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Conversations in a Crisis: Part X: Living Within Our Limits (with Rev Benjamin Miller)

May 18, 2022



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Faced with our challenge of remaining faithful within and addressing our various contemporary societal crises with wisdom, Christians and churches are fracturing over our differing approaches and postures. My friend Ben Miller suggested that we have a series of conversations, to help us to pursue greater clarity on the principles, virtues, duties, and practices that can equip Christians to meet such difficult times with prudence, insight, and courage.

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Transcript

The following is one of a series of conversations that I'm having with my friend, the Reverend Ben Miller. Ben is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church on Long Island, and he suggested in the context of current divisions within the church over political and other issues that we have a wide-ranging series of conversations about issues of Christian ethical reflection, epistemology, charity, obedience, trust, community, and conscience in this context. While our conversations are occasioned by issues such as COVID, on which Ben and I have different opinions, our conversations will not be narrowly about it, but will be a broader exploration of issues of Christian faithfulness in any sort of crisis, some of the principles that should guide us, and some of the practices and virtues that we need to pursue.

Through our conversations, we're hoping to arrive at more accurate and charitable understandings of each other, a better grasp of responsible processes of Christian

reasoning and deliberation, and a clearer apprehension of principles that we hold in common. We invite you to join us for these conversations, to listen to our discussions, and then to share your own thoughts in the comments and elsewhere. Thank you very much for your time and attention.

I should say, Alistair, as we begin this final episode for now, that I have profited so much from these conversations, and I'm very grateful to you for having them with me. We did think that now, as something of a wrap-up, we might talk about something that has been in the background throughout these conversations. It might sound a little abstract when it's just stated out loud, but we can explore it.

And that is, learning to live well with what we could call the boundedness or limitations or finitude, and ultimately the mortality of our life in this world. There is a longstanding, I'm tempted to call it, I'll just call it a preoccupation, which has been characterized as modernity, kind of at the heart of modern thinking and living. And that is the power to control things, the power of mastery.

And that is actually something that we human beings have been given by God to a remarkable degree. I mean, we are able to work with and even transform the world and form ourselves in ways that are wonderful and have produced such beneficial results. But we have created a world in which this kind of assumption that we can manage and master things is deeply woven into our social and cultural consciousness now.

I'm tempted to say it has deeply spiritual dimensions even. And on the private level, perhaps in our last episode, we talked a lot about fear and the reactivity that fear can bring. Sometimes I think that is really fueled by a sense that we are not in control or that something is trying to control us.

And so I just wonder if we could talk a bit about the importance of learning to live an appropriately bounded life where the possible is not the measure of the good. And when we've run up against a boundary that is just real, it's just part of God's created reality and we have to learn to live within that. Why is that actually a blessing? And how would that change, if nothing else, change our emotional lives and our relational reactions? Yes, I think this is a topic that really brings together so many of the threads of our overarching discussion.

We can think about the way that living as limited creatures is about recognizing the bounds of our knowledge and the bounds of our wisdom in situations, the realms of our competent judgment, the ways in which we just cannot be certain about things. And the more that we pursue certainty, the more we'll become aware of the areas of our consciousness that we lack of knowledge or awareness. To think about the way in which we have to deal with fears within ourselves, even fears that are rational fears have to be handled carefully.

We can think about the way that I often think about the way that the psalmist speaks to himself as a frightened animal. And so he tries to calm his soul, like you might treat a cornered animal that feels it's being attacked and pursued and beset upon. We can often feel like that.

And that ability to talk to ourselves and to reason with ourselves about those things which we can find security in, is something we need to practice. And particularly at times like this, we need to remind ourselves that in our lack of power, we can turn to the one who is above all things, and that he is the one who has power and knowledge and all these other things that we might feel our lack, might also think about limitations to our sovereignty. And the way that in times like this, we can often seek to gain a power that may be illusory, but and or seek to claim a certainty that is not a real certainty in order to deal with our fears and anxieties.

