

MAKING THE MOST OF THE WORST OF TIMES

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The whole world a battleground! We all are under a siege. With the present swift increase of Covid-19 throughout all the countries, where we are headed to this time, none knows. Thick dark cloud covering the whole world and every nation. Suppressed anxiety and fears on most faces. Global lockdown and economic disaster. Doctors and medical personnel at the frontline of this war working overtime with alarming shortage of staff, medical equipment and risking their own lives. No medicine and no vaccine now in view. Data and statistics of people getting sick and dying showing rapidly increasing numbers every minute.

LIVING WITH QUESTIONS UNANSWERED

This is not a time to blame God, any nation, any government, or any scientist. We are in it all together as the human race. This 'enemy virus' does not know any boundaries in terms of nations, race, gender, culture, age and social status. Our usual concept of power, the power of wealth, military, titles and positions, all are bowed down to the dust before this puny little organism of coronavirus. We are forced to submit to the truth of Ps 144:4, "Man is like a mere breath; His days are like a passing shadow".

Where is God when we need him the most. If he is all powerful how can he stand aside and do nothing? Has he abandoned the world — his world, his people? We should not be presumptuous to try to explain what God is doing or not doing. Sickness, pandemics, deaths and tragedies that we experience in this shattered world are the outcome of the misuse by humankind of God's precious gift of freedom of will. Yet, he stands with us in our miseries, and he helps us to make some good out of it all.

CORONAVIRUS AND SIN - AN ALMOST PERFECT MATCH

There are significant contrasts, but some of the comparisons. Though tempted to elaborate on each, I will not do so to keep this message short.

1. The covert, secretive and stealthy way of both, in spreading from people to people
2. The source of both is alienation from God. His will for us is our wholeness and goodness.
3. Both attack the vital organs, the virus - lungs, and sin - heart, mind and the whole person.
4. Shelter from both is in keeping a safe distance. Social distancing and "flee evil" (Paul)
5. Both no respecter of any boundaries, national, gender, age, status—leveling all.
6. The Virus needs a living cell to live and replicate. Sin is not abstract; needs a living person.
7. The sheer power of both the virus and sin on people
8. Facing the fact of the problem and its seriousness is the first step toward a cure. In virus, transparency to people, and in sin confession to God are necessary.
9. Even when conquered, both sticks around. Virus mutates and comes back in another form. So also, unless sinful nature is overcome by the power of the gospel of Christ.

IS THERE A BRIGHT SIDE TO THIS DARKNESS?

Some good results have come out of this crisis

1. WHO says that air pollution kills 4.6 million people globally each year— in China 1.3 million and in India 1.2 million. As industries, factories, and travel by air, train and are all curtailed, if not stopped, for a few months now, the atmosphere is significantly cleaner. So, one may say (insensitive to the loved ones of the many thousands who died) that Covid-19 is saving the lives of many times more people than those who die of it?
2. Countries with the largest economies boast of their power with a spirit of arrogance that in wealth, military and scientific knowledge lie their strength and greatness. With heavy economic disaster and impending recession, maybe they will be more accommodative of countries with ‘weaker’ economies.
3. Nations are learning in a new way how we are all interdependent and interconnected, and how we need one another. They know that putting aside geopolitical squabbles they have to work together to save as many lives as possible to develop medicines and vaccination for this. So also, the need for humane cooperation to make life on earth more livable.
4. The spirit of godlessness, irreligion, secularism and immorality has been on rapid increase in the world. Deriding faith in God as unscientific and foolish is common and in vogue. Could it be that because of this crisis, a lot of people in times of helplessness, agony and anxiety seek some power beyond them and turn to God? Also, with the closing down of places of worship many have come to realize that religiosity and rituals are in themselves no substitute for true spirituality.
5. Now we get to enjoy the small and simple things in life, so also the ordinary things which in busy lives we missed. We eat simpler food which we learn as what is only necessary, cherish our environment, and we are doing things such as, remembering highlights of old days, enjoying old photos and files, dreaming our future and may be making definite goals, talking to neighbors over the fence, appreciating colors, flowers and birds around, discovering delightful things in our stored junk, and learning new things about the use of internet, mobile, Zoom platform, and online business (as the world because of Covid-19 is becoming more a virtual world.)
Hope a better world will emerge from all these we go through now.

MANAGING THIS CRISIS FOR OUR GAIN

It is adversaries that make life truly richer and not riches and comforts. Suffering can produce good benefits. For most of us we are living in the worst of times. we need to find the best way to make the most of it. **We should not waste this crisis.**

With “stay home” orders when weekdays and weekends look alike, office and home are merged, Sundays and the other days of the week are identical, and with no strict schedule to follow, what do we do with all the time at hand?

