encourage you to get all the verses and meditate through them but I do understand why hymnals have boiled it down to printing fewer

verses that are sung. This hymn takes us from Christ our Hope to the church militant to the church triumphant in the coming of Christ and then into the new heavens and the new earth. It gets our mind on the Lord, what He has done, and what the Lord has promised, not only to me individually but to me as the church.

Secondly, there are couple of contemporary songs I really like. One is *Everlasting God* by Chris Tomlin which tells us we do not fear because our God will give us the strength. We need not grow weary because He is always there to strengthen us.

Another song is *Isaiah 43* by Hillsong where it tells us when we walk through the fire He will be with us. The flood will not overwhelm us. In the Bible God speaks of two instruments of judgment – water as is seen in the flood as He amerces humanity under His judgment and fire. God says after the flood that He will not judge the world again in this manner (referring to water) but He will bring a judgment of fire. The world tries to mimic that with tortures upon His people but He tells us when they do not to fear for He'll be with us.

Bruce: There is also the song *Behold Our God* written by Stephen Altrogge and Jon Baird.

Harry: That song has become a favorite at Briarwood.

Bruce: It has and it is an incredible song to focus on.

Harry: When our staff sits down to pray through each worship service I let our worship leader know he has 2,000 plus hymns and confessions to choose from and praise music didn't start in 1985 and it didn't end in 1525. So I tell him to find good solid Biblical songs. We almost always work a Psalm into our singing, then a great hymn on the attributes and acts of God and then a spiritual song where we can reflect and bring focus to something.

Behold Our God is not like some of the contemporary songs that people enjoy but don't have any gravitas that only last 3, 4, 5 or 10 years, but some of them like *Behold Our God* and *In Christ Alone* by the Getty's will be added to the hymn book and become classical hymnody. I don't call it traditional because of its subject matter and its excellence but I call it classical. So make use of those in your life.

Bruce: It was my wife, Sonya, who got me to using a hymnal in my quiet time for that's a staple in her chair that she uses in her time with the Lord. Then I found the website hymnary.org/ and it has the Trinity Hymnal but also some history on the hymns.

Harry: That website also has current histories of how the hymn is being used.

Bruce: It's an excellent tool to use online. The next question deals with those who gather for worship at home so for some this may be the first time they have ever done a worship time with family at home. Some of the questions on this are interesting. One of the questions is what should our attire be, how should we dress for home family worship? Pastor, can you make practical suggestions to help them participate in an online home worship time?

Harry: No one will become the dress police to visit your home to see how you are dressed as we apply this remedy. This is not gathered worship but it is gathered worship here that you can participate in there. I believe to make full use of it and to maintain your high view of worship

even though you're at home and the tendency is to come in your pajamas, try not to turn this into something less than it is. One of our big challenges in worship in the contemporary church is that it has become a spectator event instead of a participatory event. We work hard at Briarwood to choreograph worship so that everybody is participating, greeting, singing, confessing, giving and hearing. It's not just that we've come to watch those up on the stage.

Our worship leader looks at our choir as the underpinnings. He sees the great choir on the Lord's Day and trying to lead the congregation in worship and praise to God. I think all of those things are better done if you treat this at home as if you were at the church as to maintain your approach to gathered worship. This past week people sent me pictures from their 'gathered worship' time at home where they stood when I said to stand and remained standing when I said to remain standing. One of our elders who sent us pictures wanted everyone in their home to come dressed as they would for church and he had on his suit plus his name tag he would wear at the church. His wife said to him 'All those visiting will know you're a member, that's great!'

Go through the worship with us as if you were at the church in your own home. I know that feels awkward but go ahead and do it. This is not gathered worship but we are providing the gathered worship of 10 at Briarwood for you and if you want to be participating then try to do it as much as if you were actually here.

Please note in our online worship service it is not me to doing an online devotional where you just listen to it on Sunday. We have asked 10 people to be here so that we are actually doing our worship service that God has prescribed. All of those elements in worship God has prescribed so this isn't a devotional. This is worship and worship is a participatory event. It is not a noun describing an event, it's a verb describing an act so enter into that worship. All of the Biblical elements that God says He requires in worship we are continuing to do on the Lord's Day and the only element we can't do is the Lord's Supper which I'll talk more about later and how we can prepare for that day when we can 'come together' as Paul says to celebrate the Table.

