

LOCKDOWN MEDITATIONS
2020 - Part 2
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This booklet is a compilation of Email meditations issued weekly by Pastor Roy Mohon during the Spring and early Summer of the year 2020, during much of which time the entire country was in lockdown in consequence of the Corona Virus pandemic. Rev. Mohon was ministering during this time for the *Presbyterian Reformed Church*, Stockton-on-Tees by services delivered on [facebook.com/prcstockton](https://www.facebook.com/prcstockton) and he provided these meditations on a Thursday each week as a bridge between the Tuesday evening midweek and the following Lord's Day. Details of the Church appear at the end of the booklet.

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14. FACE COVERINGS

'As the word went out of the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face' (Esther 7.8).

The sinner's covered face

Face coverings or masks are on everyone's minds at present. We know that health workers have been wearing them for months but now shoppers will have to wear them in store. Our meditation is not arguing against this precaution in our present unusual circumstances but, rather, reflecting upon face coverings as not normal. The covering of Haman's face arose from abnormal circumstances. The background is as follows. While pleading for his life, the cruel enemy of God's people Haman had fallen on the couch where Queen Esther was reclining. This and the sequel is reported as follows, 'Then the king returned out of the palace garden into the place of the banquet of wine; and Haman was fallen upon the bed whereon Esther was'. The king assumed or chose to be seen to have assumed that this was an act of uncleanness. 'Then said the king, Will he force the queen also before me in the house?' This was taken as requiring swift retribution and as the word went out of the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face' (Esther 7.8). Jamieson, Fausset and Brown explain as follows, 'The import of this striking action is, that a criminal is unworthy any longer to look on the face of the king, and hence, when malefactors are consigned to their doom in Persia, the first thing is to cover the face with a veil or napkin.' (Volume One, page 645). I don't suppose that many will reflect upon their sin as they wear their face covering but we would do well to remember our shame and that 'God is angry with the wicked every day' (Psalm 7.11). When we ask why we have to wear face coverings we do eventually get back to human sin.

The Saviour's covered face

Face coverings bring to mind the Saviour's covered face. This was not the mouth and nose but nose and eyes. Luke mentions it as follows, 'And the men that held Jesus mocked him, and smote him. And when they had blindfolded him, they struck him on the face, and asked him, saying, Prophecy, who is it that smote thee?' (Luke 22.63-64). They thought they had the upper hand in their cruel sport. They never thought what Christ could do to them as to his power. Revelation 6.15-17 had not yet been written. 'And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; And said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?' The centurion at the cross was wiser. 'He glorified God, saying, Certainly this was a righteous man' (Luke 23.47). The demeanor of Christ on the cross was not such as the centurion would normally see and hear especially those words, 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do' (Luke 23.34).

The saint's open face

Though enemies covered *Christ's* face, his sufferings were that *believers* might have an open face. I make no attempt to produce a moral principle out of this in relation to face masks. I would expect a Christian surgeon to be wearing a face mask if he was operating on me. In matters of another's welfare we are our brother's keeper. But in spiritual things I do expect something quite different for Paul writes, 'Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord' (2 Corinthians 3.17-18). Matthew Henry comments, 'The Israelites saw the glory of God in a cloud, which was dark and dreadful; but Christians see the glory of the Lord as in a glass, more clearly and comfortably.' He whose 'visage was so marred more than any man' (Isaiah 52:14) for us, now smiles upon his beloved saints, howsoever dark the days, that we, being conformed to his image, might still live to his praise in challenging times.

15. IN THE WILDERNESS

'For the LORD'S portion is his people; Jacob is the lot of his inheritance. He found him in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness; he led him about, he instructed him, he kept him as the apple of his eye' (Deuteronomy 32.9-10)

These words of Moses are thought to date from shortly before his death around B.C.1451. His wilderness wanderings in this world of ours were almost over. We thought we understood our wilderness well enough after not a few adult years in it but the Corona Virus has dramatically changed things all over the world. We never thought to see the UK Prime Minister and the USA President masked like Dick Turpin the highwayman! We cannot even be sure how long this phase of our wilderness will last. Our Prime Minister thinks it will be gone before the end of the year but some high ranking medics think it will not end before next year and others think it will be with us for years and we need to get used to it. Christians study their Bibles and are already used to the wilderness.

The wilderness and punishment

The question might be raised as to why the people of God should be in the wilderness 'for the LORD'S portion is his people; Jacob is the lot of his inheritance'. We find that the adult Israelites of Moses' day were dissatisfied with being in the wilderness. They would rather be back in bondage! That is really hard to grasp but, apart from Joshua and Caleb, the people's hearts were far from God. It became a terrible time because of their own sin. They said to Moses, 'Would God that we had died in the land of Egypt! or would God we had died in this wilderness! And wherefore hath the LORD brought us unto this land, to fall by the sword, that our wives and our children should be a prey? were it not better for us to return into Egypt?' (Numbers 14.2-3a). Jehovah's reply was fitting, 'As truly as I live, saith the LORD, as ye have spoken in mine ears, so will I do to

you: Your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness; and all that were numbered of you, according to your whole number, from twenty years old and upward, which have murmured against me' (Numbers 14.28b-29). The wilderness experience is a warning to sinners not to provoke God, lest things get worse!

