

COVID-19 and the
**CHRISTIAN
RESPONSE**



DR. TOMMY BOLAND

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In loving memory of my dear friend David Stepelton

For the past three years, you greeted our church family every Sunday morning with the joy and love and laughter of our Lord. This COVID-19 Pandemic may have kept us apart in the final weeks of your life on this earth, but nothing will keep us apart in glory. You are deeply missed by your church family and we all look forward to being together again soon.

Pastor Tommy

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PARTING THOUGHTS

**Including our Gospel Presentation
and an unforgettable COVID acronym**

Introduction

What you are about to read has been written by a pastor, not a medical expert, and it is written with the sole intent of helping the reader understand *from a biblical perspective* God’s promise for, His purpose in, His presence through, and His sovereign power over the COVID-19 global pandemic that has been an inescapable part of our lives these last few months. In such an unhappy and uncertain time, with so much information and misinformation swirling around us every day, it is vital to understand what is going on from God’s perspective—not that of media sources or governments.

Let’s start with a dictionary definition of the word *pandemic*: a global outbreak of disease. Pandemics occur when a new virus emerges that infects people and can sustainably spread between people. Because there is little to no pre-existing immunity against the new virus, it spreads worldwide.¹

Many readers will remember the Swine Flu pandemic of 2009-2010, which killed some 285,000 people worldwide before a vaccine was invented. Just over 100 years ago, The 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic infected nearly one-third of the world’s population and killed more than 50 million people.² The Bible tells us about the first pandemic in human history: Adam and Eve rebelled against God in the Garden of Eden, causing the global outbreak of disease called sin. This was the first and unquestionably the deadliest outbreak of a virus ever, because it infected every person who would ever live, except one: Jesus Christ, who was sent by God as the only cure for the sin pandemic.

The coronavirus pandemic has caused loss on a global scale, from the loss of our style of living to the loss of life itself. Virtually the entire world has been shut down to help slow the spread of this virus. In order to accomplish the required social distancing and “Stay at Home” orders, schools, theaters, restaurants have been closed, sporting events have been cancelled, and business has been interrupted. Gathering as the church of God has also been brought to a

¹ Dictionary.com

² Ellie Riley, “What is a Pandemic? Definition, Examples, and How It Compares to an Epidemic,” April 1, 2020 *Good RX.com* Online <https://www.goodrx.com/blog/what-does-pandemic-mean-with-examples-vs-epidemic/>

halt, but God's people have been meeting by way of the internet on computers, cell phones, and television screens.

During this unprecedented time, we must turn to the Word of God, the only source of true wisdom, in order to keep fear, confusion, and anger from infecting our faith. I pray that this short book will prove to be a source of comfort and strength, enabling you to rise above the waves of this COVID-19 challenge, knowing that only the truth will set you free (John 8:31).

Purpose and passion,
Pastor Tommy Boland

Chapter One

God's Promise For This Pandemic

You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,
for when you eat of it you will surely die.

Genesis 2:17

In the beginning, God created a world that we have only read about in a book called *The Bible*. It was a perfect paradise, where everything existed as a holy hymn to God's glory and goodness. Nature bloomed, food was in abundance, and the lion lay down with the lamb. Adam and Eve lived in perfect harmony and community—both vertically with God and horizontally with each other. They lived for God's glory and for the good of the other. Selfish ambition and sinful pride were as far away from their hearts as the east is from the west. They lived for the Creator and not created things. They did not struggle with depression or disappointment, anxiety or addiction, sorrow or sadness, gnawing guilt or phobic fears, disease or death. There was no such thing as social distancing, quarantine, or "Stay at Home" orders.

In all of this unimaginable provision, the first family was given only one prohibition from God, which you see in the Scripture verse that opens this chapter. And it is from that one prohibition that I have drawn the title for this chapter: "God's Promise for the Pandemic."

Perhaps the question I am most often asked regarding Genesis 2:17 is this—"What was wrong with this tree that it would cause Adam and Eve to die if they ate from it?" The answer is, *Nothing*. In the Creation narrative, we read that God declared that everything He had made was good . . . including this tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The tree was simply a test of obedience. God gave Adam the freedom to choose whether to obey or disobey His instruction . . . to trust in Him or trust in himself . . . to depend upon Him or depend upon himself. Without the freedom to choose, Adam's obedience would have been as forced as his love was fixed. At this level of living, Adam's relationship with God would have been robotic.

In the third chapter of Genesis, after God had graciously given Adam his beloved wife, Eve, we find Adam and Eve choosing to disobey God, eating of the forbidden fruit, failing their test, and plunging all of creation into God's cosmic curse—a global pandemic of death.

Let's take a brief look at one of the saddest stories in all of recorded history.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'" "You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you." He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked so I hid." (Genesis 3:1-10)

To be sure, when God promised the pandemic of death for their disobedience, He made good on His promise. But before moving on, notice how Adam and Eve "heard the sound of God walking in the garden." This was a sound they were obviously familiar with. This was probably something they did each day with God as they walked in His wisdom and worshiped through His words. Their relationship with God had been as untainted as it was uninterrupted. They had been living for His glory while being lavished with His goodness. That lasted until they chose to rebel against God and listen to another voice in the garden; they

hearkened to the voice of temptation rather than the voice of Truth. This is what the Bible calls *sin*: falling short of God's intended mark for our lives. Sin is the source of all suffering in this world, as we read from the pen of the apostle Paul.

Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned. (Romans 5:12)

What God created "very good" (Genesis 1:31), we, as represented by Adam and Eve, stained with our sin, resulting in God's global judgment of death. Make no mistake; all the so-called "natural disasters" (hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, tsunamis, famines, volcanic eruptions, and this Coronavirus pandemic), are *not* natural in any way, shape, or form. They are *supernatural* and are the results of God's promised judgment on man's sin. Paul explains —

The creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. (Romans 8:20-22)

Notice that it was God, *not man*, who subjected all of creation to frustration—not in hopelessness, but in hope. God made good on His promise for this global pandemic of death, but He did not leave us there. Instead, the Lord God Almighty issued the first Gospel promise, which is found in Genesis 3:15, and the rest of the Bible presents God's unfolding plan of redemption—reversing this curse on creation through the sinless life, sacrificial death, and supernatural resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

In the next chapter we will investigate an important question: *Why did God judge all of creation and not just the creature who willfully rebelled against His will?* In other words, why did God enact a *physical* global judgment of death for the *moral* evil of willful spiritual rebellion? For now, let's take a brief look at two twin truths behind the promise for this pandemic.

God's Sovereignty

I will never forget what Dr. R.C. Sproul once said during a class at Knox Seminary: "If there is one maverick molecule in the entire universe, God is not sovereign. Either God is sovereign over everything or nothing." In other words, either God is in complete control of everything or nothing. If there is one maverick molecule that exists beyond the sovereign control of God, it can disrupt His plan and purpose at any time. But, thank God, that molecule does not exist! Everything is under the sovereign rule and reign of Almighty God.

