

States and Cities Change Course on Reopenings as Coronavirus Cases Rise

The Wired Word for the Week of July 5, 2020

In the News

Plans to reopen swimming pools, bars, nightclubs and other businesses across the United States are being reconsidered as the coronavirus continues to spread. As of Friday, June 26, daily coronavirus cases were increasing in at least 29 states. The increases were particularly steep in southern states, including Texas and Florida. According to CNN, only two states are reporting a decline in new coronavirus cases, Connecticut and Rhode Island.

"This is a continuation of the first wave," said Dr. Amesh Adalja to *Business Insider*. "Some places that might have been relatively spared early on in the winter and the spring are now facing cases higher than they had before." Adalja is a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins University Center for Health Security. In response, a number of states and cities are reversing course on their reopening efforts, moving back to earlier phases or postponing additional steps.

In Texas, Gov. Greg Abbott rolled back his state's plan to reopen. Bars had previously been allowed to open with restrictions in place, but Abbott decided to shut them down except for delivery and takeout. He also closed tubing and rafting businesses and mandated that the government approve gatherings of 100 or more people. "The rise in cases is largely driven by certain types of activities, including Texans congregating in bars," Abbott said in a statement.

On a single day, June 23, more than 5,000 new cases were reported in Texas, which Abbott described as a "massive outbreak." That was followed on June 24 with 6,500 more cases. The situation in Texas is "absolutely horrifying," according to Dr. Peter Hotez, who is working on a Covid-19 vaccine.

In Florida, regulators prohibited drinking in bars after nearly 9,000 new cases were reported to the state in one day. When Florida began its reopening in early May, daily new-case counts were below 1,000, and then in early June Gov. Ron DeSantis allowed bars to reopen with modifications. "We are where we are," he told reporters on June 25, holding back on an announcement of when they would go to the next phase.

According to Fox News, the City of Jacksonville did an about-face on June 29 and mandated the wearing of masks in order to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Jacksonville is hosting portions of the Republican National Convention this August. Hundreds of Florida doctors sent a letter to the city council that said allowing 40,000 "people to descend on Jacksonville is unequivocally provocative of disease, predictably harmful, and medically disrespectful to the citizens of this city, much less the rest of the country."

Louisiana has postponed its next phase of reopening by a month and will stay in phase 2, which allows most businesses and houses of worship to operate at half capacity with social distancing. "We need to do a better job of wearing masks when we aren't at home," said Gov. John Bel

Edwards to WWL-TV. Louisiana reported more than 53,400 cases and 3,100 deaths as of June 26.

Nevada is waiting several more weeks before considering phase 3, since its seven-day average case count has risen steeply since the state reopened its casinos in early June. Phase 3 could allow employers to bring staff back without restrictions, as well as to increase occupancy for bars and allow the reopening of movie theaters and sporting venues. Nevada's case count rose by 41 percent in the last two weeks of June.

North Carolina has also paused its plans to move into phase 3, and Gov. Roy Cooper has mandated face masks in public places. "North Carolina is relying on the data and the science to lift restrictions responsibly, and right now our increasing numbers show we need to hit the pause button while we work to stabilize our trends," Cooper said in a statement.

On June 28, California governor Gavin Newsom ordered the state's bars to close in several counties as the coronavirus spreads. CNBC reported that California's seven-day average of new cases increased by more than 40 percent compared with the previous week. "Covid-19 is still circulating in California, and in some parts of the state growing stronger," Newsom said in a statement. San Francisco has decided to delay its plan to reopen businesses ranging from tattoo parlors to swimming pools. The Los Angeles public health director, Barbara Ferrer, said that it is "highly likely" that the spike in the Los Angeles area is related to the protest gatherings of two weeks ago.

Washington governor Jay Inslee announced on June 27 that he was pausing the state's reopening plan due to rising numbers of cases. Some counties were preparing to enter phase 4, which would essentially mean no restrictions, but the governor put a hold on those plans. In similar manner, Maine postponed the reopening of indoor bars, Oregon mandated face masks in indoor public places for most residents, and Boise, Idaho, reversed course and reverted to an earlier stage of its reopening, which includes the closing of bars and nightclubs.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Only Two US States Are Reporting a Decline in New Coronavirus Cases. *CNN*](#)
[California Is Prohibiting Indoor Wining, Dining, and Entertainment as Coronavirus Cases Spike. Here's How States Are Rolling Back Their Reopenings. *Business Insider*](#)
[More States Reverse or Slow Reopening Plans as Coronavirus Cases Climb. *CNBC*](#)
[Jacksonville, Host of Republican Convention, Mandates Wearing Masks. *Fox News*](#)
[For Third Day in a Week, L.A. County Reports More Than 2,000 New Coronavirus Cases. *LA Times*](#)

Applying the News Story

The Greek word *metanoia*, translated as "repentance" in the Bible and defined as "change of mind," relates to this news story. The changes being made in response to the spread of the coronavirus raise questions of when it is appropriate to make a course correction.