Likewise, our relationship with death has been very much something that's been at the background. Yeah, so much of our treatment of COVID. Is it something that for some, it can be a sort of aversion, you don't want to think about it, you don't want to take this threat seriously.

For others, it becomes an all paralyzing concern and preoccupation. Yeah, it's something you can never stop looking away from the figures rising, never the scenes from hospitals, whatever it is. And as human beings, we are those who are mortal.

And as a result of the reality of death, we can be held subject by the fear of death. And this is one of the things that Christ frees us from, according to the book of Hebrews, the power of Satan is very much wielded through the fear of death, whether that's the power of states to put people to death, whether it's the power of our mortality, and when it's our sense of mortality over us when we're faced with disease or illness, whatever it is, that fear can be a stifling, dominating one, and in many respects. And in other ways, we're dealing with the fact that we live in the aftermath of some dramatic transformations in human experience.

Yeah, in the past, death was a far more real presence in the midst of life. Now it takes place increasingly behind doors, we have less of a direct relationship with the elderly. And so it's very easy to blind ourselves to death within our society.

We can also fail to recognize the horizons of our own existence. We're so fixated upon the immediacy of an image and voice saturated presence, that we forget that we are going to die, and that our lives need to be lived to a horizon that exceeds that of our own lives, lifespan, whether related to earthly affairs, or whether related to our immortal souls. We need to consider that we are destined towards a new heaven and a new earth, and also that we're going to leave things to those who come after us.

And I think one of the things that has been exposed in the last few years has been how

little those considerations intrude upon our lives, and how poor we are at dealing with them when they do. Yeah, that is certainly true. And I'm not laughing because I'm being dismissive, I felt this myself, but boy, are we unable to handle the whole specter of plague and death and sickness.

I mean, it is horrific, but just the mentality with which we approach it, I've just been struck by this, when you read accounts in honestly most of history where disease, for example, and often disease that would just wipe out, you know, at least large portions of society, this was just something that was horrific, but yet it was kind of expected, it was just a kind of fortitude of mind, not a carelessness about it, like it didn't matter, but just a readiness to meet these sorts of things and grief, but also it just didn't seem to shock our ancestors the way this pandemic really shocked, particularly the more technologically advanced world, as if we should be beyond this. I had moments, I confess, during the pandemic when I was saying to myself, it's 2021 or it's 2020, how is this even possible? And I realized the hubris reflected in that statement, like we are still but mortals, the idea that there should just be a just a pill you pop and they should all go away is a kind of madness. I do wonder, to much of what you've said, there's sort of this spiritual and social playing out of this kind of sovereignty, and here I'm going to say something that might sound weird and maybe it is.

Interesting you began with that statement in Hebrews that Jesus has delivered us from him who had the power of death, delivered those who through fear of death were all their life subject to bondage. I'm reading a lot now, a lot of reflections on what we call the modern world and kind of the Baconian project of mastering nature and so on, and various ways that's played out through history so far. And I have heard recently a theme emerge that I was initially inclined to dismiss, but as I've thought about it, I've wondered if it has merit, that there's something almost demonic, if I can use that word, in this increasingly kind of machine-like quality of the modern world, the technocracy, how much our lives now, right down to the most quotidian habits, are they're like tethered to this thing, this technological thing, for example, and there's something about it that is shaping us now in ways that seem irreversible and in some ways unstoppable.

And it is affecting our mental health, it's obviously, I see it as a pastor, affecting our spiritual lives and so on. And I wonder if we can say that with all of the good that the Baconian revolution has brought, the attempt of putting man in a position where even nature was subject to him could perhaps be linked to a kind of fear of death, fear of our mortality and our limits, that does have a kind of demonic quality to it. I'm not trying to go all bizarre with that, but I think going all the way back to the book of the early chapters of Genesis, there's a tension between man's rule over the world under God and man's attempt to rule the world as God.