Here is how the Westminster Confession of Faith frames this truth:

God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.³

To say that God "ordains" everything that comes to pass is to identify God as the decreative first cause of all things that happen. To say that God is not "the author of sin" is to say sin is a product of second causes. The scope of this brief book will not allow a full treatment of "first-causes" and "second-causes," so I encourage you to continue your study in these matters. English Bible teacher A. W. Pink put a sharp point on this inescapable and inscrutable truth in his book, *The Sovereignty of God*.

Nothing in all the vast universe can come to pass otherwise than God has eternally purposed. Here is a foundation of faith. Here is a resting place for the intellect. Here is an anchor for the soul, both sure and steadfast. It is not blind fate, unbridled evil, man or devil, but the Lord Almighty who is ruling the world, ruling it according to His own good pleasure and for His own eternal glory.⁴

Every event in the universe is a result of God's eternal decree. From a meteor falling from the heavens or a sparrow falling from a tree, God is in sovereign control of all things at all times throughout all ages, and that includes

³ Westminster Confession of Faith (3:1)

⁴ A. W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God*

this coronavirus pandemic. Here are a few passages of Scripture that make this perfectly clear.

David praised the Lord in the presence of the whole assembly, saying, “Praise be to you, O Lord. God of our father Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, O Lord, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name.” (1 Chronicles 11:10-13)

Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him. (Psalm 115:3)

The Lord Almighty has sworn, “Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposes, so it will stand.” (Isaiah 14:24)

All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: “What have you done?”
(Daniel 4:35)

Even a cursory glance through the Scriptures will make it crystal clear that God is in absolute and complete control of all things. Not a bird falls to the ground apart from His will (Matthew 10:29), and this global coronavirus pandemic is not apart from His will either.

Human Responsibility

In looking back at the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, we are to understand that the sovereignty of God ordained this event, for nothing happens in the universe apart from what God decrees. Yet Adam and Eve were still fully responsible for their sinful act of rebellion. They were not forced to listen to the voice of temptation. They were not coerced to compromise the voice of Truth. They had the ability to say “Yes” or “No,” to obey or disobey, to sin or not to sin, and they freely chose to sin against God.

On the night He was betrayed, Jesus confirmed these twin truths to His disciples during the Last Supper:

The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born. (Matthew 26:23)

For the Son of Man [Jesus] to go “just as it is written” is to go according to the decree (the eternal plan and purpose) of God as set forth in the Old Testament Scriptures. Yet Judas, who chose to betray the Son of Man, was fully responsible for selling Jesus for thirty pieces of silver to the religious leaders. Peter addressed these twin truths when addressing a crowd of people in Jerusalem.

“Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.”

(Acts 2:22-24)

God’s “set purpose”—His predetermined decree—shines a bright light on His sovereignty, and yet Peter made it clear that these “wicked men” were responsible for the role they played in the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When we go back to the Garden, we see that it was the willful, sinful rebellion of Adam and Eve against God that plunged all of creation into cosmic corruption. Their sin stained the world. Their sin brought about suffering. Their sin sent storm winds blowing throughout the universe. And yet God was in sovereign control over every aspect of their lives. The Bible suspends both of these realities in truthful tension.

John Lennox, Professor of Mathematics at Oxford University and a brilliant defender of the Christian faith, provides us with insight here:

We believe what Scripture says, we try to understand what it says, but we remain humble enough to realize that it is Scripture that is authoritative and inspired and not our interpretations of it. That is especially so when we perceive a tension – as between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility. Failure to reconcile everything in our minds is not a reason to give up believing one side or the other, nor is it a reason for emphasizing one side to such a degree that the other side ceases to exist in a meaningful way.⁵

Conclusion

It may be very hard right now, as we are engulfed in this global pandemic, which has negatively impacted our way of life in a myriad of ways, to see God’s perfect plan and purpose. But it is there. God was not asleep on His throne when Eve reached for the forbidden fruit, and He was not looking the other way when the coronavirus began to spread into a worldwide crisis in a matter of days. He planned it. He purposed it. He promised it for His glory and for our good.

Jesus told us that “There will be great earthquakes, famines, and plagues in various places and fearful events and great signs from heaven” (Luke 21:11). COVID-19 is simply part of that promise.

Now that we have seen God’s promise for this pandemic, let’s move on to look for God’s purpose in it. *We do not want to waste this pandemic by missing God’s purpose in it.* God has purpose in everything that happens, and it is our duty to drive the roots of truth deep into the soil of the sanctified life in order to locate that purpose and to learn the valuable lessons God has sent it to teach us.

So, what is our Christian response?

To RECEIVE God’s Promise For This Pandemic!

⁵ John C. Lennox, *Determined to Believe?: The Sovereignty of God, Freedom, Faith and Human Responsibility*, 95.

Driving the Roots Deeper

Here are some questions for you to consider. Perhaps you will work through them on your own, or you may choose to enlist some brothers and sisters in the faith and engage in discussion with them. These questions should help to cement the concepts presented here into your mind and cause you to consider how to live your life in light of the glorious truths of sacred Scripture.

1. Why do you think God gave Adam and Eve the tree for a test?
2. What happened when they failed that test?
3. How would you explain God's sovereignty?
4. How would you explain human responsibility?
5. How did God make good on His promise for this pandemic?
6. What is your Number One take away from this chapter?

Chapter Two

God's Purpose In This Pandemic

“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

Isaiah 55:9

Perhaps the most common question in the minds of the people I encounter at this time is, “*Where is God in this pandemic?*” In other words, what possible purpose could God have in allowing the spread of the coronavirus, which, at this writing, has infected nearly five million people and killed more than 324,000 people worldwide (both numbers still increasing every day), crippled the global economy, and sent tens of millions of Americans to the unemployment lines. It’s a fair question. And so, as we should do whenever our hearts are troubled, let us look to Scripture.

God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground – everything that has the breath of life in it – I give every green plant for food.” And it was so. (Genesis 1:26-30)

When Adam and Eve—image-bearers of the Most-High God, who had a God-given responsibility to rule and reign as His vice-regents on this earth—chose to follow their own will over God’s will, God judged not just the creatures who

had rebelled against Him, but also the creation He gave them the responsibility to rule over. And here is the best explanation I have been able to come up with as to why God would do this: ***God's global pandemic judgment of physical death is a constant reminder of the horrors of our sin in the presence of a Holy God.*** This coronavirus is just another painful reminder in a long list of painful reminders of the sin that separates us from God . . . for sin is the ultimate global pandemic, infecting every person who has ever lived. Here is a powerful quote from the great British apologist C. S. Lewis that sheds some much-needed light on our current situation.

