

SBJT Forum

SBJT: YOU HAVE DONE A LOT OF WORK ON THE IMPORTANCE OF THINKING BIBLICALLY ABOUT SPIRITUAL WARFARE AND MISSIONS. WHY DOES THIS TOPIC MATTER? WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR US TO CONSIDER?

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Chuck Lawless: Through their International Mission Board, Southern Baptist churches support approximately 3,600 missionaries serving around the world (<https://www.imb.org/about/>). Their roles vary, though all must share the gospel with a non-believing world. Their places of service range from rural to urban, frontier to legacy, Africa to the Americas. Consistent among them, however, is this truth: they find themselves in the sights of Satan and his forces. Their battle is real—as is ours—and we ignore the biblical truth about spiritual warfare to our peril.

What is “spiritual warfare”? Bill Cook, professor of New Testament at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and I have defined spiritual warfare as, “the ongoing battle between the church and the devil and his forces, with the church standing in the armor of God, defensively resisting the devil, and offensively proclaiming the gospel in a battle already won” (see William

F. Cook III, Chuck Lawless, *Spiritual Warfare in the Storyline of Scripture*

[Nashville: B&H, 2019], Kindle Edition, locations 294-296). We want believers to know that the battle is ongoing and real, yet Christ has already conquered the enemy. Indeed, our warrior-God (1 Sam 17:47) grants us his armor (Eph 6:11) to defeat the enemy through offensive gospel proclamation and defensive resistance. All believers face the attacks, yet missionaries may well be primary targets of the enemy.

Regrettably, evangelicals have often been reticent to talk about this topic. Seemingly, we so fear falling into the extreme of giving the devil too much attention that we choose not to consider his wiles at all. We do not necessarily disbelieve the existence of Satan and his demons, but we ignore them as if they do not exist at all. While the Bible is not a book about the devil, we must not ignore its teachings about our foe.

Why does the enemy attack missionaries? The Bible often portrays the lostness of unbelievers in terms of spiritual conflict. For example, unbelievers follow the “ruler of the power of the air” (Eph 2:2). They are living in the “domain of darkness” (Col 1:13) under the “power of Satan” (Acts 26:18). The “god of this age,” that is, “the archenemy Satan” (see David Garland, *2 Corinthians* [Nashville: B&H, 1991], 211), has blinded them “to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Cor 4:4). Particularly, he blinds unbelievers through false teachings and idolatries. Caught in the “trap of the devil” (2 Tim 2:26), non-believers are without hope apart from God’s transferring them “into the kingdom of the Son he loves” (Col 1:13).

The devil has multiple schemes to keep unbelievers in darkness, but God’s plan to reach them is singular: followers of Jesus are to take the good news to all the peoples of the world (Matt 28:18-20, Luke 24:45-47, Acts 1:8). He has given us no other strategy. This strategy requires all of us to be evangelists and disciple-makers wherever we are, and it requires some God-called people to move across cultures, study worldviews, learn new languages, and share the gospel with peoples of the world. Obedient believers who proclaim the gospel are God’s plan; thus, it is not surprising that the enemy aims his arrows at us. Indeed, the passages about spiritual warfare in the scriptures are invariably directed to believers.

Because missionaries are God’s frontline proclaimers of a gospel that frees people from the enemy’s trap, Satan and his forces go after them. Missionaries take the light of the gospel into the deepest darkness of the world—to places and people who have never heard of Jesus—and the enemy who is darkness

fighters back. Missionaries are targets simply because they are obedient to God's cross-cultural call.

How does the enemy attack missionaries? The apostle Paul tells us (Eph 6:11) that Satan is a “schemer,” or one who has “cunning devices” or “crafty methods” (see Frances Foulkes, *Ephesians* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989], 176; William Hendriksen, *Ephesians* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967], 272). He is the evil one (Matt 13:19), the liar (John 8:44), the tempter (Matt 4:3), and the accuser (Rev 12:10). As I have written elsewhere, the enemy often attacks missionaries through these schemes: division, discouragement, distraction, and destruction (Cook and Lawless, *Spiritual Warfare*, Kindle Edition, locations 4881-4886). In addition, he is not alarmed when any of us is disinterested, or no longer interested, in missions.