And one produces glorious things that we can call culture and medical advances are obviously one wonderful part of that, but it can also produce the cities of Cain, it can

produce this a world in which we become more like machines and monsters than humans. And I feel that now as a pastor, when I talk to young people today, there is a kind of numbness and bewilderment almost. Life today has, there's a feeling and I know I'm being sort of maybe a little bit obtuse here, there's a feeling that so much that makes us human has kind of been stripped away with the advances that have come.

And I think that's a big, I think we really need to take that into account in our thinking about spiritual formation in this moment, post pandemic not least. Yes, and there I have been very struck by the absence of a real human aspect to the COVID crisis. We've thought a lot about figures and data, we thought a lot about scientific research, government policies, and other things like that, but far less has been said about or explored about the reality of the human face of all of this, how people are dying and what it means to face your mortality.

And that aspect of it, I think, is something that Christians need to foreground. And we've been very, very poor at doing that. And death just does not have the sort of presence in our lives that it did in the lives of our ancestors.

And so our challenge, I think, is to resituate death in the midst of our lives, in a way that is not just in fearful thrall to it, but not in that sort of what not thinking about it at all costs, which is another sort of vehicle. We've often become forgetful of the fact that we are mortals, we're limited, and our powers are limited against these threats. And I've often returned in the last few years to the story of the book of Daniel, and the way that Daniel is dealing with so many of the themes that we've been discussing in this conversation, themes of human power, faced with divine power, faced with situations where we have the hubris of human authorities, and their attempts to become godlike authorities and to control and manage all things.

And on the other hand, the way in which someone in a situation where they're being persecuted or whatever, or facing resistance, can nonetheless be submissive to an honoring of authorities. And many of these complicated themes are dealt with in dense and rich ways within that book, even within the small scope of 12 chapters, it paints a remarkable portrait of the authority of God, and the authority of man, and how to negotiate the relationship between them. And I think, for instance, the way in which the king, often within the book of Daniel tries to exert his authority and his agency and his control, and ends up in a situation where his word, which seemed to be an expression of his own authority, comes back to bite him, and to control him.

And very often, I think we are experiencing that limit to our control. We think that we are actually the masters of the universe, because we've created a world around ourselves that is so carefully governed by human providence, that when something breaks in from without, like a virus, we find it very hard to deal with that, apart from the structures and the categories of human providence, we don't have a sense of divine act, we don't have

a sense of natural forces intruding upon our world. And so we tend to collapse it into categories of political partisanship, or scientific control, government measures, whatever it is, and we can't really face the reality of human limit, mortality, and just the need to live as creatures.

So can I say something a bit controversial, building on that? I think that is just, that is that is spot on. And I've wondered if there are two political impulses that were reflected throughout the pandemic, that are seen as polarized, but I wonder if they're in some ways working from that same kind of fear and assertion of human sovereignty in response to fear. You have an impulse, often associated with a so-called right, of personal autonomy, almost personal invincibility, leave me alone and I'll be fine, right? I don't need the government, I don't need experts, I don't need my neighbor, leave me alone, I'll be fine.

A kind of, a sense almost that, not that we can cheat death, but that left, if my life is left to me, I will be, I'll flourish. And then of course you have another impulse, often associated with the so-called left, which is, we need social things to solve our problems and so on. That's a clumsy way of framing this, but I do think that whether your tendency is to be more individualistic in your political view, or more socially oriented in your political view, often in both cases, and I saw this with COVID, it was a sense that if the state would just leave us alone, we'd be beyond this virus quickly, on one hand, or on the other, just a panic, like if we don't have policies and people are not complying with these policies, we're all, you know, civilization is doomed.

And I just wonder if those are both strangely, kind of a, if a certain godless humanism cannot be at work in both of those, where I actually do need protection, but that protection really does ultimately come from God. I don't know if that makes sense. Like, I just think that sometimes what we consider political polarities in many ways are kind of working from a similar trust in man.

Yep. Putting our trust in princes or in our individual agency. Exactly.

Rather than in the Lord. And that has often been something that I've had to speak to myself about. Same here.

