

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

Part Seven

May 3, 2020 • Sunday Evening

I'd like to start with a devotional thought around a challenging concept in the life of a Christian. Some have said to me 'Pastor, when you make a decision it seems to me like a gray area.' I don't believe there are ever gray areas. As I say that there are some thinking 'so you think everything is black or white, or right or wrong'? My answer is yes. We are in a fallen world and a fallen world brings confusion, chaos and the complexity that comes from the sins of men and women. That means there are many decisions we have to make in life and the problem is not that there is a gray area but the problem is there are multiple principles that are impinging upon that decision. I think of doctors on the battlefield who are attempting to save lives.

Recently I watched the opening scene from the movie Saving Private Ryan and as the doctor with his adjutant is moving from soldier to soldier, wounded to wounded, he had to make judgment calls. His principle is that he wants to save lives but some lives he could do more for than others in the context of that moment. He was not saying this person's life is not worthwhile but this one is. He was saying that with the God-given wisdom and knowledge he had that this one he could help but that one he couldn't help or this one I know I can help and this one is going to be a bigger challenge which is known as triage. It is where you are constantly making triage decisions in your life, meaning that there are multiple principles impinging at that moment.

What's the answer? The answer is James. In the broken world we live in with the trials, tests and crises we will face this is what James tells us. James 1:2-6 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. [6] But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.* Then this is the kind of wisdom James says we will receive from God in James 3:17 which says [17] *But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.*

The wisdom from below which is man's wisdom, sinful man's wisdom, leads to confusion and chaos. This is the reason the wisdom literature in the Bible is so important, like the book of Proverbs and Psalms. Remember this as a Christian. I say all of that to highlight the fact that whether we're doing this Q & A that has challenging pieces to them and many times looks at multiple issues or using other programs, we ask God for wisdom. Make it the prayer of your life continually.

This may even be a great prayer you make before you even get out of bed; God, this day give me the wisdom from above that I need from Your Word and by Your Spirit so that I can live my life with order and with ardor – the order of God's Word and the ardor, passion of God's Spirit in my love for Christ. So let's get to the questions for this session.

Bruce: In the last session we had a question that had to do with the temple veil where when Jesus gave up His Spirit on the cross the temple veil tore in two, from top to bottom, and the question was how high, wide and thick was the veil and how did the priest get through the veil?

Harry: This question is in reference to the veil that was rent in the Herodian Temple that existed in the days of Jesus. As I thought about this I thought what about the other iterations of God's appointed redemptive dwelling place, like the tabernacle in the wilderness that was brought into the Promised Land, the first temple known as the Solomonic Temple and the second temple known as the Zerubbabel Temple that was built after they returned from the Babylonian Captivity. The refurbishing of the Zerubbabel Temple by Herod turned it into something called by many the Eighth Wonder of the World which was absolutely astounding and magnificent. This is why the Disciples looked at it during the week of Passion and said in Matthew 24:1-2, *[1] Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. [2] But he (Jesus) answered them, "You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down."* The Disciples immediately associated that with the end of the age and His coming so they asked Him those questions. Jesus will go to the cross where an earthquake happens and part of the consequences of that earthquake will be the rending of the veil in the temple. So here is what came of my further study to answer this question.

The tabernacle that was built with the directions found in the book of Leviticus and Exodus, is something that doesn't contain God but it is an appointed place for God's presence in the midst of His people that will be fulfilled in Jesus. John 1:14 says *[14] And the Word (Jesus) became flesh and dwelt (tabernacled) among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.* The word dwelt here means tabernacle that was a noun translated into a verb. This glory is the Shekinah glory that was in the temple, the tabernacle and here it is in Christ veiled in the Incarnation, but without measure yet veiled in the Incarnation.

As Jesus ascends in His resurrection Incarnate body He sends forth His Spirit who dwells in the individual Christian which we see in I Corinthians 6:19-20 which says *[19] Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, [20] for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.* In the local church the Lord dwells among all of us according to I Corinthians 3 and in Ephesians 2 the Lord dwells among His church universal which is why we call the church the body of Christ. So having said this let's now go back to the veil.