God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.⁶

I believe we would all have become deaf to the diabolical nature of sin if God had simply left its judgment at the spiritual level. When was the last time any of us cried out to God for having bowed the knee to our professions, profits, and pleasures? When was the last time we lost any sleep over our impatience, anxiety, lust, man-centered anger, and countless other “respectable sins” (as Jerry Bridges categorizes them)?⁷ But when the storm winds of this global coronavirus pandemic begin to blow, God immediately has the undivided attention of the entire world . . . a world which is growing increasingly indifferent to the spiritual things that matter most in life. And remember, no one has been left unaffected by COVID-19. Both Christians and unbelievers alike share in this painful providence that was delivered to us by our sovereign Lord.

Now, at this point we must be very careful. It is not uncommon to hear religious leaders fulminating that God has sent pandemics of pain as judgement on a particular people for their specific sins. Inasmuch as all pandemic pain is a result of the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden (that is, original sin), this does *not* mean that individuals are suffering as a result of their own personal sin.

In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil. (Job 1:1)

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*

⁷ Jerry Bridges, *Respectable Sins: Confronting the Sins We Tolerate*

The story of Job provides valuable insight for us to understand this biblical truth: From our human perspective, good behavior is not always rewarded and bad behavior is not always punished . . . at least not immediately. God's Word declares that Job was blameless and upright, a man who feared God and forsook evil. In other words, Job was a very good man who did not invite his own painful pandemic upon himself because of some rebellion against God.

Enter Job's three friends. For the first seven days, they provided what I call "the ministry of the presence" by simply keeping silent and grieving with Job. On Day Eight, however, they opened their mouths to speak about what they believed to be the cause-and-effect relationship between Job's sin and his suffering.

This was the collective belief of Job's three friends—miserable counselors, as they have been called. They were convinced that Job's personal painful pandemic—which took his health, his wealth, and all ten of his children—was a direct result of his sin. But we know the rest of the story, and we know this was not true. Job's trial was simply a result of God allowing Satan to test his servant Job, for reasons that are known only to God Himself. And because God allowed it, we know He had right reasons and a powerful purpose in Job's painful pandemic. And Job knew this to be true as well! After the Lord had spoken to Job out of the storm, Job spoke to God in much the same way as he had when all his troubles began; Job worshiped the Sovereign Lord.

My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:5-6)

Job knew that God's purpose was perfect, and he bowed in humble submission for the wonderful, inscrutable will of God.

Let's now take a brief look at the two categories of people—believers and unbelievers—who suffer and discuss why they this happens. These are the only two categories of people that exist in the world today.

Believers

God's people are not immune from painful providences. Easter Sunday 2020 was a vivid reminder of this truth; churches around the world were as still and empty as the tomb that Jesus walked out of alive some 2000 years ago. Because we are fallen broken people living in a fallen broken world, we suffer just

like everyone else. But here is the key that unlocks the door to understanding God's purpose in that suffering:

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. (Romans 8:1-2)

Here the apostle Paul makes it clear to the people of God that painful pandemics are *never* a result of God's condemnation, and that is because of what Jesus has done for us. The Lamb of God took our condemnation when He was nailed to that cross. He was judged in our place, satisfying the full measure of God's wrath and condemnation against our sin. So now, when we suffer from any painful pandemic, whether that be the coronavirus or a fire or a flood, we can be sure that God is correcting us, not condemning us. All suffering is sent by God to *purify* us, not to *punish* us. God is *never* punitive in sending any painful providence to His people. If God is conforming us to the image and likeness of His beloved Son Jesus, and He is (Romans 8:29), He will use any means necessary to accomplish that purpose . . . and often those means may include painful providences like this coronavirus pandemic.

Think about it this way: To see our resources reduced, our economy evaporating, our society separating, and all travel tempered is one of God's ways of redirecting our attention to rise above the temporal and to fix our eyes upon the eternal—the one thing no pandemic can affect.

Do you remember Paul's thorn?

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

(2 Corinthians 12:7-10)

Paul's painful providence was not condemnation from God; it was God's kind correction. God was forming Paul's Christlike character, and He knew it would be best for Paul to have a thorn in his flesh. Please notice that it was not wrong for Paul to ask God to remove it. But when God does not answer our prayers in the way we would have liked, we must, as Paul did, see it as God's way of putting His power on display through us in whatever painful providence comes our way.

We do not know what this painful thorn actually was, but without it, Paul acknowledged that he would have become conceited, which means that he would have depended less and less upon God and more and more upon himself. "Knowledge puffs up," the apostle observed, "but love builds up" (1 Corinthians 8:1). If not for the thorn in his flesh, the "surpassingly great revelations" Paul had received might well have caused him to become puffed up in his own mind. He would have begun serving God in his own strength, relying on his own wisdom, and advancing the Gospel in his own direction rather than God's. The thorn was God's gracious way of guiding Paul into His perfect plan and purpose for his good and God's glory.

What specific thorn has God given to you in this pandemic?

The Bible makes it clear that believers like Job and Paul were not suffering because of any particular sins in their lives. Do believers ever suffer for their own particular sins? The answer is YES, but only as *discipline* from the hand of our loving Father in heaven, not for our *destruction*. Here is one example of God's swift and sure judgment on a specific sin in the Old Testament.

Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses . . . At once the Lord said to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, "Come out to the Tent of Meeting, all three of you." So the three of them came out. Then the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud; he stood at the entrance to the Tent and summoned Aaron and Miriam: When both of them stepped forward, he said, "Listen to my words . . ." The anger of the Lord burned against them, and he left them. When the cloud lifted from above the Tent, their stood Miriam – leprous, like snow. Aaron said to Moses, "Please, my lord, do not hold against us the sin we have so foolishly committed." (Numbers 12:1, 4-6, 9-11)

For murmuring against Moses, his sister Miriam and his brother Aaron were swiftly punished by God, but God's punishment was not *punitive*. God was disciplining them for their good and His glory, not for their ultimate destruction. The writer of Hebrews assures us that "The Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son" (Hebrews 12:6). To be sure, "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:11).

In raising four children, Kim and I have had many occasions over the years to deliver discipline as correction for inappropriate, undesirable, and sinful behavior. *We did it because we love our children*. Never was it intended for their destruction, but only for discipline, which we would often announce with the words I often heard when I was growing up: "This is going to hurt me more than it is going to hurt you!" I never understood that as a child, but I do now as a parent. God never intends to hurt us or hold us back, only to help us grow and mature in our faith. God's love and God's judgment go hand in hand.

Donald A. Carson, who is widely respected for his thoughtful work as a Christian educator, author, and editor, adds this:

There is nothing intrinsically impossible about the wrath and love being directed towards the same people at the same time. God in his perfections must be wrathful against his rebel image-bearers, for they have offended him; god in his perfections must be loving toward his rebel image-bearers, for he is that kind of God.⁸

Remember, there can be no greater picture of God's wrath and God's love intimately woven together than at the cross, where, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us so that we might live for Him. As someone once said, "The cross is where God's justice and His mercy meet . . . and kiss each other."

Unbelievers

We must understand that the Bible makes it clear that no one gets a pass for not believing in God, whether that person be a university professor or a tribesman in the bush. You see, God wrote two books: the book of nature

⁸ D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, 69.