Recognizing that there are deep instincts within us that will look to our own agency, or will look to government authority, or some other institution to act on our behalf, and fail in the process, just to put our hands in the, our lives in the hands of God. It just seems so deeply worked into us as part of modern life, that we do not have a sense of authorities that exceed human authorities, as just a deep instinct and posture. And there, I think, just the practice of daily prayer will be something that reminds us constantly, in ways small and large, of the limitations of human sovereignty, the limitations of our control, and the ways in which ultimately, we need to look to the Lord.

Even when we're reading something like the 23rd Psalm, it's easy to forget that the 23rd Psalm is written by a king, and a king who might think that he's the shepherd of this great nation, but he needs to look to a shepherd who's above him. And he needs to be guided in the valley of the shadow of death himself, he does not have the knowledge that he needs of the path ahead of him. And so he must put himself in God's hand.

And the other thing that I'm often aware of is just how many of the factors within our lives, we do not control. Something like the results of the reports of the leak of the Supreme Court, how many different people have worked for 50 years and prayed for 50 years for this result, and all the different activities that have been taking place on different levels, and just how uncertain everything is, how much everything hangs upon very minute factors that could go either way. And ultimately, we, as we reflect upon those things, realize we're not ultimately in control, we can control certain things.

But ultimately, everything is directed by divine providence. And many of the great decisions and results of our lives are determined not by anything that we could have foreseen, but by strange turns of events. I mean, who do we end up marrying? How do we, where do we settle? What job do we have? Many of the biggest decisions are things that are completely out of our hands.

And yet we think that we are in control of it all. Can I ask something about that, just at the level of daily spiritual practice? Um, so our mutual friend, Joe Minnick, has written a book about why, why it feels so obvious in the modern world that God is absent. Like, why does it feel obvious? And he talks about the fact that we just have so many ways now of insulating ourselves from providences that would have affected our forebears a great deal.

If my house is cold, I turn on my heat. If it's raining, I go indoors. I have air conditioning in my car if it's hot outside.

I'm able to flip a light on if it gets dark. We just, we've so insulated ourselves from weather and seasons and any obvious dependency on the soil and the elements and so on. And so there is this kind of instinctive thing, I think, woven into our daily habits of, well, just fix it.

Turn on the light. It's dark. You know, the sun went down.

Who cares? Turn on the light. How do we, just even physically being so insulated from, from providences that would have affected other generations much more. Are there daily habits we can, we can engage in? Prayer being one, obviously.

And I do think also just paying attention to things like pandemics. I do hope we've all, I do hope I have been listening. I hope all of us have been listening over the last couple of years.

It just hit me between the eyes very early on. God sent a microbe and it just brought the entire globe to its knees for a period of months and even years. That's a megaphone to the world for sure.

But how do we in our daily lives just kind of practice awareness that I'm breathing right now because God is giving me breath? Yes. At the beginning of the pandemic, one of the, I was thinking about how do we process something like this? And as Christians, we can often leap to the category of judgment. And I'm not sure that's the most helpful place to begin.

For me, the categories that really stood out were testing and humbling. First of all, testing is a time when those things that are strong and secure will remain. Other things start to crumble.

And I think we've seen a lot of that. It puts pressure upon things and reveals things in their strength or their weakness. And so over the course of the pandemic, and now as well, we should be constantly reflecting upon what things have not withstood the stress, what things have buckled, what things have become distorted, and what are the things that can be built up and what can we build upon that has shown itself to be sure? Where can we see some of the virtues of Christian faith coming to the foreground in response to crises like this? Another thing is humbling.

In a crisis like this, we realize the limitations of human sovereignty, human power to foresee the future. We can't predict the way that this is going to go. And we've seen that again and again, even the greatest experts and government authorities can neither control nor foresee the course of something very small, as you say, something that is beyond human power to foresee and control.

