

*THE BASIC THINGS
YOU NEED TO KNOW
WHEN OUR WORLD
FALLS APART*

Lars B. Dunberg and Ben Foley

ServeNow

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By Lars B. Dunberg and Ben Foley

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Introduction

It was 11:56 on a Saturday morning, April 25, 2015 in a village in Nepal. As she always used to do, a young woman dressed in her traditional clothes and a red cardigan to ward off a chill in the air, had taken her two children and gone to church that Saturday morning. As she sat in the service, the entire building suddenly began to shake and crumble, while a very strong earthquake shook the entire country. She immediately rushed out of the church, clutching each child's hand in her own and ran for home. As they hurriedly came around the corner, they were horrified to see their brick home had collapsed, and among the rubble she found her dead mother-in-law. It rained constantly for the next few days as she struggled to find shelter for herself and her children. But she would not give up. There had to be some way to find a new shelter. An organization came along and provided her with some tin sheet roofing. Together with others, they took the remains of the roof from her old house, converted those pieces to walls, and used the new tin sheets for a roof. Despite the trauma, she found a solution and now lives a new, somewhat different life, thankful to others who cared for her and assisted her in rebuilding the home.

In a distant country, there was a young man who became very wealthy. He met a young lady who became his wife and soon they were a small family. His cattle multiplied so that he ultimately owned almost 12,000 livestock, and his riches continued to increase. Soon he was the richest man in the area. Their family grew until they had seven sons and three daughters.

Life was going very well and the man soon found he was within a circle of very influential friends. The family took part in the religious life of the community and it seemed that he had succeeded in everything he wanted to accomplish.

Out of the blue, calamity struck! One day while at home several messengers appeared, one after the other. They all brought disastrous news.

"Robbers came and stole all your oxen and donkeys, and they killed your farmhands!"

"Fire came down from heaven and destroyed all your sheep and killed the shepherds as well!"

"Three bands of raiders stole all your camels and killed your herders!"

The man didn't know what to do. As if it was not enough, another messenger arrived and told him, "Your sons and daughters held a party in the home of your oldest son. A horrific storm with powerful winds suddenly blew so strong that the house imploded and killed everyone inside!"

The man was stricken by grief but refused to blame anyone, not even God. However, he asked some tough questions: "What did I do wrong? What is God trying to tell me?"

Over a period of time some of his closest friends came to give advice, telling him that all the problems he faced, was because of his bad behavior, since God only punishes those who sin. Even his wife lost her temper with him and exclaimed, *Curse God and die!*

The man's name was Job, and there is an entire book about him in the Bible. In the end, Job realized that he could not come to God and try to tell him anything.

God wanted simply an admission of trust. His message was really this: Until you know a little more about running the physical universe, Job, don't tell me how to run the moral universe!

Job had only one thing to worry about: his response. God never did explain why Job suffered, but instead moved the focus to the future: What will you do now?

After the Lord finally spoke, Job went quiet. Job's silent response did not minimize the intense pain and loss he had endured. Rather, it underscored the importance of trusting God's purposes while we suffer, even when we don't know what those purposes are. In the end we learn that we may never know the specific reason for our suffering, but even so we must trust in God.

Eventually Job's wealth was returned to him—this time it was twice as much! He and his wife were given as many children as they had before; with the understanding promise that when he entered eternity they would be added to the children he had lost earlier.

A pastor and his wife in India left home together to visit another city overnight. To ensure his two children could cope well on their own, the father gave them money to be able to manage for one day.

While the parents were away the entire country went into total lockdown, with immediate effect: the parents and children are now separated, and they are worried about the children having enough groceries. It is not possible for them to unite for weeks. While the parents are away they learn what a total lockdown is like. They notice four workers who are depending on their daily wage to provide food for their families being arrested by the police. They were desperate to get to their worksite but as a result of the arrest, their families will not be fed for the foreseeable future.

Some seventy-five years ago there was a little boy growing up with his parents and sister in a small apartment in a European country. Before he had turned ten, he lived in constant fear of an illness called polio that had crippled several children in the neighborhood. It was towards the end of the polio epidemic and everyone feared that young children in the area would be infected.

On one of his birthdays his grandparents gave him a fiction book about a boy in his teens that had been hit by the illness and ended up in a hospital where he was placed in a metal iron lung that would help him breathe. This frightened the young boy reading the story. It lingered in his dreams as the worst nightmare he could think of. Often he would

wake up in a cold sweat, sensing he could not take another breath. It seemed his future world had completely fallen apart. That ten-year-old boy was me, Lars. God delivered me from that fear and I am still alive today, doing what God has called me to do.