(general revelation) and the Bible (special revelation). God has revealed Himself in both these books so that all men and women everywhere are without excuse.

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. (Romans 1:18-20)

The first chapter of the epistle to the Romans declares that every person, without exception, has enough information to believe in God. When they ignore or reject Him, they are simply suppressing the truth that has been revealed to them. And all those who continue suppressing the truth will receive their due penalty (Romans 1:27) of God's judgment for their specific sins, which are rooted in their unbelief.

In the biblical account of Herod Agrippa, the Roman-appointed king of the Jews in Jerusalem, we see that God did *not* give him a thorn in the flesh to keep him from being conceited, as He did for Paul. Rather, God gave Herod swift and sure judgment and condemnation for allowing the people to praise him as if he were a god and not giving glory to the one true living God.

On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died. (Acts 12:21-23)

Here is perhaps the most important aspect of understanding God's judgment for specific sins: only God truly knows the condition of our hearts. We should not put ourselves in the place of God by assuming certain pandemics of pain are the result of specific sins in the lives of those being afflicted. To take this one step further, if all suffering was the result of specific judgment for specific sins, we would all be under the constant judgment of God, for who among us has ever loved God with all of his or her heart, soul, mind, and strength . . . even for a single moment?

Here is what we can be sure of: Our God is as longsuffering as He is loving, and He sent His Son to be the Savior of the world, that all people might repent of their sins and receive eternal life through faith in Him.

There were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them – do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.” (Luke 13:1-5)

In this one passage, we see the reality of both moral evil (Pilate murdering Galileans) and natural evil (the tower in Siloam killing eighteen people), which was a result of the effects of sin in this world. The pandemic of death that was promised in the Garden, whether through murder or mayhem, disaster or disease, is a constant reminder of the horrific consequences of sin.

Notice how remarkable is the response of Jesus to those who asked if the reason these people died was because of their own specific sins. Jesus drew His audience into both pandemics of death by making it clear that those who died at the hands of Pilate and the falling tower were no worse sinners than they themselves were! The ground is level at the foot of the cross, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23).

Jesus was issuing a stern call to repentance and urging His audience to get right with God before it is too late. Listen, since the fall of Adam and Eve in the garden, the global death rate is 100%. *Everyone must die*. But all those who have repented and trusted in Jesus Christ alone “will not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16). But those who do not repent and who reject God’s unimaginably gracious offer of salvation by grace through faith will suffer the second death of eternal destruction.

Conclusion

We have seen that every pandemic, including this current coronavirus, is a result of the first sin of Adam and Eve. Every natural evil and every moral evil is

rooted in this sin. Due to the rebellion of our first parents, who were expelled from the Garden and forced by God to live east of Eden, we all face the sickness and suffering that ultimately leads to death. No one is left unaffected. Both the believer and the unbeliever alike face the same pandemics of pain, but with one overarching difference. Unless the unbelievers repent and turn to Christ, their personal pandemic leads to eternal destruction. But for the believers, their personal pandemic leads to ultimate deliverance.

Remember, it is God and God alone who has the ultimate authority to “wound” and to “heal” (Job 5:18). When God sent the tenth and final plague upon Egypt, He protected those who were covered by the blood of the sacrificial lambs and destroyed those who were not. The same is true today. All those covered by the blood of the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, will be protected from every pandemic of death that comes knocking at the door. All those who are not covered by the blood of the Lamb of God will perish. Every pandemic of pain is a signpost, pointing to the day our Lord Jesus will return to judge both the living and the dead (Matthew 25:31-32). And that knowledge should cause us all to live in the light of eternity, not in the lust of the temporal. Now let’s move on to God’s presence through this pandemic.

So, what is our Christian response?

To RECOGNIZE God’s Purpose In This Pandemic!

Driving the Roots Deeper

1. What is God's purpose in pandemics?
2. What are your thoughts on pandemics being God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world?
3. Why doesn't God protect believers from pandemics of death?
4. Can you explain why it is wrong for us to say that God has sent pandemics of pain as judgement on a particular people for their specific sins?
5. How does God use pandemics in the lives of His people?
6. What is your Number One take away from this chapter?

Chapter Three

God's Presence Through This Pandemic

“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”

Hebrews 13:5

God's promise for this pandemic and His purpose in it would bring little (if any) comfort if they were not rooted in God's presence. I believe Moses spoke on behalf of every child of God when he said, “If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here” (Exodus 33:15). By God's grace, Moses knew what you and I must learn by way of personal experience: If God does not go with us, we simply should not want to go. Moses preferred to stay in the wilderness with his Lord than to enter into the promised land of rest without Him, even though that land would be flowing with milk and honey. No blessing from His hand—not even an angel of glory or any other miraculous manifestation—can ever compensate for missing the presence of God Himself.

In Chapter One we set forth the biblical truth that God is sovereign over all things, including this global pandemic. We also saw that it was man who sinned in the Garden of Eden and brought on God's promised pandemic of death, making man fully responsible for every pandemic, starting with the very first one: the pandemic of sin.

When we see God making good on His promise to bring judgment, we understand that it is God who sends the storms. In this chapter, I would like to briefly unpack His presence in those storms, based on two different storms that tossed the Sea of Galilee. When rightly understood, these events can deliver our hearts into the peace that passes all understanding (Philippians 4:6). Remember, peace is not the absence of storms; peace is the presence of your Savior. Let's take a look.

Walking In the Storm

Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray. When evening

came, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. About the fourth watch of the night he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, because they all saw him and were terrified. Immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened. (Mark 6:45-52)

In this remarkable passage, which recorded the presence of Jesus walking in the storms of life, notice first that He instructed his disciples to go on ahead of him to Bethsaida. Pause for a moment and think about that! If Jesus told them to go on ahead to Bethsaida, do you think a storm on the lake was going to keep them from their intended and promised destination?

Here is the biblical point we must all remember:

**Jesus never promised
smooth sailing . . .
only safe passage!**

In fact, Jesus stated very matter-of-factly that we would encounter stormy seas on this side of the grave when He said, "In this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33). I have encountered far too many people in the church who have been schooled in the so-called "prosperity gospel," which asserts that God's greatest goal for you in life is for you to be healthy and wealthy. Sadly, when the storm winds begin to blow, as they inevitably do in everyone's life—the adherents to this unbiblical teaching find themselves utterly unprepared for the waves of challenge that wash over them.

Christian, if the prosperity gospel was in fact true, how are we to explain why some of the godliest men and women who ever walked this earth suffered so unimaginably for the advancement of God's glorious Gospel of grace? John the Baptist was beheaded. Peter was crucified upside down. Paul was beheaded. Countless Christian were torn to pieces by wild beasts in the arena and others covered with pitch and burned alive. To be sure, such trials are unimaginable to

most of us, and we wonder how these saints were able to endure such suffering. The truth is that they endured because *they knew Jesus was walking in the storm with them.*

Returning to Mark's account of the storm, notice how the disciples, "straining at the oars" of their boat, could no longer see Jesus, who was still on the shore . . . but He never lost sight of them. This is true for all of us. No matter how violent the storm we find ourselves in, when all sight of safety and shelter is suspended because the winds, the waves, and the pouring rains are beating us down, Jesus never loses sight of us. He is there with us, even when we cannot see Him, walking on the top of our stormy sea.

