

“Charting a Course In a Post-COVID World”  
Michael Ramsden: June 11/2020 Webinar with Christian Embassy

Michael: Thank you so much, your Excellency, for that very gracious introduction, and Logan, thank you very much for yours. What I’ll try to do if I can this morning with you is see if we can gather some ancient wisdom to shed light on current events, especially as we continue to grapple and wrestle with exactly what will happen. I can’t claim to have a crystal ball to say what the world will look like, but, given the situation we’re in now, I think there are some lessons that we can learn that will be very helpful for us as we seek to move forward.

Around this time last year, maybe slightly earlier, I was in Ukraine just before their presidential elections, and while I was there, I was meeting up with leadership of the country, as it was then, and then also with those who were running for presidential office at the time. And, over the course of sixteen meetings which we had back to back with a series of individuals, the candidates, and the leadership, and members of the cabinet. It was interesting, how every single one of them, made a mention to me of Moses, and the comment was: “Given the crisis that we’re in, given the moment that we’re in, what we now really need is a ‘Moses’”. What they meant was someone who could come, do the seemingly impossible by parting the Red Sea, to get people safely through from one side of a situation to the other.

The very first time someone shared that with me, I smiled and asked if they had read the book of Exodus recently, and they hadn’t. And, the observation I made was that as Moses was seeking to lead people through a time of crisis, there was a moment where the people came to him and said: “It would have been better for us to be where we were rather than come to this place and die in the desert.” And Moses takes that very hard. As a matter of fact, the second time that happens in the book of Numbers, Moses asked to be removed from his leadership position. He goes to God and says: “Look, I can’t handle this. I want you to remove me.” And he’s very dramatic in the way he frames his request, because he’s actually asking for his life to be removed, in order to deliver him from the burden he now feels that he is carrying.

Now, what is interesting is just to see the disillusionment of the people. By any objective standard, when they brought their complaint to him, it wasn’t true, that the situation they were currently in was worse off than where they were. By any objective standard, they were better, living as free in the desert, than as slaves trying to make bricks without straw. But the challenge they had wasn’t that they were comparing what they used to have with what they currently have. They are now comparing what they currently have with what they expected to have, and that expectation gap is so great, the disillusionment is now set, and the disillusionment and despair of the people when Moses hears it, is then expressed also with his own heart, and therefore, in his own sense of failure.

And now, this is something which is incredibly important, because as we’ve navigated this COVID crisis, we have wrestled at one level between people’s expectations, how quickly it may pass, our ability to confine it, the ability to quickly come up with a solution, and then the actual reality.

In many senses right now, we are dealing with the global expectation gap that has manifested itself in the same despair. And many leaders around the world are now feeling the pressure of that, because they're not sure now how to navigate the particular course that we find ourselves in.

We have an additional issue, which is particularly true in the Western world, that the threat of COVID is the first time many have collectively faced the issue of their mortality, collectively wrestled with the fact that we will not be here forever, that our time on this planet is limited; and therefore, it's no surprise that we're struggling to navigate that too, because we're simply unused to asking that question, and trying to face that reality.

We see success in this world as being able to postpone that moment of mortality for as long as possible, rather than success being the position to meet something head on, which is ultimately, inevitable. So what I'd love to try to do is pick up a couple of things and then share just a little of what we might actually be able to learn, as we look at what scripture actually has to say about this particular issue.

Let me just start with a narrative that maybe started thirty, forty, years ago, when more and more people around the world stopped thinking about their duties and obligations and began to think in terms of what are the rights that we should demand. Now the trouble with that mindset, is many people even back fifty years ago, began to notice was that things can become very narcissistic. Everything revolves around us. And we increasingly look toward our government to protect and preserve those things, and we see that they are duty-bound to protect us from things which previous generations felt that only God could protect us from.

Previous generations thought God only could protect us from fear of disease, from famine, and so on, and in times of crisis, we would turn to Him. But now increasingly, we feel that the government should be able to do this, and so now, we look toward our government as if they were God.

Of course, this loads government with a weight they cannot possibly hope to carry, and also means that, in the process, those in leadership are tempted to make promises they cannot deliver on. Of course, when those promises have failed to be delivered, and we realize our limitations, cynicism is the result. We see an awful lot of global cynicism, about political leadership and the world of leadership in general, even before the current crisis that we're in.

So, we're already in a position where we're struggling to think through our own limitations. For 2.4 billion Christians around the world, for 1.5 billion Muslims, for countless others, including the Jewish community, the former chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom has said, we all look to Moses as a leader. And interestingly, he [Moses] is described as one of the most humble men who ever lived. As a matter of fact, as the most humble man. And isn't that remarkable, that the distinctive quality, which is associated with the man who led an entire group of people, through a time of immense crisis and terrible loss, had not force of character, but a gentleness and humility for which he is continually remembered, and actually revered, until this particular day.