The Big Questions

1. When is it important to repent, have a change of mind and go in a new direction? What usually drives such a decision?
2. Repentance is connected not only to sorrow for sin, but to a change of mind or attitude. In what areas do Christians need such changes today?
3. New information often leads people to a change of mind. What sources do you trust as you make decisions about the direction of your life? What sources make you skeptical, and why?
4. In your community of faith, what decisions are being made to keep people healthy during the coronavirus pandemic? How are these decisions made and communicated?
5. What prevents individuals from repenting and having a change of heart? How can they, or we, be encouraged to change course and move in another direction? What good comes of taking such a step?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Exodus 32:14

And the LORD changed his mind ["repented," KJV] about the disaster that he planned to bring on the people. (For context, read 32:1-14.)

When Moses was delayed in coming down from Mount Sinai, the people made a golden calf and worshiped it. The Lord said, in anger, that he would "consume them" (v. 10). But Moses implored God, saying, "Change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people" (v. 12). So God changed his mind about destroying the people.

Questions: How did the impatience of the people lead them to make the golden calf, and what trouble did this create for them? Where do you see people getting impatient today, and what is the result? Why did God change his mind about consuming the Israelites, and how is this a model for our repentance? How does this kind of change reveal compassion and strength?

Jonah 3:1-3

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. (For context, read 3:1-10.)

Although the prophet Jonah is best known for being swallowed by a large sea creature and spit out on land, the central message of the book is repentance. When God called Jonah to go to Nineveh, he went at first in the opposite direction, hopped on a boat, encountered a storm, was thrown overboard and was swallowed by the famous fish. After three days, Jonah was spewed out on dry land, and then God said again, "Get up, go to Nineveh."

Upon hearing God's command a second time, Jonah repented -- he changed course and went to Nineveh. "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" he shouted (v. 4). This stinking, sticky prophet cried out against the city's 120,000 residents, not knowing if they would hear him, heed him or tear him to pieces. To his surprise, the Ninevites believed in God and repented of their sins. When God saw "how they turned from their evil ways" (v. 10), God changed course. Instead of overthrowing them, God let them live. "God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not" (v. 10, KJV).

Questions: When have you, like the prophet Jonah, run away from God and then turned back in the right direction? What was the result of this course correction? Where have you seen examples of communal repentance, such as was shown by the people of Nineveh? How does such a change of mind affect the heart of God?

Matthew 4:17

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (For context, read 4:12-17.)

Jesus began his ministry by withdrawing from Judea to Galilee and making his home in Capernaum. In so doing, the words of the prophet Isaiah were fulfilled, "Galilee of the Gentiles - the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light" (vv. 15-16). Then he called people to repent and turn toward the coming of the kingdom of heaven.

Questions: To what new reality was Jesus calling people to turn, and how are we challenged to continue to do this today? What keeps people from making such a change of heart and mind? How can the church better model the values of the kingdom of heaven?

Acts 26:19-20

[Paul said,] "After that, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout the countryside of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance." (For context, read 26:1-23.)

In the city of Caesarea, Paul faced charges of being an agitator, and he defended himself before a king named Agrippa. He spoke of his Jewish upbringing and his persecution of the followers of Christ, and then told the story of his conversion on the road to Damascus. He ended by reporting that the voice of Jesus had called him to help people "turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins" (v. 18).

Questions: What does it mean to you to repent and turn to God? How are the words of Paul still applicable today? How do you understand the challenge to "do deeds consistent with repentance"?

For Further Discussion

1. "Having humility to remain open to possibilities that lead to changes of any type is hard work, yet is the essence of Christian growth," says TWW team member Mary Sells. "We have to adopt

an attitude that God can always offer us more teaching and purification." What is the importance of humility in repentance and change? How has this been true for you, if at all?

2. [According to NBC News](#), South Dakota governor Kristi Noem said that the people attending the celebration for Independence Day at Mount Rushmore would not be required to practice social distancing. "We told those folks that have concerns that they can stay home," she said, "but those who want to come and join us, we'll be giving out free face masks, if they choose to wear one. But we will not be social distancing." State officials have told the people of South Dakota "to focus on personal responsibility," said Noem. What is the proper balance of government mandates and personal choice in the face of the pandemic?