Being driven in life with ‘the urgent’ we failed much too long to understand what is **truly ‘the important’**. What are some of ‘the important’?

1. **Time to be honest before God**—alone in his presence. Our integrity—the coherence between our real inner self and our appearance before others, our claims and our inner fears, our masks/attires and the real persons they cover. Let us take time

to reconnect with ourselves, each one asking. “Who am I — who is the real me when nobody is looking except my Lord”.

2. **Time to understand what is true religion.** When opportunities of corporate worship are closed, we need to hear again, “Where two or three are gathered together I am in their midst”. Let us make no mistake, it is corporate worship that strengthens and sustains our faith, that is, provided that faith is there.

Without inner religion, religion becomes “opium of people”. Christian faith is primarily an inner reality without which corporate worship and outward rituals become a cop out and escapism from the challenges of personal bond with God through Christ—“a form of godliness but denying its power” (2 Tim 3:5). Do we shelter ourselves from our spiritual vacuum by joining a crowd of worshippers?

3. **Time for our families.** In our earliest years of childhood family was our only world. And in our last years our world again becomes just our families. Take time to cherish and nurture our only real world. If our children and grandchildren grew up never having Sunday church worship, Sunday schools and religious activities, what would their faith be just observing our lives and listening to our words? Let us ‘reconnect’ with our families, nuclear families and families at large.

4. **Time to deepen our relationship with our Lord and strengthen our faith.** This is a time we can obey his words, “be still and know that I am God.” To deepen our relationship with anyone, it takes time to be together: this is very much true in our relationship with our God. We should develop a method for systematic study of God’s word, and not casual reading of it as our usual practice, but carefully listening to its message and knowing God closer—learning the word of God is primarily by obeying it. Also, we need to spend much time in prayer, praying for the many critical needs relating to this pandemic.

5. **Time to reach out to others who are aching.** The comfort that we receive from “the Father of compassion and God of all comforts” can flow through us to those in trouble (2 Cor 1:3-4). This is a time to serve others through phones and online, while in a lockdown. Also, there

will be opportunities to be of some service to those who cannot move around as we can. There are those who are not working and so without money and means of living. Whatever way we should be God’s instruments of help for others, let us be available to him.

6. **Time to develop courage and hope to face our mortality.** Death is an absolutely sure thing in life. The Easter event reminds us that this inevitable enemy should be seen as not having the last word. It appears as a snake, but one without any venom. Christ’s death and resurrection guarantees our resurrection to an indescribably glorious life forever.

GOD’S POWER, PRESENCE AND PROTECTION

The context of the very familiar Psalm 91 must have been some unusual disaster and pestilence. The metaphor used is of baby birds finding shelter under the wings of their mother bird. He is one who is very present with those who suffer. His protection is promised because of his faithfulness and love. From under his wings we get power to face tragedies. Engulfing the reality of our suffering and pain is the greater reality of the loving presence and protection of God.

The very name of our Lord 'Immanuel' assures us that he stands with us in our pains and gives us his peace even when we do not understand what is happening to us and why.

The book of Job does not answer the problem of suffering, but it tells us where to go when we suffer—to have a renewed vision of God and hear his voice.

Fear is only natural in circumstances of crises. But our faith in our Lord should conquer our fear. Our faith is that the almighty hands of God upholds us. "Underneath are the everlasting arms" (Deut 23:27). The hands that created the world to start with, the hands that did marvelous miracles, the hands that stilled the storms in the Galilean sea, the hands that fed thousands with a few loaves and fishes, the hands that healed the sick and raised the dead—those hands are around us and under us.

CONCLUSION

We live a broken and messy world. But this is God's world. What he is at, we should not be presumptuous to assume. Granted that the mess is created by us, our help should come from outside of us. Finally, are we learning that we cannot play the part of God?

We cannot afford to have a world of power without principles, governance without accountability, knowledge without the wisdom to use it, science without compassion and relationships without self-sacrifice. When we will learn, if not in this crisis, that life is very fragile, and that a person without God is only a beast that lived, ate, reproduced and died.

When this pandemic is leveling all of us globally, nationally and locally, we need to learn, how painfully it might be, that finally we are all mere humans, one race, one interdependent interconnected people needing every one, small or great, to make our life together possible.

If we do not relearn this lesson this time, we have 'waisted' this crisis and have lost a big chance of becoming humans as God intended us to be—reconnected in mutual justice and selfless love to the Almighty and to one another regardless of nationality, gender, faith and class. God has provided a way for this in and through Jesus Christ, if only unconditionally we submit to him as our Savior and Owner and receive his embrace.

Oh, our Sovereign God! Have mercy on us and help us to surrender our lives to you and to obediently respond to your offer of "life in its fulness". Amen!

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