

Pandemic Musings

Pastor James Foley – Shared Sunday, May 17, 2020

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for joining us today. I pray that you are well and that you are prepared to hear from the Lord this morning. Please have a Bible at the ready and be prepared to take whatever notes you deem/feel to be necessary. Let's delve in...

SETTING THE STAGE

FYI – From the outset I want to make it clear that this message will be DIFFERENT than my typical sermon.

i.e., I do NOT want to preach or teach today per se, as much as I want to SHARE with you from my heart. I will offer a few stories and experiences from my life (both before and after my conversion), connecting everything together at the end for your personal benefit and application.

GRAMMY PT. 1

FYI – It was May of 1992 that my grandmother suffered a debilitating STROKE. It was May 6, 1992 in fact (i.e., my mother's birthday). I was about thirteen at the time, and though it was decades ago I can REMEMBER it like it was yesterday.

NOTE 1 – I REMEMBER that my mother was in the kitchen, preparing food for my cousin and niece, Katie and Meghan (whom many of you know). They were quite young at the time—e.g., less than one-year-old—and my mom had them situated side-by-side in baby seats on the kitchen table.

NOTE 2 – I REMEMBER that my grandmother was seated in an adjacent room, doing what she always loved to do. Namely, she was filling out her crossword puzzles or doing her circles (i.e., word-search). She would do this for seeming hours on end! She was BELOVED in our home and always welcome!

NOTE 3 – I also remember that, for whatever reason, my grandmother stood up and took a few steps. Next thing I know, she was on the ground, her speech sounded strange (i.e., slurred), and she began to do something I had NEVER heard her do: i.e., cuss/swear.

KEY – This was all incredible troubling as you can imagine, and long story short, it turns out she had experienced a massive STROKE. The left-hand side of her body was immediately paralyzed and would remain so until she her passing in 1999 (some seven-years later).

GRAMMY PT. 2

1) This Event (and the Season that Followed) Was Unforeseen

There were NO warning signs that I was aware of previous to this stroke. Looking back, there were NO red flags signaling what was to transpire in her life (and in ours). One moment life was going about its merry way and the next every facet of my/our world changed!

2) This Event (and the Season that Followed) Was Undesired

No one woke up on the morning of May 6, 1992, HOPING for a massive stroke to cripple my grandmother. No one LONGED for the saddening physical fallout she would experience or the familial fallout we would face in the Foley household and beyond. No one could have possibly WANTED this or the seven-year period of challenge, strain and sacrifice that followed thereafter.

KEY – Yet, as unforeseen and undesired as this all was, it was IMPACTING. That moment and the near decade that follow changed me—i.e., indelibly marked me—forever. In many ways, these happenings worked to make me who and what I am today. Allow me to briefly ELABORATE...

GRAMMY PT. 3

FYI 1 – Firstly, it shaped my understanding of PARENTAL HONOR...

It was just last week that I spoke from Exodus 20:12 which declares, “Honor your father and your mother.” It is one thing to read and/or hear this biblical mandate, and it is another to spend nearly seven-years seeing four individuals (i.e., my mother, father, uncle and aunt) LIVE it out before my very eyes. It MARKED me, as I came to understand the meaning of parental reverence, esteem and honor.

FYI 2 – Secondly, it shaped my understanding of SACRIFICIAL LOVE...

In the years that immediately followed my grandmother’s stroke, she came to live in our home. My older siblings were moved out at the time, so it was my two parents, gram and me. She took my room and I moved to the couch.

KEY – I can recall many nights when my mother would sit by her mother’s bedside—all night—because she was afraid to be alone. I can still hear my grandmother calling, “BETTY” at all hours of the night—and I can still see my mother walking into her bedroom to sit with her as long as was needed. And I can still see my mother getting up at 6:30am to tend to the needs of her broader family.

NOTE – It was watching the love of God in my mother that I came to UNDERSTAND what it means to love. It was watching her selflessness that I came to understand the meaning of a terms that we so CASUALLY utilize in our speech. Betty Foley, wherever you are, you are a treasure and I can only pray God makes more and more people like you in this broken world.

