

NOT UNDER A BOWL 1 Samuel 14:4-15

INTRODUCTION

Today marks a one-week anniversary of a sort. Last Sunday our governor announced that people of a certain age were confined to quarters and should not go anywhere. That announcement applied to me. It was weird to learn that I was in the age group that is considered high risk for COVID-19. I heard a story about a man with a severe case of corona virus, and the man was described as elderly. He was a year older than me. Wait, I'm elderly? When did that happen? I know, you're thinking, "Dude, it takes a long time so it shouldn't be a surprise." I guess so, but I don't feel elderly. I know of someone about my age who was in the market and a clerk looked at her and said, "Hey, you're not supposed to be here." Oh no, old people are being singled out now. I began to wonder if they were going to make me wear a big red E on my chest. I pictured myself walking toward a grocery store and people seeing me and yelling, "Go away, Old Person. Go home!" So today marks one week of being under house arrest for me. I'll tell you a secret, but you have to promise not to tell anyone else. One night this week Laurie sprang me out of jail and we went on a late night run to Home Depot. It was pretty exciting being an escaped prisoner for a brief time.

As the week went on things just got more and more depressing, didn't they? There was initially talk that schools would be closed for three weeks and sports would be shut down until the end of March. But by the end of the week the governor started talking about schools being closed until the fall and the President began talking about fighting the battle against the Coronavirus into August. Restaurants and theaters closed, and the whole state went on total lock down. So now we're all under house arrest. Welcome to my world. Toby and Anna have their house on the market. The new line realtors are using when showing a house is to ask potential buyers, "Can you see yourself being quarantined here?"

At this point with all that's happening we're dealing with two threats. There's the obvious threat of the virus itself, which has become an unprecedented disruption to our lives. We're told to stay away from everybody, thoroughly wash our hands frequently and not touch our face. Is it just me, or is anybody else finding that their face itches more than ever before in their life? My nose, my eye, my cheek, start itching in a way that is impossible to ignore, but I'm not supposed to touch my face! How do you deal with an irresistible itch when you can't touch your face? Are you supposed to go wash your hands before you scratch that itch? I've found myself becoming a contortionist trying to find ways to deal with an itch on my face without touching it with my hand.

It occurred to me that there is one silver lining with this business of being under house arrest. Yes, it is aggravating that I can't go anywhere, but the silver lining is that I now have the perfect excuse to watch all the sports I want on TV. Oh, but wait, there are no sports! So what's everyone going to do stuck at home? Laurie told me about one report that said in about nine months there will likely be a mini baby boom. It said the most popular names for those babies will probably be Angel, Charmin and Scott. I hope you saw yesterday's important announcement. It said the official time to change from your daytime pajamas into your nighttime pajamas is now 8 PM.

How drastically our world has changed in what seems like the blink of an eye. Imagine a game show on television. The host says, "Johnny, tell our winner what her prize is!" "You've just won a 10-day, all-expense paid trip to beautiful Italy!" Are you trying to kill me? That's not a prize, it's a sentence. Here's what would work as a valuable prize: "You've just won a jumbo pack of mega rolls of Charmin toilet paper."

The second threat of this disease is increasingly ominous, and that has to do with the unimaginable damage to our economy it is causing. A poll revealed that 75% of Americans are more afraid of the damage the current draconian measures are going to do to the economy than they are of the disease itself. None of us have ever experienced anything like this because nothing quite like this has ever happened. There could be terrible impacts on people's personal lives and finances. Our son-in-law, Michael, is a pilot for Delta Airlines. They just cut 70% of their flights, and worse could be ahead. That means they have 70% more pilots than they need for the moment. Michael actually had a flight this week. He flew to Honolulu and back. The night before his flight Carissa told us that his plane with capacity near 250 had 166 *open* seats. How long can that go on? Our daughter-in-law, Anna, is the marketing director for Immanuel Tours, a company that puts together trips to Israel. Oh, wait, Israel is no longer allowing tourists in. The company has already laid off all of its employees in Israel. How long is Anna going to have a job? Unfortunately, with Toby still a resident, they depend on Anna's income as their biggest means of support. Carissa works for a financial services company. Uh oh. That whole field is imploding. The only one of our kids whose job is not in jeopardy is Toby. As an emergency medicine doctor his job is absolutely secure. The only problem there is his life is in jeopardy.