The wilderness and provision

Believers understand that God can look after us and provide for us in the wilderness. 'He found him in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness; he led him about, he instructed him, he kept him as the apple of his eye'. It was in the wilderness that God provided the manna reminding us of Christ who said, 'Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead... I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world' (John 6.49,51). It was in the wilderness that God provided water from the rock of which Paul says that the fathers 'did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ' (1 Corinthians 10.4). In our wilderness times, believers find Christ more precious as the unfailing supply of all needful grace. Of Christ, Paul writes, 'But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption' (1 Corinthians 1.30). The foundations are always sure.

The wilderness and prospect

It is of great comfort to believers to know that the changing scenes of the wilderness do not alter our destination. Peter takes up the theme of what we are kept for, even 'an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you' (1 Peter 1.4). The land flowing with milk and honey was but a shadow of this. I think you will see that Covid-19 is a call from God to re-prioritize what *really* matters. It woos us from bricks and mortar to a new heavens and a new earth of righteousness. John reminds us, 'there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him: And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads. And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever' (Revelation 22.3-5). On a long journey the *stops* along the way help us but the *destination* keeps us going!

16. LEARNING FROM ELIJAH

'But he himself (Elijah) went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers' (1 Kings 19.4)

Elijah's place

We are happy in our familiar places and when things are going according to our expectations. A sudden jolt like the Corona Virus pandemic can be confusing and disturbing. When, after Elijah's victory over the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel, Jezebel threatened to take Elijah's life, it was a jolt to him and he fled into 'the wilderness'. The Hebrew word means an open field where cattle are driven and, then, by implication a desert place, barren and inhospitable. We often find that circumstances drive us into a kind of wilderness. We feel in an alien place, confused, and even despondent and consequently dis-empowered. We join Asaph in saying, 'We see not our signs: there is no more any prophet: neither is there among us any that knoweth how long' (Psalm 74.9). We feel the fog of war is upon us and it is difficult to make judgements about situations we have not encountered before. It is easy to misinterpret situations and make wrong assumptions and decisions concerning our service to God. Like Elijah, our labours crumble and we find ourselves in the wrong place.

Elijah's prayer

Elijah's reaction to his situation contains both example and caution. It was a good example that he set himself to prayer. Paul urges us to 'Pray without ceasing' (1 Thessalonians 5.17). Prayer is always timely in the changing scenes of life. Elijah had prayed on Mount Carmel before all the people, friends or foes, 'LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that thou art the LORD God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again' (1 Kings 18.36-37). Now he prays in the wilderness, solitary and alone, 'It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers'. It was a heartfelt prayer. It showed that Elijah's heart was for the things of God. Matthew Henry comments, 'Those that have secured a happiness in the other world will soon have enough of this world'. The prayer was, however, an unwise prayer. It overlooked the fact that setbacks in life are overruled in God's providence to carry us forward in his service and communion with him. God had more work for Elijah to do as the sequel shows (verses 15-16). I remember our children's 'adopted' Brethren grandmother frequently saying in her extreme old age, 'I don't know why I'm still here'. She yearned to be with Christ which is far better. But before anyone could say, "We have to wait God's time", she had said it herself!

Elijah's provision

God's ways might be mysterious but God is gracious and kind. It was with Elijah as it had been with Israel of old. 'For the LORD'S portion is his people; Jacob is the lot of his inheritance. He found him in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness; he led him about, he instructed him, he kept him as the apple of his eye' (Deuteronomy 32.9-10) God provided physical sustaining for Elijah. 'As he lay and slept under a juniper tree, behold, then an angel touched him, and said unto him, Arise and eat. And he looked, and, behold, there was a cake baken on the coals, and a cruse of water at his head. And he did eat and drink, and laid him down again' (verses 5-6). God also provided spiritual direction for his servant. We are never to be content to have splendid dwellings, wholesome food and other luxuries of life. God's provision for the way includes spiritual guidance for effective service and spiritual direction must evoke spiritual obedience. We overlook the spiritual calibre of the man if we forget the way in which Elijah responded to the instruction of the Lord and turned from isolated depression to public service once again. God assured Elijah he was not alone, 'Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him' (1 Kings 19.18). Elijah responded by getting on with his spiritual work, 'So he departed thence, and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen before him, and he with the twelfth: and Elijah passed by him, and cast his mantle upon him' (verse 19). I think that we can see, Covid Virus or not, God's people have a witness and work to do in this weary world, while being wise as serpents and harmless as doves.

17. HOW MUCH LONGER?

'O LORD, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear! even cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save!' (Habakkuk 1.2).

"How long?"

