

# Living Well With Uncertainty

## Opening

I'll begin with a question for you: what would have to happen from here on that would make you say, "Wow, 2020 was a great year!"? Maybe you have a compelling answer. I want to hear it. But I only have one answer for my own question: Jesus came back. That's the only way 2020 turns out to be a great year.

This trying year has everyone looking ahead. We fear the unknown, yet it's the subject of conversations, articles, interviews. Will we have a coronavirus vaccine available by 2021? Will our economy struggle next year? Will schools remain open? Who will be in the Oval Office? Will Tennessee finally prevail over Alabama in October (or will they play at all)? We don't do well with unknowns. Uncertainty keeps us uneasy. *But you find out who you are (or who you desire to be) when you're faced with circumstances you can't control.*

In our time, with circumstances we can't control, we make projections, predictions, forecasts. We have models for the economy, models for the pandemic, polls and projections for November elections. Now, analysis *is vitally important* for leaders in public health, finance, and government. But it's an altogether different matter when ***your soul*** places its hopes (or fears) on predictions and analysis. /

Even before COVID hit (the phrase we're all saying now), we were already a nation suffering from pervasive anxiety. Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health conditions in our country, affecting more than 40 million Americans.<sup>1</sup>

I do not diminish anyone who suffers from anxiety. I am one of those 40 million Americans healing from anxiety myself. That's not uncommon for someone of my generation. What's more concerning is the rise of anxiety among younger generations. One in every 3

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nami.org/About-Mental-Illness/Mental-Health-Conditions/Anxiety-Disorders>

teenagers today suffer from an anxiety disorder. We weren't equipped to cope with uncertainty *before* COVID hit.

We have a serious matter on our hands. We're living in a pandemic with an unknown duration. Anxiety is certainly a medical and psychological reality, but this is not a matter for doctors and therapists alone. The Church of Jesus Christ has a task for these anxious times. It is a task that has been woefully missing from faith and discipleship—*how to live well with uncertainty*. It's an essential virtue in the Christian life, yet rare is the church who has prepared her people to acquire that virtue.

I heard an interview a few years ago with an author who discussed a pervasive experience among adults about practical skills. So many competent, even successful people never learned key skills in childhood or adolescence that they should have learned. How to study or write well. How to fix a clogged drain. How to make things with your hands. He called these undeveloped skills the "missing modules" of one's youth.

There are "missing modules" to our faith, too. Living well with uncertainty is at the top of the list. In recent decades American churches have placed much more importance on how to draw crowds, how to be relevant and cool, that we failed to equip the saints for such a time as this.

Though these were probably missing modules in the churches of our youth, this is the task before us—how to live faithfully and well with uncertainty. It's a topic that deserves more than one message, so I want to address this topic more this fall, whether on Sunday mornings or online teaching sessions.

This morning I want to offer a basic framework from Scripture to guide us through uncertain times. Three realities stand out in a practical theology of living well with uncertainty:

- God's testing
- God's past faithfulness
- God's hidden abundance

This morning's readings give us a solid foundation upon which to build a stronger, more resilient faith even when we can control nothing. Remember, *you find out who you are (or who you want to be) when faced with circumstances you can't control.* Many times I have read Psalm 112 and prayed that one day the psalmists words would be my own r. Psealityalm 112.7-8 reads, "The righteous one is not afraid of bad news; his heart is firm, trusting in the LORD. His heart is steady; he will not be afraid." That's the goal. Here's how we make a good beginning toward that goal.

## Desperate Times

To make a good beginning, we need to find patterns, the common threads, in Scriptural stories when the way ahead is unclear. Here's the first reality we find: the Lord God will permit intense trials in our lives. He allows us to come into desperate times and places. The Promised Land was not on the other side of the Red Sea. Miles of desert and wilderness lay between them. The Lord Jesus does not protect his disciples from desperate situations. They fight a terrible storm at sea while he sleeps in the boat. He brings them to the seaside with more than 5,000 people and says, "You give them something to eat."

Then there's Nehemiah. Nehemiah had the tremendous task of rebuilding Jerusalem after it was totally destroyed in the Exile. I've watched a few films and documentaries of World War I and II in recent months. The aerial footage of towns and cities destroyed in those wars is breathtaking. That's the kind of devastation we ought to envision when read Nehemiah's story.

God permitted the Exile for his people. He didn't protect Nehemiah from adversaries and opposition after the rebuilding effort began.

*The Lord who saves us is the Lord who tests us.* He allows his beloved people, his prophets, his priests, his kings to experience profound crisis. He doesn't protect them from serious trials. The Lord knows that you not only discover who you are in crisis, he knows you will discover who you *trust* in desperate times.

To live well with uncertainty, we must expect that the Lord will bring us to critical situations.

## Upheld By Memory

On so many occasions in Scripture, when Israel, a family, a psalmist comes to a desperate place, they look forward by looking back. This is the second reality of living well with uncertainty: remembering God's past faithfulness. This selection from Nehemiah is an excellent example of facing the future by remembering the past.

The words we hear from Nehemiah 9 are the words of Israel's priests. The setting is a renewal of vows ceremony after successfully rebuilding Jerusalem's gates and walls. They've only completed phase I of an extensive rebuilding project; there's no guarantee good times are ahead. Even when the wall is rebuilt, the priests say "Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves." What does she do in these desperate times? Israel looks ahead by looking back. Israel's story from years past upholds her as they face the future. ***Her memory becomes the source of her wisdom.***

For many of us, this is the key "missing module" in our discipleship—a robust memory. When crisis comes, one of the first things to go is our memory of God's faithfulness. To live wisely and well with uncertainty, we need to train ourselves to consciously look back at God's faithfulness when anxiety sets in.