Laurie mentioned one day this week that she just felt a sense of heaviness because of these concerns. There is a gloom, a deep concern over what this crisis is going to do to people we love, and to us as well. I talked last week about how to overcome fear. But how do we deal with all this uncertainty and with that deepening gloom? Saying, "don't worry, be happy"

isn't very helpful. We can learn from what Jesus did in his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6. In verses 25-34, three times, he said, "Don't worry." Easier said than done. But he did something to help us implement that. He didn't just say to try to take worry away. He knew if he did that it would leave a void, and worry would just rush in to fill it again. So he gave us something to replace the worry. He said, "Seek first his (God's) kingdom and his righteousness." Instead of worrying, seek God's kingdom. Seek to serve and build up God's kingdom. Put your focus on that, and you won't need to worry. He wanted us to redirect our minds.

Laurie is brilliant in many ways. One of those is in dealing with children. Little two-year-old Cara is now old enough to assert her will, but is not quite as developed when it comes to sharing and a sense of fair play. Whatever Ella is playing with, Cara wants. She knows one way of handling that. It is to grab it and try to yank it away. Ella is bigger and can often wrestle it back, and that leads to a volcanic meltdown from Cara. Laurie has been teaching Ella a different way to handle it. Just give Cara something else to focus on. Offer her another toy, or you just start playing with a different toy, and Cara will want that. Shift her focus onto something else. That's what we need to do. As we are obsessing about the gloom of the situation, Jesus says the key is your mindset, where your heart is. Shift it onto something else and it will be much easier to not worry. I want to tell you a story out of the Old Testament that might help us, one found in 1 Samuel 14.

JONATHAN TRIED TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Previous to this incident, the people of Israel had clamored to have a king. They had been a theocracy with God as their leader. But they had decided they needed a human leader. One element contributing to that desire for a king was ongoing hostilities with the Philistines. They lived in the Canaan area alongside the Israelis, and much as there is today, there was constant conflict between the Philistine people and the Israelis. The Israelis thought what they needed was a ruler who could unify them, create an army and finally defeat the Philistines for good.

Saul was chosen as king and he had some initial success against the Philistines. But they were still a problem. In chapter 13 the Philistines had invaded Israeli territory again and were seriously threatening to overwhelm them. 1 Samuel 13:5 says, "The Philistines assembled to fight Israel, with 3000 chariots, 6000 charioteers, and soldiers as numerous as the sand on the seashore." So how many grains of sand are there on the beach? I have no idea what that number is, but I'm guessing it's more than 10, which meant they couldn't have gotten their army together today because of the restrictions due to the corona virus.

Compare that with what 14:2 tells us. “Saul was staying on the outskirts of Gibeah under a pomegranate tree in Migron. With him were about 600 men.” Saul was facing an army of 3000 chariots, each with a crew of two, and infantry numbering in beach sand figures, and all he had was 600 soldiers? Just the chariots had Israel outnumbered ten to one. Those are some really stinky odds, but there was another factor adding to the degree of difficulty for Israel. The Philistines had a significant edge in weapons technology. For whatever reason, Philistines had blacksmiths that were adept at making swords and spears, but Israel did not. All they had were farm implements like axes, plow points and sickles. And in order to make them even moderately useful for combat they had to go to Philistine blacksmiths to get them sharpened! You’ve probably heard an adage that came out of that experience. Never bring a sickle to a sword fight. Oh, wait, that’s never bring a knife to a gun fight. Well, you get the idea. I imagine the Philistines were really scared when they stood there holding the latest, most lethal model sword and confronted an Israeli farmer holding a sickle.