You may have noticed that the Lockdown has become a memory. That which was tolerated as a *solution* can now be seen as a very expensive interlude. This is not to grumble. It was intended to save lives and we have no reason to doubt that it did. Slowly we have sought to get back to normal. Its been bumpy and the road ahead looks no smoother, indeed the school term beginning in September may well be a 'car crash'. Many then, like the prophet, will be asking, How much longer? Millions in the UK and other countries are already asking, 'How long?' We are so used to off-the-shelf human solutions. At the moment the shelves seem a bit bare. Our politicians are staking a lot on a vaccine but finding, testing and rolling it out will not be quick. We will still be asking, "How long?"

"O LORD, how long?"

We need to notice that it does make a difference *to whom* the question is addressed. If you write to your MP, he or she may well reply by reference to what the Prime Minister has said. When a question is put to Mr Johnson in some public forum, he might reply, "Our Chief Medical Officer advises such and such and the Government is seeking to follow expert opinion". This is all at a human level of resort and authority. Habakkuk's strategy is very different. 'O LORD, how long shall I cry', he asks. He is concerned about what is going on in Judah some time before the Babylonian captivity but he is not petitioning the king for an answer. Habakkuk is looking to the King of kings. *His* 'How long?' is a prayer. Sometimes even believers lose confidence in prayer when no answer comes sooner or later. Our 'How long?' becomes little more than a dispirited moan or a call of duty without much energy, or expectation. The words, 'O LORD, how long shall I cry?' remind us that the prophet's concern is not inconveniences, holiday prospects, or a desire to get back to normal but the spiritual side of things. He is looking out on a covenant nation far from God in both its faith and practice and this strikes a chord with us concerning where the nations of the earth are today. Is it not that our Christian concern must go a lot deeper than getting back to normal? Should not our interest be in nations getting back to God? It seems such a tall order that we scarcely get to such a point in our prayers. God has been very kind in answering prayer to keep folk in our congregation in work despite the lockdown but should not the global impact of this pandemic be stirring us to much wider petitions concerning the glory of God? It is in the prophecy of Habakkuk that we find the essence of the Gospel as God's answer to the human predicament. Habakkuk determines to stand upon his watch, to see what is the answer of Jehovah the covenant God in the situation. The answer goes right to the heart of our human problem. 'Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him: but the just shall live by his faith' (Habakkuk 2.4). Pandemics are God calling sinners to seek the Lord while he may be found. The ultimate solution to sin is not the removal of problems but getting right with God. Its about turning from sin with grief and hatred and turning to God through faith in Jesus Christ to be justified by faith alone in Christ alone through the imputation of his righteousness.

Thou wilt save!

'Thou wilt not save!' is true. God will not save an *unbelieving* nation. The Jews who returned from the exile were led by *godly* men. The prophet's analysis of things in the light of God's word brings him to higher ground. God will save his people from their sins and keep them in his service. (1) *Our relationship to God is not dependent upon the changing scenes of life.* 'Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls;' (Habakkuk 3.17) (2) *Though things go from bad to worse with invasion, conquest and exile hope remains.* God does not change and the believer's confidence is not in vain but cause for gladness. 'Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation' (Habakkuk 3.18). (3) *The encouragement of believers is not in order to flowery beds of ease but challenging expedition in God's service.* 'The LORD God is my strength, and he will

make my feet like hinds' feet, and he will make me to walk upon mine high places' (Hab 3.19)

18. CHRIST'S SUFFICIENCY

Imagine you are back at school in December 2019. On the classroom whiteboard is the holiday homework. It reads, 'Write an article with the title, *In the news during the first nine months of 2020*'. I wonder what you would have written about the countdown to a completed Brexit? We had all braced ourselves for analysis *ad infinitum* that never came. In the place of front page, blow by blow reports on discussions between EU and UK diplomats were articles on doctors, nurses and hospitals, schools and teachers, and politicians and their advisers on the Pandemic. This should not surprise us, healing and survival, teaching and learning, and our rulers' responses to crises are closer to home than national identity. Sadly, in a secular society, instead of being built upon the Word of God, such things become its competitors and this is particularly true of the threefold office of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is, however, to Him that all should be looking in our pandemic woes.

Christ the *Physician* and his *Remedy*

The healing ministry of Jesus Christ is reported on at the outset of the Gospel records. Matthew 4 is one example. 'And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people. And his fame went throughout all Syria: and they brought unto him all sick people that were taken with divers diseases and torments, and those which were possessed with devils, and those which were lunatick, and those that had the palsy; and he healed them' (verses 23b-24). We should notice the repeated use of the word 'all': 'healing *all* manner of sickness and *all* manner of disease among the people... and they brought unto him *all* sick people... and he healed them'. We do not need to argue for the continuation of miracles to make the uncontroversial point that Jesus' miracles were attestations of his being *the* Great Physician who gives total restoration even eternal life. We do not say that believing in Jesus Christ will save anyone from the Corona virus but we can say that those Christians who have died with complications of Covid-19 will be already with Christ, which is far better. As the great High Priest of His people, Jesus Christ offered himself as the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world and made peace by the blood of his cross for all who believe on him. All *believers* in Christ, carried away by this pandemic, will go to be with Christ which is far better.