The original veil was a handbreadths thick which would have been comparable to what we know as three inches and it would have been made of blue, scarlet and purple. These are considered the regal colors or royal colors and was made of fine twined linen. It was developed very specifically for this purpose. It would have had some weight to it but it would not have been overweighted because my guess is it's about 14 feet high, probably closer to 10 cubits. The surrounding walls were 20 cubits and this is found after the giving of the law in Exodus 20. That is what we know of the tabernacle.

Then comes the Solomonic Temple which has long halls with divisions for the holy place and the most holy place where the altar would have been found but no curtain. In this temple there was no evidence that there was any curtain to divide these two places.

So now we come to the second temple when they return from Babylonian Captivity and there is not a lot of information given about this temple except for general measurements. So I began to look not only in Biblical resources but also in the extra Biblical resources, like the Mishnaic Tractate - Shekalim 8.5. These are writings of rabbis, teachers who would have written about it. The veil that was placed in the second temple was soon replaced in the Herodian

Temple and it was around 16 feet high. It would have been draping over doors that would have been folded but when the Herodian Temple was built everything was bigger.

The veil in the temple in the days of Jesus was now probably about 60 feet high. They had no ability to make that veil on any single loom therefore it was made on 72 looms and then fastened together. It was made by 80 women who were appointed to the task. When hung it was ceremonially washed by 300 priests and then had to be washed two times in its lifetime. The lifetime of the veil was basically six months, meaning it would be replaced every six months with a new one. Why? It was because of how long it took to wash it and it had to be washed twice due to the dust coming in and out of the temple located in the Middle East. Even though people could be kept from coming in and out of the holy of holies, the dust couldn't be kept out. The constant ceremonial washing of the veil would wear it out. So there would be two veils per year.

One can only imagine the weight with the veil being three inches thick. There is some question as to whether images were allowed on it or not. It seems as if Herod and his architects wanted them but the rabbis were able to prevent it. In a later tractate (Yoma 5.1) it said there were two curtains but the earlier tractate only mentions one curtain. As a Biblicist I feel comfortable for what I have related to you from the Bible and as a historian I feel very comfortable in the primary research I did to answer this question.

So with this said you can imagine seeing a veil of this size rent in two from top to bottom. I do think it had an extraordinary effect. I believe one of the abominations of desolations that the Bible is pointing to is the fact that Jesus is the final sacrifice and at His sacrifice the veil is rent in two which means there is to be no more sacrifices, but that will not stop the practitioners of Judaism for they have rejected Christ, His sacrifice and therefore they build a new veil and renew sacrifices which I believe is part of the final judgment in 66 to 70 AD. All of sacrifices are an abomination against the finished sacrifice of Jesus.

Having said that what I'm about to say is pure speculation – a later tractate says there are two veils and one would enter on the north side through one veil as one would walk between the veils down to the south side and then go into the holy of holies through an opening there. So there is full covering with two veils. Why would they have two veils? I believe it's because the veil was rent. They are attributing that it was rent from the earthquake alone and I believe this was so traumatic they would never allow the holy of holies to be exposed like this again so they developed "an insurance policy" which is two veils because this tractate follows after 33 AD which is when the veil would have been rent in two but it precedes the destruction of 66 to 70 AD. So in light of what happened at the crucifixion of Jesus I believe they went to two veils right after the renting of the veil at the time of His death.

Bruce: I knew the veil would be huge but didn't think of it being 60 feet and 3 inches thick. So going to the next question, this past week the governor of Alabama issued a 'safer at home' policy which was to stay at home and some information communicated was very helpful. That is that Alabama has not yet passed yet what the President refers to as the 'gating criteria' which is part of his opening up America again guidelines. We have not yet had 14 days of decreased cases of the corona virus per test which means we're not in phase one yet. But the governor went ahead with the task force to open up some businesses putting a capacity cap on them with social distancing guidelines but didn't open up what is known as high risk businesses. Churches fall under the large gathering category and places of worship are still limited to gatherings of no more than 10 people because we're not in the phase one yet so the question is, is our

constitutional right to assembly close to being infringed upon? Other businesses are being allowed to operate at 50 percent capacity at six feet apart so where's the balance of obeying our authorities and government and "not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together"?