Bruce: Amen! The next question has to do with prayer. So how do we pray in relationship to the corona virus? It's a broad philosophical question and also how can we enhance our prayer life during this time that would last?

Harry: You mentioned earlier about Sonya's chair and I have one too. We create this space for corporate worship. We have the Lord's Day for worship. God has given us the Sabbath cycle in life. God made the Sabbath for us and not us for the Sabbath. You create a place, not because God is only in that place, but the architecture speaks to the theology of worship.

I think what you do in public worship is what you do in private worship. Get a sacred space where you can have intimacy with the Lord. Have a sacred time to meet with the Lord each day. Then have a sacred regimen as to what you do in that time with the Lord. I would suggest having a hymn book, a Bible, a devotional book that can assist you and then have a very specific time of prayer during that time as well. When I get to that time of prayer with the Lord I pray aloud. I cannot maintain concentration praying silently. So even though no one is there but me and the Lord I speak out loud for I order my thoughts better that way. Sometimes when I get to the prayer time I will get up and walk through my house because when you get on site you get insight so as I walk past the dining room table it brings certain things to my mind to pray about for me, my family and ministry. Each room/place brings certain things to your mind so that's

my version of prayer walking. These are some things you could do that then would perhaps make something that is lasting in your walk with Christ.

We have provided two tools for you and one is called *Fresh Bread* that is a 5 minute devotional Monday through Friday where you can make that a part of your family worship or your personal worship. The second tool is called *Today in Perspective* that is a 10 minute analysis of news and events from a Biblical world and life view with Gospel solutions. This is a great thing to listen to while you are doing things around the house or on your way to work.

Bruce: Members of our church are looking for more ways to help one another so how can we practically help one another when we're basically confined to our own home?

Harry: Praise God for technology. It's not the same as face to face but at least it's contact. I have a time set aside every day to contact people. So many times these people I contact will say 'Pastor thank you so much and by the way my community shepherd has already called me plus two or three of the members have called to check on me.' Particularly the older people have been extremely appreciative of that and they understand you can't do a face to face visit. In fact, you love them too much to do a visit right now but you do want to maintain contact with them. I would strongly encourage you to make use of text messaging, email and phone calling. There is an ascending order of effectiveness and that is email, text message and then a phone call being the better. Even better than that is face to face but right now with the social and medical limitations and loving our neighbor well, that's out of the picture right now.

Bruce: I read a two page update from Benny Youngblood this morning and began to hear of different types of activities where young people are being connected with older people in helping them get groceries, prescriptions filled, etc., there are a lot of those who are doing video conferencing for the first time, so our communities pastors are helping connect people with these activities and it really is beneficial for people to see each other's faces. Zoom and face time are ways to do this.

Harry: I do want to thank our young people, graduates and careers and our young couples. Our young couples class is where we are seeing the most growth in our church and I just saw their spiritual growth when their pastor, Jason Ellerbee, stood up in our last session meeting and said 'I want you all to know our people are available to the shepherds if you need things to be done' in which I'm starting to get the reports of what they have been doing and are doing. It is so encouraging and makes me rejoice. When this crisis fades life doesn't fade and we can keep up those kinds of relationships.

Bruce: Another thing that was clear from Benny's report was that once you start that engagement the other ideas come whereas if you just sit by yourself to figure out what to do then you won't be sparked with the creativity. Once they start talking with one another they find out other's needs and that becomes someone's journey for the day to get that need met and it mushrooms from there. So I would encourage you to continue to connect.

Another question was, pastor you referenced in a recent sermon that we are not to tempt God but to trust God, so what does it mean for us to tempt God? How is it even possible for us to tempt?

Harry: It is clearly possible to tempt God for Jesus Himself said in Matthew 4:7 [7] *Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'"* In other words, you shall not tempt God or why else would Jesus tell us this as He is dealing with the temptation in the wilderness. Here Satan comes to tempt the Incarnate Christ and this is how Jesus responds to Satan. In other words, there was a promise that was given that the Sent One of the Lord would be cared for by the angels and would not even be bruised so that's when Satan says to Jesus 'So cast Yourself down' but no, for that would be tempting the Lord.