And so what we need to do, among other things, is to be humbled, to be in a situation where we tarry with the awareness of our limitations. We don't always try and escape from that into some new, more complete form of control, redoubling our efforts merely in order to get some grasp upon a reality that will always slip out of our fingers in various ways. But recognizing at a time like this, that we are creatures and God is God, and we throw ourselves more upon his hands.

And then we take our actions, but we take our actions recognizing that they are not sure in their outcomes. We're praying that they will have positive outcomes, but we ultimately recognize that God is the one in control. And there, I think also we will have a lower sense of human powers, a lower sense in, first of all, they won't be so much the objects of our trust, but nor will they be primarily the objects of our fear and preoccupation.

We'll recognize, for instance, that God establishes and removes kings. He establishes and removes laws. And so primarily we're dealing with God.

This is one of the things that I want us to think about in the wake again of this Supreme Court decision. Are we going to attribute this primarily to human power or to divine providence? And as a result, are we going to put our faith more in human power to achieve things for us? Or are we going to turn with redoubled commitment to prayer and to recognizing that we could never foresee or control these sorts of things, but God can answer his people's prayer. And he does answer such prayers.

That is just, and I confess that that is just something I long for the Lord to work into my own heart more. It is not natural to us, it seems to me in modern times, to just sit with our powerlessness, sit with our finitude and really let that drive us to prayer. As if, I use the words as if, as if it really is in the hands of the Lord.

I mean, I almost feel as if for me often in my kind of instinctive thinking, God is a fallback. God is the one you turn to when everything else is exhausted, as opposed to the realization you're bringing out now, which is that even if my agency accomplishes something, that is because God has so willed it. And I think here, along with the book of Daniel, this is a great time to spend a lot of time with Ecclesiastes.

That book helps me so much because it's, among other things, it just has shocking reminders throughout of what we could call a kind of principle of chance or just uncertainty. We actually have no idea what the outcome of things will be. The writer says at the end, just throw a lot of seed on a lot of soil because you don't know if this or that field will grow.

You really don't. The race is not always as a swift. Time and chance happen to all of us.

Ultimately, it's not chance, it's providence, but it's unpredictable, it's uncertain. And so there's always, our agency is always against the horizon of what we do not know and cannot control. And I think there's a kind of freedom that can come in that.

Particularly when we know the one whose providence is over all things. Exactly. Right.

So that the conclusion of the race is not always the swift or bread to the strong and so on, the conclusion of that can be, well then go eat your bread, drink your wine, put on white garments, enjoy the life of your youth because God has already approved what you do. Really, it's in his hands. And there's that, it is faith that enables you to live in uncertainty with joy.

Ultimately, faith fixed on the final judgment. There's a whole lot going on in this world that if God cannot right those wrongs, if God cannot, as it were, if he cannot bring beauty out of ashes, then I don't know how you don't live with constant despair, but because he is able in a way that I cannot even imagine to do that. And I think that's why the book concludes with judgment.

Remember this, my son, God will bring everything into judgment, whether it's good or

bad. So keep God's commandments. And part of that is go eat your bread and drink your wine and be joyful.

You can be joyful because God is God and you're not. And the other thing I find in Ecclesiastes that just helps me is a sense of the longness of time. Things are in cycles.

What's come before will come again. And it takes time. And you don't know where you are in that process.

So it's so very, I think it's so very easy to take a snap. I think I've said this to you before, like take a snapshot and that's the whole movie. Just get fixated in a kind of childish way on this moment, this thing that is happening and just lose sight.

And I don't even know how you get this sight unless you just read a lot of history and just kind of keep yourself in the big biblical story of everything. This moment that just seems so enormous is just, it's a vapor. And so my action in this moment matters, but I don't really know quite how it matters because I don't know the story.

God's writing that. And so I don't know, does that just enable us to have a kind of provisional view of things that we do and just recognize I'm seeking to do good and I'm trusting God to bless it. But how this fits into the overall weaving, I don't know and I'm not going to be told.

I'm supposed to. And also we recognize that no matter how great their claims for themselves might be, human powers pass away. The descriptions in Ecclesiastes are just humbling.