We hear Israel's leaders remembering the story of their ancestors in the Exodus. In the psalms, when David or another psalmist such as Asaph comes to crisis, they remember the past to deal with the future.

But there's something very odd about the way Israel remembers her past. She confesses the faithfulness of God—so far so good. But she also airs out her dirty laundry. Israel remembers and confesses the ***failures*** of her ancestors, particularly the failures of their ancestors in the Exodus.

It's a strange way to find inspiration in the midst of unknowns. What's going on here?

Deep in her story, deep in her bones is the memory that when you can't see what lies ahead, you turn your back on the God who saves you and you look around for other so-called saviors. You try to take control. If God doesn't show the way ahead when I call on him, it's time to try something else. Smelt some gold and pour it into a mold of a golden calf. Impatience is the seedbed of idolatry.

This is why God brings us into desperate times. So we will renounce all other so-called saviors and trust in the Lord when it matters most. I won't lean on my own understanding; I'll wait for the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night.

By remembering her ancestor's failures, saints grow in wisdom when they face an unknown future. They learn that trying to save themselves *never works out*. They learn that rejecting God's wisdom and turning to other so-called saviors only leads to slavery. Strange though it seem, an honest and humble *memory* is a strong foundation when the way ahead is unclear.

So read and re-read the stories of God's faithfulness in uncertain times. Re-read your journals of days when all was obscure. Remember Isaiah's words: "You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you."<sup>2</sup> Fear can only increase when we forget God's goodness. A strong memory upholds the soul.

My mom's sister has been curating the letters my grandfather and grandmother exchanged in World War II. She recently sent a scanned version of a letter my grandfather wrote to my grandmother on September 15, 1943. He was aboard the USS Charles Carroll somewhere in the Mediterranean. The Allies were still several months away from turning the tide of the war. In September 1943 my grandfather didn't know what lay ahead. He wrote to my grandmother with solemn candor about the future. He wrote:

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 26:3, ESV

I wish I could assure you we will be home by October 15th, but I can't. If we don't get home by Christmas we will probably go right onto the Pacific. I don't like to tell you these things, but that is the way things look to me. I don't want you to be buoyed up on false hopes. There are some things you should know and this is one thing I think you should know, though I don't like to write it. Resignation to events (by which he meant **acceptance of events**) is much better than uncertainty and living on false hopes...We may get home soon and then again we may not. Don't let that throw a wet blanket on you. I'm still hoping to get home soon. I shall never give up hoping regardless of what happens. Love and hope go hand in hand.

He wrote that letter to my grandmother *six years before my mother was born*. Would the USS Charles Carroll survive torpedo attacks? Would he go onto the Pacific? (He did). Facing an uncertain future with an attitude of acceptance, he placed his hope in the Lord. And trusting the Lord he experienced the mystery of faith in the face of uncertainty: God's hidden abundance. He lived an abundant life to the age of 98, married over 60 years, father of three girls and grandfather to seven grandchildren. All hidden from his eyes aboard the USS Charles Carroll in 1943.

## Trust, Provision, and Abundance

When you train your soul to remember God's goodness, you find the third reality in uncertain times: God's hidden abundance. It's the great paradox of the Lord's people when they endure severe trials. When God saves, it's not just a narrow escape his saints experience—they receive *abundant* goodness, hidden though it was in the days of testing. The Red Sea divides in two, his chosen people walk on dry ground. The Red Sea closes on their enslavers, drowning them in the deeps. He makes a fresh spring of water from the middle of a rock. He doesn't have just a little manna; he can rain manna and even quail when they demand meat.

His wonders do not cease once he has taken 5 loaves and 2 fish, feeding more than 5,000 hungry stomachs. No, he gave *more than enough* to fill every stomach. He purposely

produced leftovers. In the wilderness. Abundance in the wilderness. Twelve baskets full of leftover bread and fish.

You may remember that numbers have symbolic meanings for Israel. How many tribes comprise the nation of Israel? Twelve. Feeding a crowd of 5,000+ is only *the beginning* of the Lord's abundance. Twelve baskets of leftovers are signs for the soul, mementoes for their memory. The Lord can feed the whole nation, even in the wilderness, if they will but trust his faithfulness.

## Conclusion

God's testing, God's past faithfulness, God's hidden abundance. With these three realities in mind, I return to my opening question. If we're not allowed the answer: "Jesus came back," what would make 2020 a great year? This could be the year we learn how to live wisely and well with uncertainty, deepening our trust in the Lord. This can be the year we train our soul with the memory and stories of his faithfulness; then we can stand firm, we can withstand our anxieties, whether bad news comes or not. This can be the year we believe in God's abundance, though it be hidden from us now.

We read a portion of Psalm 78 together and this is how that lengthy psalm—a remembered story of God's faithfulness—concludes. "With upright heart he shepherded them and guided them with his skillful hand."

Where are we going? The pillar of cloud and fire appears in its time. Can God spread a table in the wilderness? His abundance is greater than we can ask, think, or imagine. He is our Good Shepherd guiding us with love and wisdom though we do not see the way ahead. To Him be glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.