3. "The topic of changing course figures greatly in the other major discussion we are having in our nation right now, too, about our troubled history as it involves race," notes TWW team member Joanna Loucky Ramsey. In Nehemiah 9:2, the Israelites "stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their ancestors." How can we continue to change course over race, rooting out the white supremacy that supported the institution of slavery?

4. [The Washington Post reports](#) that "air travel in the age of covid-19 will probably be a more socially distant, do-it-yourself experience, relying on travelers to wear masks, submit to temperature scans and check their own bags." People are changing their minds about air travel and beginning to fly again. How do you feel about returning to air travel? What safety measures will you expect to see in place? In your opinion, are airlines reopening routes in the correct ways? Why or why not?

5. TWW team member Heidi Mann observes that we often don't want to repent because we think it means losing face. How would our life of faith -- and life in general -- be easier to navigate if we could acknowledge that sometimes we need to change direction because of new information, but that there's no need to worry about "saving face" in the process?

Responding to the News

Think of a way in which you are being challenged to repent and "change your mind" about a course of action that is leading you away from the health and wholeness that God desires for you. Make a course correction without worrying about losing face, because God supports changes that bring people closer to the values of his kingdom.

Prayer

God of repentance, renewal and new life, we ask you to give us the courage to turn around and follow you, in ways that lead to abundant life, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Other News This Week

Astrobiologists Report Discovery of Exoplanets That May Support Life

In the News

Sara Seager is a planetary scientist at MIT whose life obsession to find another habitable planet like Earth began when she saw the night sky during her first camping trip at the age of 10. "It was like seeing a beautiful piece of artwork or hearing music for the first time," Seager said. She has been searching for a perfect "Goldilocks planet" -- "not too big, not too small, not too hot, not too cold, but just right for life" -- ever since.

According to a study published in late June in the journal *Science*, astronomers at the University of Göttingen in Germany say they've discovered two so-called "super Earths" that could fit the "Goldilocks" description and "potentially host life" orbiting Gliese 887, a red-dwarf star just 11 light years from Earth. The rocky exoplanets, dubbed Gliese 887b and Gliese 887c, are located outside our solar system. They are larger than Earth but smaller than ice giants like Uranus and Neptune.

Red-dwarf stars like Gliese 887 are much smaller, fainter and less intense than our Sun. The exoplanets complete their orbits around Gliese 887 in just 9.3 and 21.8 days respectively. A third possible planet that might also support life further from the host star completes its orbit in about 50 days.

Scientists tell us there are hundreds of billions of galaxies in the universe, and in each galaxy there are hundreds of billions of planets, stars and solar systems. Most stars have orbiting planets. Many in the scientific community believe it would defy imagination to think that out of all those hundreds of billions of galaxies, each with hundreds of billions of solar systems containing hundreds of billions of stars orbited by hundreds of billions of planets, our Earth is the only one capable of sustaining life.

In November 2013, astronomers reported, based on Kepler space mission data, that there could be as many as 40 billion Earth-sized planets orbiting in the habitable zones of Sun-like stars and red dwarfs in the Milky Way. Astrophysicists at the University of Nottingham in England estimate that at least 36 intelligent alien populations may exist in the Milky Way galaxy alone.

Adam Frank, an astrophysics professor at the University of Rochester and author of *Light of the Stars: Alien Worlds and the Fate of the Earth*, told Mary Louise Kelly of NPR that the odds are 1 in 10 billion trillion that Earthlings "are all alone and always were."

"When you add up all the possibilities in the universe," Frank says, "you end up with 10 billion trillion planets where a civilization could have formed."

Similarly, Harvard astrophysicist Avi Loeb said, "We humans are probably not special," since the existence of alien civilizations might not be that unusual, given the number of potentially habitable planets in the universe.

In the past, in the Search for ExtraTerrestrial Intelligence (SETI), researchers have listened for purposeful radio signals from an exo-civilization or alien life form. Recently, scientists have increasingly turned to other methods to detect indirect evidence of past or present existence of life through "bio-signatures," "techno-signatures" or "unintentional markers" provided by the atmospheres of exoplanets.

Loeb notes that "it's possible that when we survey planets we may find artifacts of dead civilizations that aren't around anymore." Loeb adds that some artifacts could be discovered in space rather than on planets, if alien civilizations have ventured to explore space just as humans have done. These physical objects could serve as "messages in a bottle" if we can develop technology sophisticated and sensitive enough to spot them.