Note too that these events took place during the fourth watch of the night (3:00am to 6:00am), and the disciples being only in the middle of the lake. We can deduce from this that the disciples had been battling the winds and the waves for several hours, so they were as exhausted as they were terrified. They simply were not making much headway because of the strength of the violent storm they had encountered. Jesus, who knows all things, could have come to their aid much earlier in the night. But He did not. He could have calmed the storm before walking in it Himself. But He did not. *Jesus entered into their storm*, and their struggle in that storm was designed to strengthen their faith, not shipwreck them and send them to the bottom of the sea. Jesus knew just the right time to enter into their boat . . . and He knows just the right time to enter into ours.

I want to draw one final point from Matthew's parallel account of this remarkable event; we read there that "Those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God'" (Matthew 14:33). At this point they realized that if Jesus could control the storm, He had to be greater than the storm. In fact, He had to be the God of the storm.

If you have ever been in a really bad storm, you know just how terrifying it can be. Living in sunny South Florida with its sandy beaches and spectacular ocean vista most of my life, I have experienced several destructive and deadly hurricanes. One in particular I will never forget. In 1992, Category 5 Hurricane Andrew, one of the five worst in Florida's history, made landfall. By the time Andrew had moved on, the total damage was estimated at \$25 billion, with more than 25,000 homes completely destroyed, 101,000 more homes damaged, and

250,000 people left homeless. Forty-four people died during Andrew's onslaught.⁹ My family huddled together at my parent's home in Hollywood, and I remember thinking at any moment the roof would blow off and the walls would collapse around us. By God's grace alone, our home remained intact, but I will never forget the ferocious power of that storm.

Sleeping In the Storm

One day Jesus said to his disciples, "Let's go over to the other side of the lake." So they got into a boat and set out. As they sailed, he fell asleep. A squall came down on the lake, so that the boat was being swamped, and they were in great danger. The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Master, Master, we're going to drown!" He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was calm. "Where is your faith?" he asked his disciples. In fear and amazement they asked one another, "Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him."

(Luke 8:22-25)

Again we have another remarkable passage regarding the presence of Jesus in the storms of life . . . except this time He is sound asleep! And once again His disciples forgot the very first thing He said to them before they set out on their voyage: "Let's go over to the other side of the lake." If they had remembered that, they would have *known* they were going to reach the other side of the lake, not sink to the bottom of it, no matter how terrible the storm was they were facing. Let me repeat that Jesus never promised us smooth sailing, only safe passage. And He has promised to be in the storm with us. "Never will I leave you" he assures us; "never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5).

Now, there are usually two immediate questions on the minds of most readers. The first is, "If Jesus is God, how could He be tired, need rest, and fall asleep?" It's a reasonable question, especially since Psalm 121:4 tells us that "He who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep." But Jesus is not just God; He was also a man. Theologians refer to this marvelous truth as *the hypostatic union*—Jesus, in one person, was fully God and fully man. Now, no finite, human

⁹ National Hurricane Center Report, Category 5 Hurricane Andrew, August 1992

mind can fully understand or explain this biblical truth, so we simply must look to the Word of God and accept it as truth by faith.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made . . . The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1-3, 14)

Fully God and fully man, Jesus the Christ needed food, needed water, and needed sleep, just as you and I do.

The second question is this: “How could Jesus be asleep in the boat in a storm that had His disciples frightened for their lives?” Remember, many of the disciples were seasoned fishermen who made their living out on the water. They were quite familiar with squalls that would quickly blow in on the Sea of Galilee, some with waves as high as 20 feet, and they knew how to navigate a boat safely through squalls. For these professional seamen to believe they were about to drown, this must have been a storm unlike any they had encountered in the past—a bit like this global pandemic—yet Jesus was sound asleep.

I think this story is intended to teach us a few things that can help us deal with any storm we are facing. First, because Jesus was fully human, he needed rest from His earthly ministry. From travelling by foot from place to place to performing countless miracles to preaching and teaching messages of hope, Jesus was simply exhausted from His labors and needed rest.

But that’s not all. Despite his utter exhaustion, a storm of this magnitude should have disrupted His sleep in His humanity. But it did not. Why? I believe it was because of *His sold-out submission to and total trust in His Father in heaven*. The gospel accounts tell us that Jesus often retreated from the crowds and even from His disciples to spend time in prayer and communion with His Father. Seeing our Lord sleeping soundly in the midst of this fierce storm is a reminder of how secure Jesus was in His relationship with His Father. Jesus lost no sleep when the storm winds began to blow, because He trusted His Father completely.

Make no mistake, the storms of life are promised to you, but so is His presence in your boat. Notice that I said *your* boat. That is because we are never in the same boat together, which is a clear biblical principal as we see in the parallel account in the Gospel of Mark.

That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, “Let us go over to the other side.” Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. (Mark 4:35-36)

To be sure, we are all caught in the same storm of this global pandemic right now, but we are not all in the same boat. Some have lost income. Some have lost jobs. Some have lost relationships. Some have lost loved ones. In our college ministry, Cross University, we are doing what we can to minister to all of the students who lost the lion’s share of their spring 2020 college experience when it came to a sudden, screeching halt. In particular, college seniors have lost something they worked hard to achieve and eagerly anticipated: a graduation ceremony to celebrate with family and friends. Many of those graduates-to-be have lost internships and job prospects. My wife Kim recently pointed out that our own family and our church lost a graduation experience, which was scheduled at Knox Theological Seminary on Friday May 15, 2020, where I was to have walked across the stage to receive my Doctor of Ministry degree.

Our daughter Jenna, a junior at Western Missouri University, lost the spring season of volleyball, which plays an important part in preparing for the regular season in the fall, when she will be a senior. Because so many have lost so much, we do not have a one-size-fits-all response to those who are suffering. But what we do have is a one-size-fits-all Redeemer. Jesus can and will meet each and every person at their point of need, regardless of the boat they find themselves in. He is in the boat with you, and if it feels like He is sound sleep, fear not! He has everything under control. Perhaps knowing this truth will allow you to get the rest you need too.

Conclusion

As we learned from these two “storm passages,” we are going to get to the other side of this seemingly omnipresent pandemic because we are not alone. When Jesus said, “I will never leave you or forsake you,” He meant what He said! Nothing—not storms, not Satan, not even our own sin—can ever separate us

from love that God has for us in Christ Jesus. Now, it may be that we do not arrive at our intended destination, but we can be certain that we will always arrive at the destination that God decreed for us from all eternity.

Joseph, the favored son of Jacob, never intended to arrive in Egypt as a slave, but God had intended for all eternity; seventeen years later, Joseph was used by God to save His people from a famine. Let these words from the prophet Isaiah comfort you:

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 . . . Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you, I will give people in exchange for you, nations in exchange for your life. Do not be afraid, for I am with you.