First, Satan's forces attack by encouraging division among missionary teams. This strategy was evident in the Garden of Eden when Adam blamed Eve for his sin (Gen 3:12), and it is evident today when missionary teams struggle with unity. As one missionary told me during a training event, “The battles we face aren't always with nationals and followers of other world religions. Many of our battles are with each other.” The stresses of cross-cultural living magnify every issue, and even the smallest disagreements become divisive. No missionary team that fights continually among themselves is much threat to Satan's kingdom.

Second, the enemy fosters discouragement among missionaries. Imagine, for example, what many missionaries face. Some have moved their families to risky, spiritually bleak places around the world, but the work they do seems to have little effect on the darkness. No matter what efforts they make, no one has yet responded positively to the gospel. It seems the enemy snatches the Word away (Mark 4:13-14) before it ever settles in anyone's heart. Meanwhile, family members are sick. They have no strong church family with whom they worship and do ministry. If a fledgling church does exist where they serve, the missionaries worship in a language they may not yet fully understand—and even their struggles to worship contribute to discouragement that the enemy only magnifies.

Third, the enemy works through distraction. This scheme can be quite subtle as Satan's forces seek to lure missionaries away from sharing the gospel. Perhaps the lostness in a given area is so overwhelming that the missionary is almost paralyzed by the darkness. In some cases, the distraction is secret sin

that haunts the missionary. The consuming battle of temptation is intense, and the missionary caught in that snare gives little attention to evangelizing others. In other cases, missionaries get so invested in other good activities that they leave little time or energy to do evangelism. Proclaiming the good news becomes a secondary activity, and unreached people remain in bondage.

Fourth, the enemy seeks to destroy missionaries. The word “destroy” is a strong one, but we cannot ignore an enemy whose aim is to remove believers from the mission field. He tempts believers, seeking to lure them into sin that costs them their ministry; indeed, the temptations are at times far more blatant in other cultures than they are in North America. Often feeling isolated and alone, vulnerable missionaries sometimes take the bait the enemy dangles in front of them. At least temporarily, the missionary’s witness is extinguished.

Moreover, the enemy is behind persecution that threatens the global church. The one who is “prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for anyone he can devour” (1 Pet 5:8) looks particularly for those who most threaten his kingdom. Though scholars debate the current number of Christian martyrs (see for example, “Christian Martyr Numbers Down by Half in a Decade. Or Are They?” at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/march/christian-martyrs-numbers-down-by-half-in-decade-or-are-the.html>), it is still the case that the dragon of Revelation 13 wants to destroy the people of God. Some missionaries face this persecution in their own lives, but the new believers they reach and equip often face even more opposition. In fact, the missionary lives with the reality that his or her call to others to follow Christ is at times a call to put one’s life on the line.

Even as the enemy attacks missionaries, he also delights when other believers are disinterested in missions. Thus, he slyly attacks both the “sent ones” and the potential “senders,” enticing the former to give up and the latter to ignore their Great Commission responsibility. Former president of the International Mission Board, Jerry Rankin, describes this scheme this way: “In trying to convince Christians that missions is optional, he [Satan] diverts churches to focus on their own programs and to see their mission as reaching people for their own church. If he can persuade Christians that reaching the nations has no relevancy or urgency to their own life, he has raised a barrier that makes other barriers obsolete” (see Jerry Rankin and Ed Stetzer, *Spiritual Warfare and Missions* [Nashville: B&H, 2010], 151).

How might churches prepare missionary candidates for the battle?

The apostle Paul is clear that we must “put on the whole armor of God” (Eph 6:11) if we intend to win battles of spiritual warfare. Adorning ourselves with this armor is not about simply “praying it on” each day; rather, it is about living obediently out of our position in Christ. For example, we wear the belt of truth by trusting the one who is Truth in us (John 14:6) and living with unquestioned integrity. Thus, the armor is both positional and practical.

Wearing the armor is about living out our salvation by walking in truth and righteousness, proclaiming the gospel, trusting the promises of God, and knowing and proclaiming the Word. Many believers, however—including potential missionaries—have never learned how to live out the armor. Their churches have not discipled them; instead, they have sent their members into the battle unarmed. The result is often spiritual defeat as unprepared believers lose a war they did not even know existed.

Thus, preparing for spiritual battle is first as basic as learning to be an obedient follower of Christ. The local church must, therefore, take seriously its responsibility to teach believers to “to observe everything I [Jesus] have commanded you” (Matt 28:20). We must be strategic and deliberate in developing our discipleship plan as we battle against the schemer. Through God-centered worship, life-giving small groups, and one-on-one mentoring, we teach and model how to wear the full armor of God—and thus prepare believers to serve God wherever he sends them.

