

The Corona Virus Experiment

By Phil Moore | Wednesday 18 March 2020

Christian leaders all across the world are facing two unprecedented problems as I write this blog. But the great missionary James Fraser faced those exact two problems before us, and we can learn a lot from how he responded. Maybe we will even look back on these days and thank God for the Western Church's great Corona Virus Experiment.

As I write this blog, Christian leaders all around the world are facing up to two great challenges that are unprecedented within their lifetimes.

First, due to government restrictions aimed at slowing down the spread of COVID-19, most church leaders find themselves unable to gather those they lead into church services for the next few Sundays. Second, for the same reason, most church leaders are looking at diaries that are full of cancelled meetings. For decades - even for centuries - the predictable answer from any Christian leader to the question "*How are you doing?*" has always been "*I'm busy.*" Now, for the first time, Christian leaders actually have time on their hands. Stressed? Of course they are, for these are definitely troubling times. But busy? Not so much, to which I say wow - just wow! Take a moment to sit back and to savour this rarest of smells in Church History. A Church whose leaders have time on their hands. Enough time on their hands, in fact, for us to be able to run a little experiment together with the Lord.

The challenges that church leaders are facing for the next few weeks may be unprecedented for the Western Church, but it is not unprecedented in Church History. The great missionary James Fraser found himself in a very similar position when he began to preach the Gospel to the pagan Chinese villagers of Lisuland in the first half of the twentieth century. Lisuland lies several hundred miles west of Wuhan, in the foothills of the Himalayas, so James Fraser very often found himself unable to reach his converts in the most mountainous areas. Winter snowfalls made it too dangerous for him to gather them together in church services. At first he was frustrated and even angry with God, who could easily have held back the snowfall to enable his church services to go ahead. But as he prayed, James Fraser became convicted that God was in the problem - it was a challenge of the Lord's own making. The Lord wanted him to conduct an experiment on behalf of the Body of Christ. I believe that God wants to turn us back to James Fraser's experiment right now.

James Fraser worked out that it would take him three to five days to conduct church services in the highland villages of Lisuland - one or two days of travel up into the mountains, a day of gathering together, and then one or two days of travel back down again. He therefore decided to find out: *What would happen if I decided to spend the time that I would have spent gathering with these Lisu people praying for them instead?*

For James Fraser, this was more than just a throwaway tweet on social media. It wasn't an oh-so-radical piece of church-leader virtue-signalling. Nobody knew, or much even cared, how a missionary chose to spend his time in the foothills of the Himalayas. It was between James Fraser and God alone, but he gave himself to his experiment completely. He prayed for three

to five days for each of the highland villages instead of visiting them. Then, once the spring sun had melted the snow, he climbed the mountains to discover what had happened. No scientist can ever have been so eager to examine the petri dishes in his laboratory.

James Fraser discovered that his converts in the highland villages had prospered during the winter months in which he had found himself unable to gather them together. In fact, as he met with them to hear about their winter Bible reading and their isolated prayer times, he came to the remarkable conclusion that his converts in the highlands of Lisuland had grown *far more* during the winter than his converts in the lowlands - the converts that he had been busy visiting and gathering all winter long. He recorded his conclusion: *“If two things stand out clearly in my mind, they are firstly how ‘foolish’ and ‘weak’ our new converts are, and secondly that God has really chosen them.”* Thereafter, he was determined never to fret when he could not gather people, but always to seize it as a God-given invitation to pray for people instead. *“If I were to think after the manner of men, I should be anxious about my Lisu converts - afraid for their falling back into demon worship. But God is enabling me to cast all my care upon Him. I am not anxious, not nervous. If I hugged my care to myself instead of casting it upon Him, I should never have persevered in the work so long - perhaps never even have started it. But if it has been begun in Him, it must be continued in Him.”*

James Fraser never knew the full results of his prayer experiment. Many missiologists trace back the enormous revival that has swept through China in the past fifty years to the revival that began amongst the highlanders of Lisuland during the winters when he stayed at home and prayed.

As a Christian leader, I feel a little stressed right now that I am not going to be able to gather together in person with the people that I lead for the next few Sundays. I’m busy pastoring many of them via email and social media, and I’m busy preparing online services so that I can serve them well over the next few Sundays. But I’m challenged that I can do far more to serve them than to take my pastoral overbusyness online. God isn’t just encouraging me to transfer my face-to-face meetings into Skype and Zoom conference calls for a season instead. He is inviting Christian leaders all across the Western world right now to rethink the whole of their ministry and to trust him that their inability to **gather people to them** for a season is an opportunity for them to **gather themselves to God** on behalf of the people.

Charles Spurgeon preached that *“Prayer is the slender nerve which moves the muscle of omnipotence.”* By God’s grace, let’s therefore embrace the next few weeks as an opportunity to experiment together and discover how much this is true. Let’s not fritter away these precious days of pastoral isolation. Let’s use them in such a way that we can look back in days to come and recall the lessons of the Western Church’s great Corona Virus Experiment in Prayer.

Footnotes: Quotes in this blog are taken from Eileen Crossman’s biography of James Fraser, which is entitled *“Mountain Rain”* (1982) - pages 133 and 198.