Harry: I have done a program on Today in Perspective to address this which can be found on iTunes at the following web link: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/how-coronavirus-is-revealing-abusive-governmental-authoritarianism/id595347900?i=1000473623577>. I'll just simply say it is close to being infringed upon. In some states that have gone beyond our state of Alabama, I think it is infringed upon. I think whenever the church is targeted as it was by the mayor of New York, by the governor of Michigan and the mayor of Greenville, Mississippi, it clearly needs to be dealt with and our department of justice on the federal level. Attorney General Barr says he will be on the alert for this. I do believe him because of the great speech he made at Notre Dame on religious liberty. If you have not seen that it was a noteworthy speech and a very encouraging speech which so affirmed religious liberty with clarity and passion.

Our President who is kind of a take charge type business man by reputation has established a framework whereby one goes into phased openings with gating metrics to get there and what's interesting is that he then lets each governor implement how they see best for their state. One would think in this situation that the President would just 'flex his muscle' here but he hasn't yet some governors have flexed their muscles. Our founding fathers knew this. When authoritarian type people get authority they tend to get wrapped up in it and move to authoritarianism. In our current distress I believe that is being exposed particularly by those whose political platform tends to bend towards socialism, where things are in the power of the state and the state is your messiah, your deliverer. One governor said 'God didn't flatten this curve, we did.' He is speaking of the government. So I believe we ought to be on the alert for this.

Now I want to bring it back to this state of Alabama. At this point in time I believe our governor has declared churches as essential and has had a general application of the principles. Our governor is now appealing to the federal level guidelines as the measuring stick when she will move to phase one which will give us the ability with social distancing to resume meetings as a church. Here is where I would make an appeal to our governor, where I see the problem is. She is allowing others to meet without getting those metrics accomplished in what she thinks is essential businesses. When you go to some of these big stores I'm not sure there is a lot of social distancing taking place there so the argument back is that churches will have a harder time doing social distancing. No, I think churches have shown our reliability on this for 99.8 percent of our churches have been very conscious and proactive as to how this is done. We have a bigger issue of how we love our neighbor for we don't want to be an instrument of lethality in the life of our neighbor. I think you can depend on churches to do it better than those motivated by profit.

So I have been supportive of a letter that has been sent to our governor appealing that if she can open this up for these bigger retail businesses then she can open it up for churches with the requirement of appropriate social distancing. I believe churches will be more compliant than the businesses. I believe as a citizen in the state of Alabama due to the patient and appropriate approach our governor has done, in fact our governor declared abortion a non-essential, but now overruled by the 11th court of appeals, along with our attorney general and lieutenant governor, we have a very sympathetic ear for the churches. I don't see our state government as an enemy. I believe some states are targeting churches, Christians and religious entities in general but I don't believe our state is so I want to give our governor some days to work through this. Then

we can make further appeals as necessary for we have recourse to do so. I am anticipating a favorable response to the appeal for churches that has been issued on the heels of her last press conference.

Bruce: We have been preparing here at the church for strict social distancing guidelines so if and when the governor says we are in phase one we will be ready. We are very blessed by our facility because we can provide multiple entrances so that people don't bottle neck to get in or out. We are working for a person to be able to go from the parking lot all the way to the pew without touching anything so they can make it all the way in while maintaining social distancing. We are in the process of marking off our pews so that we only use every third pew to maintain social distancing. We'll be cleaning and disinfecting more often. We'll have stations with hand sanitizers and masks. The masks are becoming a very important part of this.

Harry: Our music director asked me to wear a mask while I was singing but perhaps that was for other reasons (smile).

Bruce: We are thinking through how to fully implement as the President would say 'strict social distancing.' Just this week I have been in meetings with three or four other executive pastors around Birmingham and we're all wrestling with the same things and hearing what each other has thought on this where best practices are concerned. We're trying to get to a place, not just to meet the letter of the law but to provide what we need to in order to love one another well in this current distress to provide a safe, socially distance opportunity to meet as the body of Christ.

