

# “THINK ON THESE THINGS”

Philippians 4:8

## Faith, Fear, And Folly During A Pandemic

By Shane Scott

*“And our enemies said, ‘They will not know or see until we come among them, kill them, and put a stop to the work.’ And it came about when the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times, ‘They will come up against us from every place where you may turn,’ then I stationed men in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, the exposed places, and I stationed the people in families with their swords, spears, and bows. When I saw their fear, I rose and spoke to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people: ‘Do not be afraid of them; remember the Lord who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses.’ And it happened when our enemies heard that it was known to us, and that God had frustrated their plan, then all of us returned to the wall, each one to his work” (Neh. 4:11-15).*

Faith primarily refers to our trust in God. It is a response to and a product of God’s faithfulness. This trust in God’s trustworthiness fortifies our heart to remain faithful even when we have reasons to be afraid. But faith is not to be confused with folly, with reckless abandon, with a presumption that no matter how foolish our actions may be, so long as we have faith, God will protect us. That has more in common with Satan’s twisted version of faith expressed in the temptation of Christ (*“if you are the Son of God, throw yourself down”*) than it does with genuine trust.

But how do we determine when faith becomes folly, or when what seems to be prudence is really thinly disguised fear? These are not easy questions to answer – even in the best of times. And they are doubly difficult to answer in the midst of the stress of a deadly pandemic. In such a time we should steer away from simplistic answers that tend to press complex questions into crude caricatures of faith, fear, and folly.

The people of Jerusalem faced multiple crises in the time of Nehemiah. The city walls were in ruins, and in that time a city without walls was a city without security. The massive project to rebuild the walls presented a crushing burden to those few Jews who were committed to the task. This task was made almost impossible by the threat of violence from Israel’s enemies, a threat taken so seriously by the Jews in the countryside that they insisted their countrymen abandon the work and come home.

There was every reason for the Jews in Jerusalem to be afraid of these adversaries, which is why Nehemiah exhorted, *“Do not be afraid of them.”* And the key to managing this fear was faith – *“Remember the Lord who is great and awesome.”* But notice that this faith in God did not absolve the people from taking steps to secure their own safety. Nehemiah stationed armed guards at the most vulnerable points of the wall, *“with their swords, their spears, and their bows,”* and charged them to fight for their families. The faith of the people prompted them to faithfulness as they took up arms to defend their city.

So, how was the city saved? By faith in God’s power, or by taking up weapons and standing guard? The answer is – YES. As the text explains, the enemy realized that *“God had frustrated their plan.”* GOD frustrated it, but he did so working through Nehemiah and the people.

Suppose that upon hearing the threats of their hostile neighbors, Nehemiah had told the people, “God brought us here and promised us success. So, don’t worry about defending yourselves. Just keep right on working, and trust God to protect us.” Faith or folly? The answer is obvious.

Faith trusts that God is at work. But faith also recognizes that God often works through people. God provides our daily bread through our labor (Matt. 6:11; 2 Thess. 3:10). God heals the sick through the prayer of elders and the anointing of oil (Jas. 5:14-15). God comforts us through our brothers (2 Cor. 7:6). God works through creation. He *“waters the mountains”* and causes *“the grass to grow”* and feeds the *“young lions”* through the natural processes

which he made and governs (Psa. 104:13-14, 21). Creation receives its existence and energy from God, so its power is secondary while God's is primary.

As my wife fought against cancer, we prayed fervently for God to heal her. We also met with oncologists to arrange for radiation, chemotherapy, and surgery – and we did so precisely because we were praying for God to heal her. We knew that God heals, but we also knew that one way he heals is through medicine. His power isn't limited to medicine, but it is surely at work in medicine. To ignore God's use of secondary causes is like asking whether Hezekiah was healed by God or by the cake of figs applied to his boil (Isa. 38:21). For people of faith, the answer is YES.

These same principles are true when it comes to the COVID-19 virus. Relying on God's protection against the virus includes taking steps like wearing a mask to prevent inadvertently spreading it, and receiving a vaccine to keep from getting it, and receiving medical treatment while having it. Such measures reflect the consistent and abundant biblical testimony that God works through people and nature to bring about his purposes. We work because we trust that God works (Phil. 2:12-13).

Above all, we trust in God's promises that this body, this creation, and this life, are not all there is. Through the death and resurrection of Christ we have the hope of a resurrected body, a new heavens and earth, and eternal life. This is why the apostle Paul could pray in view of his impending death, ***“The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen”*** (2 Tim. 4:18). Paul knew that his death was inevitable, but it was not final. And the same is true for us as we face the reality of a deadly pandemic. Many of us have already lost brothers and sisters in Christ to this virus, and while we sorrow, we also rejoice in view of our hope. That is faith.

At the same time, while Paul did not waver in his faith when death was unavoidable, he nevertheless frequently evaded death when it was possible, from escaping in a basket let down over a wall (Acts 9:25) to laying low in Tarsus (Acts 9:29-30) to appealing to Caesar (Acts 25:11-12). In the course of his life Paul willingly suffered more than we can imagine (2 Cor. 11:23-28), but there were also times when he sidestepped grave harm. And I could make the same point about churches. When Saul instigated his persecution of Christians in Acts 8, the entire Jerusalem church save for the apostles fled the city (Acts 8:1). And as their evangelistic efforts around Judea, Samaria, and beyond testified, this wasn't because of faltering faith. As they scattered, they spread the word (Acts 8:4), but they did so fleeing for their lives. Living out our faith in an uncertain world means making tough judgment calls that navigate between faithlessness on one extreme and foolishness on the other. For Paul, sometimes this meant nearly being murdered – and returning to the same city a short time later (Acts 14:19-22). Other times it meant escaping at night with an armed guard (Acts 23:21-31). On the surface these look like diametrically opposite choices. But, these choices reflected Paul's best judgment in pursuit of a single purpose – faithfulness to God's mission.