(Isaiah 43:2-5)

In this passage, the prophet Isaiah intended for us to understand “water” and “fire” as any type of calamity or catastrophe, trouble or tragedy. Water has a tendency to overwhelm us with its pounding waves of challenge, and fire has a tendency to consume us with its flames. I also believe Isaiah wanted us to recall how God intervened on behalf of His people at the Red Sea, where He parted the waters so that they could escape the pursuing Egyptians (Exodus 14), and in Nebuchadnezzar’s fiery furnace, where God entered into the furnace with the three young Hebrew youths whom the Babylonian king had sentenced to death (Daniel 3).

So regardless of the stormy waters you are passing through this day, Jesus is with you in your boat. If you feel like He is sleeping, fear not! Follow His lead and trust in your heavenly Father. He promised this pandemic, He purposed this pandemic for your good and for His glory, and He is present with you right now in this pandemic. With those three truths firmly in place, let’s now take a look at God’s power over this pandemic.

So, what is our Christian response?

To REST In God’s Presence Through This Pandemic!

Driving the Roots Deeper

1. Peace is not the absence of storms, but the presence of your Savior. Do you agree or disagree with that statement? Please explain your answer.
2. Why is it important to know that God did not promise us smooth sailing, but did promise us safe passage?
3. Can you explain why the so-called “prosperity gospel” is not compatible with the revealed truth of Scripture?
4. How can Jesus sleeping in the boat during a furious storm be a source of comfort to you right now, today, in the middle of this pandemic?
5. What do you think is the best way for you, personally, to emulate our Lord’s example during these difficult days?
6. What is your Number One take away from this chapter?

Chapter Four

God's Power Over This Pandemic

We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. **Romans 8:28-29**

We have worked through God's promise for this pandemic, God purpose in this pandemic, and God's presence through this pandemic. In this final chapter, we will see God's almighty power over this pandemic, a power that works in "all things" for the good of all those who love him.

However, we must always look at the Scriptures *in context*; in this case we must see His power in light of what Paul penned a few verses earlier in his inspired epistle to the Romans: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18). Paul understood what God was doing in his life in the midst of suffering—that is, accomplishing the greatest goal that God has for all His children: not health, wealth, and happiness, but conformity to the likeness of Jesus Christ.

The reason it is possible for us to endure this pandemic and any other pandemic that comes our way, no matter how long it may linger, is because we know that God is working it in our lives for His glory and our ultimate good—"good" being defined as being conformed into the image and likeness of Christ.

Because Romans 8:28-29 is one of the most popular passages in all of sacred Scripture, I want to make sure we understand what it is saying to us and what it is *not* saying by establishing the following two concepts: **All Things Are Not Good** and **In All Things God Works For Our Good**.

I have learned as a pastor that this passage often brings as much confusion as it does comfort for those who do not fully grasp its truth. Many who sit under the false teaching of the "prosperity gospel" are convinced that they signed up for success, not suffering, in their walk with God. When the storm winds blow, they often fall away, grumbling, "This is *not* what I signed up for!"

What these disillusioned individuals must understand is that all things that happen during our earthly existence will most definitely *not* be good. This global pandemic is a prime example; it is *not* good that the coronavirus has infected nearly five million people and killed more than 324,000 people worldwide. It is *not* good that untold millions of men and women worldwide may lose their jobs because of the coronavirus, and it is *not* good that millions more at this moment are feeling lonely, isolated, and depressed. These things are *not good* . . . but Scripture promises us that God will work even these terrible events for the good of those who love Him. We don't know how and we don't know why, and that is because we are not God. But we trust His promise to be true.

One final point from a pastor's perspective before moving on: the book of Ecclesiastes tells us that there is a time and a place for everything. This includes when and where *not* to share the truth of Romans 8:28. I cannot tell you how many times I have heard well-meaning Christians tell someone in the middle of a crisis situation, from an unexpected cancer diagnosis to the tragic loss of a loved one, that God is working all things for their good. Yes, the passage is true. Yes, the passage is a source of unimaginable comfort. But it is only comforting when it is delivered at the appropriate time and in the right way.

We never *ever* should use Romans 8:28 as a "go to" passage when we are speaking to someone whose wound is fresh and whose heart is broken. We make God out to be cold and callous when we speak this truth in the early stages of suffering. When the storm has passed and the wound is beginning to heal, *then* this passage can and does prove profitable for so many I have ministered to over the years. Oh, and when you are ministering to an unbeliever, they need to hear John 3:16, not Romans 8:28! This precious Romans pearl cast at the feet of an unbeliever will simply be trampled on.

All Things Are Not Good

The very first thing we must understand is what Paul is *not* saying. He is not saying that "all things" are good. There is much bad in God's very good world because, as we saw earlier, our sin has stained both the creature and the creation.

- ✓ Storms that destroy property and devastate people's lives are not good; they are bad.

- ✓ Cancers and disease that ravage people's bodies and ruin their minds are not good; they are bad.
- ✓ Wars that have been fought throughout the centuries that litter the landscape with lifeless bodies are not good; they are bad.
- ✓ Mothers who have to bury stillborn babies are not experiencing something good; it is so very bad.
- ✓ Drug addiction and alcohol abuse that divide families and destroy lives are not good; they are bad.

The list of bad could fill an entire volume. The point in this brief section is to make it perfectly clear that the world is full of many very bad things, and we ought to call it like it is. The prophet Isaiah makes this crystal clear:

Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. (Isaiah 5:20)

God's Word never minimizes the painful truth that a great many bad things happen in this life. Rather, Scripture has set this truth against the backdrop of God's absolute sovereignty in working "all things" together ultimately for our good. Let's take a look.

In All Things God Works for Our Good

We could spend a lifetime unpacking this biblical truth and never plumb the depths of the cosmic comfort it provides for the Christian. Notice that the Romans 8:28 promise is given to the believer only—to "those who love Him." This is not a universal promise for all mankind. It is a specific promise for those who are in relationship with Jesus, by grace through faith, trusting in the chemistry of the cross that is continually working "all things" for the good of God's people.

PLEASE NOTE: If you are reading this and realize that the promise does *not* apply to because you are not currently in a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, do not be dismayed! I will explain how you can be in my "Parting Thoughts."

For the purpose of our brief study in this passage as it relates to God's power through this pandemic, I would like to focus on two truths that are designed to transform us, regardless of the storm winds that blow and the waves of challenge that may be crashing over us.

The Guarantee

There was no doubt in the mind of Paul regarding what God was up to in the midst of the difficult circumstances he was facing in spreading of the Gospel; “We *know* that in all things God works for the good of those who love him,” he said. Paul was not wishing that this would be true. Paul was not wondering if it was true. He was not wanting it to be true. Paul was gripped by inspired, ironclad, Spirit-filled certainty that God was working every bad that Paul endured for his ultimate good and deploying every difficulty for Paul’s ultimate deliverance.