The armies were maneuvering and positioning prior to a looming big battle. The Philistines sent out scouting and raiding parties both to gather intelligence and to degrade the Israeli forces. A detachment of Philistines had established a position on the high ground commanding a key pass near Michmash. They had an ideal defensive position. It was at the top of the pass, with steep cliffs on each side of the valley leading up the pass. One of the cliffs was called “Slippery,” so today it would have been known as Slippery Rock. The other was called “Thorny.” It was covered with heavy brush that had long thorns. Those two outcroppings guaranteed the only way opposing troops could approach the pass was to march right up the road to it.

This pass was a chokepoint. If the Philistines held it they controlled the pass and put the Israelis at an even further disadvantage. It was pretty much a hopeless situation. Enter Jonathan. Jonathan was the son of King Saul. He was a noble man who saw that Israel was facing an ominous and seemingly hopeless situation. For them to have any chance at all of repelling the Philistines would take something remarkable. That military problem began with that pass near Michmash. Jonathan knew that the only way to take out the Philistines guarding the pass was with a small special forces unit that the enemy would feel they could handle on their own with no back up needed. So Jonathan proposed that a *very* small unit, just he and his armor bearer, would attack.

Jonathan’s young armor bearer, who is never named, was a real hero of ancient Israel in my mind. A warrior would have several weapons as well as a shield, but it would be too much for him to carry it all. So he would have an aide who would carry some of his weapons, especially his shield. But this meant when the warrior went into the heat of battle, the armor bearer went with him.

Jonathan proposed to his aide that the two of them climb up that steep pass and take on a unit that likely consisted of at least 30 or 40 men. This looked like a suicide mission. The rule of thumb in the military is that to defeat a force that has a dug in, superior defensive position you need to outnumber them at least 3 to 1. Instead of outnumbering them 3 to 1 Jonathan had come up with a plan that had him outnumbered possibly as much as 20 to 1! This seemed like it was hopeless from the start. By far the most likely outcome would be Jonathan and his aide would die. The only hope really for the aide is that somehow he could escape and run away.

I love the response of Jonathan's aide. "Do all that you have in mind," he says in verse 7. "Go ahead; I am with you heart and soul." This young man said, "I'll follow you to death." And when he said that, that's almost certainly what he figured the outcome of this mission would be.

The thing that strikes me is that even if they were successful and gained control of the pass, they still faced overwhelming odds with the main Philistine army. Winning one small unit skirmish would not make any difference in the large arena of the war. So what was the point of taking such a risk?

Listen to what Jonathan said as he proposed this crazy attack. In verse 6 he said, "Come, let's go over to the outpost of those uncircumcised men. Perhaps the Lord will act in our behalf. Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few." Perhaps? Maybe the Lord will help us? Yeah, um, Jonathan, what if he doesn't? Perhaps and maybe aren't a good military plan. You won't last 2 minutes up there! Apparently Jonathan was willing to accept that as the outcome. He did not presume that God would do some miraculous thing. But he believed nothing is beyond God. Nothing can hinder God. Jonathan could surely remember the story of Gideon, whom God used to defeat an invading force of many thousands with an army of only 300 men. God had done a miracle to rescue them. How many men do you need to have a miracle? It doesn't matter how many men you have when God steps in to act, because no one can defeat God. Jonathan was quite clear. God could help them, and if he chose to do so then no amount of human opposition would matter. If God didn't help them, then at least Jonathan would die trying to make a difference.

Jonathan believed that God wanted him to attack that Philistine position. So that's what he did. In verse 12 he says to his young aide, "Climb up after me; the Lord has given them into the hand of Israel." In other words, those clowns are toast.

GOD USED JONATHAN IN A POWERFUL WAY

Once he got to their position it was game on. Jonathan started fighting and verse 13 says the Philistines fell before him. In that violent attack the two of them killed 20 men. The account tells us this happened in an area about a half an acre in size. How big is that? Not very big. A football field is about an acre, so imagine from the 50 yard line to the goal line, 50 yards wide. That's a fairly compact space to end up with 20 dead Philistines.

