

The Coronavirus—A Perspective From Jerusalem

In early March, I returned from Germany to Israel. In both countries, the TV and news sites were filled with coverage of the coronavirus and its impact on society, public health, the global economy and international travel. The day after I arrived home, the Israeli government decided to require everyone arriving from certain European countries (including Germany) to self-quarantine for 14 days. So over recent days, I have had an opportunity to pray and think about what this global menace could mean for the church and for Israel, as the worldwide impact of the corona threat reaches new heights almost daily. I write this at the halfway point of my two-week quarantine.

This tiny virus—smaller than one micrometer—has brought the world economy to its knees with plunging stock markets, international travel at a virtual standstill and many peoples and nations gripped with fear of a possible pandemic. One of the main pieces of advice given to people is to frequently wash their hands. This is taken so seriously people are stealing large quantities of disinfectants right out of European hospitals.

1. A Call for Purity

In Western cultures, the regular practice of washing our hands is not as old a tradition as we might think, but was only adopted some 150 years ago. The reason is that there was no knowledge of bacteria and viruses or their role in spreading diseases. It was Hungarian doctor Ignaz Semmelweis (1818–1865) who discovered, while working in a maternity hospital in Budapest, that when doctors would wash their hands in a chlorine solution before treating women the death rate among birthing mothers caused by infections was drastically reduced.

He was called the savior of mothers.

But the nation with the oldest reported tradition of physical cleanliness is the Jewish people. Because of this, Jews in the Middle Ages were less impacted by the “Black Death” plague. The reason was that Jews—unlike the wider European culture—maintained a biblical practice of washing their hands before meals. This was not understood by their gentile neighbors, and it gave rise to conspiracy theories and violent waves of anti-Semitism that left thousands of European Jews dead.

Yet this tradition of purity goes back to the very beginning of the Jewish people, when Israel received the law of Moses. There, God commanded the priests to immerse themselves totally in water when they were dedicated as priests (Ex. 29:4). Whenever they entered the tabernacle to serve God, they were commanded to wash their hands and their feet in the bronze laver before the tent of meeting (Ex. 30:17–21).

The people of God understood that this was not just a ritual of physical purity, but it reflected a far deeper truth: the need for purity in our hearts. In Psalm 24:3–4, King David asks: “Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart; who has not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully.”

Through the prophet Isaiah, God also warned that He could not stand the services, sacrifices and singing of His people anymore because “Your hands are covered with blood” (Isa. 1:15b, BSB). The passage makes clear that the prophet was not speaking of physical blood but about the sins of His people.

And the prophet Joel commands to “Blow the trumpet in Zion” to call the people of God together to repent and search for Him, because “Who knows if He will turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind Him” (Joel 2:1, 14, NKJV).

The coronavirus should thus be understood by all of us as a heavenly shofar blast, calling on us to seek God and to search our hearts. Let us follow the advice of James, the brother of Jesus, to “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded” (James 4:8, MEV).

Jesus himself teaches that purity of the heart is more important than personal hygiene and washing of hands, because it is our hearts that defile and deceive us (Matt. 15:16–20).

Of course, this does *not* mean we can ignore any practical advice or health law requirements concerning this virus (such as those in Israel my family is currently observing). But it does mean that we need to show the same and even greater vigor when it comes to purifying our hearts, because this will impact our spiritual life.

2. A Time of Global Shaking

In early February, many key leaders of our ministry worldwide joined us in Jerusalem for strategy sessions regarding the ICEJ’s 40th anniversary. In one of the prayer times, Dag Øyvind Juliussen, an ICEJ board member and our national director in Norway, shared that over recent months the Lord spoke to him strongly from Haggai chapter 2. There the prophet declares:

“For thus says the Lord of hosts, “‘Once more in a little while, I am going to shake the heavens and the earth, the sea also and the dry land. I will shake all the nations; and they will come with the wealth of all nations, and I will fill this house with glory,’ says the Lord of hosts” (Hag. 2:6–7, see also v. 21–23, NASB).

This prophecy is then quoted in Hebrews 12:27–29. Heavenly and earthly principalities and systems will be shaken. Just a few weeks after our gathering in Jerusalem, the world is indeed experiencing a shaking that has led to many unprecedented

consequences, such as Israel not allowing any tourists into the country.