As we develop better technology to study different wavelengths of light as well as sound, scientists hope we will improve our chances of detecting signs of past or present life on other planets and in the spaces between heavenly bodies.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Astronomers Discover Nearby Super-Earths That Could 'Potentially Host Life.' CBS](#)
[Three 'Super Earths' Spotted Orbiting Nearby Star. BGR](#)
[Sara Seager: How Close Are We to Finding Life on Another Planet? NPR](#)

The Big Questions

1. Why do you think many people are fascinated by the search for a habitable new earth? Is it love of fantasy or entertaining science fiction; curiosity about our own beginnings and ultimate fate; interest in science, and especially in astronomy; a hunger for meaningful connections; the desire to find new, useful resources; the pursuit of the glory of accomplishing what has never been done before ("to boldly go where no one has gone before," as the *Star Trek* series described the mission of the Starship *Enterprise*) or something else?
2. To what degree might the desire to find an Edenic Earth-like planet elsewhere in the universe reflect human angst over the physical state of our own planet and fear about the long-term survival of the human race? How might the drive to find the potential for extraterrestrial life be related to our own longing for a new beginning -- a "do-over," if you will -- because, deep down, we realize we haven't done too well with the planet we have? How does the biblical promise of a new heaven and a new earth speak to that human hunger to start over?
3. If we did find another Earth, how would we react? What would that actually mean? How might the Golden Rule ("Do unto others as you would have them do unto you") apply to the way humans should relate to life forms discovered elsewhere in the universe?
4. How might the discovery of intelligent life elsewhere in the universe change your view of God? Of humanity's place in creation?

5. How might the way we think about potential life forms in outer space relate to the way we think about people of other ethnicities, races and nations, or about other species, here on Earth?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Psalm 19:1-4

*The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world. (For context, read 19:1-10.)*

Matthew 24:35

[Jesus said,] "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." (For context, read 24:3-8, 33-35.)

The psalmist says that day after day and night after night, the heavens speak about God's glory throughout the whole world.

Matthew 24 contains Jesus' response to his disciples' question about signs of his return and of the end of the age. Jesus replied that the end of the age would be characterized by many false messiahs, wars, rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, persecution and other tragedies. He prophesied that heaven and earth will come to an end, but that his words will live forever.

Questions: What, if anything, do you hear the heavens and heavenly bodies tell you about God?

Given that John described Jesus as "the Word of God" (John 1:1) and as "the Word made flesh" (John 1:14), how are the words spoken by the heavens the same as and different from the words Jesus spoke and still speaks today, and from Jesus as "the Word of God"?

How does Jesus speak the Word of God today? Where do you hear that Word? Might Jesus speak God's Word through people? Through you? Through people or extraterrestrials who are not like you? What is that Word Jesus is speaking today?

Psalm 8:3-4

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? (For context, read 8:1-9.)

The vastness of the night sky convinced this psalmist that human beings are but a small piece of God's larger creation, and yet he rejoiced at the care God gives to mortals, and that God creates them just "a little lower than God" (v. 5).

Looking down at Earth from above might evoke similar awe. Mike Massimino was on two missions to repair the Hubble Space Telescope and got to see Earth from outside his spacecraft. In his book *Spaceman*, he tells of looking down at our planet and thinking, "Wow. How much God our Father must love us that he gave us this home. He didn't put us on Mars or Venus with nothing but rocks and frozen waste. He gave us paradise and said, 'Live here.' It's not easy to wrap your head around the origins and purpose of the universe, but that's the best way I can describe the feelings I had."

Questions: Does our status in the created order as "a little lower than God" mean we will rank above any alien rational beings we might encounter during the exploration of space? What problems could such a view cause? What responsibilities might such a view imply? In light of this compliment, how do we avoid getting a big head?

John 10:14-16

[Jesus said,] "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." (For context, read 10:1-18.)

TWW team member Frank Ramirez wrote, "We live in a God-centered universe, but we tend to think of it as human-centered, or me-centered. When Jezebel was pursuing the prophet Elijah to kill him, he told God he was depressed because he thought he was the only faithful God-follower left. God told him there were 7,000 faithful people who had not bowed down to Baal (1 Kings 19:1-18).

"These exoplanets remind us that there is so much happening, rich and bountiful, in God's universe. We're off at the edge," Ramirez noted.