Harry: In phase one we will continue to encourage those who are health impaired and elderly to stay at home for we'll keep streaming the services and we'll do what we can for you. We are looking at how many worship services we can social do to keep our social distancing guidelines. We are looking at all of those things. Again, our desire is not simply to meet the letter of the law, for our desire is for your safety. We believe that the gathering of God's people for the means of grace and public worship is crucial on the Lord's Day. That is a Biblical injunction. We are not going to abandon that. On the other hand we have a pestilence in our midst and the Bible gives various ways that pestilence was to be dealt with by God's people and that means there will be some limitations that take place. So we're attempting to bring all these principles to bear to deliver in obedience to every principle to the best of our ability in a fallen world. We have prayed for wisdom so the principle of gathered worship, loving our neighbors, encouraging one another, caring for one another and loving those outside the body can be done the way God would have us to do it.

We have been in touch with our churches in our denomination talking with them about their plans so we are all in this together. Birmingham, Alabama has passed a mandate to wear face masks when out in public but our church is not in the city limits of Birmingham so the mandate would not apply to us but the wisdom and need for them certainly does. So we will plan to provide them for people.

Bruce: As Harry mentioned about having more confidence that the churches will be better at the social distancing than these big retail stores, but we also have more confidence in our people's response because that's the key. You can do a lot of things, like put lines on the ground that show people where to stand or arrows showing people which way to go, but it really comes down

to the behavior of the people and that's where we do have confidence. Our people will love one another well enough to protect each other as we work our way through this.

Harry: Please don't take my response to this as coming across in a disdain manner for that is not what I mean to do. I know there are a lot of principled owners of retail outlets and big box stores, for all I'm saying is for the love of Christ and the love for one another is a greater motivation and we don't have to deal with the issue of making a profit when we get together because we're not a business. So I believe you can actually trust the essential nature of the church to do its calling well because we're not doing business. We are ministering praise to the Lord and we're ministering the love of Christ to one another. That means we gladly embrace the spiritual and physical health of God's people that they can prosper in both soul and body.

Bruce: Our last question addresses this where you hear the desire of wanting to gather so the question is we're wondering if it's reasonable in your mind if those who are younger and healthy, willing and desirous, could meet in small groups for fellowship in prayer and the Word in homes?

Harry: I think right now, I would say no. I think when we get to phase one some of those discussions can take place. We are anticipating that as we think about our congregational communities – when can our Sunday school classes meet? We are looking at all of those things with guidance from our elders and deacons, getting input from other churches but this is going to be a phased reopening. The first thing is socially distanced ministry appropriately for worship on the Lord's Day. Then we'll look at small group Bible studies at church and other locations, then our congregational communities, our seminary and everything else as well. We are grateful for your input that comes but until we get to phase one we really shouldn't even consider that, except for considering how we can do it when phase one is opened up to us. I do believe there will be a way for those things to take place. The questions are where, when and how can it be done for the safety of everyone. Right now it's just families together and take advantage of the technological ways to reach out. We may be able to open worship before phase one if the governor opens that up in the next couple of days, like she did for some retail businesses, but if not, when phase one happens we will give direction to all of this in a way that encourages you.

Bruce: That is all we have time for in this Q & A but please continue to send your questions to askthepastor@briarwood.org.

Harry: Some of you may be interested in some of the research books I used for the study of the tabernacle, the Solomonic temple, the second temple and the veil so along with the ones already mentioned earlier here are some more. One of the books is the ESV Bible Atlas which we carry in the Briarwood Bookstore. It is a treasure chest of good research material. I hope and pray this time has been a blessing to you and that the Lord is continuing to work in your life. I also hope and pray you are taking advantage of this season of a present distress to make a future plan that is a way of life that will carry you into the future so that when the normalcy of the world comes back to impinge upon you, you will already have in place what one of my favorite writers has said, Os Guinness; you have developed the habits of the heart that are informed by the Word of God, enabled by the Spirit of God and exist to the glory of God out of your love to the Son of God who first loved you.