



**Sunday, October 25, 2020**

**Message in Word “Uncertain Times”**

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Revelation 2:4 (King James Version)

Good morning. Let me give you an update on Pastor Mike who has been at Lynchburg General in the COVID ICU with pneumonia, a blood clot in each lung, and severe dehydration since late Friday evening. His wife, Gwen, texted me this morning around 7:30 and said he’s alert and oriented, his vitals are good, and he’s in good spirits. He says he’s feeling much better and getting excellent care. Please continue praying; it is working—the Lord will watch over His servant. We ask that you contact me, Gwen, or another staff member for information so Mike can rest.

“Uncertain Times:” To say we’re living in trying times is an understatement. In fact, where Pastor Mike is right now underscores what’s happening in our area. Many things happening in our country have happened before, but rarely so many negative things at the same time. Our churches are under serious attacks on many fronts. Evil is not only obvious, it is rarely rebuked and often celebrated. Occult activity is increasing in our area. Christians and Christianity are being tested and pressured from all sides. In recent days we’ve seen both internet and social media giants such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google, ban or shut down conservative Christian statements and messages. The restrictions imposed on us by county, state, and national governments have put many churches in the position of diminishing, changing, or even closing. The impact on the church from the response to the pandemic will most likely not be temporary. Now that government leaders have found they can get by with shutting things down, they’ll likely do it again to suit their needs.

At some point, I certainly hope the restrictions will lift and we can get back to some semblance of normalcy. I do believe there will be a “new normal.” Our congregation will probably not be as large as it’s been in the past. The Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia suggest there will be a falling away from church as a result of the long-term shutdown. A program I like to tune in every evening at 6:00 p.m. on Radio Station Equip FM (91.7) is “Pastor’s Perspective.” It’s a call-in program with pastors and apologists to answer listeners’ questions. Two weeks ago they said, in their estimation, of all the churches that have had to shut down and not have services at all through this pandemic that one out of every five will never open again. That’s an astounding number. Regardless of where we stand on the pandemic and the related restrictions, what is patently clear is that Satan has used it as a terribly divisive tool. It’s brought division and disagreement not only to the community but even to the Body of Christ.

Why would people decide not to come any more? There are several reasons which, sadly, make very good sense. A lot of people don’t feel comfortable in crowds; that may never change. Whether that’s a scientifically justifiable reason or not, it does not matter. The truth is that sometimes we aren’t allowed the luxury of dealing with reality but with people’s perception of reality. Our calling as a church is to minister to everyone wherever they are, whatever they think. They have a right to their opinion. Fear of exposure to something deadly is a strong motive not to come, especially with the elderly and those with pre-existing conditions of various health challenges. Every church has people who have been long-time attendees but life got busy, schedules got complicated, and they slowly began to attend a little less each year. The lack of being able to attend church before will bring the temptation to do other things instead of coming. Internally, they’ll tell themselves they can worship the Lord anywhere and nothing will change in their relationship with Him. This is a very dangerous perception of oneself. We may remember that Felix told the Apostle Paul I’ll send for you at a more convenient time which never came. Scripture says not to forsake the assembly of yourselves together for a reason (Hebrews 10:25). Churches sometimes fail to get people connected in ministry with other members. Clifford has been guilty of this unintentionally at times. The oversight of making sure people are properly involved in something when

they join helps create someone who might fade away. When the church is blessed to have new members, many times after they're voted in, we almost take them for granted. We have a tendency to think they will automatically feel at home, feel welcomed, and feel mentored. If we never get them involved in the choir, a Sunday School class, or small group it will be easy for them to assume they were never very important to our church anyway. Not feeling wanted is an excellent reason to go somewhere else. Small groups are crucial and invaluable to the church; I would love to see numerous home Bible studies pop up and grow. In a home Bible study where you invite people you may already be close to, you're already friends. As you worship together privately in a small, less formal venue you'll feel more comfortable. You're more apt to share issues with each other and lean on each other in difficult times. You'll feel safe in keeping confidences with one another. We need more small groups; we'll give you whatever you need to get started!

All churches have folks who are very good; everyone assumes they're solid Christians and happy with the way things are going. But it's always possible they've been coming out of habit—their parents and grandparents did—it's just what you did on Sunday morning. This can result in the person never making a conscious, intentional personal commitment to Christ. If church isn't a top priority and they're busy people, they may slowly fade away as well. All churches have a few folks who never seem to be happy with anything, such as how the church is handled or its ministry. Because we're all different, that's a good thing. It's excellent we're all different because we'd all make the same mistakes! If someone is already, by nature, predisposed to be a bit hard to please or think if something doesn't go their way it's got to be wrong, times like these make it very easy for them to seek “greener pastures” which are never there—they're just different. Some people, sadly, come to church for business reasons to make business connections—an upstanding person in the community ought to be seen in church. They think they'll be better thought of and make good connections; it's a win-win. While this may be true, it has nothing to do with knowing the Lord; therefore, they don't have a “heart” connection with God which makes it very easy to drift away.