Christ the *Prophet* brings saving *Revelation*

'And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom' (Matthew 4.23a). Christ's method was *teaching*. It is sad that in my lifetime Christ's teaching has been removed from its proper place in publicly funded

schools. The *Education Act 1944* required that religious education should be Christian and that corporate school worship should be Christian. The failure to maintain this is one factor that has led to mass ignorance of the saving teachings emphasized in the Gospel record. In Christ was fulfilled the prophetic word, 'The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up' (Matthew 4.16). Neglect of Christ's teaching has left the U.K. unprepared for a more infectious strain of the virus. Christ's teaching speaks into our pandemic world with urgency. 'From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand' (Matthew 4.17).

Christ as *Prince* exercises his *Rule*

Right at the beginning of Christ's ministry, the legitimacy of alternative kingdoms was excluded. Satan staked his claim but got such a flea in his ear that there is no need to doubt that *all* counter-kingdoms must fail. 'Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him' (Matthew 4.8-11). The global impact of the Pandemic shows what the nations might expect by taking Satan's part against the sovereign and safe rule of Christ.

19. RESPONSIBLE REACTIONS

*"I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord."
(Psalm 122:1)*

Our *Parable of Two Pulpits* begins one Lord's Day in 2020 when a great fire broke out in a plastics factory. Up the road were two churches one at either side of the road. The fire chief told the police superintendent that all buildings as far as and including the two churches must be evacuated. A police sergeant was dispatched to implement this. At the church on the east side of the road the sergeant communicated the order and the Pastor explained to the congregation and everyone went home. On Monday morning the caretaker found the only casualty in the pulpit. The church mouse had been overcome by smoke and died. The caretaker began cleaning up. At the church across the road the order to leave was disregarded and the pastor and elder decided to continue the service. The atmosphere in the church became uncomfortable and one by one the congregation left and only the pastor and elder remained. Monday lunch time the caretaker crossed the road to clean the second church. He found the pastor lifeless in the pulpit and the elder who had gone to help him dead beside him. Consider some issues arising.

Subjection to authority

The government, courts and police have authority and responsibility to maintain the nation's civil laws and the safety of the population. Christians have no quarrel with this. If, on proper advice, the police require that an area be cleared for a period of time then it is a civic duty to comply. If a general national lockdown is genuinely needed for a limited period for good reasons, then politicians default in their duty to God if they do not implement such a measure and pastors and people default in their duty to God if they do not observe it. The Apostle Paul lays down the general rule, 'Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation' (Romans 13.1-2). When we apply this to the pandemic lockdown arrangements we can accept the validity of closure to help save lives without imputing sinister motives to suppress Christianity.

Pastoral authority and responsibility

In our *Parable of Two Pulpits* can we support either pastor or even both of them? With respect to pastors and elders we need to remember that they are not medical experts. The pastoral role is clearly spiritual and defined in Scripture as Biblical instruction, pastoral oversight and church discipline. Thus Peter, 'The elders which are among you I exhort,... Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind' (1 Peter 5.1-2). Paul advises Timothy, 'Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth' (2 Timothy 2.15). In the case of the fire in the parable, common sense should have alerted to the danger of smoke and could have warranted closure. In defence of the pastor who stopped the service, we may say that by obeying the police directive, he complied with Romans 13, but it is not so with the minister across the road. But may we not say that the second pastor at least maintained the congregational worship of God for longer and that he died in a good cause? It would appear that he had warrant, by the providence of God, to apply Romans 13. The directive from the police chief made him responsible and answerable at God's judgement throne for the termination of the service. And so it must be with respect to all civil jurisdictions that interfere with the worship of God. They need solid grounds for so doing that will stand in the day of judgement.

Responsibility of private judgement

The responsibility of private judgement makes each individual responsible for personal decisions and applies particularly to household heads. In the first part of the parable the first pastor complied with the police directive to disband. There was, thus, no longer a service to attend. Each could return home with a clear conscience. This would be more difficult in the second church, each must grapple with the personal responsibility, whether to remain in defiance of the police directive or disappoint or disobey the pastor depending upon one's perspective.

Hebrews 10.23-25 is one of those verses that provides a warrant for church discipline where members are negligent about church attendance. 'Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;) And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: *Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together*, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another...' It is a clear responsibility for members to assemble with their Christian brethren and, more importantly, to appear before their Maker. Church attendance is of a different order altogether from attending the gym etc. and this requirement must be faced up to as a matter of responsibility to the Lord Jesus Christ who gave all for believers. Covid-19 has raised an issue which is not new but does require careful attention. Pastors do not have the expertise to assess medical risk and members must make their own decisions concerning church attendance in times of extraordinary pandemic.

