



Charting a Course In a Post-COVID World

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Thank you so much, your Excellency, for that very gracious introduction. And Logan also 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 may be very helpful for us as we all 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 the 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 mention to me of Moses. And their comment was, “Given the crisis that we're in, given the moment that we're in, what we now really need is ‘a Moses.’”

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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 that 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.

The great global expectation gap—the difference between our current reality and our actual reality

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, 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.

And so 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 this particular course which we find ourselves in.

The threat of COVID is the first time many have collectively faced the issue of their mortality.

We have an additional issue too, the threat of COVID is for the first time—this is particularly true in the Western world—that 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 to be to postpone that moment of mortality for as long as possible, rather than success being in a position to meet something head on, which is ultimately inevitable. So what I'd love to try to do, if I can, is just to 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.

We increasingly look toward our government to protect us from things which previous generations felt that only God could protect us from.

Let me just start with a narrative that maybe started 30-40 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 that many people—even back 50 years ago—began to notice 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 only God 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 we now look to our government as if they were God.

Of course this loads the 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.

The distinctive quality associated with the man who led an entire group of people through a time of immense crisis and terrible loss, was a gentleness and humility for which he is continually revered.

So we're already in a position where maybe 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—many people, as the former chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom has said, 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, also 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 and 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?

We need leaders right now who are not just simply addressing our interests, they are actually raising our sights.

Now that's the first thing I'd just like to leave with you. The reason why it's so important, is what that therefore also means is that we need leaders right now who are not just simply addressing our interests, they 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.

If God is God and is able to intervene, why does He need Moses to do anything at all?

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.

How many of us right now are in desperate need of strength to actually cope with all the hurdles and obstacles put before us and not be defeated by them?

The encouragement that I find in all of this, is 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 actually cope with all the hurdles and obstacles put before us and not be defeated by them?

If we are going to rebuild trust, we need to have the strength of character and humility to admit where our own limitations are.

The reason why this speaks into the issue of truth and trust, is 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 expectations. And that is why we need wisdom and leadership, as much as we also need humility and also responsibility, where we take things to ourselves and ask the question, "What is it that I'm being asked to do?"

The difference between technological and adaptive challenges

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. And 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, "At times of global crisis, one of the greatest failures we have in leadership is diagnostic. We can't distinguish between technological and adaptive challenges."

What does he mean by that? Well what he means is 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 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 in adaptive challenges, our heart, 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."

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?

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 to 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.

There is a strength and a love and a peace that is able to endure and survive even when we feel constrained and hemmed in.

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 just simply that the constraints and the sense of 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. even if our life was to be taken away—it is possible to know a peace in this world, that even death itself is unable to disturb, and death itself cannot actually remove.

We're in desperate need of a hope that doesn't just simply take us and inspire us to the point of our own grave, but raises the question, "Is there any hope beyond it?"

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 own grave, but raises the question, "Is there any hope beyond it?" And that's then exactly what Jesus Himself began to talk about and also promise.

This is the world we live in, but it's not the world that we live for. There's also a world He promised which 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 that we can enjoy eternally with Him. And if we know peace with Him in this world, 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 which 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 on and patterns of behavior are going to need to adapt. Of course, we're not even sure at this point

whether 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.

In desperate need of a strength which can endure, even when distress is great.

But the question is "How do we live in the meantime? And what happens if we're not talking about six months, or a year, or two years? What happens if 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 and 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.

A peace that can speak into our anxiety and into our loss.

But we also are 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 which Jesus Himself was uniquely qualified to do. When we talk about losing something, the reason 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 that 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 when 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. [...] And thank you so much for giving us a hearing.