Finally, there's a convenience factor. Good people, who may be genuine Christians and want to stay connected to the Lord and to the church, and have the live-streaming and media options offered, they don't have to go to church to get it. They can watch us in a fishing boat. Several weeks ago my wife, Susan, and I sat on the second floor of the Outer Banks Motor Lodge and watched Pastor Mike preach against a background of sand which is hilarious because Mike hates sand! That's exactly why we sat there! These folks don't want to disconnect, but these online services allow them the opportunity of staying more relaxed. Ladies don't have to get up and put on makeup and fix your hair—neither of which I worry about! I told the early service about hearing the late J. Vernon McGee (he hosted “Thru the Bible” radio programs) speak of a gentleman who came forward in a very strict church and asked Dr. McGee how much makeup is all right for a woman to put on her face. He said, brother, it depends on the face. All these types of people I've mentioned are those who might drift away from the church slowly; you begin to notice more empty seats. The point being that in the current situation we're in makes it that much easier to make that kind of decision.

So how do we survive in “uncertain times?” First, in order for the church to survive we better find out who the church is. The buildings and property we own are not the church. Neither are the programs we offer nor the money we've saved and invested. Clifford Baptist Church is each and every person who worships here—member or not. Each of us individually is the church. I remember hearing Reggie McNeil speak at an annual conference; he said people do not judge the success and health of their church by the three “B's”—buildings, budgets, and bodies. If you have a church full of people, it may be you're saying what they want to hear. Budgets and buildings may mean you're spending God's money in the wrong place. We need to ask the Lord what to do with what He's given us. Spiritual health is what we're referring to. If the church needs to change and have problems we're not correcting, there is no ethereal group attached to this building to fix those challenges. You have to; I have to. We are the church; we're not sitting in the church—we are

the church in the building; we have to fix those things ourselves. Pastors, deacons, teachers, and committee chairmen are part of the church just like everyone else. We all have responsibilities though with different duties and positions.

I have a few suggestions which refer to us individually and also collectively as the Body of Christ as to how to survive right now and also to thrive. We must never forget that we the people are the church. We must improve in connecting people; everyone needs to belong to some type of group such as the choir or Sunday School class. We need more in-home Bible studies; more places where people can connect, make intimate friends, and lean on each other. We must realize while God's Word never changes how we share it must be practical and effective to the different needs of different people. We must take that message to people where they are. The Bible does not instruct us to throw open the church doors and hope they come. In Luke 14:23 Jesus says we must **"...go out into the highways and hedges and compel them to come in that My house may be filled."** We're somewhat resistant to change; I get that. Even the Lord had to confront the Apostle Peter with the need to change. In Acts 10, Peter was praying in an upper room and fell into a trance. The Lord lowered a sheet to him and told him to look in; it was filled with all kinds of animals both approved and disapproved by the Mosaic Law. Jesus said in verse 13, **"Peter, rise, kill, and eat."** Even knowing the Lord told him this Peter, being human, said he disagreed. I've never eaten things that are impure. Jesus said **"...what I have cleansed, do not call impure."** This had nothing to do with how Peter was eating. The Jewish Nation, Jewish Christians in particular, thought salvation was for them alone and no one else in the world. God was saying change your focus; expand your ministry. Everybody gets salvation if they accept it. Likewise, Clifford Baptist Church must be flexible and think "out of the box" so the Lord can improve our outreach, as well as our "inreach."

I think the Lord has allowed the current health difficulties and restrictions to force us to pay attention. One of the new realities He has brought us to is to realize we must embrace the fact that Clifford Baptist now has an in-person congregation and an on-line congregation. As the prayer of Jabez indicates, it would seem the Lord has enlarged our borders. If so, we're required to minister faithfully to both congregations. This will be an impossible task if we're not healthy as a church. We must make a point of ministering to every different group in the way that's meaningful to them both within and without the church. This means we need to offer traditional services to those who learn best from that; contemporary to those who learn best from that approach. I believe we're required now to perfect the way we stream to make sure our sound and recordings are good; to post Scripture and Bible studies online because there's an audience who needs and desires to be fed or they wouldn't be tuning in. My idea of a worldwide ministry may seem over-optimistic. To emphasize the importance of what God's beginning to do here, I would suggest that while the majority of people who tune in to our services are people we know, we've already had people listen from England, the Philippines, Mexico, India, Egypt, and many states in our country. A lady recently contacted us to find out where she could watch us on TV; her daughter saw one of our broadcasts and told her mother to find that church because it's teaching God's Word. Does this mean God has TV broadcast in our future? I don't know, but we must be open to the idea if God wants to take us there. Jesus taught us to feed those who are hungry, visit those in prisons, and clothe those who are naked. I don't think He was talking just about Clifford. We are literally called to minister worldwide, and we must not drop the ball. Already people from Clifford have physically been to 35 different countries, and we have three career missionaries who are on the field or have been. How can we look at that and deny God is calling us outward and not look inward? It seems very clear to me He's calling us to expand our reach into the technological audience—it travels further and faster than we can.