Within that discipleship strategy must be intentional efforts to teach believers to know the Word and to pray. Too often, churches *tell* believers they must do these disciplines, but they do not *teach* them how to do the work. The result is believers who remain unprepared for spiritual conflict; they know neither the promises nor the power of God. They do the work of ministry in their own strength and according to their own plans, and the enemy is not alarmed.

Moreover, churches must intentionally connect with missionaries. Not only do we need to know missionaries to learn about them and pray for them, but we also need their help in preparing future missionaries for the battle. Those who serve on the frontlines know best the nature of the conflict. They understand the significance of worldview—Westerners tend to cognitively disbelieve or ignore the demonic, and animists tend to fearfully find the powers behind every area of life. Missionaries know by experience that the

enemy often attacks the family, with particular interest in destroying marriages. They know the need for perseverance no matter how the enemy attacks them.

They also know, however, the power of the Word, the presence of the Spirit, and the glory of God's work as he uses them to push back the darkness. When churches have no connection with missionaries, we thus miss an opportunity to prepare the next generation to do the Great Commission. To be frank, I place this responsibility at the feet of lead pastors whose example and passion largely determine whether their congregations will have a heart for the nations.

What else would you add to this discussion? I would add one final thought. Missionaries faithfully follow God's calling in obedience. They trust that God is going to use them to reach non-believers—and God is, in fact, drawing to himself “a vast multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language” (Rev 7:9). Spiritual warfare can be intense for missionaries, but God is more powerful than the enemy and his forces. We must, therefore, willingly and enthusiastically disciple believers and challenge them to consider going to the nations. Our continual “calling out the called” is one step toward the enemy's defeat.

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SBJT: RECENTLY, THE CHURCH HAS BEEN REQUIRED TO THINK CAREFULLY ABOUT AND RESPOND TO THE COVID-19 CRISIS? WHAT KEY TRUTHS DOES THE CHURCH NEED TO REMEMBER DURING THIS TIME, AS SHE SEEKS TO REMAIN FAITHFUL TO THE LORD AND CARRY OUT GOSPEL WITNESS TO THE NATIONS?

Jason C. Glas: “These are interesting times.” That was the conclusion of a friend from a phone call I had with him this past week as the COVID-19 cases climbed, the economic markets roller-coastered, job losses mounted, and churches were unable to meet. While the times are interesting, they are

far from novel. The church has always dealt with life's uncertainties, disease, and provisional scarcity, but has consistently found strength and courage in the Lord to endure. Therefore, as we face the threat of this pandemic and the ancillary damages in our society, there are seven things I would like to share with you that I pray you will find edifying, instructive, and encouraging during these days.

1. THE CHURCH HAS DEALT WITH MANY VIRUSES IN THE PAST.

Plagues and pandemics are littered throughout church history, and I have been encouraged by reading how the church responded in these moments. Here is a hint, they did not sit around watching Netflix. There are as many headlines over the threat of internet speed slowing and the demand for streaming content as the virus itself. Netflix has been described by some as “necessary” and “basic for human survival” during this time of quarantine. This does beg the question, what did Christians do during a pandemic before the internet? In short, the church found ways to show the love of Christ, even tending to the sick at risk to their own life. When the plague of Cyprian broke out in the Roman Empire during the years 249-262, some cities like Alexandria lost over 60% of its population. The sick were in the streets, death surrounded everyone, and physicians were clueless how to help. What we also know, is that it was during this time that the entire social attitude toward Christians began to change. Christians were also getting sick and dying, but it was the compassion of believers that caused the Western world to socially accept Christians and begin listening to the Gospel. Christians served the sick, helped bury the dead, took in orphaned children whose parents died, and much more because of their faith and hope. There are multiple examples throughout church history of Christians who served amid plagues even to their own peril, but the Lord used their faith and compassion to save countless souls. How will the Lord use us in all of this? What is our testimony before the world in our reaction?