The world seems to have fallen apart several times before

Over my lifetime the people of this world have not been strangers to crises and catastrophes.

One night in December 1984, a leak from a gas plant in Bhopal, India, killed thousands of innocent people and gave non-fatal injuries to over half a million people. That night the world fell apart for many living in India.

Only two years later thousands of people in the world were watching live television newscasts when a space shuttle blew apart while launching. That same year a nuclear power plant in Chernobyl, Ukraine, suffered a nuclear disaster, spreading radiation across national borders affecting more than thirteen countries in Europe. Many years later people were still suffering from related diseases, including cancer. That day their world fell apart.

In 1994, a passenger ferry between Estonia and Sweden came upon a storm with waves reaching an estimated 15 to 20 feet. Water poured in through an open port door and the ferry capsized within an hour trapping many passengers inside, killing 852 people. Another 137 people were rescued from the chilly water, mostly by helicopter. I personally

knew some of the passengers who died. The world for their families fell apart that night.

Most of us do not forget September 11, 2001, when terrorists hijacked four passenger planes in America and flew them into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York, the Pentagon in Washington, and into the ground in Pennsylvania. Thousands died that day and America was forever changed as the security of the world fell apart.

Following Christmas 2004, the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami with its epicenter in Sumatra, Indonesia, created waves up to 30 meters (100 feet) and killed an estimated 250,000 people in 14 countries. The event is viewed as the largest natural disaster in history. As I walked through village after village in Sri Lanka a few months later, the aftermath of a world that had fallen apart was evident wherever I turned to look.

In September 2005, Hurricane Katrina claimed more than 1,800 lives in the southern part of the United States, creating complete devastation in that area.

In March 2011, Japan experienced a strong earthquake, the most powerful ever recorded in that country. It triggered a tsunami with waves up to 40 meters (133 feet). It killed almost 16,000 people and affected over 200,000 others. Their world fell apart in Japan that week.

The 2015 earthquake in Nepal affected surrounding India, China, and Bangladesh. Nearly 9,000 peo-

ple died and 3,500,000 people were left homeless. Nepal's world fell apart that day.

As the pandemic of 2020 spreads rapidly across more than 170 countries, I recently heard a young woman make this statement: "I have been locked in my house for many days in total isolation. Not just me, but my own family is also locked up in their house in another city. Some of my close friends have died in this pandemic. I am worried about my grandparents who are old and fragile. Will they die in this pandemic, without anyone of us even being present at their burial?"

As we face crises, catastrophes and pandemics, there is no doubt you and I will go through enormous emotional and physical stress. It seems our worlds are falling apart, and we wonder where to turn for hope and inner peace.

Are you feeling angry?

Are you upset because your government forced you to stay at home? Are you angry because there are no trains or planes taking you out of this situation? Are you angry at your gods or the god because he is mistreating you in this way? Are you angry with the press or the politicians who seem to slant their stories in one particular direction?

Are you worried about what may happen to you?

Over the years, you may have worried about all kinds of issues. What if I don't get into the right college? What if I cannot find someone to marry? What if I

cannot have children? What if I don't earn enough money to survive life? Will an earthquake happen in my country? What if I get caught in a fire? Perhaps my future will be a disaster! Worry and anxiety fills you as you look ahead, wondering where to find some peace. And then a pandemic happens. Will someone that I don't even know infect me with a virus?

Most people worry about something:

"I worry about having children because of the state of the world and fear that I am bringing a child into a sad and dangerous place."

"My number one worry is staying healthy long enough to raise my twelve-year-old daughter and helping her get established as an adult."

"My biggest concern is whether or not I'll be able to take care of my family. If I lose my job, what would I be able to do with almost everyone in the same situation?"

"I worry mostly about anything that can hurt my children, from the scary guy lurking at the park, to car seats not performing their job, to them being sick. And now I can add this deadly virus!"

I need to blame someone

Whose fault is this and who is to blame for it? Was it my fault? Or the fault of the people in the country where this started? I would feel so much better if I can blame someone or something.

The consequences are so negative

Before this pandemic happened, there were problems in the world. Perhaps the hospitals were already full in your country. People were struggling to find food for the day. Others found it difficult to find employment— and now this! The consequences for my country are more than I know how to deal with.

Did I do wrong?