The purpose of the parable is not to solve all the dilemmas but to focus on issues. Different Christians may come to different conclusions but 'God forbid' that such should produce the kind of vicious polarization that we find in secular politics. We have some idea how many lives were *lost* to Covid-19. God, however, knows exactly how many lives were *saved* that would otherwise have been lost without Government action. Our knowledge is partial, whereas, God's is complete. We should have reserve about rushing to judgement. There are good, better, and best personal and public policies and, when carried through in faith, God accepts them all. What God will not accept are *sinful* policies. Christians must not slide into the spirit of the age, which is so condemnatory. Let us not be making judgements we do not need to make. God is judge. Let us be *cautious* not *secular* thinkers. The secularist regards his judgements as *risk free* but they are not. God is listening in and we all have to answer for the judgements we make about the decisions of others. We should avoid passing unnecessary judgements whereby we entangle *our* consciences in *their* business. Thus James, 'My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation' (3.1). Let us love one another. It will serve to help us through all our pandemic questioning if we meditate on that question of the Lord Jesus to Peter, "lovest thou me" (John 21.17).

20. THE MELZAR MODEL

'Thus Melzar took away the portion of their meat, and the wine that they should drink; and gave them pulse' (Daniel 1.16).

The Melzar Model

Melzar was an important steward somewhere in the chain of command between Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, one of the greatest kings that has ever reigned, and his domestic servants. Melzar was put in charge of four Jewish captives, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. All four were men of conscience and kept the dietary laws of Moses mandated by Jehovah, the Lord God of Israel before whom Nebuchadnezzar was as a grasshopper. Gentile food and drink did not meet the standards of the Old Testament dietary laws, just as our eating pork today does not. These dietary laws were abrogated at Christ's death but they were still in force in the sixth century B.C. Conse-

quently Daniel and his three friends could not in good conscience accept Nebuchadnezzar's menu. The prince of the eunuchs had his own problem with Daniel's suggestion of abstinence knowing something of the king's fury. Melzar (meaning 'Steward') was, however, more accommodating when Daniel suggested a ten day trial of vegetables and water (Daniel 1.12). The steward took a course of action consistent with the conscientious convictions of Daniel and his friends. His wisdom in this and God's providence kept the peace and involved no harm. The U.K. Government's handling of conscientious objection to military service had its blots but also showed that workable pathways can be found. So it proved in Babylon long ago. The Melzar respect for conscience proved a workable solution even in what was a tyranny. One might hope that our modern societies can get somewhere near to the Melzar model rather than civil servants or police invoking legal sanctions against Christian conscience.

Face masks and silence

Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were also committed to the *worship* of the God of Israel to the exclusion of all else and at the highest cost, even life itself. When Nebuchadnezzar set up his image of gold and the herald announced Nebuchadnezzar's command that *all* were to fall down and worship the image upon pain of death, Daniel's three friends (now high ranking provincial officers known by their Babylonian names Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) would not join in the idolatry. The enraged Nebuchadnezzar, disregarding the *Melzar model*, had them cast into his fiery furnace heated seven times more than usual. Their future, it seemed, was ash, if even that! (Daniel 3.1-23). Had it not still been an age of miracles they would indeed have been burned to apparent oblivion. There would be no bodies to bury. Things, however, turned out differently. Nebuchadnezzar looking on found his rage turned to astonishment. 'Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God', he cried (Daniel 3.25). It was a very impressive lesson for this great ruler not to meddle with the convictions of godly men. The lesson still stands. It is not the place of sovereigns, prime ministers or politicians to meddle with the worship of God. They ought not invade the sanctuary. Their writ does not extend to how God is to be worshipped. Christians rightly believe that the manner and parts of the true worship of Abel, Abraham, Moses, and Paul are God-given and from Moses through his written Word in the Scriptures. It is for this reason that it is unwise and unjust for our civil authorities to attach penal sanctions to their prescriptions regarding Christian worship and they will have to account for it at the judgement seat of Christ. Even the word *must* is out of place in this connection. We should be far from accusing our Government of Nebuchadnezzar's dictatorial cruelty and we must be careful where we draw our lines. As medically supported advice, the use of face-masks and not singing should not be dismissed out of hand. As temporary expedients to save lives, if such is their effect, there are surely grounds for encouraging church observance?

Enforcement

Enforcement is a step into the sanctuary beyond what is wise or just and God will not overlook it. It implies an irreverence for holy things to ban what God commands upon pain of civil punishment. On the other hand a voluntary code places a lot more responsibility on pastors and congregations. We are all on a learning curve regarding precautions and the consequences of misjudgements could be just as fatal as a fiery furnace. The old saying, 'When you're dead you're dead' is true enough regarding physical causes whether fire without or virus within. It is not, however, true to reality when implying extinction at death. There is no such extinction, 'for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad' (2 Corinthians 5.10). Politicians, pastors and people all have this final assessment to face and allowing the right of private judgement in justifiable cases greatly reduces ultimate accountability of those in positions of authority. Christian Concern will be putting Government actions to the test in the courts and that is the proper forum concerning our civil liberties and we need to be prayerful about this. However, we still have to accept that there are occasions of national crisis when a Government has to declare a state of emergency and do what has to be done for the preservation of life and property. One would hope that in such circumstances threats of civil penalties could be avoided but this necessitates positive response from Christian folk and Churches. Government cannot do the impossible. It is only with God that all things consistent with his character are possible. This should prompt governments to humility and believers to prayer. Come to think of it, both of these featured in the *Melzar Model* for the steward was humble enough to listen to the man of God and we know that Daniel was a righteous and prayerful man. Can God testify of we Christians today as of Daniel, 'Though these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they should deliver but their own souls by their righteousness, saith the Lord GOD' (Ezekiel 14.14).

