

“Conversations on this Present Distress
with Harry Reeder and Bruce Stallings”

Part Three

April 5, 2020 • Sunday Evening

This is our third program of conversations on this present distress with Harry and Bruce. We are doing this to substitute for a normal Sunday evening service due to the current crisis our world is going through with the corona virus. We are looking forward to returning to our normal worship services on Sunday but for now I'm grateful that we can make this available to you. I'm going to set it up first with a Biblical perspective so that will be from the book of James. In this text James has informed us that we will have trials and tests in this life in the sovereign hand of God for God's sovereign purposes, just like we're going through now. Then he tells us we need wisdom and if we lack wisdom which we do, then we are to ask of God which is praying for wisdom. Solomon is a great example of this. God will give liberally when we ask.

James 1:2–5 says [2] *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, [3] for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. [4] And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. [5] If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.*

How does God give wisdom? It is called wisdom from above. We don't want the wisdom from below which is worldly wisdom which brings chaos and disorder. The wisdom from above is Godly wisdom that is given by grace through the Word and in the Spirit. In other words, the Spirit of God uses the Word of God because of the grace of God to endow the people of God with wisdom from their God. That is what we ask for and I am certainly asking for it now as we go through these questions together.

Bruce: The beginning of this last week President Trump and Vice President Pence extended the 15 day stay-at-home order to a 30 day and when they did that they threw out some pretty daunting numbers. They projected a 100,000 to 200,000 deaths in just over a 2 to 3 week period that we might experience this and then came back with possibly 240,000 deaths. None of us have really lived through an experience like this in particular. At the end of the week, our governor, Governor Ivey from the state of Alabama, gave the shelter in place order for our state to go to April 30th so my question would be, how do we process and respond to all this?

Harry: We are trying to make as many resources available to people as we can and there are two resources in particular that have been available and will continue to be available after this present distress. One of them is *Today In Perspective* which is a 10-minute podcast and *Fresh Bread* which is a 5 minute daily devotional with both being found on the Briarwood website.

Not to blunt our concerns, but whenever you see models they are predictions and the predictions are based on certain assumptions which may or may not be right. In fact, they keep going back and changing some of these assumptions. One of the reasons it's hard to get a good model is the testing hasn't been all that conclusive – who has it, who doesn't have it, how many people actually have it, who actually have it but are immune to it – there are all kinds of factors that play into this and therefore cause it to be difficult to come up with an accurate model. The tendency is to put the model in the worst scenario so that you're fully prepared and then you're fine if it's underneath that. That is kind of what we are hearing and seeing right now.

Ministry is going to change on the other side of this for the church. They are going to be shepherding, discipling, counseling, mercy ministry and all kinds of issues that will be before us, but if anything near 100,000 to 200,000 is there, then there will be some extraordinary changes in all of life because of that. This goes for cemeteries, first responders, health care, counselling, grief sharing, etc.

So what do we do? This will not surprise you but pray. We have been doing a series called Crisis and the Christian and when we return to that series we will learn some things from Nehemiah. When Nehemiah heard of the crisis facing the people of God in the city of God, Jerusalem, the first thing he did was he sat down and mourned, wept and prayed with fasting. We in the PCA along with other denominations are using Good Friday this week as a day of fasting so I encourage you to join us on that day. We are planning to start Thursday evening and go through noon on Good Friday. Please remember your own medical and dietary needs on something like this but that is time we are planning to observe for prayer and fasting.

We need to be praying for various things as we go through this current crisis – for people responding, those in health care, the victims of the virus, for God to eradicate it, for God to minimize it, mitigate it so just call upon the Lord as He lays this upon your heart for Him to intervene. We also want to pray for God to use this for the proclamation of the Gospel, the edification and equipping of His people and the communication of the Gospel to the lost. We need to be praying that everybody through this crisis gets the opportunity to hear a compelling, cogent, competent Gospel presentation and a crossroads experience – which way will you go, for choose this day whom you will serve. You want to know the God of glory and grace so that you not fall under His hands under judgment. The crisis is a call to repent to the Lord and that we not perish for all eternity.

The other thing you want to do, because of God's grace in this present distress and present age, be sensible, righteous and Godly. That is to think with wisdom from above – sensible. Do righteousness. Be obedient to God's Word and stay in the channel markers of God's Word. Godly – keep a God-centered perspective. The result is trusting God but not tempting God – prudence without panic – faithfulness diminishing fearfulness. As Christians, we ought to be seen differently. The Christian does not seek death but is always ready for death and always finds a way to be with people so that they can know the grace of God and the Lord who is with you in the valley of the shadow of death. If the Lord choose this current crisis in anyway in our life as opportunities to minister, we're ready. We have things you can do and still practice social distancing and shelter in place.