Questions: Is it possible that some of those "other sheep" of whom Jesus spoke in John 10, and "faithful people" God referenced in 1 Kings 19, live or lived on planets elsewhere in the universe? How do you feel about that possibility?

Revelation 21:1, 5

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ... And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." (For context, read 21:1-7.)

While we face various natural and human-made disasters, environmental degradation, disease, famine, wars, sociopolitical turmoil and other pressures, these words assure us that, just as God created the heavens and the earth we know out of chaos, he can and will do so again.

In that new heaven and new earth where death, mourning, crying and pain are no more, God promises to live with us.

In that new heaven and new earth are "myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands" of the voices of many angels and every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, worshipping and "singing with full voice" praise to the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb of God that was slain (Revelation 5:11-14). Imagine what an amazing choir that will be! We can only wonder what heavenly creatures that choir will include. Might we see extraterrestrial life forms from exoplanets we never knew existed represented in this choir of the universe?

Questions: To what extent do you think the interest in finding other planets that could potentially sustain life represents a desire to "return to Eden," to find "Paradise Lost," if you will? Do you think humans could maintain a new planetary home in pristine condition, assuming it were discovered and that we had the technology to relocate there? Why or why not? What would prevent humans from treating a new planet and its inhabitants the way colonizers treated other countries and indigenous people here on Earth?

How does God create the new heaven and new earth described in Revelation? Is it possible to experience that reality in our own world and lifetime? Why or why not?

What is the nature of the new heaven and the new earth the text says God is making? How is it greater than simply moving from one worn-out planet to an undamaged, new neighborhood in the universe?

For Further Discussion

1. Discuss this, from evangelist Billy Graham: "[The Bible's] main concern is with human life on this planet, including our problems and our future. This doesn't mean life can't exist on other planets, for it well might; the Bible simply doesn't tell us.

"But the Bible does tell us ... that everything in the universe ... owes its existence to God. ... 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' (Genesis 1:1). ...

"Although God created us, we have rebelled against him and chosen to go our own way. Think of it: We have rejected God, our creator -- and we have paid a terrible price for our folly. This is why we need Christ, for only He can reconcile us to God, and only He can give us hope that we will go to be with Him in Heaven forever."

2. C.S. Lewis once said he thought of the distances of space as part of God's quarantine zone, in order to protect the universe from our fallen nature. In Lewis' *Space Trilogy*, the philologist Ransom encounters unfallen races on Mars, and is present on Venus when that planet's Eve faces the same temptation as in Genesis 3.

What would a planet be like where there was no need of redemption because that people (whatever they might look like) had never fallen? Is it possible to achieve maturity as an individual or a group without some sort of sin? Does one need God if one does not need redemption?

3. Have images from orbiting telescopes, automatic probes or reports from humans who have ventured into space had an impact on you, and if so, what impact?

4. After Christ returns and we have eternity to spend with him, might God send us to planets with sentient beings to interact with them the way Jesus did with humans on earth? Might we literally become "little Christs" willing to sacrifice our lives so other species might also come to know how much God loves them?

5. Respond to this, from TWW team member Heidi Mann: "Maybe thinking about possible other beings in other places would lend a bit of perspective to our own current situation. We are very self-focused right now -- both as individuals and as a planet (not to push aside how many of us are trying to be other-focused for the well-being of our neighbors in terms of pandemic and racial injustice)."

TWW team member Bill Tammeus added: "I think about what astronauts always say about looking back at our big blue marble -- they say it looks so peaceful and wonder why it seems to have so much division and trouble. Maybe a broader view of the cosmos would move us to work for peace here."

What might the church hope to learn from extraterrestrial civilizations? How might curiosity about the universe and the possibility of extraterrestrial life forms provide perspective about how to live with greater justice, mercy and humility here on this planet?

Responding to the News

The discovery of planets that could contain intelligent life opens interesting future possibilities about how to relate to rational beings who are different species from us. For now, we are challenged by how to relate to other human beings who are different from us. This is a good time to remind ourselves that God is Lord of all he has created, and to do our best to avoid acting toward others out of prejudice and preconceived notions.

Prayer suggested by Psalm 147:1, 4-5; 148:1-6, 13; Philippians 2:14-15

Almighty God, whose power is abundant and whose understanding is beyond measure, we join with all your angels, the sun and moon, all shining stars and heavenly bodies to praise you, for you commanded, and they were created. We exalt your name, for your glory is above earth and heaven. As the heavenly bodies declare your glory and direct us to you, may we be signposts pointing others to you. In Jesus' name. Amen.