Unexpectedly, we're in a time of restriction and potentially smaller church attendance. Oddly enough, it seems it's happening at the same time that Clifford is being called to a larger field of ministry. What is God doing? Why would God allow our church to be pressured by a greater government with restrictions and health challenges while simultaneously calling us to a greater ministry? It seems contradictive. I would suggest Christians and churches in general have drifted from the faithfulness to the task that we're called to. We have invited and welcomed far too much of

the world into our lives and churches. We could very well be near to the time of the Antichrist's appearance. Because of that, I believe the time has come when Scripture says judgment of God must begin at the house of God (1 Peter 4:17). I think He's shaking us and refining us to cleanse us from false doctrine, from the faithless, the undecided, and the uncommitted. God needs the church to be His church, His way, in His time. We're in a war; we always have been. We're required to stand for Him at any cost to ourselves. An undecided and wishy-washy church will be of no use to the Lord; its own doubt and uncertainty will betray its powerlessness. The lost need to see the reality of God's power in action if they're to be convinced there's something here worth checking out. Satan is certainly not deterred by an uncommitted and powerless church. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link—God is not only shaking the church, I think He's shaking the nation in order to shake the church in order to shake us individually within that church. He calls each of His children to repentance and recommitment. In order for Clifford to survive and explore new opportunities, we must first examine ourselves and be willing to be refined. Our primary problem is not the pandemic, not the political climate, not persecution of Christianity. The church has grown the most in the deepest persecution. We may think it's terrible; it could be God pouring "Miracle-Gro" on His church to get something done. Persecution of a church or an individual will reveal the genuine and false; fair weather friends don't stay around long.

We should not be praying for normal times or an easier path; we should be praying the Lord helps us see we're not what we should be. Jesus changed the entire world with twelve men who were willing to die for Him. Are you? Am I? Turn to Revelation 2:4 **"Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love."** Sometimes something has to be broken down before it can be built back up. No person has ever taken medicine willingly until they were convinced they were sick. If we are weak and powerless, it's because we have individually left our first love. Let's examine ourselves honestly this morning. Remember, if there's a problem with our church it's us; we're the church. Is our focus on Jesus? Ask yourself: Is my focus only on Jesus? Do my thoughts, words, and actions prove He is first in my life or do they indicate something quite different? If we examine where we spend our time, money, and efforts do they lead others to Jesus or only lead to our favorite activities and places of pleasure? We are the church, and it can never truly be healthy and usable until its members are refined which will refine the church which will refine the community which will refine the country. Refining is the process of removing impurities from metal; the longer it's in the fire, the longer the impurities will burn off. The difference between regular and sterling silver is simply that sterling has been in the fire longer. How long will our refining take—my refining take? That depends on how long I choose my personal pleasure and convenience or the call of God. As it is with the silversmith, it will be with us. The silversmith refines the metal until he sees his reflection in the silver. God will refine us individually and collectively until He can see His reflection in us. Let us examine ourselves honestly and ask the Lord to show us what to refine out of our life. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide us in renewal and recommitment to Him. Only when we're in right relationship with Him will He be able to exhibit His power in and through us. Only then will our church be His church and not ours.

I would encourage all of us as Christians to open the door to our souls and let the Holy Spirit point out the things we need repenting of. I have them and am working hard to do just that. Perhaps there are people here today who have other issues; we don't want to ignore you. We'll pray for you, ask the Lord's power to fall on you, and deliver you from whatever you're dealing with. Most important there may be someone here who does not know Jesus or has taken Him for granted. Jesus cannot be your Savior unless He's also your Lord; many church folks want to try for just half of that and that does not work. One hundred percent commitment—He died 100% for you; He desires 100% from you.

**Let Us Pray:** Father God, thank You for each person here. I ask You would remove any semblance of myself from this sermon I believe You gave me. Move in the Holy Spirit, move in power, and have Your will done in every life. In Christ's name I pray. Amen.