Remember that the man God used to pen this promise had endured more bad than most of us can even imagine. Paul recalled that –

Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea. I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:24-28)

That is some *serious* bad that took place in the life of the apostle Paul! He was no ivory-tower servant, secure in some special, supernatural seclusion and insulated from the storms of life and the suffering they bring. Paul did not live a comfortable or convenient Christianity. His life was marked by one storm after another. And yet he was able to say, “We *know* that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.” Paul knew that Jesus was on the throne of his life, no matter what he was going through. He understood suffering as God’s path to perfection, for the Lord had revealed to Paul that God’s power is made perfect in our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Charles Spurgeon explained, “Most of the grand truths of God have to be learned by trouble, they must be burned into us with the hot iron of affliction, otherwise we shall not truly receive them.”¹⁰

Paul’s life was marked by the “hot iron of affliction” from the hand of the Almighty . . . Paul knew it and he trusted in God’s goodness. He exulted that “Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:17).

Remember, this guarantee that God is working all things for the good of those who love Him is rooted in His omnipotence. Greater is the power that is at work within you than any power that can come against you. It is the resurrection power that raised Jesus from death to life. Isaiah was right in telling us that “No weapon forged against you will prevail” (Isaiah 54:17). Now, *that* is a guarantee you can take to the believer’s bank and cash for your comfort.

And that leads us to God’s goal. What is God’s purpose for us?

The Goal

In a word, God’s goal for us is *Christlikeness*. Far too many people never read on past the promise in Romans 8:28. Only in verse 29 do we see God’s goal in working all things for the good of those who love Him: “Those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.”

God’s goal in our lives is not happiness; it is holiness. God’s goal in our lives is not comfort; it is Christ-likeness. Without understanding God’s “good” in this passage, we will be left confused and challenged, straining to see God’s goodness in our lives. This is what is known as the *summum bonum* in the Christian life—our ultimate good—which is God’s highest goal in our lives.

The key that unlocks the door to understanding this deep biblical truth comes at the end of verse 28, where we read that we have “been called according to [God’s] purpose.” God’s purpose is far better than our purpose. God knows exactly what we need and when we need it. And that includes both the good and

¹⁰ Charles Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*

the bad. God uses everything that is happening in our lives to conform us into the image of His Son. There is purpose in pain and there is purpose in prosperity—*His purpose*, not ours. When God makes us prosperous, we must understand that we have been blessed to be a blessing to others. I know some people who have been very blessed financially who give to God’s work with both hands. And I know others who squeeze a quarter so tightly that the eagle screams!

Now, a hundred lifetimes would not allow enough time to fully grasp what it means to be conformed to the image of Christ. Imperfection can never fully grasp perfection. However, this conformity can be organized under three main headings:

- ✓ Behavioral = Right doing
- ✓ Emotional = Right feeling
- ✓ Mental = Right thinking

Our God works in the lives of His people through every set of circumstances to renew the mind, recalibrate the heart, and realign the will. All of this, of course, takes a lifetime of both painful and pleasurable providences. In caring for people in crisis, I have learned the critical importance of conformity to the mind of Christ.

Without this aspect of God’s goal firmly in place, the promise of Romans 8:28 often generates conflict and confusion, rather than comfort and confidence. That is why we must use wisdom when bringing this truth to those in the midst of trials. Only those who have been “transformed by the renewing of the mind” (Romans 12:2) will be able to fully connect with the comfort contained within God working “all things” for our good. Only those with the mind of Christ will see crisis as God’s means of chipping away at the imperfections in our character.

With God’s ultimate goal for His children firmly in place—“to be conformed to the likeness of His Son”—we must understand what our goal in this life needs to be so that we can be active participants in the lifelong process. Here are a few verses to point you in the right direction.

This is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. (John 17:3)

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. (Matthew 22:37)

I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. (1 Corinthians 2:2)

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross . . . (Hebrews 12:2)

Conclusion

Joni Eareckson Tada broke her neck in a diving accident when she was seventeen years old. Her spinal cord was severed, and she was paralyzed from the shoulders down. Did she understand the power of God in her personal pandemic? Here is what she says: “God permits what He hates to achieve what He loves.”¹¹ Clearly Joni understood both God’s guarantee and God’s good, regardless of the circumstances of life. For the past forty-plus years, Joni has been committed to providing hope through the truths of the Gospel to millions who have been afflicted by disabilities all over the world.

When we believe that God is working “all things” for our good, we understand 1 Thessalonians 5:18, which commands us to “Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” Remember, the Bible never instructs us to give thanks because we feel good; rather, *we are instructed to give thanks because our God is good!*

In all circumstances—the good, the bad, and the ugly—we are to give thanks to God, because we know that in all things He is working for our ultimate good. Nothing happens to you that doesn’t first pass through His nail-scarred hands. May that truth set us free from the potentially paralyzing effects of this global pandemic . . . and others that will surely follow. Remember, “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. The righteous person may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all” (Psalm 34:18-19).

So, what is our Christian response? *To RELY On God’s power over this pandemic!*

¹¹ Joni Eareckson Tada, *Joni & Friends*

Driving the Roots Deeper

1. Does Romans 8:28 tell us that all things are good? Please explain your answer.
2. Is this a passage of comfort for the unbeliever too? Why or why not?
3. When people are on the front end of suffering, why is it a bad idea to share the “all things” promise with them, even though we know it to be true?
4. What is the ultimate good that God is achieving in the lives of His people?
5. How can we offer our sincere thanks to God . . . even what is happening to us or around us is not “good” at all?
6. What is your Number One take away from this chapter?

Parting Thoughts

This is not the first word on the COVID-19 global pandemic, nor will it be the last. Much has been written and much more remains to be written by experts who understand this pandemic far better than I do. But what I do understand is the power of the Word of God, for “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16).

Because we know that God is sitting on His throne in complete control of all things, including this pandemic, we know that God is using it for His glory and our good. The world may have been put on hold, but not the Word of God and the expansion of His Kingdom. God has not social distanced Himself from His creation. God is not waiting for the world to flatten the coronavirus curve and slow the spread of this disease. The global scope of COVID-19 is simply an instrument of salvation and of sanctification in the hands of the Almighty, for every tribe and language and people and nation (Revelation 5:9).

We who are the people of God have not been called to be spectators in this global pandemic, but rather, servants for the Great Commission. Inasmuch as we must stay insulated from each other, we are not to be isolated. There is much good work to be done right now, right in the middle of this pandemic.

To be sure, the coronavirus has accomplished something that no war or natural disaster has ever been able to do: close the church buildings where God’s people gather to worship. But COVID-19 has not and cannot shut down the church, because the church is not a place, it is a people. Not being *at* church cannot keep us from being *the* church.