Do we need to rediscover the limits of what we can do, while embracing, at the same time, and acknowledging what we can't do? Do we need to unashamedly turn to the one who can intervene and help, and at times, even change the course of history in his hand, as simply as someone who might be able to turn a stream of water?

Now that's the first thing I'd just like to leave with you, the reason why we need leaders right now who are not just simply addressing our interests but are actually raising our sights. We may not be able to reach the stars, but we can be guided by them. And we are now looking for leading lights who are able to provide a guide for us at this time. If we feel that everything can be done for us, we are in danger of generating a global form of dependency rather than generating capacity. When we become overly dependent, even on skilled leadership, we're going to find ourselves in great difficulty.

Again, you can easily see this illustrated from the life of Moses. If God is God and is able to intervene, why does he need Moses to do anything at all, why not do everything Himself directly, and bypass human agency?

But it has always been God's desire and fashion to use people and to guide them and to lead them. In other words, He doesn't just simply bring us into being, He gives us a purpose and reason for being here. Life may be difficult, and it may be hard, but at the same time, it tells us that we're actually necessary, within His economy, to bring about what He would have us bring about. We don't simply need hubris and motivation at this point, we need to develop a capacity for innovation, because if we are going to move forward through this time of crisis, we're going to have to find a way in which we can innovate and think of new ways of doing old things so that we can have new patterns and live in a fresh and a whole new way.

The encouragement that I find in all of this is that we're also told that we don't have to generate this strength ourselves. One of the most remarkable promises that we find in the Bible and through the life of Jesus Christ is the gift of endurance. When you have endurance to run a race, you're not talking about being delivered out of it, you're talking about being given strength for it. And how many of us right now are in desperate need of strength to be able to run our race well, and to actually cope with all the hurdles and obstacles put before us, and not be defeated by them?

The reason why this speaks into the issue of truth and trust is that when we overpromise and underdeliver, we see an erosion of sympathy and an erosion of loyalty to the institutions of leadership that are in a position, and can help to deliver aid and relief and shelter at a time such as this. So it is not a sign of weakness at this point to recognize our limitations; if we are going to rebuild trust with our own communities and with the global community, we need to have the strength of character and the strength of humility to admit where our own limitations are, and of course, it gives us this incredible challenge, about casting a vision for hope, that doesn't at the same time, generate false expectation. And that is why we need wisdom and leadership as much as we also need humility and also responsibility, where we ask the question "What is it that I'm being asked to do?".

But interestingly, in this particular story, there's another instance. Moses is twice confronted by the people with the question: "We're here in the desert, we're going to starve here, why did you bring us to this point?". In Exodus 16, he deals with the objection in his stride, and he says: "Okay, here's the solution." But when it happens a second time, as recorded in the book of Numbers Chapter 11, and the people come with the same complaint, Moses loses heart. Why does Moses lose heart the second time and not the first? I think one of the reasons for this is given to us by one of the leading lights in the field of management by the name of Ronald Heifetz, Harvard academic and author of the seminal 1994 book *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. Again, I'm very grateful to the former chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom for pointing this out in one of his books. Heifetz says that, "in times of global crisis, one of the greatest failures we have in leadership is diagnostic. We can't distinguish between technical and adaptive challenges."

What does he mean by that? Well, what he means is that there are two types of problems: there are technological problems, where we know the problem, we know the issue, it's familiar with us, we know the resources, we know what the response needs to be, we know what has to be done in order to meet it, and then the question is, how do we implement a system to help deliver? And of course, technical problems respond very well to strong command and control systems. But adaptive problems are very different.

Adaptive problems are when the issue is unknown, when we're struggling to realize how we can deal with it. There are no known proven solutions, and now we're struggling to innovate and create in order to meet the new challenge. And what we're facing right now is an adaptive challenge, not a technical one.

The reason why Moses, the second time he hears and meets the people, and they bring the same complaint to him, the reason he feels such despair, is that he realizes this is different from the first time. The first time it was a technical challenge, the problem was the food, but now it's an adaptive challenge, the problem is the people. And adaptive challenges are hard, our values, culture, our practices have to change, and the question is: "Who on earth is capable of bringing about that change, in our thinking, in our heart, in our life?" And, Moses realizes he can't possibly do this, and he says to God: "You've given me a burden too great."

Now God's response is interesting- there are two things he does. Number one, he distributes the burden of leadership across a wider field, and you can read that if you read the story for yourself. But there's something else too, he also helps Moses realize and accept the limits of his own leadership. What he cannot do, God can. Jesus Christ said that he was able to give peace in this world in a way that the world doesn't give it. The world can give peace when it comes up with a solution, but what do we do when we're dealing with things unseen, and we are living in a hope which is yet unrealized. Who is able to guarantee that for us?