That was a shocking outcome. No one would have expected that. But that huge upset was the precipitating event for a much larger one. Jonathan didn't just defeat 20 guys. There was a larger force farther back and the survivors of the skirmish with Jonathan took off in panicked flight back toward the rest of their army. Remember from last week that fear is contagious. The panic spread. Verse 15 says, "It was a panic sent by God." In other words, it was not reasonable. They just freaked out. It struck the entire army. Raiding parties, outposts and the main camp all went nuts.

You see the result of all this in verse 20. The rest of the Israeli army sees what's happening with the Philistines. So they quickly mount an attack. "Saul and all his men assembled and went to the battle. They found the Philistines in total confusion, striking each other with their swords." The final outcome is revealed in verse 23. "So on that day the Lord saved Israel."

Israel faced an ominous, depressing and seemingly hopeless situation. How were 600 men going to defeat an enemy of thousands armed with superior weapons? How were Jonathan and his aide supposed to overcome an enemy unit that had every tactical advantage and outnumbered them almost 20 to 1? Even if they won that battle how was that going to help with the bigger problem? But Jonathan looked at that situation, one in which no one else was doing anything to try to change the equation, and decided he had to act. He believed he needed to act, he needed to do something, and he knew that his God had the power to defeat the odds. Jonathan did not know how victory in his battle at the pass could make any difference in the larger scheme of the war. But he knew he had to do something. So he chose to do what he could, and then let God decide what to do with it.

That statement in verse 6 is one of the most profound in the Bible. "Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few." In other words, God's power is not limited by human ability. He can act even when the task seems impossible for the human resources at hand.

IMPLICATIONS

WE NEED TO CHANGE OUR MINDSET

Jonathan did not see himself as a helpless victim of an impossible situation. He saw himself as a servant of God who could make a difference in the situation, even if he didn't know how that could happen. He just knew he had to act. He believed if God chose to act there was no end of the good that he could do, and as he had hoped his impact turned out to be enormous.

We also need to change our minds about who we are. We need to not see ourselves as helpless victims of a seemingly impossible situation, but as servants of God who can make a big difference, and we need to believe that nothing can hinder God. Perhaps we don't have a lot of power. Perhaps there are few of us. But nothing can hinder God from saving.

In Matthew 6:14-16 Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." That's absolutely true. Do you put in lighting in your home, and then cover it all up? I didn't think so. That's just common sense, right. Laurie and I bought a couple of jigsaw puzzles before the pandemic confined us to quarters. Now that we are shut ins it gives us another thing to do. I know there are people who say doing nothing is better than doing a jigsaw, but being the crazy, exciting people we are, we like them. But here's the thing. If you never take the puzzle pieces out of the box, it really isn't much good. Jesus was saying, take the pieces out of the box.

2 Corinthians 4:6 Paul wrote to believers in Jesus, "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ." We have this light within us. Jesus said "don't stick it under a bowl. Let it shine."

Yes, things are gloomy right now. They are dark, and it is foolish to pretend otherwise. But do you know what the dark is? It is an opportunity for the light to be even more obvious. If you light a candle outside on a bright sunny day you can hardly see its light. But put that same candle in the same place on a dark night and its glow becomes obvious from considerable distances.

In his book, *The Rise Of Christianity*, Rodney Stark says that much of the spread of early Christianity was sparked by the care and compassion of Christians, especially during times of epidemics in the early centuries of the church. Early church historian Eusebius wrote in

the 4th century that because of the compassion of the church in times of crisis “the deeds of Christians are on the lips of everyone.”

That has continued in this present crisis. Christians in the city of Wuhan in China took to wearing protective yellow suits and going into the streets to hand out free masks and share their food with others. This is a big deal. One resident of the city said about the masks, “Money is useless because you can’t find a store that is selling the masks.” They gave out over 30,000 masks. People call them the “Angels In Yellow.” Other Christians delivered 400 masks, 1000 pairs of gloves and 1000 goggles to Wuhan Central Hospital. Yet another group noticed that people were putting up pleas for medical assistance, for hospital beds, on the Internet and government censors were scrubbing them off the net. So they set up a web site dedicated to helping people find beds and medical help.