In most countries, there have been partial or full lockdowns. People have been told to stay inside and not go out for many days. However, you needed items from a store and did what you needed to do to get them, even if you had been told that it was wrong to do so. Now you may have infected someone else who shows worse symptoms than you have. It is difficult to feel guilty for acting without responsibility.

Is it wrong to hoard?

I was told by some that I could only buy one container of milk and one roll of tissues...and there were no eggs! The shelves with rice, flour, and sugar, that are always well-stocked, were completely empty, but somehow I managed to get hold of four times as much—much more than I needed, plus some eggs! Now I feel guilty. Was it wrong of me to hoard while others went without?

It is all so out of control

There seems to be new instructions and restrictions every day. While I know there is not yet a solution to be found, except being in quarantine, it all seems so out of control. You have to figure out new ways to cook with the limited resources you have. It all seems such a lengthy process and I feel completely out of control.

I feel so paralyzed

Sometimes people make quick statements just to make you feel a bit more relaxed. "This will eventually build your character," or, "It could have been so much worse!" I feel utterly paralyzed and their words seem like putting a bandaid on a broken leg. Where can I turn so I don't feel like this?

Who made the choice?

Today I feel so guilty. Several of my co-workers became very ill with the virus. Eventually two of them died. I am alive. Why them and not me? I feel very guilty when I stop to think about those around me who died. Who has made that horrific choice in my world? Am I betraying those who were my co-workers and friends?

Is there any hope?

For many the future looks hopeless. Hopelessness often leads to desperate steps to subdue these negative impulses. Some use alcohol or drugs, others even consider suicide as an option out of this un-

controllable pandemic. However, read on and you will find hope!

Why did my world fall apart recently?

Scientists and medical researchers have often differed on the exact definition of a pandemic. However, we can all agree that the word describes a widespread disease beyond what can normally be expected in a geographical region.

It has happened before

There have been many pandemics in our world since it began. Many of them have been extremely severe. One of the early plagues took place as soldiers returned to Rome from Mesopotamia around 165 A.D. It is not certain whether it consisted of measles or smallpox, but it killed over five million people.

Between 541-542, approximately half of the population of Europe died in a pandemic called the Plague of Justinian, who at that time was the emperor over the Eastern Roman Empire. In the city of Constantinople (now Istanbul) 5,000 people a day died and ultimately decimated 40 percent of the city's population.

During the 1350s, another 50 million people died from the bubonic plague, or Black Death. It began in Asia and was carried throughout the world by rats covered with infected fleas. Europe lost sixty percent of its population to the Black Death. Symptoms of this disease began with swelling of the lymph nodes, either in the groin, armpit, or neck. After six

to ten days of infection and sickness, 80 percent of those people died. The virus was spread via blood and airborne particles. This epidemic changed the course of European history.

Other epidemics have resulted in numerous deaths.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the modern plague (caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*) was spread by rodent fleas and claimed ten million lives. Following World War I, approximately 20 million people died of the Spanish flu.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic that began in 1960 and exploded onto the worldwide scene in the 1980s, has so far claimed 39 million lives. Today, about 37 million people are living with HIV.

At the time of this writing, the COVID-19 (generally known as the novel coronavirus) has claimed more than 120,000 lives worldwide. The numbers change every day and may multiply tenfold or more. While it is overwhelming at the moment, and may become worse before the curve is flattened, it is not the largest threat to affect the world. This will also pass. There is a brighter future ahead.

Where was God when this happened?

Many of us question God's way of dealing with pain and suffering. Actually, for many Christians and non-Christians alike, this is one reality making it difficult for people to believe in a loving God. If he is good and great, how can he allow pain?

We tend to ask, “If God really exists, if he loves us and has the power to stop this pain and suffering, then why doesn’t he?”

A man in the Bible, Gideon, struggled with a similar question. When he was told that God was with him, he responded, *if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us?* (Judges 6:13).

Why do these bad things happen to us? Why does an all-loving, all-powerful God allow the suffering and pain that we experience in our lives? How is it possible to see God’s presence in pain and suffering?

The Bible does describe God as all-powerful; he can do anything he desires to do. But we also read that he allows suffering and pain.

God’s governing principles

Much suffering has come about because of two governing principles God has built into creation: freedom of choice and natural law.

Freedom of choice

One reason God allows suffering is because he has given us freedom. We are created in his image with the ability to think, speak, and decide what we want or don’t want to do. With the freedom to choose comes the responsibility of dealing with the consequences of our choices. God could have made us into persons unable to decide for ourselves — like robots that would always do exactly what he wants us to do, beings that would not have the freedom of choice. However, because he loves us, he has made

us with the freedom to choose. Very often we experience suffering and pain as a consequence of our own choices.