We realize we are building sandcastles on the beach. And they're going to be washed away in time. And we've seen great empires rise and fall.

Think about the powers of Babylon as described in the book of Daniel. Babylon fell, even within the book of Daniel itself, Babylon fell. And there is another power in its place.

And that power has fallen and all these other powers after it have fallen in their time. And yet the Lord's power reigns supreme. And it continues.

His kingdom is expanding and will never pass away. And when you look at the great claims made for countries like China or the United States, their powers will pass too. They are not ultimately the kingdom that will endure.

We trust ultimately not in princes, but we trust in the Lord of hosts. And when we do that, we don't need to be so much seeking to control through our princes, nor being in paranoid fear of our princes, because they're limited in what they can do, either for good or for evil. And that I think is something that we see very much in a figure like Daniel, someone who's not in thrall or in just preoccupied with the powers of state.

And he has immense power, but he recognizes that's not ultimately what's going to sway things. And so his ability to, even in that position of great power, to be willing to forfeit at all, just to be faithful to the Lord is a very telling one. That power that he holds the second in rank to the king is not something that he holds as a greater power than the access that he has to the power for what it is.

It's fleeting, it's illusory in many respects, it's limited, it's something that does not have the providence that he would claim for itself. And then he's able to hold it with an open hand and do great good with it, because he recognizes it for what it is. And that power, I think, to approach power without that preoccupying grasp, or that imaginative thrall is something that the book of Ecclesiastes, as you say, really gives us.

Ecclesiastes reminds us from mortality, it begins with that sense of things passing away, cycle recurring, the adamant surface of the earth that we might seek to change, that resists all of our efforts, the ways in which our sandcastles are washed away, the ways in which there are times for different things, but things do not necessarily endure, the way in which our purposes that we have within this life can be thwarted by the actions of the next generation, the way in which the actions even of the most provident or wise man can fail in time, and the chance befalls us all. And then at the end of the book, the reminder just of the reality of death with that great evocative poem, and then the description of what it looks like to trust in the Lord in that sort of situation, in your living out of your life under the sun, that we do not actually have that providence, but those who live in fear of the Lord and enjoy their life within its proper limitations can find a confidence and a wisdom that others lack. But there I think, one of the things that does give us this wisdom is time spent in the presence of death, talks about the importance of the funeral or the mourning house.

He talks also about the way in which there is, wisdom also passes through people who have experienced the cycles of sowing and reaping within life. So being with the elderly, those who have reflected upon things and experienced things, gives us a sense of we're passing through seasons, which will in their turn pass on. And they remember stories that have been told them by previous generations.

And those cycles of wisdom within our society have so often been broken by our trust in the sort of technological knowledge and insight and control that leaves us dulled to the repeating patterns and cycles of sowing and reaping, and the way in which the imprudence or the folly of a certain period of sowing will give you a bitter harvest later on. And likewise, the way in which a rich harvest can be a testament to the wisdom of someone's sowing earlier in their life. And recognizing our own lives through the eyes of why counsellors and elderly people who are able to teach us in these respects is another thing that maybe we lose in a technocratic society.

We're not able to deal with the presence of those limitations. And so we run from them in

various respects, whether to a cocoon of normality, or to where we close out the reality of death, or to some sort of extreme control, where we try and suppress a reality that we just have to be exposed to because we're limited human beings. Yeah, it is interesting to find ourselves living in a society that really does not want children or the aged.

Somebody once said, I forget where I heard this, we all want to live like we're gonna be 23 forever. I think that's true. And it's interesting, back to Ecclesiastes, it's interesting too, in light of your comments about listening to the elderly and learning from them about the law of sowing and reaping, it's interesting that the conclusion that the writer of Ecclesiastes reaches is not passivity.

It's not sort of hedge your bets all the time, because you don't know what's going to happen. He actually summons us to really bold ventures, because you don't know what God will bless. You don't know that he will bless, but you don't know, but he might.