2. GOD USES VIRUSES FOR HIS GLORY.

God calls the church to repentance for indulgence, he calls the world to reflect on life and death, and he makes a harvest ripe for salvation. In the 5th

century, Augustine defended Christianity and provided theological clarity to the collapse of Rome in the year 410. Christians suffered immensely when Rome fell. The economy crashed, homes were lost, many people were forced to migrate elsewhere, and many comforts once enjoyed were evaporated and replaced with efforts simply to survive. Augustine said Christians in Rome had much to learn about themselves in all of it. On one hand, Christians claimed they were not attached to earthly things but “they have discovered by the pain of losing these things how much they were sinning in loving them” (see Saint Augustine, *The City of God* [trans. Marcus Dods; New York: Modern Library, 1993], 14). Economic recession is not something anyone wishes to endure, but often times the Lord uses these episodes in economic history to call his church to repentance. In suffering loss of worldly goods, it often exposes our wayward affection for the things of this world instead of the world to come. Sometimes we need a virus and a recession to remind us of our frailty and dependence upon the Lord. Loss of “health and wealth” can be a good inoculator to protect us from the virus of idolatry, which is far more deadly in the end. It is good to see the pandemic threat as a tool of purification for the church.

We also cannot lose sight of the opportunity this presents the church. Numerous media publications are even questioning if the virus will be the means of religious revival in our country. It may not lead to another “Great Awakening” but none of us can discount the opportunity to speak truth. People around us will be asking questions about life, death, and what the Bible teaches, and we need to be ready to respond. We cannot be so focused on our self-preservation that we are negligent toward the Great Commission in speaking the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. How are we using this time? How are we using this moment of our lives to reach our neighbor? We need to pray for one another, pray for our church, and pray the Lord will use these circumstances to awaken souls to their plight and draw them to Jesus.

3. THE CHURCH MUST NOT BE GRIPPED WITH FEAR LIKE THE WORLD.

We must learn to be cautious without being fearful. The response to the COVID-19 threat by many Christians is discouraging because the reaction of fear does damage to our testimony before the world. The world will interpret our fear as the absence of hope, which is ultimately caused by a lack of

faith. I do not mean a foolish faith believing we will have some invincibility to the virus, but faith in the purposes of God and trusting him through all of life's uncertainties and threats. Much like our testimony about idolatry and worldliness, we may verbalize and claim we have faith and hope in the Lord, but a virus or crisis in our life may expose feebleness in our faith and hope. Just like suffering financially, no one wants a disease, but in a world where suffering exists because of sin's curse, these things are unavoidable. By faith we must remember that and learn to trust the Lord with everything; especially what we cannot control.

I recently had a conversation with an unbeliever over this matter who was offended by my response to the pandemic because he wrongly interpreted me as being passive. I simply explained that disease, infections, viruses, and the like are part of living in a post-paradise fallen order. He said to me, "That's easy to say now until it is your child that is sick." I explained to him that I am fully aware that my children could get the COVID-19. One my children could get that, cancer, another disease, or die from a playing accident, but that is what happens when we live in a world that awaits new creation. What he interpreted as being passive is actually *by faith* learning to be content. *Our anxieties are often manufactured by our desire to be in control.* We are not God, so let us learn to trust him who is. Suffering, disease, and death are evil and part of our burdensome groaning and creation's groaning (Rom 8:18-25) until our Lord makes all things new. The Bible reminds us of our spiritual posture when we suffer or face the threat of suffering: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?" (Rom 8:35 NIV). Paul's ? "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:37-39 NIV).

4. WHEN THE NT SPEAKS ABOUT SALVATION IT INCLUDES ESCHATOLOGY.

The text in Romans 8 above reminds us that our salvation now is the beginning of salvation. "And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for

our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body” (Rom 8:23 NAS). Our hope is firmly fixed on the completion of our salvation. The church has yet to experience our complete salvation when our bodies will be resurrected, we will be transformed, given glorified bodies, and death will be swallowed up from the victory of Jesus’ resurrection (1 Cor 15:50-58). Our hope is based upon nothing in this present order, but on the New Creation order to be revealed when Jesus makes his final coming. Right now, our spiritual rebirth, love for the Lord, love for his truth, love for his church, and desire to live righteously before him are all appetizers for what awaits us in the future when Jesus is fully revealed. “Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:13 ESV).