It's like the Lord is going to protect me but I read in the Proverbs where you don't go stand in front of a lion and say the Lord is going to protect me. One of the ways the Lord protects you is by giving you the wisdom and prudence not to tempt God to fulfill His promise in a way that is out of accord with your responsibilities. So the way you tempt the Lord is by being irresponsible or by not trusting Him. The way you point out that you don't trust Him is either you put your trust into something else or you act irrationally in the name of trusting the Lord.

There was an incident that happened with the Apostle Paul in Acts 28 with a snake and people read that and think I'll go play with snakes for a while where that would be tempting the Lord and not trusting the Lord. That's an irrational act that stands in opposition of the way God created you to live.

Bruce: One of our members read a statement online that said; we are witnessing the whole cell destruction of our inalienable rights and constitutional freedoms by governors and mayors. They would like you to give your thoughts on that statement.

Harry: I don't think that's true. I understand the concern but I think in a moment of crisis, that's the reason you have a government so that pandemonium doesn't happen. Isn't it interesting that pandemic is an epidemic over all borders, yet do you know where pandemonium came from? It was first used in Dante's book Inferno as a description of hell. Pan means all. Then you can see the word 'demon' in the word pandemonium. It refers to things being out of order, chaotic. That is what Satan does, he brings things out of order. The government is there to be an instrument of God to bring order when crisis would be used of Satan to bring disorder.

If this is a manufactured crisis then you have an argument but the crisis we are going through right now is not. Nobody went and invented the corona virus as a tool to undermine our liberties. Here is where you have to be careful. In times of crisis like war or epidemics and the government validly steps in to call for certain things because of importance of victory over that virus or victory over that war, it has power given to it and now when that epidemic or war is over does it release that power back to the places and doesn't assume those things, so that's what you want to make sure doesn't take place. In other words, what is happening to respond to this moment to defeat the virus, those things cannot become a way of life.

Let me give you this example when dealing with the church. We are doing technological things to extend the public means of grace into your life privately so the private means of grace can be enhanced but we ought to be doing the public and private means of grace where they impact each other but now we're trying to connect them in your home because that's the moment we are doing it. What we are currently doing is not the new norm. When this virus is done and we can assemble I will be crying like a baby when we sing that first hymn together.

Can they overstep it? Yes, but I don't see that that has been done yet.

Secondly, some have said the government is trying to keep the church from meeting. If this was an order just given to churches I would agree with them but it hasn't. It's been

interesting to me that whenever they give out these guidelines with the exception of a couple of states, most of the governors don't even mention the church. That's not a place they want to go. For instance when they list essential and non-essential businesses they don't talk about the church. They are leaving that up to the church to act responsibly. I have appreciated that. I think the responsible thing for us to do is to follow the guideline with the reality and to call for them to remember.

I'd like to go a step further here. I just did a Today in Perspective program on this. President Trump is being railed on because he said we don't want the cure to be a greater problem than the disease and people are saying he doesn't care about the disease. I don't attribute that to him and I'm not defending the president but I am defending that statement he made. Every doctor is always making that decision – they are thinking 'what I am doing to cure it, is it going to be greater than the disease?' Every general has to make that decision in a battle where to win this battle is the cost going to be greater than the individual victory? Business men and women are also doing this in their businesses when they make decisions.

So there comes a time when you say 'we're not going to do it this way and we'll back off to this because if we continue doing this we're going to cause greater problems.' People are right now losing their businesses. They were on the edge and two weeks of a cash flow, they're done. When they have lost their business they have lost their livelihood and people have lost their jobs etc. So they are making decisions like that all the time in the way they do business to keep it going and profitable. This is a valid principle to work through.

Bruce: A follow-up question to that or a sister question to that is, is there a point though that we disobey the government directives in the name of public health emergencies that severely limit the church's ability to worship and encourage each other?