So like, cast your bread, sow your seed, don't stand and watch the, you know, watch the clouds and try to discern the wind, just go out and act. And also, act wisely. The law of sowing and reaping, right? Like plant good seed, planted in good soil, pay attention to what you're doing.

So there's, it's strange, like this awareness of our boundedness and our limitations, it's almost as if it frees us to live more fully, less, there's something about needing to be in control that just constantly, I think, makes you overthink everything, if that makes sense. Like, you're just, you're in a position of trying to manage what you can't manage. And so you don't, your energies are not able to be channeled into what you can do, which is take that seed and go sow it with all of your might, whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your strength, because she all's coming.

And there, I think we return to the fundamental principle that's repeated throughout all of the wisdom literature, which is that wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord. That ability to act in that way is not something that arises just from awareness of our mortality. It arises from a deep awareness of a power that is greater than our mortality.

Everything, single aspect of our lives can be oriented towards the Lord. And that fear that we have of the Lord is something that helps us to deal with all the other fears that would otherwise preoccupy us, hold us in their thrall, as we see in Hebrews, it's the fact that we have a God who is greater than the power of death, a God who cannot be touched by the power of death, and a God who has defeated the power of death in his son, that enables us to live in the face of that power of death without being those who are dominated by it. And I wonder if that's somewhat of something of what Jesus is getting at in the, at least part of the parable of the sower too, of how it is that the Word is choked by cares and pleasures and riches of this age.

It's interesting, I actually preached on that parable, I think it was one of the, maybe the

second Sunday we were live streaming as a church when we couldn't assemble, obviously in March of 2020. And it just, it dawned on me then, although I couldn't have foreseen how true this would be over the next couple of years, God is shaking things. He is just shaking loose so many things that have been, we've taken for granted, and we are now cast back upon his Word, or to put it as you said, like we're thrown back on the fear of the Lord, which is not a place, again, it's not a fallback, it's the reality that whatever limitations and even horrors we face, death, pervasive death being one of them, we're receiving that from the hand of the Lord.

And so we can approach it with faith and confidence, but also the fear of the Lord enables us to believe that God is at work here, that great opportunities are opening before us, and that sometimes in the breaking of things that we hold dear, God is bringing us into a new set of parameters and realities in which he's going to be doing things, and our work will have meaning and will bear fruit because it's part of what he's doing. And so there's a freedom that comes in being shaken, but because God is God. And I just, if nothing else emerges from this crisis, that's what I'm looking for in my own heart and in the lives of those that I shepherd would be, that we would know the Godness of God more, because that's really, it's not even, as you said, not even knowing our own limitations, that's the ultimate thing.

It's knowing our limitations within the context of God's Godness and then being able to be fruitful. Very reformed point that we have at the very beginning of Calvin's Institutes, the knowledge of God and the knowledge of the self are very closely and reciprocally related. You cannot truly know yourself without knowing God.

And likewise, you cannot truly know God without knowing yourself in the light of God. And that knowledge of ourselves in the face of what is ultimately, it's very easy to forget, what we're dealing with is an act of God, whatever human powers may be involved, we need to ultimately relate to God in this crisis. And it's very easy when we are faced with an act of God to turn to all sorts of human authorities and other powers, rather than dealing with the one who made us and the one in whose hands we ultimately, our lives are held.

And that reminder that we have again and again, in the book of Ecclesiastes of the inscrutability of life, of that term, vaper, as a description of life, often translated vanity, I think captures so many aspects of our life that we experience at times like this. It's inscrutable, you can't see through this, it's not something you can get purchase upon, you can't control it, you can't shepherd the wind, God can shepherd the winds, we cannot, it's something that is ephemeral, it moves away, it leaves nothing, it has no purchase upon reality, it has no gain. And in all of these respects, we experience the uncontrollability, the inscrutability, the ephemerality, the mystery of life, and the ways in which we experience that, if we're experiencing that truly, should all drive us back to a dependence upon God, to a recognition of our creatureliness.