Please don't over listen and get inundated with the 24-hour news cycle happening currently. Pick one competent news program and listen to it so that you minimize it to one a day so that you have your information. Don't get caught up in people producing fearfulness in your life. Look at the Word of God. Meditate on the Word of God. Trust in the Spirit of God and walk sensibly, righteously and Godly in this present age. I'm getting all kinds of calls for how people are using Holy Week as opportunities for outreach, connecting others to the live streaming services, doing things in their yard, giving things out people can pick up, tracts, devotionals, etc. Be there for each other. Call and talk with one another. Pray with one another so we can love one another well. Reach out to the lost observing all the current guidelines. One elder put it this way – it's not going to me time but knee time for prayer in the Lord.

Bruce: We have numerous questions about Holy Week. Due to the more recent restrictions, what are Briarwood's plans for Holy Week for family, for communion on Maundy Thursday and the potential of a drive up service during this week?

Harry: This is great outreach opportunity and there will more people who are more willing to listen to live stream services of God's Word so take advantage of inviting people to do this. Get friend and family connected in this way and then follow up with them by asking things like, what did you think of what you heard, what will you do with this Savior who died for you and who rose again, so that people get that crossroads experience.

So for Holy Week we have already had a Palm Sunday service which can be viewed from our Briarwood website or you can read the transcript. We will have a Maundy Thursday live streaming service at 7 p.m. central standard time but we will not be having communion. Why? Health reasons are one reason but the number one reason is to have communion you must meet together. That is another reason I keep saying in this time of crisis that virtual worship is not really worship because in worship you are looking at one another, speaking to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual psalms, you greet one another, you're hearing God's Word together, you're encouraging one another to stimulate one another to love and good deeds. Worship is a gathered event. It is not a scattered event. In these current times, we are extending our limited (by social and medical limitations) worship service so that you can engage in your home which ought to be wetting your appetite for family worship.

The opposite should be working in this current situation where home worship – family and personal worship – that should lead to Lord's Day worship. Then Lord's Day worship is followed up with personal and family worship the next week. In our home we love to have our family worship time on Saturday to read the text of the coming Lord's Day and sing a song in the coming anticipation of the sermon text that will be preached the next day. So that is what this occasion should be giving you the opportunity to do.

During the Maundy Thursday service this week you will see a display of the true Passover. Some of you have been to Sadder's that are working off of a 19th and 20th century Sadder in Europe but we're going to go back to the Biblical simple Passover Sadder as is described in the Scripture where Jesus would have been at that Table to make it the last Passover Supper that would become the first Lord's Supper in anticipation of the Marriage Supper with the Lamb. We also will not be doing communion even with the 10 people that will be doing the live stream service here at the church, because it is to be done as a gathered assembly. That is why Paul says three different times in the Scripture, 'when you come together' to eat the Lord's Supper and how we are to do it for the better. We will use this time to better understand the Lord's Supper, the flow of Scripture from the Old Testament to the New Testament, the consummation (the apocalypse), and how the Lord uses the Supper as a meal of covenant renewal with His people.

It will be very special and that will be a part of the preparation for the Good Friday service and one of the first things we will do when we can gather together again is to celebrate the Lord's Supper together to the praise of God as the people of God. Good Friday will be just as it always has been with the readings, the singing and special music, having to do with the time Christ was on the cross. This will also be a service that is live streamed starting at 12 noon central time Good Friday as we go through the seven words of Jesus and the Biblical accounts surrounding them.

As the Lord went to the grave we will have an Easter sunrise service at 6:30 a.m. central time followed by a Lord's Day celebration worship services live streaming at 8:00 a.m. and 10:55 a.m. central standard time on Easter. Then there will be another service at 6pm central time on that day with another program of Q & A with Harry and Bruce on this current distress we are going through.

Now concerning the drive in church there will not be this. We have actually been working hard for the past two to three weeks on trying to put up a drive up service for the Easter Sunrise service at 6:30 a.m. To some degree it looks like our governor's proclamation accommodates that but we really have to look a little closer on what they are intending. We have looked at various ways to try and do this and also went to about five different organizations to get their take on what we were planning to do. We didn't want to surprise others in case something might happen during this time if we did this, like someone who might have a heart attack during this service and a first responder was needed but two things became obvious as we checked into this.

