

## Yet Another Challenging Season (29 Jul 2020)

Well we've survived maybe even enjoyed the challenges of the "everything changes" season as church gatherings were stopped abruptly and church went online. We've made it through the "this is not fun anymore" season as congregants (and many of their pastors) lost their early excitement and passion for everything in digital form. And we've been looking forward to the "isn't it great to be together again" season when we could return to our services and ministries with some extra skills that we have learned through the COVID period.

But disappointingly, it looks like the season may well be "I'm not so sure it's great to be together" in many of our churches. I know that it's early days, but the enthusiastic return of everyone to services, that we were hoping for, has not eventuated in most churches.

There are many reasons for this. Some are understandable and others are concerning. Let me summarise some that I have heard (I'm sure you can add others):

- "I'm worried about further outbreaks and don't want to congregate at this stage."
- "I know that there are limited places available in services and I would rather others have the opportunity to attend."
- "It's not like church was – all this social distancing and no touching and no food. I'll wait until we can do real church together."
- "I have enjoyed the flexibility of streamed services. I'm not keen to go back to attending church every Sunday."
- "Church services have never really been my thing. I have enjoyed meeting online and with my small group. I haven't missed the services at all."
- "My family/friends are not Christians and they wouldn't come to services, but they have been attending online church with me. I don't want to lose this."
- "I've realised that church/God doesn't play a big part in my life and I've lost the habit of going."

A difficulty for pastors and leaders is that we don't know how many people are in each category. Are people who have not regularly returned cautious or generous or satisfied or slack? Are they living closer to God and people or have they drifted away in their isolation?

So rather than the return to church bringing relief and renewed vitality, enthusiasm and an easing of the pressure, it has actually brought renewed challenges for many pastors. These include:

- Working out what to do with so many restrictions and trying to keep everyone positive
- Offering both physical services and streamed services
- Providing more services or different services than normal to allow for social distancing
- Obeying and policing lots of extra rules and regulations
- AND the concern that some people are not returning to church

Maybe this is not true for you. There are also some positive signs around the place. For example, in most churches, offerings have been maintained. What a blessing that is. If you are feeling excited and hopeful, praise God and forge ahead.

But I'm raising these issues because I want pastors to know that this may well be a very draining time (especially when it comes on top of the last six months). And if this is the case for you, then you are not alone. It's a demanding (and possibly disappointing) season for many.

So what do we do? Here are a few thoughts from Psalm 27. David was meditating on the days of trouble (27:5) and oppression (27:11) and this is what he found particularly helpful.

### **1. Keep reminding yourself of God's strength**

The God who has called you to pastor your people is the one who controls everything. He remains strong. He remains powerful. He is the one we hold on to. He is the one who we are accountable to. He is the rock. COVID doesn't threaten God. It bows to him. You're on the right side.

*The Lord is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid? (27:1)*

### **2. Keep seeking God as your first priority**

As the pressure and workload increase, it's easy to feel that we have to dig ourselves out of the problems. But we can't. All we do is increase the pressure on ourselves. There certainly is a time to work hard and this might be such a time, but not at the expense of our seeking God. The key questions are: "What is God doing? What does God want? What is God saying? How can I please him today?"

*One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple. 27:4  
My heart says of you, "Seek his face!" Your face, Lord, I will seek. 27:8*

### **3. Keep believing in God's promises**

You have promises from God for your ministry and your church. Some are truths of Scripture and others may be personal calls and promises from God. These promises can be overwhelmed by disappointment and problems or sheer exhaustion. But hold on! There is more of God's blessing and power to come. What God has promised will come to be. Be strong and take heart.

*I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord. (27:13-14)*

If you are still finding it difficult, the QB Movement has a lot of support structures in place. We have Area Pastors, Regional Ministers, and a QB Services Church Support Team. We are wanting and ready to help if you are struggling in any way. Don't hesitate to reach out. We need to get through this season together.

## What is God doing at the moment? (12 Aug 2020)

For many pastors and church leaders, it's pretty tough going at the moment. We're tired from implementing lots of change. Our people are still unsure as to when they will return to physical church and that worries us. We're trying to do more than ever. Whatever we decide some people are unhappy. And we have no idea when (or even if) things will return to normal. There is no respite on the horizon.

Of course, in Queensland we're in a much better position than most churches in our world and many churches in Australia. But still, it does wear on us.

So where is God in all of this? We know that he still loves us and our future is secure? But what on earth is God doing? I really have no idea, but I do know that he's up to something. He always is. So I thought that I would have a guess at what he might be doing. I'll probably be wrong of course. But my goal is to awaken faith in God and his purposes. There is still more of God's kingdom to come.

I'm not saying that God is causing the coronavirus. It is an insidious disease from the pit itself causing great hardship and suffering for our world. But God's purposes are never thwarted by Satan's plans.

So what is God doing? Here goes ...

- God could be refining the church in preparation for what is to come – weeding out the half-hearted and slack and growing deep commitment in the faithful. Jesus was constantly doing this in his ministry on earth. He had little appetite for the crowds. Maybe he's doing it now. A purifying season.
- God could be bringing Australia to its knees so that we will cry out for his mercy and love rather than depending on ourselves. Maybe we're on the edge of a new move of God in our country as we awaken to our own mortality and vulnerability and insecurity. Yes God.
- God could be developing new gifts and skills in us that will be helpful for the next stage of our ministry. Maybe online community will be needed more in the future and he's forcing us to develop the necessary skills and tools to do this well.
- God could be forging the faith of our leaders. It's easy to be faith-filled and passionate when things are going well, but hardship always tests the reality of our faith. How do we react when our plans are not working and God seems distant? Maybe God is forging a deeper faith in us that is not dependent on circumstances.
- God could be opening up new mission fields for the church. Just about everyone is online. But generally the healthy church has not been. We've been busy serving and teaching our congregations. Maybe God is opening our eyes to new opportunities for reaching lost people.
- God could be teaching us to work together as churches. This crisis has caused us to collaborate and learn from each other. We have needed each other more. Maybe this is the best way God could see to bring us together as his body.
- God could be changing the perception of the church by the community. For many years now we have been tarred with the brush of sexual abuse and political incorrectness. Through this crisis many churches are showing their love and care, and people are seeing it. Maybe God is improving our tarnished reputation.

You get the idea. There are numerous ways in which God is at work at the moment. Not the ways he normally works, which makes it hard for us with our systems and structures. But God is moving – in our community, in our church and in us. You can be sure about that. We must hold on to our faith in his advancing kingdom that the gates of the hellish coronavirus cannot prevail against.