All actions produce consequences—but all consequences are not the same. Imagine a person working hard all day to earn money for a living, and another person stealing that hard-earned money. What if the consequences of both actions were exactly the same? Or, perhaps you decide to take care of the poor and feed the hungry, doing the best you can to help others. On the other hand, you might decide to deface your neighbor's garden fence because you don't appreciate the color they have just painted it. What if the consequences of both of these actions were exactly the same? Would that teach us how to live correctly in our world? No, it would not!

After creating our world, God placed the first couple, Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden—a perfect garden designed in a way to provide a home for them forever. He didn't want them to experience suffering, pain, and death, but he allowed them to freely choose to obey or disobey him. When they freely chose to disobey, they paid dearly for that choice by being driven from the garden and having to fend for themselves in a much different world.

As in their case, sometimes suffering and pain result from our own poor or wrong decisions. We are created with the ability to choose, but our poor choices bring about consequences that can cause pain and suffering—even in the lives of the innocent.

Natural law

God designed a universe that is regulated by natural law. We use natural law in a positive way on a regular basis; for instance, the law of gravity. We study the law of gravity to determine how to create an airplane that takes us from one city or country to another. We also understand what our bodies need in order to survive: they need food and water. That is why we must have sources of clean water to drink. However, the water that allows us to live can also be a cause of pain and suffering. It can become polluted and kill us. We may even drown in it. The law of gravity, and other natural laws, helps us to construct buildings and homes, but workers have been injured and have died when climbing ladders while constructing those buildings. So those laws at times cause pain and suffering in our lives because we ignore them. And natural phenomena like tornadoes, earthquakes, hurricanes, and tsunamis are often at play.

Imagine a person deciding to build a house in an area where flooding is likely to regularly occur. And there may also be an earthquake, for one had happened many, many years before in that area. While the person understands the risks to build in this particular area, he insists to build there anyway. However, when disaster strikes, he may tend to blame God instead of himself.

You may ask, "Why didn't God design a world where natural laws wouldn't cause us pain and suffering?" Can we imagine a world where those laws

do not stay the same? That would create absolute chaos, and that is not how God designed the world.

It's nothing new

Sometimes when we experience crisis or a pandemic we think something unusual or unique is happening to us. But the reality is, catastrophes, crises and pandemics are nothing new. And the truth is, there will be more crises and pandemics in the future. Jesus himself said that times like these would come and will increase the closer we get to his return. Here is how he worded it: *Then he said to them: Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven.*

There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near (Luke 21:10-11 and 21:25-28 NIV).

Notice, Jesus said that these crises would cause fear to consume and paralyze many people. Therefore, it's important for us to discuss how to overcome fear and maintain our hope in Jesus. In fact, these very "signs" remind us of the great hope of the Christian faith: Jesus is returning to restore all things!

The first thing to overcome is fear itself

Famous leaders have reminded us in different ways of the following quote by Nelson Mandela, “I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.”

Fear is a normal human emotion we all experience. But fear is also a stronghold the enemy uses to paralyze and cripple us. Fear is sometimes necessary, causing us to act in specific ways in given situations that can save lives; but the problem develops when our lives become consumed or controlled by fear. During pandemics this is sadly what happens. People become so consumed by fear that they add panic and other problems to an already challenging situation. For example, people begin to hoard, steal, or hurt others. Self-interest can easily destroy human compassion.

Therefore, we need to acknowledge the reality of fear and not allow it to consume or control us. Did you know that other than the command to “praise the Lord,” the most often repeated command in Scripture is along the lines of “do not be afraid?” There is a reason the Bible (often God himself directly) reminds us to not be afraid...because we are so prone to be afraid!

But as God’s people, we have the ability not to be controlled by a spirit of fear. In fact, Paul reminded Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:7 that, *the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline* (NIV). Ask yourself, are you operating

in a way that displays confidence, courage, love, self-control, and discipline? If not, then it means you are operating under a spirit of fear, which is not the Spirit God gave us.