One was they were very sympathetic with the desires we have behind doing this. Many of them talked about how they wanted their church to begin to meet. Secondly, they were requesting that we not do it. What the governor approved was in response to some smaller churches and actually in the spirit of the law there would actually need not be more than 10 cars that attended, like 10 people there wouldn't be 10 cars. It was brought to our attention that if Briarwood in Birmingham does something like this then we'd probably be looking at 200 cars or more and what would happen if there was a medical emergency or if someone tries to be disruptive. This would put our agencies in a very difficult situation. They also said that it would probably only be a couple of more weeks of streaming live and asked that we would just maintain that for now. They were very gracious, sympathetic but also very clear. So we have decided not to do the drive up service but we will continue with the live streaming.

Some have also asked if they could at least come and sit in the parking lot to hear and view the service while it is happening, but I believe you would get more sitting in your own home than in a parking lot. I appreciate your patience with us on this for we're doing our best to honor those who are caring for us in common grace while maintaining the dynamic of the church which is essential.

I want to be very clear that the church of Jesus Christ is not one of those activities that is non-essential. We are more essential now than we ever have been as I am praying with first responders regularly, we're counselling, we're providing virtual worship, we're reaching out with instruction and encouragement and all the various outreach events we're doing. We are not a non-essential activity. We are an essential activity and I thank the Lord that our governor has recognized that by opening up doors for us to continue ministering. I was also very encouraged as our governor affirmed Isaiah 43 in her proclamation.

Bruce: I haven't watched every states press conference but what a blessing ours was here in Alabama and the Word does not return void. God was proclaimed in her proclamation and I want to encourage everyone to take advantage of the John Piper devotional guide which you can get by going to this website; <https://briarwood.org/devotionalguide>. There is a reading for each day of Holy Week that you can use personally and/or in your family devotional time. At this time of year I love to try and follow the steps of Jesus during this week in His life by looking at the four Gospels. Monday and Tuesday seem to be fairly easy days but Wednesday is a bit of a recovery day. Thursday begins the preparation for Passover and then there is Good Friday.

There is nothing on Saturday and then Sunday is when we're back for the sunrise service. It is a wonderful project to walk through this devotionally for this week.

Next, we have several questions that have to do with responding to these government decisions. One question is how concerned are you about the government dictating so much to us? Secondly do you think a time might come when we will have to challenge government regulations to live and worship freely and how do you do that respectfully to honor leadership? Finally, should Christians or churches petition the government and help authorities give some sort of relief for church gatherings of more than 10 people?

Harry: Those are great questions. First of all, no I don't think the responses are exactly what I think they ought to be in terms of public policy but right now I'm not in the business of evaluating. I'm going to salute and be submissive for no one is commanding me with a target as a Christian that here is something that God commands you to do that we're not going to let you do. In fact our governor has gone to various lengths to open up ways that we can maintain Lord's Day worship even if it's a limitation of an assembly. Notice also that our President nor our governor are targeting the church for this is affecting everyone from sports, to businesses, to entertainment industry. No one is being targeted or trying to be eradicated here in particular. They are trying to be instruments of God's common grace to help in this and what is literally a war right now.

So does the government get special powers that it doesn't normally get in times of crisis like this? Yes, now when this is over I'll be one of those along with many of you that reminds the government to put those things back in the hands of the people and not to take away these liberties. Sadly, some people like to use a crisis so that they can utilize their power. For instance there are some governors but not ours, who are using this crisis to say things like 'We're going to transform our society for it will never be the same after this.' Are they talking about everyone is going to wash their hands more? If so, praise the Lord but are you talking the government taking hold of production, consumption and the God-give liberties? Then no, for our constitution and bill of rights are still in place. Right now under strict scrutiny I don't think anyone has gone beyond what they should do in a time of plague, crisis or war so I am supportive of what is being done. I think time for evaluation will be afterwards so as a believer I want to honor the king, be submissive, pray for them and be a part of the solution. I believe what we are doing falls under love your neighbor the way you would want to be loved. I don't want to infect anyone or be a cause of infection so I think all of this is absolutely appropriate.

One mayor said recently, 'if you try to meet I'm going to fine you and I will close you down permanently.' They are not allowed as a mayor or a governor to close the church permanently. They may have some limitations and social distancing along with that but they have no power to close down Christ's church permanently. Therefore we will be on the alert for things such as that if anyone attempts to abuse this crisis for nefarious purposes. Otherwise let's pray, be submissive, love our neighbor well and let's get on the other side of this then see how to rebuild relationships, society and the government under our constitution, not trying to get around our constitution and the bill of rights.