21. GETTING BACK TO CONGREGATIONAL WORSHIP

I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the LORD (Psalm 122.1)

Return to the Bible Centre

We know that the Bible is the Word of God and, consequently, we expect what it records of spiritual experience to correspond with reality. Last Lord's Day we returned to *The Bible Centre* after several months absence. I think I could honestly say I was glad that a month or more of organizing had come to fruition even if things were going to be different. The service would be half-length, the congregation would be wearing face masks and there would be no singing on this occasion. By now most of us would accept that the Government's health advisers are not trying to make life more difficult for Christians or unnecessarily interfere with the worship of God. Their main declared objective is to *save lives* and protect the NHS, which could collapse under the strain of increased cases. The fact that the main beneficiaries of Government policy are expected to be old should not make us lax. I suppose most of us turned out on Sunday morning with a bit

of grim determination to at least get things done and yes, that was what happened but not *all* that happened.

A taste of spiritual reality

I am reminded of Wesley finding his heart 'strangely warmed' or C. S. Lewis's 'Surprised by joy'. It was that awareness of the Lord's promised presence, as when two disciples said, 'one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?' (Luke 24.32). Our joy of being in 'the house of the LORD', that is *his presence*, rather than the *bricks and mortar* was not imagination. The journey to the Lord's house was cluttered with a lot of thoughts about practical matters not to be forgotten but once in the Lord's presence, he gave that assurance, 'This is real' or better, 'I *am* here as I promised' saying 'For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them' (Matthew 18.20). We could pray in a renewed sense of fellowship as David, 'For my brethren and companions' sakes, I will now say, Peace be within thee. Because of the house of the LORD our God I will seek thy good' (Psalm 122.8-9).

Pretty well all age

It was good to see the children who were present. The Lord's words come to mind. 'Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God' (Mark 10.14). These included very young children for the Lord 'took them up in his arms, put his hands upon them, and blessed them' (Mark 10.16). I sympathize with parents who feel a sense of protectiveness, as many feel apprehensive about pre-primary children heading back to nurseries. I would be concerned about what to do in the present circumstances. But we also had the aged and that is a bigger challenge because Covid-19 related deaths have been mainly in older folk up to present. It is no good younger generations skipping precautions thinking, I'll be alright. '*All lives matter*' and besides, being over seventy myself, I do have a vested interest in not leaving the congregation without a pastor! We are certainly being exercised by the Lord in connection with our duty and our desire to meet with the saints and all our decisions need to be prayerfully made. Let us be neither careless nor headstrong.

What about singing?

The importance of singing praise should not be lightly dismissed. It is a part of the worship of God. 'Praise ye the LORD. Sing unto the LORD a new song, and his praise in the congregation of saints' (Psalm 149.1). The current Government requirement is no congregational singing. The rationale is plain. It is the problem of droplet distribution. I am not for breaking the law on this as I know I would be one of the most vulnerable to droplet infection being over seventy, at the front, and necessarily without a mask! But at the same time we recognize that God *is* to be praised. Just another of the Covid conundrums!

22. THE ROCK

'Hear my cry, O God; attend unto my prayer. From the end of the earth will I cry unto thee, when my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the rock that is higher than I' (Psalm 61.1-2).

The Rock

As I approach our meditation for the week commencing 6th September 2020, a shroud of uncertainty is cast over the nation. We have kept up our spirits in the face of Covid-19 through the Spring and Summer but now, as we contemplate shortening days, cooler temperatures, the shock of winter and the slow New Year exodus from cold and damp into next Spring, the virus resurges as if to say, this is a new opportunity for me. The second time round can be more trying than the first. We now have experience to help us on our right hand but also a degree of weariness and disappointment to hinder us on our left. 'O Lord, how long...' we cry with Habakkuk. This is an excellent start, however doleful! It gets us beyond government regulations, inconveniences, sensible precautions and incessant media coverage to the ultimate realities that really matter. I like the metrical version rendering of Psalm 61.2:

"What time my heart is overwhelm'd
and in perplexity,
Do thou me lead unto the Rock
that higher is than I'

The Hebrew word translated *overwhelmed* means 'to shroud', like clouds around the mountains. It is a fitting metaphor for our languishing times. But then we must remember that our Rock is higher than we are. The Rock is stronger than I am and, by the middle of August, I was thinking about a trip to the Lake District just to see it first hand! Its not that general revelation is needed to *supplement* God's inspired Word but it certainly *impresses* it upon our hearts. So much of scripture is expressed in vivid metaphors from nature and there is a resuscitation and rejuvenation in just being exposed to the metaphor in living reality. I have missed out on that so far because of the NW weather forecasts. The rocks are often enhanced in beauty when soaking wet but it is different for human beings! I say this with apologies to seasoned walkers, pleading age as an excuse.

This Rock

A question arises and it is this, Why is God '*the* Rock'? We must take the short cut here for our weekly meditation is neither sermon nor book and the question, 'Why is God '*the* Rock?' is an extensive subject and takes us higher than Everest. You will find the heart of the matter in Matthew 16.18, 'And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it'. These are superb words to draw us to Christ the Rock upon which the Church is built and flourishes, just as Jerusalem upon Mount Zion. Calvary guarantees that the Church will re-

main invincible against the world, the flesh and the devil. The shed blood of the Lamb stands between the believer and the wrath of God that we might have the peace that passes understanding through the forgiveness of sins. Matthew Henry comments, 'This assures us that the enemies of the church shall not gain their point. While the world stands, Christ will have a church in it, in which his truths and ordinances shall be owned and kept up, in spite of all the opposition of the powers of darkness; They shall not prevail against it'. Here is hope for Peter and every true believer and each spiritual Christian can say, 'Here is hope for *me* in the tempests.

My Rock

'My Rock' brings us to the heart of experimental Christianity and peace in trouble. David, the Psalmist, uses this expression, 'My Rock' in Psalm 18. Let us pattern after his strategy for coping and triumphing. (1) *Take hold personally on Jehovah the covenant God saying and meaning 'My'*. 'The LORD is *my* rock, and *my* fortress, and *my* deliverer; *my* God, *my* strength, in whom I will trust; *my* buckler, and the horn of *my* salvation, and my high tower'. (2) *Turn from anxiety to prayer*. 'I will call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised: so shall I be saved from mine enemies'. (3) *Though you seem headed for total loss keep fast hold on Christ and call on him*. 'The sorrows of death compassed me, and the floods of ungodly men made me afraid. The sorrows of hell compassed me about: the snares of death prevented me. In my distress I called upon the LORD, and cried unto my God: he heard my voice out of his temple, and my cry came before him, even into his ears' (Psalm 18.2-6). It works for bereavement, illness, loss of employment, failure in witness or duties, war, pestilence and every ill. These texts remind you that if you truly confess Christ as 'MY Lord' you will have cause to say, 'God heard *my* cry'. 'He is the Rock, his work is perfect: for all his ways are judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he' (Deuteronomy 32.4).

23. LESSONS FROM COVID-19

'He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him. He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God' (Matthew 27.42-43).

The human race has a great problem that can be traced over thousands of years of civilization. I refer to that aspiration to displace the living and true God from his rightful place as sovereign Lord and take over from Him. This aspiration was there with Adam's disobedience in Paradise when he ate of the forbidden fruit *in defiance of God's revealed will* (Genesis 3.6). It was there in the defiance at the Tower of Babel when God's judgement at Noah's flood was not laid to heart. 'And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and *let us make us a name*, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth' (Genesis 11.4). It was there at the cross when men ridiculed God the Son incarnate saying, 'He saved others; himself he cannot save. *If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and*

we will believe him. He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God' (Matthew 27.42-43).

Covid-19 has exposed man's limited *knowledge*

This cry came from learned men, humanly speaking but it was the voice of ignorance, spiritually speaking. I think you can see the problem, Man wants to be his own god. He will set the terms for his conduct. He will make a name for himself. He will set the terms for recognizing any Divine King. In all of this opposition to the Saviour men, women and children are 'in denial' as we say and the Covid-19 virus has exposed this. We teach our children that man's knowledge is *experimental*. We mean by this that knowledge increases as a result of our interaction with one another, our environment and our personal reflection. We learn by our mistakes. Learning based on the scientific method involves much trial and error. No scientist expects instant vaccines. It takes months, if not years of research, laboratory experiments and trials to develop safe and effective vaccines for new diseases. Governments, medics and scientists might be expected to be omniscient and get things right first time but that is not reality. Its all a political game. We know that man's knowledge is limited and partial. We do not share God's omniscience, a word the theologians use for God's totally comprehensive knowledge. Covid-19 has set the record straight by exposing man's *limited* knowledge. We would like to have the vaccine now off-the-shelf but we have no off-the-shelf solution. Creatures are *not* endowed with the Creator's omniscience and Covid-19 has taught us that by catching us out, unprepared.

Covid-19 has exposed man's limited *power*

We are already engaged again in damage limitation measures imposed by our Government. These measures, such as limiting social contact to *six* illustrate how weak we are when it comes to saving lives. I say this, not to complain about our Government. The members of our Government must do what they can to save lives and I am glad not to be in their shoes deciding what to do. They will answer to God at the judgement for their policies as will every supporter or critic. The Christian must *obey* the powers that be and in so doing his or her conscience is not entangled in the pros and cons (Romans 13.1-5). MPs, News editors and political activists must answer for supporting or criticizing the policies. It is enough for Christian conscience to cheerfully obey as unto the Lord as long as there is no *intended* suppression of truth and God's worship. If the reason is 'saving lives' it is no more reprehensible than a sea captain announcing "Abandon ship", if *considered* necessary, even though the Chaplain is conducting morning prayers at the time. The captain must do what he can to save lives and the chaplain must support his genuine endeavours with a clear conscience. The captain may have got it wrong. No man is all knowing in the information at his disposal or infallible in his judgements. We can *expect* mistakes but cannot approve *careless* mistakes.