FYI 3 – Thirdly, it shaped what would become a FAITH in the Lord

I will not say I came to Christ at this point in my life. I came to faith in the Lord around twenty. But I will say that the tracks that ultimately led me to Him were laid in this season—as I came to understand the finite nature of life, witness the action/faith of others, etc. God used this season to point me to Him.

GRAMMY PT. 4

KEY 1 – You see, it turns out that this season of pain, brokenness and difficulty was USED by God to achieve a purpose greater than I could perceive. Though this season was absolutely unforeseen and undesired, it was used in the purpose/plan of God to shape me—making me CLAY in the hands of the Master POTTER.

KEY 2 – Looking back, I come to appreciate the wonder and the gravity of the following statement from Paul...

Romans 8:28 (NIV)

28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

KEY 3 – It turns out that you cannot make a DIAMOND without pressure or refine GOLD without heat. Oftentimes, it is the unforeseen and undesired seasons of life and living where the greatest work of God is done. We do well to remember this!

DADDY PT. 1

Moving onward, it was 2006–2007 that I received a phone call that would change everything...

NOTE 1 – Misty and I were living in Worcester in our newly-purchased condominium. We were SO excited in this season of life. We were actively serving on staff at a wonderful church, newly married (app. 3-years), and first-time homeowners! Life was going so well! And then IT happened...

NOTE 2 – It was quite early in the morning when my sister, Christine, called me. She was working as a Nurse in the Emergency Room at the time, and she contacted me with news that sounded something like the following: “Jim, Daddy came to the ER last night in terrible pain. They have run some tests on him, and it looks like he has large tumors in his abdomen. It DOESN’T look good. I have to go but I will call you later.”

NOTE 3 – I remember sitting up in my bed, feeling as though I had been hit by a BUS. Though I was a Christian at the time, my first thought was not faith but FEAR. It is a terrible thing to hear the news that someone you love—i.e., someone that you cherish and aspire to be like—may have cancer. I pray you never have to face it.

KEY –Very long story short, he did have cancer, and this was the beginning of a twelve-year struggle for him and my family (i.e., until his passing in August 2018).

DADDY PT. 2

1) This Event (and the Season that Followed) Was Unforeseen

There were NO warning signs that I was aware of previous to this phone call. Looking back, there were NO red flags signaling what was to transpire in his life (and in ours). One moment life was going about its merry way and the next every facet of my/our world changed!

2) This Event (and the Season that Followed) Was Undesired

No one woke up on that morning HOPING for cancer for Ken Foley (Lord rest his soul). No one LONGED for the saddening physical fallout that he would experience or the familial fallout we would face in the Foley household and beyond. No one could have possibly WANTED this or the twelve-year period of challenge, strain and sacrifice that followed thereafter.

KEY – Yet, as unforeseen and undesired as this all was, it was IMPACTING. That moment and the decade-plus that follow changed me—i.e., indelibly MARKED me—forever. In many ways, these happenings worked to make me who and what I am today. Allow me to briefly ELABORATE...

DADDY PT. 3

FYI 1 – Firstly, it shaped my understanding of SPOUSAL HONOR...

Earlier I noted my mother's unceasing care for her mother following her stroke. That same level of diligence was again on full display for all to see—and seeing it (again) changed me (again). I saw in her the living EMBODIMENT of Philippians 2:3–4...

Philippians 2:3–4

3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

KEY – So much of how I see my obligation to my parents and my spouse was SHAPED by the example of her dedication to her parent and her spouse. Betty Foley, wherever you are, you are a treasure and I can only pray God makes more and more people like you in this broken world.

FYI 2 – Secondly, it shaped my understanding of SPIRITUAL COMMITMENT/PRIORITY...

Many of you came to know and love my father, Ken. Church, I cannot say how much I loved you for loving him. You also know that Ken Foley was the kind to be here if/when the doors were opened. He had a love for God and His people, and church became a deep PRIORITY to him.

I can still see him—in the midst of his chemotherapy and cancer treatments—walking up those stairs on a Sunday morning. So tired—so depleted—so in pain—but SO committed to the God who had saved him. If any man had a legitimate EXCUSE to start missing church regularly, it was him. Yet there he was, week-in-and-week-out. He embodied the principle expressed by the author of the Book of Hebrews:

Hebrews 10:24–25

24 . . . let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, 25 not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

KEY – I don't think that I ever UNDERSTOOD what it was like to be him. He lived with constant pain. Yet the Lord used his example, causing me to want to be a man like him in ever-increasing degrees. I want to follow him as he followed Christ!