The remarkable thing that Jesus promises us and says that He is able to do, in a time of crisis as well as in a time of peace, is to give a form of peace and comfort, a form of stability and hope within the human heart, that cannot be taken away from us.

And this is of course what the early Christians themselves discovered 2000 years ago. In the book of Romans in chapter 8, there's a very famous question that says: "Who can separate us from the love of God?" Now interestingly, it never answers that question, the question is asked "who will separate us", and the book goes on to talk about "what may separate us". And it gives a list, and the very first two words in that list are striking, especially in today's context. It talks about trials and tribulations, the very first word which is used there literally means "to be constrained". The second word which is used there is the word to be "hemmed in", which is why we translate it to stress. If you hem in an animal, if you trap it in a corner, it's going to feel distressed and act accordingly. And those two concepts of living a life where we feel constrained and hemmed in, are two words that speak directly and immediately to the situation we all find ourselves in. And yet it is saying, not to simply the constraints and to being hemmed in, can be taken away, but rather, that there is a strength and a love and a peace that is able to endure and survive even in that particular circumstance. As a matter of fact, the list ends by saying, even if the sword were to come, i.e. if our life was to be taken away, it is possible to know what peace in this world, even death itself is unable to disturb, and death itself cannot actually remove.

We're in desperate need of that hope right now, we're in desperate need of a hope that doesn't just simply take us and inspire us to the point of our grave, but raises the question is there anything else actually beyond it, and that's exactly what Jesus himself began to talk about and also promise.

This is the world that we live in, but it's not the world that we live for. There's also a world that He promises that is yet to come, and we can live in light of that, which means that even if we cease to have life in this world, there is still a life we can enjoy eternally with Him, and if we know peace in this world with Him, that peace will then also continue. And He makes it possible through the extension of his forgiveness.

Now, this is a very different narrative, but it also speaks very, very powerfully, I think, into the challenges we have. And for the sake of time, let me try to give a summary of how this may practically work out into our world.

We are living in a time of great adaptive challenge. We're dealing with unknown problems, to which there are no known technical solutions, and part of the solution is going to require a change of attitude, of heart, of practice. The post-COVID world will be a permanently changed one, and even when we come up with a vaccine and a cure, the memory of it will live long, and patterns of behavior are going to need to adapt. Of course, we're not even sure at this point if even a vaccine will be successful; we have yet to prove that COVID itself would actually respond to it, but we're doing the best that we can, but the question is "How do we live in the meantime, and what happens when we're not talking about six months or a year or two years, what happens when we're talking about five, or ten, or for a lifetime, what is it that is able to help us through?" We have to face the adaptive challenge head on. We need, therefore, a creative, an innovative response. It's not enough to simply go back to patterns which we've simply known, we actually need the strength of character to move forward.

We're in desperate need, therefore, of a strength which can endure, even when distress is great. And that is ultimately what Moses found as he found peace with God, a strength to be able to continue to lead in humility, in service, even though he continued to have to wrestle with the hearts of his own people, as he sought to see them set free from the things which had formerly captivated them. But we are also in need of an immediacy of a form of peace, a peace that can speak into our anxiety, and into our loss, and this is something that Jesus is uniquely qualified to do.

When we talk about losing something, the reason that we feel sad is because we know we'll never see it again. There's that sense that even if we're given a precious object, and it may not even be valuable, it may just simply be a pen, that you can buy for \$10 in a shop, but the person who gave it to you was significant, and therefore, it has significance because of what it means. When we lose something like that, we feel sad, because we know that we'll never see it again. And when we talk of losing someone, as so many of us now deal with the consequence of death in the outfall of COVID in this world, the reason we feel sad is that loss of I will not see them.

But there is a promise that Jesus Christ makes, that if we put our trust in Him, there is the hope of a resurrection. In other words, when we die, it's not the end, and in that sense, within the Christian faith, no one is ultimately lost, we will see them again, we can meet again.

We grieve because there's a time we will experience now, when we will be separated from them, and we can't continue the relationship we once had, but we're looking forward to a time where we can find peace with Him who actually brought us into this world, and know that when He brings us back, we can meet those who we have loved again once more and be reunited.

It's something that is capable of giving strength, even in times of distress, and it's received and achieved, not through any great achievement on our own, but because of what He was willing to do for us when God entered into this world and gave His own life for ours, that we may find that peace with Him.

I want to thank you so much for giving me your time so far, I've had my notes propped up against the screen, which has also had the effect of blocking out the timer, so I'm hoping that I framed my remarks tightly, I'd like to thank you for the attention you've given so far, I'll do my very best to answer any questions you might have.

If I get stuck, Logan will come in and bail me out. I've known him for many years, he's a very gifted speaker and thinker in his own right and capacity, and in more languages than I can actually deliver anything.

Thank you so much for listening to me, and thank you so much for giving us a hearing.