And the fact that we have struggled to deal with that well, I think has provoked so many of our conflicts, that if we were more aware of our creatureliness, maybe we would be able to deal with these crises in a calmer way, in a way that's less dominated by fear, by hostility, and by the other things that preoccupy us when we think that human agencies are the most important agencies in the world. Yeah, the social flows from the spiritual, right? Like, faith is what works by love, and we touched on that in our last conversation. I really don't know if it's possible to love without faith.

I say that somewhat, it's been a bit of an overstatement, but I'm not sure it's much of an overstatement, because if you're not confident in the Lord, then people either become idols or threats, it seems to me, right? Like, there's just always this over-investing of what other people are doing with significance, and you know, even as I tend to overestimate my own agency, I tend to overestimate theirs, as opposed to seeing both myself and my neighbor as participants in the realm of providence. I mean, to whatever extent the word disenchanting, I know that kind of makes, that word is loaded now, but we do live in a world where our imaginations have been disenchanting, in the sense that we really do see the spiritual as kind of like, maybe it's out there, but it's at the last kind of realm of reality, after everything else has kind of done its thing, as opposed to this imminence of the transcendent God, His presence and purposes are acting within our acting, right? They are, He is more present to us than we are to ourselves, and surely, I speak here as someone who struggles with working this out every day of my life, but surely then, that means that in this interaction with my neighbor, God is working, God is present, and He has purposes, and if that does not change the tenor of at least the way I approach this, then I'm not walking in faith. I think that one thing that challenges me is how often we think about wisdom in terms of expertise, intellect, whatever, and that aspect of the fear of the Lord, which is central in Scripture, drops out, and so that fundamental posture and disposition that should govern all of our investigation of the world, all of our consideration of ourselves in reality, becomes something that is negotiable, or it's something that is dispensable, it's something that maybe as Christians we need for our own spiritual lives, but it's not something that our experts need, those who are the counselors of our kings, or the kings themselves, our rulers and authorities, but that is needed for everyone, unless there is some steep sense of our creatureliness, and unless there is some fear of a God who is over us, a healthy fear, that's not just a terror, but a respect, an honor, a reverence, everything else will start to go wrong, and I'm often reminded of the ways in which past generations would have days of national humiliation, or a sense of national repentance, not in the ways that we have national apologies now, which tend to be a more secularized form of that, but a sense of how we have sinned, a sense of our limitations that we are thrown upon the hands of God in a crisis, so we are not actually in control, when we experience these crises, we turn to experts, and we turn to authorities as if they were God, but they're not, and as Christians, so often, even if we're resisting the authorities, we're still treating them as if they were God, we're still putting our faith in some sort of political or social solution,

rather than actually turning to the Lord, and there, for me, that humbling experience that we should have in such a crisis has not really kicked in for so many, and even for myself, I feel this often, I'm spending more time thinking about some of the solutions that are technocratic, or governmental, or scientific, then I'm actually just turning to the Lord in my powerlessness, because I'm not ultimately in control of any of these things, I'm not even advising anyone in government on these things, and so my preoccupation with these things is often, is it serving as a cathartic way to deal with my own sense of powerlessness, that I'm finding refuge in my opinion, rather than actually looking to the Lord, who is above all these things.

Yeah, and that also plays out, I think, in a kind of ingratitude for blessings, that's sort of the flip side of that, you know, racing to human help in times of crisis, do we run to give thanks? I mean, is that really that deep awareness that health is from the Lord? The fact that we haven't had pandemics just sweeping through our civilization every few years is from the Lord, and I just, I think that's another way of cultivating what you're describing, the fear of the Lord, is just to recognize that, you know, we used to have national days of Thanksgiving, and I think all of this, I just keep coming back again and again to Moses' words in Psalm 90, so teach us to number our days, we may present to you a heart of wisdom. I think that's what, I think that's the lesson for our time. That, I think, is the lesson in the crisis.