

Giving Up the Control I Never Really Had

Without a doubt we are living in an unprecedented time.

The COVID-19 global pandemic is affecting nearly every aspect of our daily lives, from work, to family, to recreation and entertainment, to the more mundane things we need to do such as grocery shopping. We are having to become familiar with terms such as ‘social distancing’, ‘flattening the curve’, and ‘self-isolation’ as these terms have become part of the daily discourse from government, healthcare experts, media pundits, and a wealth of online sources (not all of them are credible – so be careful!) as we grapple as a society about how to describe our new reality.

As the crisis has escalated over the last few weeks, one thing that has personally struck me is how much I’ve taken for granted the control I thought I had over what’s ‘normal’ in my daily life. Here are just a few examples of what I mean, I imagine you could add many more to this list:

- I’ve gone from working in a modern office with ~120 other people to working in my basement home office alone.
- I used to enjoy a meal with my wife at a restaurant at least twice per month. Now it’s either take-out from a local restaurant or eat home-cooked food (important note: just in case my wife reads this, the home-cooked food is amazing!!).
- A highlight of my week was meeting with my local church of 250+ people, and in small groups in my home enjoying worship and fellowship amongst my closest friends. My ‘new reality’ is church online...thank God for livestreaming!
- Say goodbye for now to meeting with a friend at the local Tim Hortons to catch up over a coffee...we’ll have to get our coffee from the drive through and meet in our cars....of course we’ll need to maintain social distancing, so we’ll have to video chat on WhatsApp so we’re not sitting too close in the same vehicle!

So much for being in control!

James 4:13 – 15 reminds me of how much control we really have in our lives.

13 Now listen, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.” 14 Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. 15 Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.”

I have read this scripture many times and used it many times to counsel others. But this present time makes it much more real. Why? Because by nature, I’m a creature of habit. I have my routines in the morning and throughout the day and the week. I like my ‘stuff’ a certain way around my home, and I have my activities that I look forward to doing daily and weekly. And the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted many of the routines that I’ve grown accustomed to. And when I searched my heart about why I’m tempted at times with frustration, it came down to one simple thing that I felt had been taken from me: Control.

Control is often what we seek, especially in times of crisis. Psychologists have written volumes about our need for control and how it can be a destructive element in our relationships with others.

No doubt you’ve heard much about the panic buying of toilet paper. I’ve been intrigued by this phenomenon (why of all things are people hoarding toilet paper!?) so I’ve done some

reading from research from different psychologists and here are a couple of takeaways from an interview with Dr Dimitrios Tsivrikos: expert in consumer and behavioural science at the University College London: **[emphasis added is mine]**

- In public health issues we have no idea about the time or intensity and we get messages on a daily basis that we should go into panic mode that we buy into more than we need to. **It's our only tool of control**
- Because toilet paper has a longer shelf-life than many food items, is prominently featured in aisles and is big in size, **we are psychologically drawn to purchasing it in times of crisis.**

According to this expert, the toilet paper hoarding phenomenon is not about toilet paper, it's about seeking control in a time of crisis. The very control that James says we really don't have because our lives are 'but a mist that appears for a while then vanishes'.

I'm so grateful to God during this time of disruption in my routine, that I can still work, still enjoy food (especially the home-cooked version!), and still stay connected with my church family and friends using technology.

And I'm grateful for James' wisdom expressed in the scriptures, especially the reminder that my life is but a mist and therefore, I'm not in control now, and I wasn't in control when things were 'normal'.

I am certainly taking all the wise precautions from the government and health care experts to manage my life and lead my family through this uncertain time, but my ultimate confidence is in "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."

In that spirit, let's all be reminded that God is still in control (*and we never were*) as we embrace with gratitude the 'new normal' that God provides for us according to His will.

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