Psalm 46 is a wonderful chapter in the Bible that speaks directly to times of crisis. It reminds us that we must resolve in our hearts to not be afraid no matter our circumstances or what may be happening around us:

*God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.*

*Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.*

*There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy place where the Most High dwells.*

*God is within her, she will not fall;
God will help her at break of day.*

*Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.*

*The LORD Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.*

*Come and see what the LORD has done,
the desolations he has brought on the earth.*

*He makes wars cease
to the ends of the earth.*

*He breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the shield with fire.*

He says, "Be still, and know that I am God;

*I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth.”
The LORD Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress (Psalm 46:1-11 NIV).*

Resolve right now that you will not be afraid, but instead trust that God is with you!

Overcoming anxiety

The other powerful emotion we wrestle with, especially during times of crisis, is anxiety. We worry about what might happen to us or our families. We worry about our health. We worry about the economy. We worry about our future.

But Scripture again calls us not to give into worry or anxiety. Consider these words from the Bible:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? (Matthew 6:25-27 NIV).

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour (1 Peter 5:6-8 NIV).

The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of

God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:6-7 NIV).

The importance of prayer

Notice the role that prayer plays in overcoming anxiety. Specifically, we are called to not give in to anxiety, but to bring our anxieties to the Lord in prayer. We do so, trusting him with our life and future. Worry is evidence of a lack of trust in the Lord. Trust the Lord with those things that cause you anxiety and entrust your life into his sovereign and loving hands.

The promise of God's peace – Jesus is the Prince of Peace

When we bring our anxieties to the Lord in prayer, he promises to replace it with his supernatural peace. The peace Jesus gives us is of a kind that nothing else in this world can provide, a peace regardless of our circumstances – perhaps even illogical considering our circumstances – especially in the middle of a pandemic or crisis! But nonetheless it is real, and it is available for us.

However, for God's peace to truly protect our hearts and minds, we must pray and trust in him and pay attention to what we are choosing to focus our minds on. The letter to the Philippians 4:8 (NIV), further calls us to this: *Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admi-*

rable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.

The prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament assures us that, *You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you* (Isaiah 26:3 NIV).

It is very easy to get so caught up in the 24/7 news cycle, social media, or gossip around town, that our minds become focused on a steady stream of bad or worrisome news. While we need to understand what is happening in our world and communities in order to wrestle with the issues of our age, we need to make sure our minds don't become fixated on all that is wrong and bad. We must keep our thoughts and focus on the Lord if we want his peace to rule and reign within us!

Letting his peace rule and reign in our hearts

Paul's letter to the Colossians expresses it like this, *Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful* (Colossians 3:15 NIV).

Peace should be what characterizes the lives of God's people regardless of what is happening in the world around them. Jesus has not promised us an easy, comfortable, or trial free life. In fact, he clearly taught the opposite!

Jesus said in the Gospel of John, *I have **told** you these things, so that **in me you** may have peace. **In this world you will** have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the **world*** (John 16:33 NIV).

And in the Book of Isaiah 43:1-3 (NIV), God reminds us,

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.
For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior...*

Trust

While pandemics and other crises are nothing new in the context of world history, it may be a new experience for many of us today. Each new crisis can bring us into unknown, unfamiliar, and uncharted territory. But we can trust God! While the way forward might be unknown for us, it is not unknown to God. While our future might be uncertain, it is not uncertain to God. He promises to guide us, lead us, and walk with us through all situations, no matter how difficult.

For example, in the Book of Isaiah, God promises,

*I will lead the blind by ways they have not known,
along unfamiliar paths I will guide them;
I will turn the darkness into light before them
and make the rough places smooth.*

*These are the things I will do;
I will not forsake them (Isaiah 42:16 NIV).*

The psalmist declares,

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil for you are with me;
your rod and your staff they comfort me (Psalm 23:4 NIV).*

Notice, the promise is not only that God will be with us, but that he will lead us through the darkest valley! While we are not promised exemption from “dark valleys,” we are promised that he will see us through those dark valleys and be with us the entire time.

A great psalm to mediate on during times like this is Psalm 91:

*Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.
I will say of the LORD, “He is my refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust.”
Surely he will save you
from the fowler’s snare
and from the deadly pestilence.
He will cover you with his feathers,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.
You will not fear the terror of night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,
nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness,
nor the plague that destroys at midday.*

*A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.
You will only observe with your eyes
and see the punishment of the wicked.
If you say, "The LORD is my refuge,"
and you make the Most High your dwelling,
no harm will overtake you,
no disaster will come near your tent.
For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways;
they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.
You will tread on the lion and the cobra;
you will trample the great lion and the serpent.
"Because he loves me," says the LORD, "I will rescue him;
I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name.
He will call on me, and I will answer him;
I will be with him in trouble,
I will deliver him and honor him.
With long life I will satisfy him
and show him my salvation."*

Battle against self-preservation

One last important point to be made during a pandemic or crisis is often overlooked. When disaster strikes, we tend to turn inward instead of outward. But repeatedly, Scripture calls us away from our inward focus to an outward, and other, focus. Consider these words from the Bible:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others (Philippians 2:3-4 NIV).