The great diversity in Paul's responses to potential danger suggests that there is not a “one size fits all” approach for people of faith in dangerous circumstances. While it is simple to caricature those who are more cautious as faithless, or those who are less cautious as foolish, reality is much more complicated. Paul made his best judgment as he sought to be faithful to God, and so must we.

Most Christians I know agree that faith in God's protection is not mutually exclusive with taking precautions, just as Nehemiah and the people took extreme measures while at the same time trusting in God's protection. By the same principle, lots of churches arrange for security from law enforcement and/or trained members. This doesn't reflect a lack of faith; it displays a desire to be faithful to protect the flock.

Likewise, most Christians I know agree that sometimes it is not safe for Christians to try to assemble. The leaders of every church I've been a part of have at times cancelled, postponed, or abbreviated the assemblies when weather-related events such as ice storms or hurricanes made it physically dangerous to gather. These decisions were never taken lightly, but sometimes they were necessary in balancing faithfulness against foolishness.

In principle then, this virus is nothing new in its demand for taking precautions – especially when it comes to our assemblies. What is unprecedented is the ongoing nature of it. Nehemiah's wall was finished in 52 days! (Neh. 6:15). Ice storms and hurricanes last only a short while. But we are a year into this pandemic. It has understandably tested the collective patience of all of us.

But if we disagree with each other, it is not because of faithlessness or foolishness; it is because we are making different (and difficult) judgments about the relative scale of danger involved. In such matters of judgment, above all

else, charity toward one another should prevail.

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ***“You shall love your neighbor as yourself. But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another”*** (Gal. 5:13-15).

Perhaps your judgment puts you on the less cautious end of the spectrum in responding to the virus. Resist the temptation to assume that those who disagree with you just don't have enough faith. Perhaps your judgment puts you on the more cautious end of the spectrum. Resist the temptation to assume that those who disagree with you are foolish and presumptuous. Instead, ***“decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother”*** (Rom. 14:13); ***“pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding”*** (Rom. 14:19); and ***“welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God”*** (Rom. 15:7). ■

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### ***“every one of you”***

Giving grudgingly or the lack of giving at all to the Lord's work is a common problem among many of the Lord's people. Some seem to think you should give only if you have some extra funds. Some have the idea that the “well-off” brethren are to do the giving. Some have the idea that giving is necessary only on the Lord's day that is near their pay day; claiming that if you only get paid once a month, then you should be expected to give only once a month. Some have the idea that if you suffer a job loss or some financial difficulty you are excused from giving all together. But, what do the scriptures teach about giving? Are the above stated ideas good *reasons* or are they just *excuses* some make because of their lack of love for God, the church and brethren in need? Which?

In 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 the apostle Paul commanded, ***“Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come.”*** In this passage Paul gives the *why*, the *who*, the *when*, the *where*, the *what*, and the *how much*! (1) *Why?* – for the poor saints according the Divine order (command) of the apostle Paul; (2) *Who?* – ***“every one of you.”*** This means ***“every one of you”!*** When Peter and the apostles preached on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, Peter answered the Jews by saying, ***“repent and be baptized every one of you for the remission of sins”*** (Acts 2:38). So, the *Who* in our text included every member in all the churches of Galatia and the church at Corinth. And it is the pattern for all Christians today! (3) *When?* – ***“on the first day of the week.”*** ***“When”*** means the first day of every week since every week has a first day; (4) *Where?* – when the saints ***“come together”*** on ***“the first day of the week”*** (1 Cor. 11:17; 18, 20, 33; 14:23, 26; Heb 10:25). The assembly necessitated the saints coming together ***“into one place”*** (1 Cor. 11:20; 14:23). (5) *What?* – give a portion of the physical blessings under our individual control that the Lord has blessed us with (Acts 4:32-37; Rom. 15:25; (6) *How Much?* – ***“AS God hath prospered.”*** This means in proportion to what you have been blessed with—and ***“every one of you”*** has been blessed! Remember the words of the song we sometimes sing: ***“count our many blessings, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord hath done”*** (Song # 392 – ***Hymns for Worship***).

In the first paragraph of this short article, I posed the question: *are the above stated ideas good reasons or are they excuses some make because of their lack of love for God, the church and brethren in need?*

Since the treasury of the local congregation is to be used for the Lord's work, then failing to give to this great work is a lack of love for God! Case in point, Paul used the example of the liberal giving of the churches of Macedonia when he wrote to Corinth. The Macedonians were exceedingly poor! Paul describes their situation – ***“How that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality”*** (2 Cor. 8:2)! Notice that Paul said they gave ***“in a great trial or affliction”*** being in ***“deep poverty.”*** But, they gave ***liberally*** even though they were in poverty themselves! Also, they gave ***joyfully***; not making excuse or bemoaning their situation of ***“deep poverty.”*** They gave ***abundantly!*** That is, their giving exceeded the expectations of the apostle himself! In other words, they gave until it hurt (cf. Luke 21:1-4)! They, like Jesus, looked not on their own poverty, but on the needs or poverty of others (Phil. 2:4; 2 Cor. 8:9). – ***tgmc*** ■

Service Times - Sunday: 9:00 & 10:00 AM; 6:00 PM - Wednesday: 7:00 PM

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