Harry: There may come a point to that but we are not anywhere near there. That's not where we are. There is a statement that is attributed to a man name Rahm Emanuel where he says 'Never let a serious crisis go to waste' and this was when he was an advisor to President Obama. This statement meaning in the midst of a crisis there is a lot of stuff you can get done. I don't think anyone invented this crisis. I think it's a real crisis.

Now, I have some personal disagreements to the cure that is being established in terms of the extent of isolation and shelter at home. I'm not talking about that right now because right now I want to be a part of defeating the virus. Later on you can go back and evaluate whether there was overstepping for schools, sports, businesses, who should be sheltered at home etc., but that's another discussion. But are there people who will take a crisis and use it to advance their agenda? Absolutely. I think you have seen this on the discussions of the stimulus package.

By the way, Rahm Emanuel did not invent that. The first case I know of where that phrase 'never let a serious crisis go to waste' comes about is in The Screwtape Letters by C.S. Lewis. In this book Lewis brings out how Satan is discipling the underlings and how wormwood is being developed to be an effective demon to promote sin and bring the chaos of sin. In the book there is a particular paragraph on plagues and it is said to wormwood 'do not let a crisis go to waste.' Here he is talking about plagues and wars. We can do some of our greatest work then and I agree with that but I also agree that crisis can become the time where the Kingdom of God does its greatest work.

So I would say to our brothers and sisters to be on the alert for people that would use the crisis for nefarious purposes and I think some of that is happening. I think the call to isolation

and shelter at home as they are trying to think their way through it, I don't think that's part of it but underneath the cover of the crisis there are certain legislators who are trying to advance their cause. So encourage faithful statesmen not to let that happen.

I also believe a crisis is the time for us to do our great work which is what I think you need to really focus on. Right now people are more susceptible to the Gospel so instead of pandemonium we want pan-Kingdomism – we want to get the Kingdom lifestyle out there to people while they are so open right now and while they are so concerned about their safety. You use this virus to help people see Jesus for while they are concerned about this virus bringing death you can tell them about another virus called sin that also brings death but it's not simply physical death but it's also spiritual and eternal death so can I tell you about the One who can help you defeat that immediately by the Gospel and then grow? There are just wide open doors for us in this time of crisis for conversation and ministry so take advantage of that and don't let this crisis go to waste for the Kingdom of God.

Bruce: The last question in this lesson is a very personal question. Rank in order what you miss watching the most – March Madness, the Masters, opening day of baseball or Talladega 500.

Harry: The opening day of baseball hands down is first. That's when basic rhythms of life are re-established again. I can smell the grass. I can smell the kangaroo leather. I can smell the horse hide. I love to hear that statement in February, 'Pitchers and catchers report to Spring Training.' Secondly, the Masters, then March Madness and last Talladega 500. But right now what I miss more than anything is gathered worship on the Lord's Day, just to be with God's people, to raise up praise, to go through the Biblical elements of worship that He has prescribed, to worship Him in spirit and in truth and growing Lord's Day by Lord's Day. Although I'm grateful for the opportunity to do some things in the midst of this that I wouldn't normally be able to do.

Bruce: That is all we have time for so please remember to send your questions to askthepastor@briarwood.org and we'll get them answered either in a program like this or directly.

Harry: I also have an 'ask the pastor vlog' at briarwood.org/askthepastor/ where we'll keep moving forward with questions there as well. We appreciate the opportunity to communicate with you through these means and I hope and pray these answers have been helpful for you as we have given you a Biblical framework in them. We look forward to when we can have the gathered Lord's Day morning and evening times as we give praise to God with the morning and evening sacrifices of praise. So in anticipation of that we'll continue that as long as it is necessary. Thank you so much for your prayers, support, encouragement and what you're doing to get worship, ministry, fellowship, stewardship and giving done to the best of your ability for all of those things are so encouraging. It reminds me again of the privilege I have to be your pastor and to work with a staff like the one we have at Briarwood and to be under the oversight of our elders served by our deacons. I look forward when we can get together on the Lord's Day and then of course that anticipation of that great 'getting' up' morning when we get together in the new heavens and the new earth. The Lord bless you and keep you, Amen.