If we see ourselves as living for the kingdom of God, see ourselves as having the chance to shine light in the darkness, we will not be as obsessed with what might happen. As we focus on making a difference perhaps we can actually make a difference, and maybe we will be less gloomy than if we see ourselves only as victims. We need to see ourselves as agents of the kingdom of God.

WHAT CAN WE DO TO SHINE THE LIGHT?

The big problem is we don’t know quite what to do. We’re being told to limit our exposure to people. We are being told that if we go out and try to connect with people in order to help them we might actually make the problem worse. So what are we supposed to do?

Be An Example

People’s lives are being turned upside down. They are disturbed, even fearful about what this is all going to mean. Many are seriously worried and lacking in peace, and some are losing hope, fearful that things will never return to “normal.”

One of the most important things that we can do is live in peace ourselves. We need to live out the reality of Psalm 23. “The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.” We are walking through a pretty dark valley, but the Shepherd is with us. We don’t need to fear any evil. I can guarantee you that people are looking for someone who is at peace, not fearing evil. They want to be at peace, and need to know that it is possible.

When we were with our granddaughters last Saturday at one point 4 year old Ella told us about her most recent visit to Disneyland, back when it was still open. She told us she went

on Space Mountain, which is pretty daunting for someone her age. She said, "I was so brave." Her parents told her that, and she was. But what enabled her to be brave is that she was with her Mom and Dad. I know for sure that without them there she would not have been brave. We can be brave too, because our Father is with us.

He has promised that he will somehow work good out of even things like this. So we can trust him and have hope. And maybe what people need most of all in this time is hope. If we live in hope we can make a huge difference in their lives.

Pray for Them

We can't make this virus suddenly go away. We can't fix the problems in the economy. But we can pray. Nothing can hinder God from saving, whether by many or by few. We can ask him to save us, to protect us from this disease, to make it go away, and to somehow keep us all from being financial destroyed by an economic cataclysm.

Do you know that if you offer to pray for people and ask them what they would like you to pray, they will almost never turn you down? People are always happy to have someone praying for them.

Care For Them

That caring could take the form of just expressing concern, just listening to them, giving them a place to offload their worries. It could be seeking to encourage them. Right now most of us are feeling more cut off from others than we have ever been. That's unpleasant to a lot of people. It matters a lot to know that someone is thinking about them. Just a phone call or a text asking how they're doing is huge during times like this.

It might involve physically taking action. Maybe it's helping someone with the chore of getting to a store or a doctor. Maybe it's sharing some of what you have. There is an article in the newspaper today about a growing trend in our country. People are putting up Christmas lights as a way of brightening this dark time. It quoted one woman who in explaining why she did it said, "Anything I can do to make people happy right now, I'm going to try to do." She's thinking of others, and that's good.

If you will pray God will put on your heart what actions you should take. What I think we need to learn from Jonathan is the way of thinking. It is living based solidly in the truth that nothing can hinder God, and then seeing ourselves as agents of his kingdom, here to spread light and to make a difference in a dark world. If we are busy doing that we will not have time to sit around feeling fearful and worried about what might happen to us. And that's a good thing.

Years ago when I wasn't an elderly person I used to play hockey. I was not very good. Actually that's not quite true. I was terrible. So when I played I had to focus totally and I had to give it everything I had. It was exhausting. I can remember coming off the rink after a shift and being so tired my legs were shaking. When it was my turn to go back on the rink I feared I was going to collapse. Money was a big stress for me those days. But I remember when I was playing I never had a moment of stress or worry about money. Jesus wants us to be focused on making a difference for his kingdom and working at it with such passion that we don't have time or bandwidth to give to anxiety over what is going to happen.

Yes, but, how is what little I can do going to make any difference in the big picture? And how is this all going to end? Here's why I like the story of Jonathan's attack on the pass. He didn't fret about those questions. He did what he could do. He didn't know how it would end. He just knew he had to make a difference, and so he did. Jesus said, "Don't worry about tomorrow, each day has troubles of its own." So do today what you know you can do, and let God sort out how it all turns out. Remember what the great Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky said, "If God exists, everything is possible."