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life (1 Timothy 6:17-19 NIV).

We must resist the urge to forsake compassion for others during times of crisis. Instead, like Jesus, we must seek to serve others and help those in need. Sometimes this may mean putting our own lives at risk. During the Black Plague, mentioned earlier, many Christians put their own health in jeopardy to tend to the sick. Some even died as a result. But as the Scripture above reminds us, true life is life eternal – not just this earthly life.

Where do we go from here?

There are some easy and some difficult lessons we all can learn as we experience the unfolding of this pandemic. Some are practical; however, most of them deal with our innermost beings.

We must improve our personal hygiene

Nothing helps better to keep us from future epidemics than to ensure that we constantly wash our hands, preferably in hot water rather than cold, and do it for 20 seconds. This is a good time test: Recite the Lord's Prayer while you wash your hands! It will take approximately 20 seconds. Do that many times a day, even when you don't think you need to do it.

Make sure to cover your mouth with a handkerchief or a piece of cloth when you cough and/or sneeze. If you don't, future germs from some new epidemic may be spread from you.

Keep some personal distance from each other person when you can. This does not mean you should avoid people, but you can still have a warm and positive conversation even if you are a few feet apart.

Carefully consider how to plan your days. James the Apostle has this advice to give us, *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." 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. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that"* (James 4:13-15 NIV).

Use new opportunities to help those who are hurting

While most of us live busy lives and are taken up with things important to us, it becomes evident in a time of crisis that we may have new opportunities to help those around us that are hurting. It could

mean sharing some food, preparing meals for others and taking it to them, providing warm clothing, or caring for someone's children. The list could go on and on. Whatever needs you become aware of, find a way to help those in greater need than yourself.

Deal with old truths as if they are new

During times of crises, opportunities arise to spend time thinking and evaluating where we are in life. Here are some of them:

Do I possess a new life in God?

You may never have considered that God exists, or you may believe that after all there must be something behind life – whatever you will call it.

The truth is that God has been looking for you since you were born. He wants to have a personal relationship with you. That is why he loves you, whatever you have done to make your life feel miserable. During a time of crisis is a perfect time to turn to him.

He loved you so much that he sent his son Jesus to die for you through his death on a cross more than 2,000 years ago; he took all your burdens, guilt, loneliness, and frustration, whatever you call sin in your life, and forgave it all.

Jesus said, *For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life* (John 3:16).

The Book of Ephesians expresses it well, *He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sin* (Ephesians 1:7).

The prophet Isaiah forecasts what God would do through Jesus Christ. *I – yes, I alone – will blot out your sins for my own sake and will never think of them again* (Isaiah 43:25).

Through his resurrection from the dead three days later, he lives forever and has promised this life to you, not only for eternity which is fantastic in itself, but he also promises you a life here and now – one that has meaning and makes it possible to look to God as your father and Jesus as your best friend. *This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun* (2 Corinthians 5:17)! Jesus confirms it this way: *The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life* (John 10:10).

What is God's purpose for my life?

God has a purpose for everyone who follows him. It will include among other things who we marry, where we are educated, and how we spend our lives making a living. Wherever God has placed us he wants us to be a part of his purpose for this world and now may be one of the best times to do so. This is what he asked us to do: *I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you.*

And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age (Matthew 28:18-20).

What do I need to know to prepare for eternity?

Many times in Scripture Jesus makes us aware that life is short and that we need to live each day as if it were our last. Jesus told his followers, *So you, too, must keep watch! For you don't know what day your Lord is coming* (Matthew 24:42).

So here are some key encouragements for you:

- Pray daily about his presence in your life.
- Serve others around you.
- Share the good news with people who do not yet know Jesus.
- Look forward to his coming with expectancy.

Conclusion

What first seemed like our world was falling apart, could actually be the instrument for our entire world coming together again. Circumstances that have created difficulties, anxieties, fear and anger, could lead to peace, faith, life purpose and a new desire to live not just for ourselves, but for Jesus who has given us new life for now and eternity. Through that life, we can together serve the people of this broken world and show how they, in turn, can experience a new peace and a future without fear.

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