As a pastor, I know first-hand some of the changes that have taken place within the church overnight. In-person pastoral care has become a challenge, to say the least (*I dedicated this book to a dear friend and co-laborer in the Lord, David Stepelton, who I could only visit with by phone during his last few weeks on this earth*). We have been prohibited from personally comforting family and friends who are sick and consoling loved ones in death. Memorial services and weddings are being postponed. Mission trips have been shut down and the

sacraments of communion and baptism have been put on hold. Yet, in spite of these current challenges, the church will still to be the church by bringing the love of God in Christ Jesus to a fallen, broken, and hurting world, as fallen, broken, and hurting people who have been saved by God's grace.

Here are just a few examples of the good works God has been doing through the membership at Cross Community Church:

- **Prayer Team** – Many people are praying daily for wisdom for health and government leaders, healing for the sick, hope for the hurting, comfort for those experiencing a variety of hardships and losses, and for revival.
- **Call Team** – Volunteers are calling as many people as possible to stay connected and to identify any specific needs.
- **Weekly Service Production Team** – Church attendance has actually *increased* through our live-streaming services and teaching lessons, because the congregation is sharing these services with friends and family.
- **Service Teams** – Our Cross quilters put their ministry of making quilts as gifts to shut-ins and the sick on hold; today they are making masks for those serving on the front lines. Other church members have been making food deliveries from restaurants. Still others have been picking up groceries and medications for those who should not or cannot leave their homes.
- **Children's Ministry Team** – Led by Meg Carter, our Children's Ministry director, some of the Cross children have made thank-you notes, cards, and videos to encourage those serving on the front lines.

Dr. Sam Lamerson and Dr. Josh Bruce, both professors at Knox Theological Seminary, are part of our pastoral team. In speaking with them, I have been reminded of the power of the good works performed by the first century church. When the Roman Empire was crushed under the weight of the plagues and people were fleeing the area, it was the Christians who rushed in to care for the sick and dying, often at the cost of their own lives. This kind of sacrificial love goes beyond the declaration of the Gospel to demonstrating its truths. This kind of selfless service emphasizes the truth that people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

In the face of social distancing orders, there is still much we can do to safely share that Jesus is Lord. I believe this virus has created an unprecedented

opportunity to begin to change the public perception of the Christian church. Let us show the world that the church is not a place to congregate, but a launch pad for people who care for the needs of others, *all* others, above and beyond their own needs.

Because every person is made in the image of God, every person has dignity and value, regardless of who they, where they live, or what they believe. Jesus proved this truth by entering into this world to reverse the curse of the sin pandemic. He lived a sinless life, suffered and died a sacrificial death, and rose supernaturally from the grave on the third day. This is the living hope the Christian has. There is purpose in pain, and the cross makes this clear. We may not always understand the “Why” of certain painful providences or seasons of suffering, but we know what that Why can *never* be: It can never be because God does not love us. The cross of Christ makes it crystal clear that God truly does love the people of this world. He loves *you!*

Earlier I addressed those readers who are not in a saving relationship with Jesus and said I would share how you could be. What follows is a brief overview of our *Show and Tell Evangelism* training at The Cross, which is presented in a shortened format in the Gospel tract we hand out. On the front cover we ask the question, “Have you ever thought about what happens after you die?” This has proven to be a great way to enter into a spiritual conversation with someone. The four inside panels contains our four-hand signal Gospel presentation. The four hand signals are a simple memory device to help those presenting the Gospel message remember what the next point is that they wish to raise.

ALL GOOD – The Paradise

In the beginning there was no death, only life – everything was . . . ALL GOOD!



God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27)

God saw all that he had made and it was very good. (Genesis 1:31)

ALL BAD – The Problem

But mankind turned away from God in rebellion, making everything . . . ALL BAD!



Just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned. (Romans 5:12)

For the wages of sin is death. (Romans 6:23)

ALL PAID – The Promise

God loved us too much to leave us in our sin.



For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

LET'S PRAY – The Prescription



God raised him [Jesus] from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen.
(Acts 10:40)

If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9)

This is the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ

Do you understand these truths?

Would you like to receive the free gift of eternal life right now?

Pray this simple Prayer of Salvation:

Lord, I understand that everything started all good, but we rebelled against you and made it all bad. But you loved me so much you sent your Son Jesus to pay the penalty for my sin. I confess my sins and trust in Jesus Christ alone for my salvation and ask that you help me follow you. Amen!

If you prayed that prayer in humble reliance upon the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, your sin debt is paid and, by grace through faith, you are saved.

If you received the Good News you just read, we would love to hear from you and send you some faith-building resources to assist you in your Christian walk. The next step is to join a Bible-believing church to begin the lifelong process of growing and maturing in your faith.

Remember, you were saved individually, but you were saved to community. The Bible knows nothing of the solitary saint, living in isolation from the family of faith in the local church. Inasmuch as online viewing is all that is available to the church during this stage of the pandemic, when things clear up and church reopens, follow these words from the writer of Hebrews: “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another — and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:25).

In closing, I wanted to share with you one of our *Grace for the Race* blogs that was a favorite with our church family early on in this coronavirus pandemic.

C.O.V.I.D.

He who sits on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.”
(Revelation 21:5 NASB)

I want to encourage you with a simple COVID acronym to strengthen you during this season of separation and social distancing. For too long the word “COVID” has

injected doubt, fear, and perhaps even anger into our hearts; from now on, when you hear the word, I hope you'll be inspired to worship the One who is Lord of all—even the Lord of COVID-19. If this message encourages you, please feel free to pass it on. Here is the COVID acronym:

Christ

Our

Victory

In

Doubt, **D**iscouragement, **D**isappointment, **D**arkness, **D**isease, and **D**eath

C = *Christ*

These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:31)

“This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations.” (Luke 24:46-47)

O = *Our*

Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died — more than that, who was raised to life — is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

(Romans 8:34)

Since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God . . . Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

(Hebrews 4:14, 16)

V = Victory

Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

(1 Corinthians 15:57)

“Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed.” (Revelation 5:5)

I = In

“I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness.” (John 12:46)

Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

(Romans 8:38-39)

D = Doubt, Discouragement, Disappointment, Darkness, Disease, and Death

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

(John 1:5 ESV)

“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

(John 16:33)

No matter what happens while this terrible virus runs its course, whenever you hear the word COVID, remember that Christ is Our Victory in Doubt, Discouragement, Disappointment, Darkness, Disease, and even Death. *Jesus always has the last word.* He is the living Word of God! Jesus is sitting on His throne, sovereignly in control of all things, and He is working all things together for His glory and for the good of those who are His.

And Jesus is coming back to finish what He started! One day He will return to earth to make all things new, and the new heavens and new earth He has promised to create for us will be so perfect and so glorious that we will not even pause to shed a tear over the dark times which seem to be brooding over the entire world at this time. They will not even be a distant memory as we behold

the perfect splendor of Christ, who is and always will be the Light of the world, world without end. Amen.

Until that day comes, keep looking to the One who holds you in the palm of His nail-scarred hand and has promised never to let you go.

You are in my prayers and in my heart.

Purpose and Passion,

Pastor Tommy