5. THERE IS ONLY ONE MESSIAH, AND GOVERNMENT IS NOT IT.

Over the last century, the role of government has expanded because the role of the church has retreated. As a result, even Christians have become more hospitable toward government expansion of power largely because some are too trusting that government actions are benevolent. Christians must be cautious for how much of a role we call on government to assume because as history proves, when government takes power, it does not give it back. The worst dictators of the 20th century came to power in response to a crisis and economic deprivation. The church cannot afford to be naïve but must be watchful to see how our governing authorities use police powers, commerce regulations, and other acts and polices to regulate lives, and particularly the assembly of the church. Rather than calling on government, let us call on the church to do more. In the end, we will all be better off for it.

6. REMEMBER THAT NEWS BROADCASTERS GET PAID TO KEEP YOU ON THEIR CHANNELS AND WEBSITES.

We must remember that information is politicized, agenda driven, and financially motivated. No matter your information source, there is always an angle. The complexity of our digital age is not just the amount of information but the quantity of conflicting information. We can temper our thinking if we remember the doctrine of human depravity; “As it is written, ‘There is none

righteous, no, not one” (Rom 3:10 KJV). How is this practical for dealing with COVID-19? We must remember that money is paid handsomely to keep humanity in fear and tuned in. It remains difficult to know how effective efforts are at controlling the virus spread, but remember it is a virus and not nuclear fallout. The real concern over the virus is not getting sick, but how lives have been and will be impacted by this. How many people will lose their jobs? How many will struggle to make ends meet? How many missionaries will lose funding and must quit their work because of no financial support? How many children are being abused in homes because of being with adults all day? How many church members, already struggling with loneliness and isolation, are being spiritually and emotionally impacted by “social distancing”? There will be an aftermath over all this that is greater than the virus threat itself.

7. BE CAREFUL WITH WHAT WE COMMUNICATE.

It is good to remember that “All things are lawful,’ but not all things are helpful. ‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.” (1 Cor 10:23-24 ESV). Remember that in our social media networks what you post reflects on those with whom you associate. Our social media communication must always be from a representative posture; we represent Christ, we represent his church, and we represent our local church. Anyone from the outside viewing our posts must gain an accurate sense of our faith and church family from our etiquette and posts online. We must be careful to broadcast only what is good and helpful for building up one another and ensuring that our personal positions on matters do not unfairly label everyone in our circles as sharing those convictions. *Some issues where people are passionate are matters of Christian liberty.* Christians will have various positions on things like quarantine, government mandates, social contact, etc. that may differ from your view, but it does not mean they are necessarily wrong. James gives good advice we should consider, even in the context of social media: “My dearly loved brothers, understand this: Everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger (James 1:19 CSB). For many of us, we reverse these. *We are often too quick to speak, slow to hear, then quick to get indignant.* Social media creates tight circles of influence that tend to generate bandwagon thinking and can

result in vilifying anyone who thinks differently than the group. When we are quick to speak, slow to listen, and others do not align with our views it can create frustration and bitterness, even over petty non-essential matters. Just because we are willing to speak, does not always mean we should. Just because we are willing to speak does not mean we speak for our whole social network. We need to be cautious that our personal matters of liberty do not unfairly represent those in our network. As we speak and write about the virus or any matter, remember that charity is the key in all of this. Learning to be charitable, gracious, loving, respectful, helpful, and encouraging to one another is most needed. Let us seek each other's good.

So, as we live in these interesting times, let us remember to be cautious without being fearful. Continue to share, check on one another, witness for Christ, and find ways to fellowship so we can remain steadfast in our faith. Be strong in the Lord fearing him alone.

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SBJT: THIS YEAR AT EASTER, CHURCHES ARE MEETING ONLINE DUE TO THE COVID-19 CRISIS. HOW SHOULD CHRISTIANS THINK ABOUT THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST AND THE GLORIOUS NEWS OF THE GOSPEL IN THE MIDST OF THIS CRISIS? WHAT IS THE MESSAGE THAT THE CHURCH SHOULD BE PROCLAIMING TO THE WORLD AT THIS TIME?

Greg Strand: Saturday of Easter weekend is the day of silence for Christians, the day between remembering the death of Jesus Christ on the cross and his resurrection. It is referred to as Easter Eve. It is not silent as if God is

removed, or is absent, or not doing something. Rather, it is referred to as silent because there is not much recorded in the Scriptures about this day (cf. Matt 27:62-66). But God's work of salvation continues. The tomb is a reminder

of sin and its effects; it has the stench of death. And yet, it is also a *sanctus*.