Covid-19 has exposed man's limited *salvation*

The common wisdom, "Better safe than sorry" is not a bad rule and witnesses to the limits of human wisdom and power. Jesus Christ, even in the days of his flesh was above such human limitations. Our *crowds* are now limited to *six!* The Saviour could safely gather a crowd of at least six *thousand!* At the miracle known as "The feeding of the five thousand", Matthew tells us, 'And they that had eaten were about five thousand men, *beside women and children*' (Matthew 14.21). The Lord Jesus Christ could not only keep large crowds safe from disease but could heal those who were diseased! 'And Jesus went forth, and saw a great multitude, and was moved with compassion toward them, and he healed their sick' (Matthew 14.14). I have no intimate knowledge of our Prime Minister's heart but I know he has cause to reflect upon the ultimate source of healing. With the best NHS attention many have died of Covid-19. He did not! Food for thought, surely, concerning a higher hand than the atheist's *Chance*. Through the Covid-19 mists a 'a still small voice' (1 Kings 19.12) is calling to the nations. The message from God in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, is, 'Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else' (Isaiah 45.22). On the positive side, Covid-19 has some great positives for the reorientation of our thinking. That it can steal away lives globally despite all of man's achievements scientifically and medically is surely cause for humility, dependence, repentance of sin, faith in the crucified Saviour and prayer? In 2020, towards the close of my ministry, I marvel to see this Global teaching taking place concerning the limits of man's knowledge and power but how many are listening. Some might say, "But Christians have died as well as others". I answer, Yes, but have you not read that Jesus Christ has said, 'I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?' (John 11.25-26)

24. LESSONS FROM THE LAKE DISTRICT

'Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion...' (Psalm 48:2)

On my day off last Friday, we went to the Lake District National Park, known as 'The Lakes'. We had no idea where we were going to visit as one cannot be too ambitious on a day trip. We soon settled for Tarn Hows near Hawkshead. It was a different view to my first visit. The picture I painted as a young man was still there, trees, sun, water and mountains but the latter were more hidden.

The Trees

The older trees have grown so much taller but that is to be expected in over fifty years. Trees are so important to the biosphere and, consequently, human life. It was so in the Beginning for more than a biological reason. The Tree of Life bore witness to enduring spiritual life and The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil bore witness the importance of holiness, obedience and faithfulness in order to true joy, peace, and fruitful service. Genesis 3 records the sad tale of how Adam and Eve sinned by eating of the forbidden fruit, thus, bringing themselves and their posterity under judgement, the curse of the broken law, and death. Their sinfulness resulted in being shut out of Paradise. 'So

he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life' (Genesis 3.24). It was a dark day.

The Sun

Thankfully, it was not a dark day for our outing. I had been watching the weather forecast for the NW and it was sun for Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. As the forecast, so it was, the sun was shining. What a difference it makes! So it is with Christ crucified. He suffered and died upon Calvary's cross as it is written, 'Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree' (Galatians 3.13). Through faith in the crucified Saviour, we emerge out of the darkness of guilt, corruption and death into the glorious light of God's salvation. Malachi 4.2 is to the point. 'But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall'. When the Lord Jesus was dying on the cross, 'from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour' (Matthew 27.45). In his substitutionary atonement, the Saviour endured the darkness of the cross in order that penitent sinners might have the light of life through faith in him, our spiritual sun. Then the scene changes and all is white and bright, like my winter visit to Tarn Hows under two feet of snow, sparkling in the sun. It is a reminder of Daniel 12.3, 'they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever'.

The Water

There's water and water. Some water is filthy and some sparkles in pristine beauty. The water of life comes into this latter category. The Apostle John writes, 'And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb' (Revelation 22.1). This is the spiritual thirst quencher and life sustainer. Remember John 7.37-39, 'In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water'. Note what follows, '(But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive)'.

The Mountains

I own up, it is chiefly the mountains that draw me to the Lake District. Trees, sun, and water can be seen elsewhere but in the Lakes you see them in the context of mountains. The mountains speak of permanence, strength, elevation and, consequently, nearness to God. Psalm 48 begins, 'Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in the mountain of his holiness. Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King. God is known in her palaces for a refuge' (Psalm 48.1-3). Despite reduced time, social distancing, masks and other limitations regarding corporate worship, let us not lose the sense

of being in the mountain of God's holiness, that we might be wonderfully refreshed in his presence.

PRESBYTERIAN REFORMED CHURCH
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SERVICES

Lord's Day 10:30 p.m. & 6.00 p.m.

Tuesday evening Midweek 7:30 p.m.

(Service duration is approximately 1½ hours)

During pandemic contact 01642-780002 to confirm