DADDY PT. 4

KEY 1 – You see, it turns out that this season of pain, brokenness and difficulty was USED by God to achieve a purpose greater than I could perceive. Though this season was absolutely unforeseen and undesired, it was USED in the purpose/plan of God to shape me—making me CLAY in the hands of the POTTER.

KEY 2 – Looking back, I come to appreciate the wonder and the gravity of the following statement from Paul...

Romans 8:28

28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

KEY 3 – It turns out that you cannot make a DIAMOND without pressure or refine GOLD without heat. Oftentimes, it is the unforeseen and undesired seasons of life and living where the greatest work of God is done. We do well to remember this!

Allow me to share one FINAL STORY before we move to a close...

FOSTER PT. 1

NOTE 1 – It was mid-November of 2019 that I received ANOTHER phone call. This time it was NOT my sister, Christine, but a social worker from DCF. In fact, it wasn't just one social worker, but TWO. I had the feeling I wasn't going to like this phone call when I was introduced to multiple voices.

The call served as NOTICE that the foster-child placed with us for nearly 18-months was to be REMOVED.

NOTE 2 – For those who may NOT know, my wife and I were unable to have children. After infertility treatments—which consisted of 6 IUI's and 3 IVF cycles—we decided to pursue adoption through the foster care system. It seemed like it was affordable, a place to love those in need, and of the Lord (prayer).

NOTE 3 – On the day that we were approved to become foster parents, we were asked if we would take in three-day-old child. Feeling that God was in this we said YES, and the following day our world changed. For eighteen months we cared for this child as though she was our own—with the HOPE that maybe she would become our own—UNTIL that call came in November.

NOTE 4 – It was a Friday. I was trying to write my sermon (without much progress when it came). When I was notified that she would be moved nigh immediately, I felt like I wanted to DIE. I felt like a part of me did die as wheels were set in motion that I was POWERLESS to stop.

FOSTER PT. 2

1) This Event (and the Season that Followed) Was Unforeseen

There were NO warning signs that I was aware of previous to this phone call. You may be saying to yourself, “How? You know that there are NO guarantees with DCF!” It was unforeseen in that we were told she would remain with us by DCF via previous correspondence (likely to end in adoption all things remaining equal). But the rug was seemingly pulled out from under us.

2) This Event (and the Season that Followed) Was Undesired

When you get attached to a child (i.e., allowing them to enter your home and your heart), the LAST thing you want to do is say goodbye. The last thing you want to do is give them one last hug (trying to communicate a lifetime of love), hand them off to a social worker at the front door and watch them drive off—hearing the baby you’ve raised SCREAMING as they leave the driveway.

KEY – I say this with all SINCERITY. I’d rather bury my father a hundred times than relive that one moment.

FOSTER PT. 3

Yet as unforeseen and undesired as that moment and the subsequent season have been, it has CHANGED me forever. In fact, it still is (i.e., there is a present tense aspect to this for Misty and me). You may say, “Pastor, it has been seven-months—you need to move on.” I will tell you I will take WHATEVER time I need to grieve what feels to be the loss of our child.

KEY – But I yet perceive CHANGE within me...

NOTE 1 – It has shaped my understanding of MINISTRY...

Firstly, I have been CALLED to ministry for nearly two decades (i.e., pastorate). But God is working to EXPAND the scope of my ministry through this connection with DCF (e.g., helping children in need; helping other DCF parents who are facing loss, etc.). Only God knows the fullness of what is to come!

Secondly, I have MINISTERED for nearly two decades. But never before have I felt SO equipped to minister to those who are hurting and in need. A loss of this magnitude has sensitized me—creating a deeper EMPATHY. If this world needs anything right now, it is more empathy and care for one another!

NOTE 2 – It has shaped my understanding of FAITH...

So often we treat faith like a COMMODITY. i.e., If we have “enough” faith then God HAS to do for us whatever we wish. But what happens when you believe and believe and believe and you get the OPPOSITE of everything you wanted? It is in that place that you come to understand what it means to trust in Him and His purposes.