These prophetic tremors will be so impactful that Jesus himself warns of “men’s hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken” (Luke 21:26, NKJV).

The effects of the current shakings are manifold. An unanticipated economic crisis is looming worldwide. According to some news outlets, the economic damage of the coronavirus in canceled flights, undelivered goods and so forth is already in the order of \$1 trillion U.S. This is not just a number but affects real people. For example, El Al Airlines has placed most of its staff on unpaid leave, and large parts of its fleet are grounded. The shares of computer giant Apple fell sharply in January and February as parts of their smartphones were produced in the Wuhan region and are not deliverable anymore. The British weekly Spectator assessed it all means a breakdown of globalization—at least temporarily.

The corona crisis definitely demonstrates how fragile the global trade system is. It is a possible foretaste of that great day described in Revelation when the global system comes to a sudden end because “Babylon is fallen, fallen” (Rev. 14:8b).

At the same time, the prophet Haggai describes this shaking as releasing a new measure of glory in God’s temple. In other words, as the world is in turmoil, His kingdom is growing stronger on the earth. One of the more positive outcomes of the coronavirus outbreak currently hitting Iran is that some 70,000 prisoners—among them many persecuted Christians—were reportedly released from prison.

These same shakings can release a hunger for God, and the church needs to be ready for it. What this passage from Haggai demonstrates is formulated in a different way in Hebrews 12.

Here, the shakings to come will shake what can be shaken while also revealing the things that cannot be shaken (and following).

The passage then concludes with an appeal to all of us: “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:28–29).

3. Just a Foreshadow

Reading the Word of God and listening to the news, I cannot help but think that this is only a small foreshadow of what is to come. The Hebrew prophets and the New Testament speak of a time when God will severely judge the world for its unrighteousness and rebellion against God.

If someone would have googled “corona” in early January 2020, the search result would have led either to a Mexican beer or to images of the corona of the sun as seen during a solar eclipse. This occurs when the moon is totally covering the sun, forming a bright corona (“crown”) in the form of a ring of fire surrounding the moon. Only the outermost rim of the sun is seen and not the sun itself. In prayer, the thought came to me that this is exactly what we see today. The pandemic of the coronavirus is not the judgment itself but a harbinger of what will come in far greater measure if the world does not repent. In that sense, the coronavirus is a sign of things to come, when certain plagues will devastate the earth and still humanity will not repent (Rev. 9:18–21). Yet it also is a reminder that this is still a time of grace when “whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved (Joel 2:32; Acts 2:21). It is a wake-up call to the church to understand the times and season we are living in and to act accordingly.

Therefore, allow me to offer the following advice. These

suggestions should in no way replace sound measures that your national health system might require from you. But we should use this as an opportunity to:

1. Draw near to God, review our actions, and wash our hands where necessary. Let us search our hearts and renew our relationship to God, who indeed is “a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29; James 4:8). The apostle Peter, speaking of these last days, admonishes us: “[S]ince all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat” (2 Pet. 3:11–12).
2. In this time of shaking, let us remember that God does not change. Our lives are in His hands. He is telling us to “fear not, because I am with you.” It is exactly in these dark and challenging times when our light can shine even brighter. People will be watching us. Let us be rays of light and hope in the risen one.
3. Let us recognize that we are living in times when we should expect more shakings to come. And so let us establish a sure foundation. Jesus reminds us in the Gospel of Luke: “Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near” (Luke 21:28). Indeed, Jesus is coming soon!
4. Jesus encourages his disciples to view prayer as essential to make it through these challenging days: “Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:36). Make a commitment today to spend more time in prayer and to seek God like never before.
5. The apostle Peter reminds us that God’s prophetic word is meant to serve as a light in times of darkness: “And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place,

until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your heart" (2 Pet. 1:19). The Word of God will serve as a beacon and a compass for our lives in these shaky times. Make sure to have your daily diet of His living word.

6. Finally, it is a great opportunity to stand with God's purposes for Israel. This nation has been placed under severe restrictions due to the coronavirus, with the primary aim to save human lives. In particular, the elderly (including many Holocaust survivors) will be affected greatly by the quarantine measures and limitations imposed during this health crisis. New Jewish immigrants will still be allowed to make Aliyah to Israel, but they also must self-quarantine for two weeks. Our ICEJ AID team has already received requests from local charities to assist in various projects to support those most affected by this challenging situation. Please help us meet this urgent need.

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