Bruce: There are some wrestling with the difference between worshipping together at home as a family watching the live stream service versus family worship so would you explain that. What are the difference between the two? One will get replaces back with gathered worship so what stays?

Harry: Gathering together to watch live streaming is not family worship but it is your family virtually joining worship. It is Lord's Day gathered worship and your family is joining it with an extraordinary technological asset to participate to whatever degree you can, but this does highlight for you and perhaps give you a taste of what it would be like for your family to regularly gather around God's Word. Family worship is not as involved as gathered worship.

I would encourage you to start out with at least 10 or 15 minutes of a family worship time. Start with a devotional like *TableTalk* or *Our Daily Bread* or *Morning and Evening* (by Charles Spurgeon) for there are all kinds of wonderful helps for you to use during this time with your family. It's Scripture, a devotional reading, maybe singing a song from a Trinity hymnal using those great hymns of the faith or use some of the albums from our praise team where you could sing along as a family particularly if no one in the family can carry a tune. A sample time of family worship could be something like; open in prayer, read a Scripture, read a devotional, sing a song, time of sharing, then close in prayer as a family.

The Morning and Evening devotional by Spurgeon could be used in the morning during your personal time and the evening part could be used with your family worship time. You can use the Shorter Catechism for a devotional for family worship as well. In fact, we are going to have a seminar on family worship when we have our conference at the end of the summer (August 2020), Lord willing. When our kids were growing up we used to do it at supper time and then as they were more involved with athletics we moved it to a time right before we went to bed. They would all pile on our bed and it was just a really enjoyable time in our family. Now I get the joy of watching my own children do that with their families as well.

Bruce: The last question for this program comes from a student but probably is a question of some our members as well and the question is, why does the bell chime only three times at the 8a.m. service rather than eight times for the hour represented?

Harry: The first thing that came to my mind as I heard the question was 'well how would we do the chime ten times at the 10:55 a.m. service' but that's not the answer nor the reason we do that. The answer is that there have been two traditions in divine worship where you want to mark out the time and from then on everything that happens is commanded in the Scripture. We hold to reformed theology and that is a reclaiming of apostolic Christianity from the Word of God during the time of the Reformation. One of those things was the cleaning up of worship from superstition and ritualism so you would mark out when the worship service would begin with the striking of the chimes. The two ways this was done was one, you struck the hour so if you met at 8a.m. you would eight chimes etc., and the other was to draw from the Trinitarian nature of worship and strike three times no matter what time you worshiped, because it is God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit calling us to worship. Trinitarian worship is we worship the Father through the Son and in the Spirit. We worship the Father, Son and the Spirit but the flow of worship is to be the Spirit enables us through Jesus to praise the Father from whom all blessings flow. Then in those worship times we have our Trinitarian confessions and hymns based on the Word of God which has been authored by the Father through the Son and delivered by the Spirit through holy Prophets and Apostles.

This week we'll be talking more about the Passover at our Maundy Thursday service. When did the angel of death pass over? It was when the doorposts had the blood on the posts and the lintel which would require three strikes – one on the lintel and one on each side door

posts. I believe that is another way we are being focused upon the Trinity throughout the Scriptures. So we strike (chime) three times for Father, Son and Holy Spirit to bring Trinitarian worship. Jesus said in John 4:23–24, *[23] But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. [24] God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.* So we worship the Father through the Son in the Spirit as we praise Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That is a great question from this student and hopefully that will be a good answer for everyone.

Hopefully it will even enhance your time of preparation for the Lord's Day morning service as your spending those moments after you read the meditation in the worship folder (bulletin) anticipating the striking of the chimes and from then until the benediction everything we do has been commanded in Scripture. We don't simply avoid what is forbidden in worship, we only do what is commanded by God in worship.

Bruce: This coming Sunday is Easter so send your questions regarding Holy Week to askthepastor@briarwood.org and we'll answer as many as we can in our next program.

Harry: I pray for you this coming week that God will keep you safe as you do your shelter in place and are able to accomplish what you can. Let's pray for God's grace and mercy to be upon this pandemic throughout the world and our nation. We will praise His Name and seek God for continued ways to minister together. I will just simply end with the three strikes themselves; May the Father be your delight, may the Son of God be your Savior, and may the Spirit of God bless you with His power and His presence – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.