Q. You can tell me God is good all the time—but is that how we live?

NOTE 3 – It has shaped my understanding of PERSEVERANCE...

It is easy to serve the Lord when life is easy, but what happens when it is NOT? There have been times that the LAST thing I want to do is serve Him, pray, preach a sermon, etc. How can I minister and push on when I feel dead at times? But it is in that place of weakness that we grow—where I HAVE grown!

Romans 5:3–5a

3 . . . We glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4 perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 And hope does not put us to shame

FOSTER PT. 4

KEY 1 – You see, it turns out that this season of pain, brokenness and difficulty is being USED by God to achieve a purpose greater than I can perceive. Though this season was absolutely unforeseen and undesired, it has been USED by God to shape me—making me (i.e., once again) CLAY in the hands of the POTTER.

KEY 2 – I appreciate the wonder and the gravity of the following statement from Paul...

Romans 8:28

28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

KEY 3 – It turns out that you cannot make a DIAMOND without pressure or refine GOLD without heat. Oftentimes, it is the unforeseen and undesired seasons of life and living where the greatest work of God is done. We do—I do well—to remember this!

TRANSITION

You may be saying to yourself, “Pastor, WHY are you sharing all this? What is the PURPOSE in this message?”

NOTE 1 – Firstly, I believe that there is power/value in TESTIMONY. I believe that we can learn from each other, STIMULATING needed growth. If any part of my story can be used to encourage, comfort or edify, I consider that a victory and time well-spent. You have a story to tell too, you know!

NOTE 2 – Secondly, I have told these stories to offer some much-needed PERSPECTIVE in these times of crisis...

ALLOW ME TO ELABORATE...

PRINCIPLE POINTS PT. 1

1) We Are Experiencing Something Unforeseen

Regardless of what media outlets might say at this point in May, no one was sounding the alarm bells in January or February concerning the CORONAVIRUS. No one REALLY foresaw the MEDICAL and ECONOMIC devastation that this thing has wrought. This has taken the world by surprise!

2) We Are Experiencing Something Undesired

No person in their right mind woke up in early 2020 hoping for a pandemic that would TAKE the lives of hundreds of thousands, CRIPPLE the global economy, SHUTTER businesses, WREAK havoc and beyond. No one WANTED what seems to be unending months of social distancing and isolation, with churches closed and families connecting only through Zoom.

KEY – My heart goes out to those SUFFERING in myriad ways. Remember...

Psalm 34:18

18 The Lord is close to the brokenhearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

PRINCIPLE POINTS PT. 2

YET the question REMAINS to be answered...

Q. How will these unforeseen and undesired events IMPACT us?

Q. To what degree will it indelibly MARK us (for time and eternity)?

Q. To what degree might it shape our understanding of mutual honor, sacrificial love, selfless compassion, faith, spiritual priority/commitment, ministry, etc.?

KEY 1 – These are questions that may take years to fully answer at the NATIONAL level. I can only PRAY for the Lord to bring forth the change that He desires, sending forth a mighty revival that would sweep across the earth.

KEY 2 – But these are questions YOU can wrestle with at the INDIVIDUAL level. What manner of person do you want to be coming out of this challenging season (i.e., and it will end)? Do you want to come out worse than before OR changed by the Lord?

FYI – Like it or not this WILL mark us—but HOW will it mark us?

PRINCIPLE POINTS PT. 3

I call you to be soft, pliable CLAY in the hands of the Master. Allow Him to SHAPE/MOLD you according to His GOOD plan and design! I call you to trust in His sovereign purpose—even if that purpose TRANSCENDS what you are able to fathom or understand).

REMAIN CONVINCED OF ROMANS 8...

Romans 8:28

28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

KEY 1 – Remember that you CANNOT make a diamond without pressure or refine gold without a flame!

KEY 2 – As for me and my house, I want to live according to the wisdom of Job...

Job 23:8–10

8 “But if I go to the east, he is not there;
if I go to the west, I do not find him.

9 When he is at work in the north, I do not see him;
when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him.

10 But he knows the way that I take;
when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold.”

CONCLUSION

KEY – Thank you for joining us today. If you would be willing – **GIVE ONLINE**