This day is often more somber for Christians as they live between the tension of the ignominious death of Jesus, God the Son, and the glorious resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. We know we will celebrate his resurrection because it has happened.

Sunday is the day we remember and celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and we worship him (Matt 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20). This is the day “death is swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor 15:54) and we exclaim “thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 15:57). Discouragement, despair, and death were transformed into a “living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pet 1:3).

What we experienced between Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday is reflective of living between the first and second comings of Jesus. We live between the times, and there is tension, because even though sin and its curse have been removed in the person and death of Jesus Christ, we wait the permanent and complete destruction of sin and its effects in the second coming of Christ. But the certainty that he will return and make all things right gives us hope.

FLATTENING THE CURVE

Though this year’s Easter Eve may have been silent and somber for Christians, the implications and results of COVID-19 shouted. In consulting the data from John Hopkins University of Medicine (JHUM), we were informed that globally, the total confirmed cases were 1,754,457, with total deaths numbering 106,469. In the US, total confirmed cases were 506,188, with total deaths numbering 19,701. We also learned that the 2100 deaths on Friday were the highest daily death toll during the pandemic, and that the US now has recorded the most deaths due to COVID-19 of any country.

This COVID-19 pandemic has affected all of us. We are hearing and learning a whole new list of words: social distancing, isolation, self-quarantine, flattening the curve, the RO number, shelter in place, among others. And as we know, these are not abstract terms, but they reflect a certain way of life and living in order to love our neighbor.

Since we are now all living under “shelter in place” orders and practicing “social distancing,” we are engaging in behavior of “flattening the curve.”

This term “refers to using protective practices to slow the rate of COVID-19 infection so hospitals have room, supplies and doctors for all of the patients who need care.” Because of our love for God and love for neighbors, we are committed to flattening the curve.

FLATTENED BY THE CURVE (SIN)

This pandemic also graphically reminds us of the truth that sin and its effects flatten us all. We have all been flattened by the curve; the virus of sin has affected us all. Affirming God’s revelation of sin and its effects (Gen 3; Rom 5), sin is often described as *homo incurvatus in se*, “man/woman curved in on oneself.” And since this is true of each individual person, it is also true for humanity. Each individual person and all of humanity have been flattened by the curve of sin.

This is one of the effects of the sin committed by Adam and Eve against God in the Garden of Eden. They defied and rebelled against God, and the consequence was the fall and the implication was original sin, and the punishment was permanent and death was eternal (Job 4:17; 14:4; 25:4; Ps 51:5; 130:3; 143:2; Eccl 7:20; Jer 13:23; 17:9; Rom 5:12, 19; Eph 2:3). Although Adam and Eve were created in a state of being both “able to sin” and “able not to sin,” all those now born in Adam, which is true for all of humanity after the fall, are born “not able not to sin” (Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:22). All are under sin (Rom 3:9) and fallen short of God’s glory (Rom 3:23), and all are accountable to God (Rom 3:19), and are under his wrath (Eph 2:3). That is now our nature—flattened by the curve of sin. This means we are guilty and corrupt, and our corruption results in total depravity, which means every aspect of our human nature is infected with sin, and total ability, which means we cannot save ourselves, that our salvation is dependent on God, spiritually dead and under God’s wrath (Rom 3; Eph 2).

The fruit of sin is manifest in our relationship with God and in our relationships with others—all are curved or bent in on self. One writes, humanity is “deeply curved in on itself that it not only bends the best gifts of God towards itself and enjoys them (as is plain in the works-righteous and hypocrites), or rather even uses God himself in order to attain these gifts, but it also fails to realize that it so wickedly, curvedly, and viciously seeks all things, even God, for its own sake.”

Not only are our relationships curved or bent in on self because of sin, so is all of creation. In fact, creation “groans” (Rom 8:22) because of sin, and “creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God” (Rom 8:19). Because of sin, we live in a fallen and broken world, one that is not the way it was supposed to be. As a result we get sick, we suffer, and we die. Specifically, we suffer from COVID-19. Of course, for Christians, these griefs, this sadness, these pains and sorrows are intermixed with trust and joy, because the fall and sin and groaning do not have the final word. God does, and he addresses sin and its effects, these curves, through the Son, God the Son.

THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF CHRIST AND THE ERADICATION OF THE CURVE (SIN)

Death

“But God” ... makes all the difference. Being in Adam or being in sin or being in a state spiritual death or being under God’s wrath or being curved is not the complete story. It is an accurate description of the story, but it is incomplete. There is more to the story, the good news, and the gospel.

In our curved state, apart from Christ, we are weak and ungodly. We were not left in that state. Although there was no reason for God to act in and through God the Son, Jesus Christ, because of his love, his grace, and his mercy, he did. Paul writes, “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” God’s love is manifest in Christ’s death. Jesus Christ, the God-ly died for the ungodly. And he died this death on our behalf even while we were still guilty sinners.

Christ’s death is the heart of the gospel, the heart of the story of redemption. It is not all there is to the work of Christ, since there is also a burial and a resurrection that vindicate the person and work of Christ (Rom 1:3-4) and validate the story. These works of Christ and of first importance to the gospel: “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3-4).

The profound truth is captured in the text of Scripture that addresses the great exchange, a double imputation (I speak personally, because making it true personally is the ground of this being true corporately): my sin (and death) is imputed to Christ, i.e., he bears my sin as my substitute and dies the death I deserve, and Christ's righteousness is imputed to me, i.e., not only are my sins forgiven, but Christ's perfect righteousness is imputed to me and my account before God, meaning my Judge is also my Savior. Here is this way this doctrinally dense truth is stated: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). And this righteousness of God comes "through faith in Christ" (Phil 3:9).

Resurrection

Through Christ's death and resurrection the universal curve of sin is absorbed and that curve is made straight (Matt 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-10). By faith, the individual curve in each human heart is made straight, made right, justified. In Adam we are all curved by and in sin, and in Christ and through faith in him we are declared right with God, we are justified, the curve has been absorbed and made straight. Here is how this contrast is stated: "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Cor 15:22; cf. Rom 5:14-18).

Christ's death, burial and resurrection are truths that comprise the essence of the gospel (1 Cor 15:3-4). Although they focus on different aspects in the life and ministry of Jesus, they are of one piece: they address the means by which God's righteous requirements are met and the curve or spiritual deadness is overcome. It was through dying that God the Son, Jesus overcame death—God raised up Christ Jesus, "freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him" (Acts 2:24). It is in Christ Jesus' resurrection that he "was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom 1:4).

And contrastively, if Jesus had not been raised from the dead, we misrepresent God (1 Cor 15:15) and our preaching is in vain (1 Cor 15:14), our faith is futile and vain (1 Cor 15:14, 17), we are to be pitied (1 Cor 15:19), we are still in our sins (1 Cor 15:17), and those who have died have perished with no hope of life with the Lord (1 Cor 15:18). This is bleak. That is what life would be like if the resurrection were not true.

“But in fact,” Paul assuredly affirms, “Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep [i.e., died] (1 Cor 15:20). Even though the resurrection of Christ Jesus has occurred, not all receive the life he came to give. Paul’s description of what life would have been like if Christ had not been raised *is* what life is like for those who remain “in Adam,” and who do not by faith live in union with Christ.

WHAT OUGHT TO BE THE CHURCH’S RESPONSE?

We worship Jesus Christ, the resurrected and living Lamb who was slain for us (Rev 5:6), the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29, 36). And as we worship, we also give thanks. Ponder these profound truths.

1. Sin and death have been overcome (1 Cor 15:54-58), so that even when we die, yet shall we live (John 11:25-26), thus removing the fear of death (Heb 2:14-15).
2. Christ died for our “trespasses and [was] raised for our justification” (Rom 4:25).
3. Through our union with Christ, we have been “born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading” (1 Pet 1:3-4), which entails a whole new act of creation (2 Cor 5:17).
4. Jesus Christ’s resurrection has cosmic implications in that it addresses the fall and fallenness of the world (Eph 3:10; Col 2:15), such that even though creation “groans,” it has been and will eventually be liberated from this groaning (Rom 8:20, 22).
5. Christ’s resurrection is the firstfruits, which means we too will be raised (1 Cor 15:20, 23; cf. Rom 6:5; 2 Cor 4:14), and we will experience the ultimate end for which God created and redeemed, presence with him in the new heavens and the new earth (Isa 65:17; 66:22; 1 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1, 2.), at which time “death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev 21:4).

With all the people of God, the church of Jesus Christ we confess “thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 15:57). And following our confession, we corporately sing, and not just on Easter Sunday, Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia!