

Manna



What Should We Do in this Day of Trouble?

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Back in December 2019, we could never have imagined how COVID-19 would transform the world so utterly, and so swiftly. Our notion of normality has been upended, economies have seized up, social unrest and inequalities have been exacerbated, and, most tragically, lives have been cut short by this virus. In late September, the world passed a sobering milestone—over 1 million COVID-19 deaths reported worldwide.¹

The world has faced era-defining crises before—but nothing on such a truly global scale. Behind the catastrophic statistics are hidden the many millions of smaller, personal tragedies brought on or intensified by lockdown—untreated illness, stress and anxiety, isolation, tensions at home, disintegrating social bonds, financial insecurity, future uncertainty, and many more unforeseen consequences over the horizon. We are truly in the day of trouble.

In March 2020, as the first wave of coronavirus infections surged in the West, the Manna team decided to put together an unscheduled special issue around the pandemic and its impact on believers. Christians are certainly facing the same challenges as everyone else, and we may wonder why God puts us through these tribulations, both collectively and individually.

The Bible is overflowing with teachings on the correct view of such situations, and how we should respond when we find ourselves in the day of trouble. In this issue, we explore these teachings through three sub-themes.

Firstly, *in the day of trouble*, we should *reflect, repent and return* to our Sovereign Lord (Jer 4:1, 4; 29:13–14; 31:18; Joel 2:12–13); secondly, we can, and should, *find peace in God* to face all hardships (Isa 30:15; Phil 4:6–7); and finally, we should be refined through our afflictions, and use this God-given time to draw closer to Him through spiritual cultivation—to *pursue*

spiritual transformation (Ps 66:10; Isa 48:10; Zech 13:9; 2 Cor 12:7–10; Jas 1:2–4).

*The LORD is good,
A stronghold in the day of trouble;
And He knows those who trust in Him. (Nah 1:7)*

*Come, and let us return to the LORD;
For He has torn, but He will heal us;
He has stricken, but He will bind us up. (Hos 6:1)*

Many of us in the True Jesus Church have already experienced the truth of these verses amid the turmoil of this pandemic, as witnessed in the reports, testimonies, and reflections found in the following pages. We can truly attest to God's faithfulness and mercy upon His beloved children in times of trial, and see that God has His plan for us (Jer 29:11; Rom 8:28).

While this pandemic has taken away many things, it has provided opportunities for personal growth, spiritual cultivation and re-evaluating our service to God. It has also brought to the fore the things that really matter—our physical and mental health, our family bonds, fellowship with brethren, worshiping in spirit and truth, and, most importantly, our relationship with God.

As we go to print, many countries have re-entered national lockdown under the crushing resurgence of COVID-19, which scientists predict will be more severe than the initial wave of infections. Since we do not know how this crisis will unfold in the coming months and years, we can only prayerfully submit and entrust our lives to the One who knows all things, and works all things for the good of those who love Him (Rom 8:28).

In this day of trouble, let us never forget the lessons we have learned, and let us never return to the way things were before. May this fiery trial be the crucible in which we are transformed for good.

¹ "WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard," World Health Organization, covid19.who.int.

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A Time of Pestilence and Reflection

INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2019, as the world prepared to welcome and celebrate the new year, we were unaware of what 2020 would bring. The facts emerged gradually: an infectious and deadly disease caused by a novel coronavirus was spreading rapidly. The World Health Organization (WHO) later designated the disease COVID-19, and the virus that caused it, SARS-CoV-2. This outbreak would go on to become a global threat as it proliferated throughout the world.

Experts began to warn of the incoming crisis, and, one by one, governments put their healthcare systems on high alert. Some countries were quick to mobilize and roll out preventive measures, such as quarantines and isolations for those traveling from affected areas. Members of the public were reminded to wash their hands

diligently and to stay at home if they showed any symptoms at all, to prevent further transmission and to contain any clusters of infection. As the virus spread with gathering momentum, more stringent restrictions were introduced: limits on the number of people allowed to gather, enforced social distancing both indoors and outdoors, more rigorous disinfecting of public spaces, and mandatory temperature taking and mask wearing. These measures were introduced in a bid to contain, control, prevent the spread of the virus, and save lives.

During this global pandemic, many governments had to impose various forms of lockdown in their cities, provinces, and even their entire countries. International flights were canceled, and tourism came to a standstill. Schools, offices, shops, and leisure venues had to close their doors,

and the movement of individuals was restricted. These factors have naturally slowed down the global economy, preempting recession in some countries, reshaping society, and affecting the careers and daily lives of millions.

The effects of COVID-19 on human life have proved to be far more severe than those of SARS in 2003. Both viruses are genetically similar and attack the respiratory system, causing horrific symptoms. SARS may have a higher death rate but, crucially, COVID-19 has a longer incubation period and delayed onset of symptoms, meaning an infected individual could spread the virus widely before he realizes he is ill and quarantines. In this way, COVID-19 spreads much faster and much further, reaching more vulnerable people than SARS ever could, and becoming far more lethal. Tragically, by August 11, 2020, nearly twenty million confirmed cases



“For the foreseeable future, this pandemic will continue to be a threat to human life, as well as causing social unrest and international political tension. Although the scope of this pandemic is unlike anything we have experienced before, it is not without precedent.”

and over 700,000 deaths worldwide had been reported to WHO.¹

Currently, there is no vaccine or cure, and there is a fear that, even after the infection rate has died down, there may be another wave in the autumn-winter period. For the foreseeable future, this pandemic will continue to be a threat to human life, as well as causing social unrest and international political tension. Although the scope of this pandemic is unlike anything we have experienced before, it is not without precedent.

PRECEDENTS

Pestilences in the Bible

Throughout history, countless plagues and pandemics have decimated human populations. The Bible records many references to plagues:

1. During Moses' time, pestilence among Egyptian livestock was one of the ten plagues (Ex 9:3–7, 15).
2. When the Israelites complained to Moses and Aaron because of the bad report by the men who spied out Canaan, God struck them with pestilence (Num 14:1–3, 11–12, 37).
3. After the rebellion and punishment of Korah and his companions, the entire congregation of Israel complained to Moses and Aaron. In His wrath, God sent a plague, killing 14,700 (Num 16:41–50).
4. When the Israelites committed harlotry at Acacia Grove, God became angry and sent a plague, killing 24,000 (Num 25:1–9).

5. After David had taken a census of the people, he was struck to the heart when he realized he had sinned against God with this foolish act. In retribution, God sent a plague upon Israel, and seventy thousand men died (2 Sam 24:10–17).
6. When the Lord Jesus was preaching on earth, He warned that the last days would be marked by wars, earthquakes, famines, pestilences, terrors and great signs from heaven (Lk 21:10–11).
7. In Revelation, the apostle John records what will happen when the fourth seal is opened:

And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth. (Rev 6:8, ESV)²

Pestilences in History

The most severe pandemic ever recorded in human history is the Black Death in the fourteenth century.

2 The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

Over many years, the bubonic plague spread throughout Asia, North Africa, and Europe, killing over seventy-five million people worldwide, impacting society on every level. It was estimated that about half of the population of Europe perished during this plague.

Increased global interconnectivity and globalization have enabled COVID-19 to spread across the world much faster than the plague did in the middle ages. It has also proved to be more of a threat to human life than SARS or the flu. The world is in uncharted territory.

PESTILENCE AND FAITH

Though the current global crisis has interrupted our way of life, it has also allowed us to pause and reflect without the usual distractions of social commitments and other pastimes. In times of trouble, everything is put into stark perspective, and we realize what truly matters in our lives.

Here are some thoughts on how this pestilence should help us to reassess and realign our heart and relationship with God.

Emotions: Peace in Christ

The spread of COVID-19 has not only posed a threat to public health, it has also stirred up anxiety and social unrest. The people of the world are reminded of the fragility of life: they are like a bird perched on a wire, startled at any tiny vibration. Nevertheless, as Christians, we can hold fast to the promise of the Lord: though in the world we may experience tribulation, we have peace because the Lord Jesus has overcome the world (Jn 16:33).

*He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High
Shall abide under the shadow of the*

“Though the current global crisis has interrupted our way of life, it has also allowed us to pause and reflect... In times of trouble, everything is put into stark perspective, and we realize what truly matters in our lives.”

1 “WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard,” World Health Organization, accessed August 11, 2020, <https://covid19.who.int>.

*Almighty.
I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge
and my fortress;
My God, in Him I will trust."
Surely He shall deliver you from the
snare of the fowler
And from the perilous pestilence.
He shall cover you with His feathers,
And under His wings you shall take
refuge;
His truth shall be your shield and
buckler.
You shall not be afraid of the terror by
night,
Nor of the arrow that flies by day,
Nor of the pestilence that walks in
darkness,
Nor of the destruction that lays waste at
noonday.
A thousand may fall at your side,
And ten thousand at your right hand;
But it shall not come near you.*
(Ps 91:1–7)

Kinship: Set Up the Family Altar

During any pandemic, a major line of defense is for the public to self-isolate at home, going out only when absolutely necessary. This self-isolation impedes our freedom of movement and affects our mental health, but one area that could benefit is our family life. Before the pandemic hit, we led such busy lives that our family relationships may have suffered. But now, those under lockdown and movement control orders can spend more time with their loved ones. More importantly, this extra time allows us to focus on our faith and build up our family altars—to worship God at home.

Whilst we cannot attend services in physical church buildings, many of us are fortunate enough to be able to tune into livestream services hosted by the True Jesus Church across the globe and continue to worship in the Spirit collectively. These services connect our family virtually to the broader church, strengthening family bonds by strengthening faith. We also have the time to hold additional family services—Bible reading, prayer, and fellowship. This allows us to pursue spiritual growth together, to encourage and pray for one another, which fosters love and warmth within the family. The home is



not only a fortress of protection against the pandemic but, more importantly, a fortress of faith.

Friendship: Show Respect and Concern

Living in a pandemic has changed our social interactions drastically. We maintain physical distance, wear masks, and avoid shaking hands with others when we are out in public. However, we should not grow distant from our friends and allow these social distancing measures to affect our relationships. We should minimize the risk of transmission, but not at the expense of showing care and respect towards others. Many will be experiencing difficulties with their finances, their health, and their mental well-being, so we should be ready to offer support.

In terms of fellowship with church members, we can stay in contact through social media, chat groups, and video calls. If we use these tools effectively, we can strengthen the various fellowships, as well as pastor

and care for one another, ensuring that we continue to grow together in faith even when we are physically far apart.

Sin: A Silent Killer

Birth, old age, sickness and death, joy and sorrow, partings and reunions: all these are part of man's lot. However, within the pandemic, these human experiences have been magnified, touching us with an intensity we have not felt before. From the start, it was evident that COVID-19 was a flu-like infection that primarily targeted the lungs. Later, temporary loss of taste and smell were added to the list of symptoms. At this moment, we are still discovering more about this virus and what it can do to an infected person. The most worrying fact is that COVID-19 can be fatal, and yet we may not be aware that we have contracted it. It is a silent and stealthy killer, striking fear in people's hearts.

Many people wonder about the origins of COVID-19 and the identity of patient zero. However, the virus that we should fear most is the virus of sin. As the Bible

“ The home is not only a fortress of protection against the pandemic but, more importantly, a fortress of faith. ”

“ We have to earnestly repent of our sins and pray for God’s mercy, for ourselves and others. We must be the fragrance of Christ to God, diffusing the aroma of life in our prayers, so that we can be as Moses and Aaron, standing between the dead and the living to stop the plague. ”

tells us, “[W]hen desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death” (Jas 1:15).

Just as sin and death entered the world through one man, so we must be cleansed of sin and receive salvation through Christ Jesus (Rom 5:12; 6:23). While we try to combat the physical virus that is COVID-19, we must all the more guard against the virus that may be in our hearts. The Bible offers us guidance in this endeavor: “Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice” (Eph 4:31).

*“O Death, where is your sting?
O Hades, where is your victory?”
The sting of death is sin, and the strength
of sin is the law. But thanks be to God,
who gives us the victory through our Lord
Jesus Christ. (1 Cor 15:55–57)*

THE WAY FORWARD FOR THE CHURCH

United in Standing Guard, Praying for Preservation

During this pandemic, the True Jesus Church in Taiwan is promoting the theme “United in standing guard, praying for preservation from the virus.” Since many of us are spending more time at home, we can pray, petition, and intercede for others, asking for God’s grace and mercy. With faith and love, we should pray for our family members and for the peace and well-being of the people in the world. As it is written:

*Therefore I exhort first of all that
supplications, prayers, intercessions, and
giving of thanks be made for all men, for
kings and all who are in authority, that*

*we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in
all godliness and reverence.*

(1 Tim 2:1–2)

Online Pastoral Care and Training

In the past, attending regional, national, and international church meetings would often mean traveling, sometimes across borders, spending much time, money, and energy in the process. Since the onset of the pandemic, online meetings have replaced in-person meetings by necessity. Not only does this save time and money, but it has also made our work more efficient. With technological advances at our disposal, the church can use this moment to rethink and restructure our processes of conducting the pastoral, evangelistic, and training work. Using online platforms and social media, we can train more church workers, as well as expand and strengthen our pastoral work.

Evangelizing Like the Flying Angel

Today, the church needs to diversify its methods of evangelism. The lockdown caused by the pandemic has led to increased use of the internet and social media by people worldwide. Moreover, the trend seems to be a preference for accessing information online over traditional forms of communication. Therefore, we should not procrastinate in upgrading our internet ministry and online evangelism. This includes making sure our literary ministry reflects the times in which we live, and using up-to-date methods to strengthen our social media presence and evangelism strategies.

Just as the Bible records:

Then I saw another angel flying in the

*midst of heaven, having the everlasting
gospel to preach to those who dwell on
the earth—to every nation, tribe, tongue,
and people—sayng with a loud voice,
“Fear God and give glory to Him, for
the hour of His judgment has come; and
worship Him who made heaven and
earth, the sea and springs of water.”*

(Rev 14:6–7)

The church is this flying angel, charged with the commission to preach the gospel. We must do all we can so that we may, by all means, partake in the gospel and save more souls (1 Cor 9:16–23).

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has affected millions of people and claimed many lives. We have to earnestly repent of our sins and pray for God’s mercy, for ourselves and others. We must be the fragrance of Christ to God, diffusing the aroma of life in our prayers, so that we can be as Moses and Aaron, standing between the dead and the living to stop the plague (Num 16:46–48; 2 Cor 2:14–16).

*For His anger is but for a moment,
His favor is for life;
Weeping may endure for a night,
But joy comes in the morning. (Ps 30:5)*

*Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to
me!
For my soul trusts in You;
And in the shadow of Your wings I will
make my refuge,
Until these calamities have passed by.
(Ps 57:1)*

The Word of God is Not Chained!

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in the province of Ontario, Canada, was diagnosed on January 25, 2020. Subsequently, the Ontario government closed all indoor recreational venues, libraries, theaters, and schools, and banned social gatherings of fifty individuals or more. From March 24, all non-essential businesses were shut down, except for grocery stores, pharmacies, and other essential vendors. On March 28, the maximum number of people allowed to gather was reduced to five.

From March 18, the church in Toronto started hosting online worship services for members to attend. Many members have found this arrangement beneficial, sharing that they participate with a more reverent attitude, treating the occasion to worship their Savior as a privilege. To address the need for

interaction and fellowship during this time, the church replaced the scheduled afternoon Sabbath service with group Bible studies catering to different age groups and languages. Members are also encouraged to greet one another, using their cameras and microphones on their devices at the start and end of each session.

In July, the Ontario government started lifting restrictions cautiously, allowing churches to open for services for a limited number of congregants, at thirty percent capacity of the building. Online services continue, but afternoon Sabbath services have resumed, with the online Bible study shifted to later in the day. Even as the lockdown eases, the appetite to fellowship with God remains strong, as the number of attendees to the Bible study continues to increase.

Through this pandemic, our Lord Jesus put an emergency brake on our lives, which had increasingly become inundated with confusing information and chaotic opinions, and He brought the whole world to a standstill. He allowed us a time to refocus and reflect—to ask ourselves: Have I, in my usual busy routines, forgotten the most precious things in life? Have I neglected the ones whom I should cherish? Through these reflections, we may be able to realign ourselves and relaunch our lives in a new direction.

*“I am the LORD, and there is no other.
I form light and create darkness;
I make well-being and create calamity;
I am the LORD, who does all these things.
Shower, O heavens, from above,
and let the clouds rain down
righteousness;*



“Through this pandemic, our Lord Jesus put an emergency brake on our lives, which had increasingly become inundated with confusing information and chaotic opinions, and He brought the whole world to a standstill. He allowed us a time to refocus and reflect.”

*let the earth open, that salvation and
righteousness may bear fruit;
let the earth cause them both to sprout;
I the LORD have created it.”*
(Isa 45:6b–8, ESV)¹

The shadow of the pandemic hovering over every land is, of course, God’s doing. To many who have been busily toiling away in this age of information and endless pursuits, this calamity is a wake-up call. But to those who delight in God’s name and long for His righteousness, this calamity brings peace. It is a time of quietness, when we can once again learn to revere God, to calm our hearts with His words and be inspired, so that we may regain strength and mount up with wings like eagles (Isa 40:31).

ARIEL

At times in the Old Testament, God’s chosen people drifted far away from Him. In His lovingkindness, God would bring calamities upon them, so that they would return. During the time of the prophet Isaiah, the people continued to make their three annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem for the feasts, as instructed by God through Moses (Deut 16:16). But their hearts were not genuine. In their daily lives, they walked in idolatry and filthy conduct. To call them out of this spiritual darkness and restore a clear conscience in them, God sent His prophet, Isaiah, to proclaim:

*“Woe to Ariel, to Ariel, the city where
David dwelt!
Add year to year;
Let feasts come around.
Yet I will distress Ariel;*

*There shall be heaviness and sorrow,
And it shall be to Me as Ariel.”*
(Isa 29:1–2)

The meaning of *Ariel* is “altar hearth,”² signifying Jerusalem, the city where David dwelt. During the feasts, the people would bring their grain, new wine, and firstborn cattle, or pigeons, to offer as sacrifices at the temple of God.

While the sacrificial animals were lifted to the altar one by one for burning, Jerusalem was revived and became radiant with joy and vitality during these festivities.

However, God found these offerings detestable. They made sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem, yet at home, they would bow down to idols. They were confused about their devotion and worship. Because they lacked genuine faith and true worship, God viewed Jerusalem as *Ariel*—merely a furnace for burning dead animals.

*Therefore the Lord said:
“Inasmuch as these people draw near
with their mouths
And honor Me with their lips,
But have removed their hearts far from Me,
And their fear toward Me is taught by the
commandment of men,
Therefore, behold, I will again do a
marvelous work
Among this people,
A marvelous work and a wonder;
For the wisdom of their wise men shall
perish,
And the understanding of their prudent
men shall be hidden.”* (Isa 29:13–14)

Their hearts were far from God as they did not follow what was required of them—to offer sacrifices according to the true knowledge of God’s word and commandments. They would steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and walk after other false gods they did not know, and then stand before God in the temple called by His name (Jer 7:9–10). Hence, their ritual worship and burnt offerings became detestable to God.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God warned them of a “marvelous work and a wonder” that would astonish their wise men and cause their wisdom to perish. This work unfolded when He allowed the Babylonian armies to besiege and invade Jerusalem, tear down the city walls, and burn the temple. Many of God’s chosen people were taken captive to Babylon and elsewhere in the empire. These events caught them unaware as they never thought such harm would come upon the temple bearing God’s name (Mic 3:9–11; Jer 7:4).

However, the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem was not the end of the miracle and wonder with which God would astonish them. The loss of the physical temple on earth opened a way for the new spiritual temple to come into being through the blood of Jesus. At the calling of the prophet Jeremiah, God declared: “See, I have this day set you over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out and to pull down, to destroy and to throw down, to build and to plant” (Jer 1:10). Before God builds and plants, He destroys and pulls down what has become corrupt.

God gradually revealed the meaning of sincere worship in spirit and truth. Through the Holy Spirit, He also revealed Christ’s mystery, which was hidden in Him since the beginning of the ages—how He extended the grace of salvation to encompass not only the Jews but all nations (Eph 3:1–11). This mystery entailed God’s manifestation in the flesh, His crucifixion on the cross, and the shedding of His blood to pave the way for men to return to Him. It is a wonder, an act of God that surpasses all human understanding, as foretold by the prophet Isaiah.

1 The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

2 “Isaiah 29,” *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, accessed August 19, 2020, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/cambridge/isaiah/29.htm>.

THOUGHTS OF PEACE

After the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, God assured those in captivity that things happened as they did because His thoughts were of peace towards them:

For thus says the LORD: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. (Jer 29:10–11)

This message was spoken to the captives: the calamity would bring peace, a future, and a hope. We can see that for God's intended peace to come, three things needed to happen: the holy temple had to be destroyed, the people had to be taken captive to a foreign land, and their channel of ritual sacrifices in Jerusalem had to be cut off. Because they had failed utterly in offering sincere worship and faithfulness, a drastic transformation was required to revitalize their faith.

TO PULL DOWN AND TO BUILD

How can peace be granted through calamities? Such peace is incomprehensible to the one suffering from said calamities. However, if one genuinely seeks and fears God, he can experience peace through God's word and promise, which bring hope. Psalm 126, a Song of Ascents, is the expression of such a process:

(A Song of Ascents.) When the LORD brought back the captivity of Zion, We were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, And our tongue with singing. Then they said among the nations,

“ Our Lord Jesus has a purpose in all things He causes to happen to His loved ones, even in calamity. It is always to build us up, not to dishearten us. He wants us to seek His comfort and peace through His word in whatever circumstances. ”



*“The LORD has done great things for them.”
The LORD has done great things for us,
And we are glad.
Bring back our captivity, O LORD,
As the streams in the South.
Those who sow in tears
Shall reap in joy.
He who continually goes forth weeping,
Bearing seed for sowing,
Shall doubtless come again with rejoicing,
Bringing his sheaves with him.*
(Ps 126:1–6)

This psalm celebrates the return of the captives from the foreign land. When God brought them back to Zion, they dared not believe what they saw, as if it were merely a dream. At this moment, even Gentile nations proclaimed the works of God, exclaiming how He had done great things for His people.

The Negev region is south of Canaan, comprising mostly wilderness and

desert. Every summer, the rivers and creeks dry up in the drought; yet, come autumn, abundant rains revive these rivers and creeks so that they can flow through the winter. Even the streams in the South receive continual care from the Lord! The Psalmist evokes this image as he pleads with God for the return of the remaining captives. The rejuvenated rivers of the Negev can once again restore the holy city to grandeur, where its people eat, drink and rejoice in the Lord's presence.

THOSE WHO SOW IN TEARS SHALL REAP IN JOY

“He who continually goes forth weeping, bearing seed for sowing, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him” (Ps 126:6). In the Bible, the seed often represents the word of God (Lk 8:11), within which are the promises of God. Before the captives were taken away, God had already made a promise through the prophet Jeremiah:

“For thus says the LORD: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place.”
(Jer 29:10)

If those who mournfully left their homelands could believe in God's compassion and unfailing love, and hold fast to God's promise while dwelling in

foreign lands, they would surely return home with the fruits of their faith. They would experience the peace God had preserved for them behind the disasters and calamities. More importantly, they would come to realize the grace and love of God through these tribulations, and hence revere God even more. When those who returned to Jerusalem laid the foundation of the temple to rebuild, they were overjoyed in thankfulness:

But many of the priests and Levites and heads of the fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this temple was laid before their eyes. Yet many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard afar off. (Ezra 3:12–13)

Our Lord Jesus has a purpose in all things He causes to happen to His loved ones, even in calamity. It is always to build us up, not to dishearten us. He wants us to seek His comfort and peace through His word in whatever circumstances. This current pandemic provides the God-loving person a moment of calmness to meditate on His word and to communicate with Him through prayers, and hence draw even closer to Him.

THE WORDS OF GOD ARE NOT CONFINED

Today, the phrase “those who sow in tears shall reap in joy” has extra resonance for us: it impels us to spread the seeds. As mentioned above, the Scriptures often use the seed to signify God’s word and promise. As recipients of the truth of salvation, we must reach out and share these good tidings with those searching for the meaning of life.

*He who observes the wind will not sow,
And he who regards the clouds will not reap.
As you do not know what is the way of the wind,
Or how the bones grow in the womb of her who is with child,
So you do not know the works of God who makes everything.
In the morning sow your seed,*

“ Future uncertainty should not prevent us from doing good. No one knows what the future will bring—only God knows. What we should consider is whether the work is according to God’s will. ”

*And in the evening do not withhold your hand;
For you do not know which will prosper,
Either this or that,
Or whether both alike will be good.*
(Eccl 11:4–6)

He who observes the wind will not sow for fear that the seeds will be blown away—he worries that the work will be ineffective and fruitless. He who regards the clouds will not reap for fear that the rain will cut his work short, and he ends up harvesting nothing. Future uncertainty should not prevent us from doing good. No one knows what the future will bring—only God knows. What we should consider is whether the work is according to God’s will. If so, we carry it out and pray for God to lead the way. God provides opportunities. To wait for the perfect one is to be destined to miss them all. This is why Paul encouraged “Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching” (2 Tim 4:2).

In current circumstances, social distancing has kept most of our loved ones and friends out of our homes. However, many of them have yet to enter into the fold of our Lord. The pandemic has made life unpredictable and brought death to our doors. Although we cannot gather physically, we should not let any opportunity to share the salvation grace pass us by. The government-imposed lockdowns confine us to our homes, and we are reduced to listening to sermons online. But this presents a great opportunity: most people are working from home or are not required to go to their workplace. Since they have more time, we should invite our friends and family to online Bible study and testimony sessions. This is the ideal time; being taken out of their busy routines allows them to reflect on the meaning of life,

and be open to inspiration. Social distancing measures cannot restrict us from acting out the Lord’s commission to preach and minister His word. We are required to sow the seed and nurture it.

Confined in prison, Paul boldly wrote to Timothy:

Remember that Jesus Christ, of the seed of David, was raised from the dead according to my gospel, for which I suffer trouble as an evildoer, even to the point of chains; but the word of God is not chained. (2 Tim 2:8–9)

The word of God is not chained! It transcends all and touches all. We should continue to invite truth-seeking friends to our online church services. Encourage them to ask questions and pray for the Holy Spirit to lead them into the true faith.

This pandemic will surely subside, and eventually, it will be dismissed by our Lord. There will be a transition period of adapting to a new socially distanced lifestyle until everything returns to normal. The most important question is: has this calamity drawn us closer to our Lord Jesus, and strengthened our faith in His word? We need to treasure every footprint the Lord Jesus has made during this pandemic and let them be imprinted on our hearts, because He has His purpose for everything that happens.

Live Life Meaningfully

in the Face of the Pandemic

If there is to be a reckoning over the second coming of Christ and the urgency to get ourselves prepared, it has been spotlighted by the coronavirus pandemic. As this crisis unfolds, the world seems to be at a loss on how to deal with the situation. Many countries have placed their cities in lockdown at some point and enforced stringent social distancing rules to suppress the spread of the virus. Once vibrant cities have ground to an abrupt halt.

One major impact of the pandemic is on mental health. For many people, the risk of catching the disease has brought feelings of stress, anxiety, and fear. It has led to them limiting their interactions with others and to extreme behavior such as panic buying. Over time, we have also seen the effects on the economy, with businesses closing down due to inactivity. It seems that no aspect of human life has escaped

unscathed, and who knows what the future holds?

AN HONEST ASSESSMENT

As the world grapples with the pandemic and its aftermath, it is a good time to review our relationship with God. While we cannot escape from this difficult situation, we can learn the lessons that God has given to us. The Bible assures us that our heavenly Father, the Most High God, cares for us, and therefore we do not need to be afraid of what is happening (Mt 24:6; Jn 14:27).

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

When considering our relationship with God, we also need to reflect on our state of mind. For the people of the world, to experience fear amid a calamity is natural. But what about us? For Christians, the world will always be a hostile place that poses

constant challenges to our faith. And now, in these extraordinary times, we face additional pressures. How we are feeling is a good barometer of the state of our faith and whether we need to strengthen our relationship with God.

However, strengthening our faith will be hard if our relationship with God is strained. This may be the case if we did not work on our spirituality during times of peace, or if we focused our attention on matters of the world. Nevertheless, it is not too late to turn our focus back onto our faith and to consider how best we can mend our relationship with God. Once reconciled with God, we will have more courage to face the world and the power to resist its allure. God's peace shall then replace fear and begin ruling in our hearts (Col 3:15).



“The pandemic reminds us that our life is in the hands of God. As His children, we must spend the time we have on things that relate to God; nothing should get in the way of our worship, which the Bible says is the whole duty of man.”

SPENDING TIME WITH GOD

Living in a fast-paced world means we often have to juggle many things. We could feel exhausted from, say, having to earn a living or pursuing our academic studies. We may find that we have little time left for God—to attend church services or for spiritual cultivation—with the result that our faith suffers. This, in turn, will negatively affect our ability to serve the Lord. Trying to keep our faith afloat against the strong tide of the world can feel impossible.

The lockdown has forced all of us to cease our regular routines and confined us to our homes. This can lead to feelings of boredom, causing us to look for ways to pass the time. If we are not careful, we may be tempted to while away the hours by watching TV dramas and movies, or by surfing the internet mindlessly. The latter could lead us to stray onto websites that go against the beliefs of the church. We must take stock of the habits we have developed during this lockdown period, and to remove those that are not helpful. We must resolve to redeem the time and draw closer to God (Col 4:5; Eph 5:16).

The pandemic reminds us that our life is in the hands of God. As His children, we must spend the time we have on things that relate to God; nothing should get in the way of our worship, which the Bible says is the whole duty of man (Eccl 12:13). It means grasping hold of every opportunity to attend online services, kneeling before Him in prayer, and searching into the word of God so that we know in Whom we have believed. In this way, we can strengthen our heart of worship, which will stand us in good stead even after the pandemic is over.

FOSTERING A GOOD RELATIONSHIP WITH FAMILY

Before the lockdown, some of us might

not have had time for our family, giving priority to other matters. This may have led to an emotional distance between family members—even when living under the same roof. As a result, we may not be aware of each other's spiritual state, or we may become indifferent when family members stray from God.

The lockdown has brought family members together physically, creating the opportunity for us to become reacquainted with each other. Through caring communication, we can start making an effort to understand the spiritual condition of our family members, and willingly help each other. Also, through regular family worship, we can rebuild our bond of faith in Christ and ensure that it will remain strong.

SERVING GOD IN THIS PERILOUS TIME

The lockdown has removed our freedom of movement. The way we do things during lockdown is entirely different from how we did things before. This includes how we worship God. Our ability to hold church services, to gather in members' homes for Bible studies, and to do pastoral visits has been put on hold. But where there is a will, there is a way. Technology and social media have enabled us to bridge the social distancing gap. Indeed, many of us can take part in church activities

online such as daily Bible studies with other members from around the world. Technology has also enabled us to send e-invites to friends and relatives to join online evangelistic services. This lockdown period is truly an excellent time to rekindle our fire of evangelism on an individual and collective level. It is hoped that this fervor can continue and that it will lead to more evangelistic activity after the pandemic.

BEING VIGILANT AGAINST THE UNSEEN SPIRITUAL PANDEMIC

While we are vigilant to reduce the risk to our physical well-being during this pandemic, we need to be aware that Satan has engineered a spiritual virus, devised in the synagogue of Satan (cf. Rev 2:9; 2:13). Unseen and barely noticed, it is capable of inflicting widespread damage to the church globally. The virus thrives on the imperfection of church leaders and believers, leading people to doubt the trueness of the church and to rebel against God openly.

This situation requires us to take action to correct based on the principles of the Bible so that we can protect the members. As a church, we must all come before God to repent of our wrongdoings, particularly our unfaithfulness towards God and His word (cf. Dan 9:1–19). We must put away all human suppositions, return to God, and resolve to follow only what the Bible teaches. Once we mend our broken relationship with God, we will find that power will be restored to the church and her leaders. With the abidance of the Lord, the church shall defeat the heretics.

The church has an obligation to the believers: to remind them of the Bible's teachings relating to church

“The lockdown has brought family members physically together, creating the opportunity for us to be reacquainted with each other. Through caring communication, we can start making an effort to understand the spiritual condition of our family members, and willingly help each other.”

“ The current COVID-19 pandemic serves as a stern warning to us. We have been taking things for granted for too long. We must rectify our lifestyle if we are to improve spiritually, through serious prayers and confession of our wrongs before God. ”

organization and the Ten Articles of Faith, making sure we reach every age group. We need to embrace the precious doctrines with humility, honesty, and willingness. The workers of the church should encourage the brethren to hold fast to the pattern of sound words that God has given to the church through the Holy Spirit. With this steadfastness, God will unleash the power of His word to pull down strongholds and to cast down arguments (2 Cor 10:4–5).

It is time for us to wake up from our slumber, to see that a plethora of demonic weapons surrounds the true church. They include materials posted on social media, with articles targeted to poison and corrupt the believers' simplicity of faith. Faced with this situation, the church must address the issue of members not knowing the basic beliefs of the church and their susceptibility to deception. The church should make members aware of the proliferation of websites and social media accounts set up by heretics and ex-workers. She should advise members only to read materials from official church websites and to avoid being curious about other sites that have the potential to inflict spiritual harm.

CONCLUSION

The current COVID-19 pandemic serves as a stern warning to us. We have been taking things for granted for too long. We must quickly rectify our lifestyle if we are to improve spiritually, through serious prayers and confession of our wrongs before God. When God is our main focus, the church will be energized to carry out His great commission to preach the gospel readily. When God's abiding presence is felt in the church, it is natural for us to keep a check on one

another's faith. Searching the word of God and praying will be the norm—an essential part of life for every family.

The detrimental effects of the coronavirus have also brought to light the devastation caused by the spiritual pestilence created by the synagogue of Satan. The church must avoid the risk of infection by putting measures in place—biblically stringent measures which amount to nothing less than a complete severance from the evil being disseminated. We must immunize the church through the process of re-teaching the basic beliefs to every believer and every worker, with unceasing prayers for God's divine intervention to save the church.

Heavenly Worship in Revelation

In the Book of Revelation, John records how a voice told him, “I will show you things which must take place after this” (Rev 4:1–2). These things were the seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. We tend to be interested in what the future holds, which is why the Book of Revelation is so intriguing. We feel a sense of urgency in identifying how many seals have been opened, we wonder about the seven trumpets, and we speculate what calamities and plagues will be unleashed through the seven bowls.

However, before these visions were revealed, the Lord Jesus showed John “a throne set in heaven” (Rev 4:2). Around the throne were twenty-four elders and four living creatures, worshipping and praising the One on the throne (Rev 4:4–11). This scene depicts heavenly worship. Why did God show John this

vision before revealing the events of the future?

LEARN FROM THE WORSHIP IN HEAVEN

Heavenly worship is an important theme in the Book of Revelation (see also chapters 5, 7, 11, 14, 15 and 19.) Our Lord Jesus instructed John to record these occasions of heavenly worship to help the true church reflect on whether our present earthly worship measures up.

In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray that the Father’s “will be done on

earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10; Lk 11:2). Worship in heaven is done according to God’s word. If our worship on earth falls short of what takes place in heaven, then it is not following God’s will and will not be pleasing to Him. The following are several features of worship in heaven that we must emulate.

1. See the Door Standing Open in Heaven

After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven. And the first voice which I heard was like a trumpet speaking with me, saying, “Come

“ Worship in heaven is done according to God’s word. If our worship on earth falls short of what takes place in heaven, then it is not following God’s will and will not be pleasing to Him. ”



“ If we find ourselves in a predicament similar to John’s, or worse, suffering from a chronic illness or living a solitary life, let us turn our vision from earth to heaven. Look up and see the door in heaven open. ”

up here, and I will show you things which must take place after this.” (Rev 4:1)

Look up

When John saw these visions, he was on the island of Patmos. He had been persecuted and deported there because he held fast to his faith. It was a solitary life, cut off from family and church, with probably only his fellow deportees for company. Gazing out, he would have seen nothing but the sea; there was no way off his island-prison. In these circumstances, God showed him an open door in heaven.

This vision immediately drew his gaze away from things on earth to things of heaven. Had John kept his sight on earthly matters, he would have been discouraged. But he was moved by the Spirit to see the heavenly door—to see God’s glory and the multitude of angels and saints worshipping Him. One day, John would join them in such a place to worship and be with God forever. With such a glorious hope awaiting him, there would be little point worrying about the present difficulties he faced on earth.

In their sufferings, the Christians in Corinth were understandably focused on the problems around and ahead of them. They might have wondered why God allowed these afflictions, and why He remained ignorant of their weeping. But the apostle Paul could see past his own troubles, even while in the midst of them; he knew these difficulties would achieve for them a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are

temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal. (2 Cor 4:17–18)

We are often so transfixed by our afflictions that we are blind to what will be fulfilled for us in the future. We should recognize that today’s pain and toil are necessary for tomorrow’s outcome. This is well demonstrated in sport. Every athlete wants to win the gold medal. But intense training will differentiate the champions from the rest. Some are unable to take the pressure and give up. Some merely go through the motions and are unlikely to win. Champions continually push themselves. They persevere, knowing that any discomfort is temporary and relatively light. These athletes know that their future gain—the deafening applause and adulation of the crowds—far outweighs the present pain. They give their all for a moment of glory. As followers of Jesus Christ, the glory we will receive is eternal. Should we not hold on to our faith and endure even more?

If we find ourselves in a predicament similar to John’s, or worse, suffering from a chronic illness or living a solitary life, let us turn our vision from earth to heaven. Look up and see the door in heaven open.

Look with faith

The way to see this heavenly door

open is not by asking God to show us a vision; instead, we ought to open the door of our hearts and see with our hearts. Abraham saw a better heavenly home—such insight and foresight made him willing to live like a sojourner. His heavenly vision kept him from worrying about any earthly affliction. Learn from Abraham to hold fast to the faith right to the end. Although we live in this tangible, physical world, we must stay focused on invisible spiritual matters. This is the faith that overcomes the world.

2. Come Up to the Lord

John saw a door standing open in heaven, and heard a voice telling him to “Come up here” (Rev 4:1). Had he not accepted the Lord’s invitation, he would not have witnessed the glory and joys that lay beyond heaven’s door. In other words, having the right vision—seeing the open door—is not enough by itself. Obedience to God’s word is critical.

Climb new spiritual heights

John was lifted to the Lord in the Spirit. Today we may not be lifted in a vision, but our spirituality should be lifted to where the Lord is.

The lyrics of the hymn *Higher Ground*¹ remind us:

*I’m pressing on the upward way,
New heights I’m gaining every day...
Lord, lift me up and let me stand,
By faith, on heaven’s table land,
A higher plane than I have found;
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.*

Only by standing on a higher ground can we see more clearly and see heaven more closely. We may have established

¹ By Johnson Oatman, Jr (1856–1922).

“ Only by standing on a higher ground can we see more clearly and see heaven more closely. We may have established a routine of attending services, reading the Bible, and praying. But have these worship activities lifted us to higher ground, to where the Lord is? ”

a routine of attending services, reading the Bible, and praying. But have these worship activities lifted us to higher ground, to where the Lord is? To guard against spiritual stagnation, we must always check our relationship with Jesus—are we growing closer to the Lord day by day? Is our image increasingly like the Lord's?

The whole point of our worship should be to improve ourselves and be raised to the Lord. Let us not only strive for higher earthly achievements but, more so, aim for higher heavenly planes.

Come to the true way

Ironically, the most important life issue we all must attend to is the *end* of life—where will our souls go after death? Different philosophers and religious teachers have tried to provide answers to this. However, no human being can give us the truth of the matter; only the Lord Jesus can, because He is the true God in heaven who descended to earth to save humankind. Jesus is the absolute truth, eternal life, and the way of salvation. No one can come to the Father except through Him (Jn 14:6–7, 10). During His earthly ministry, Jesus invited people to come to Him. To those who labor and are heavily laden, He promises rest. To those who believe in Him, He promises everlasting life and resurrection on the last day (Mt 11:25–28; Jn 6:37–40).

We must come to the Lord. Only then can we have the absolute answer to what happens at the end of life.

“You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life.” (Jn 5:39–40)

The way to the Lord is through the Scriptures—these testify of the Lord, enabling us to understand who Jesus is, and how to follow Him to eternal life. But Jesus said, “You are not willing to come to Me.” Reflect on this and how we have lived our lives thus far. What is our ambition—to gain money or to gain life? If it is the former, we ought to go to the world. There is much money to be made there for those willing and able to

LOCKDOWN MEASURES: A BLESSING IN DISGUISE

In normal times, we have the freedom to go anywhere we wish. However, because we have so many things to do and places to visit, we leave no time to spend with God. As a result, we drift further and further away from the Lord. Our preoccupation with work and worldly entertainment have also distanced us from our family.

When COVID-19 lockdown measures were imposed in different cities, many rued the loss of freedom initially. Some grumbled at the virtual imprisonment. However, staying at home not only protects us and averts further disaster, it also provides an opportunity to improve our relationships with the Lord and our family members. By compelling us to suspend the busyness of normal life, we are able to quieten our hearts and reflect on the state of our souls. When our lives come to an end, are we able to enter the heavenly kingdom with the Lord?

work hard. But the COVID-19 pandemic is an abrupt reminder that even if we are wealthy, it may be of no use to us (Lk 12:15–21).

Let us realize that the true and only worthwhile aim of life is to gain eternal life. And the only way to achieve this is to go to where the Lord is.

3. See God On the Throne

And He who sat there was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald. (Rev 4:3)

See His glory and holiness: Be reverent

God can neither be seen with human eyes, nor His glory accurately described in mere human words. In the Book of Revelation, John thus uses precious stones—jasper and sardius—to represent God's glory and holiness. The brilliance of these jewels should constantly remind us of our unworthiness. When the prophet Isaiah saw the glory and holiness of God, he exclaimed, “Woe is me. ...Because I am a man of unclean lips!” (Isa 6:5–9). Sadly, today, some believers are proud and puffed up by their wealth, social status, or their standing in church. They conduct themselves irreverently, even in church. They behave like this because they have not seen the glory and holiness of the One who sits on the throne. True worship requires us to see

the glory and holiness of God so that we can worship with reverence and piety.

See His mercy and faithfulness: Be repentant

The rainbow around the throne represents the mercy and faithfulness of God. After delivering Noah's household, God set His rainbow in the sky. This was a sign of His covenant with man—His promise that He will never destroy the world with a flood again. In our worship, we should see the rainbow and remember God's faithful deliverance and mercy. When we have sinned, do not give up and draw away from God. Instead, return to Him and confess our sin; seek His grace and ask for His forgiveness. When the Israelites sinned, God spoke of His mercy to Moses:

And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation.” (Ex 34:6–7)

Moses' response to this divine proclamation was sincere gratitude. He then hastened to intercede for the Israelites (Ex 34:8–9). Let us recognize our iniquities and, while we are in this period of grace, seize the opportunity



to receive forgiveness and share His faithful mercies with others.

See only Him: Be dedicated

Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads. (Rev 4:4)

Many things were vying for John's attention, but his eyes were immediately drawn to the One sitting on the throne. This is another attribute of heavenly worship: a focus on God who sits on the throne in heaven.

In our worship today, we must not allow our worship to become human-centered instead of God-focused. This may happen both personally and at church level. For example, some churches are more concerned about pleasing the worshipers, rather than pleasing God in their worship. To boost attendance, they overhaul their services so that people will find attending church fun and relaxing. Instead of leading the congregation to worship the Almighty God with reverence, they transform worship of the Almighty into a recreational event. Another example is sermon speakers who are more concerned with pleasing their human listeners than striving to preach what God wants them to. Such speakers may choose topics deemed to be interesting;

they may even be prepared to “innovate” on the truth to please the congregation.

At the personal level, we must reflect on whether we have become the type of listener who only pays attention to feel-good sermons, shutting our ears to messages that we dislike. Reflect also on our level of concentration during services. If we use a Bible app on our smartphones during services, can we resist reading the incoming message notifications that pop up, or sneakily checking the news and social media? We may be undergoing the rituals of worship, but we are not concentrating on God. God is looking at us, but we are not looking at Him. We have other things on our minds. How could such worship be pleasing to God?

We must recalibrate our worship today to the standard of heavenly worship. When we come before God, focus our eyes on He who sits on the throne, focus our minds on the presence of God, and tune our ears to the word God wants us to receive. Worship God with a reverent heart and a dedicated mind.

4. See the Sea of Glass Before the Throne

Before the throne there was a sea of glass, like crystal. (Rev 4:6)

Marina Ivanovna Tsvetaeva, the famous Russian writer, once said that she could

never love the ocean because—given its vastness—it is uninhabitable by man. In contrast, land covers a smaller portion of the earth's surface, yet sustains so much human life. The ocean is also temperamental: calm and peaceful one moment, but terrifying when a storm whips the waves into a frenzy. So puny and helpless is man before the vast ocean that life, with all its uncertainty, is oft described as a bitter ocean. However, the sea of glass in John's vision reassures us.

Jesus is our shelter

On one occasion, when Peter saw Jesus walking on the lake during a storm, he asked Jesus to allow him to do the same. At Jesus' invitation, Peter got out of the boat and started to walk on water. However, when he saw the winds, he became afraid and began to sink. When he cried out to the Lord, Jesus immediately reached out His hand to catch him, and together they made it back to the boat (Mt 14:22–32).

Like Peter, we too may lose our nerve when assailed by the ferocious storms of life. There is no need to fear because the Lord is our shelter; He can turn the bitter ocean into a sea of glass. Then we can, like Peter, stand and walk on the sea together with the Lord.

*In my distress I called upon the LORD,
And cried out to my God;*

*He heard my voice from His temple,
And my cry came before Him, even to His
ears. ...*

*He sent from above, He took me;
He drew me out of many waters.*

(Ps 18:6, 16)

Today, when calamity comes, and we find ourselves sinking into the bitter sea, learn from Peter to cry out to the Lord. Our merciful Lord Jesus will surely stretch out His hand and save us.

Worship is an essential time of communion between our Savior and us. However, some Christians claim that since God is everywhere, there is no need to worship God in His temple; they can just worship God in their hearts or worship at home. But in Psalm 18:6, the Psalmist says that God heard his voice from God's temple. This is a reminder that God wants us to gather in His temple—His church—for worship (Heb 10:25). If we do not obey God's instruction and see formal worship as a waste of time, then our cries for help during times of distress will be displeasing to Him.

Technology has been a blessing, allowing us to continue worshipping throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing social distancing measures. But as lockdown gradually lifts, do we find ourselves eagerly anticipating the opportunity to once again worship with fellow-believers at church? Or have we come to prefer online services since they are so convenient, saving us time and trouble, and providing us with a choice of speakers from around the world?

The ancient saints remind us:

*Blessed is the man whose strength is in
You,
Whose heart is set on pilgrimage.
As they pass through the Valley of Baca,
They make it a spring;
The rain also covers it with pools.
They go from strength to strength;
Each one appears before God in Zion.*

(Ps 84:5–7)

These ancient saints worshiped God in their houses, but they still willingly traveled to God's temple for worship. God had instructed them to worship

in the place where He put His name (Deut 12:5; 16:2, 11; 26:2; Neh 1:9). This was His temple, where the ark of God was placed. The ancient saints did not have the convenience of our modern transport. And they would have had to pass through the Valley of Baca, which means the valley of “weeping”—a warning that they needed to traverse many sorrows. Yet, by relying on God, these ancient saints found the strength to obey God's command to worship at God's temple.

The Psalmist declares that those who desire to worship God in this manner will be blessed; God will add to their strength so that they can come to His temple to worship Him. Hence, we should not let anything deter us from making the trip to church. It is true that we—the people of God—are the church. But the physical church building is no ordinary building because it has been dedicated to God for worship. This is a place that belongs to God—the sanctuary where God's name has been established and continues to be proclaimed (cf. 1 Kgs 9:3). More importantly, this is the place where God commanded His rituals be performed (Deut 12:11; 16:6). As God's children, we ought to rejoice when we can come to worship Him at church. Our desire to go to His temple reflects our obedience and our longing to receive God's grace. Therefore, no matter how tired we may be or how arduous the journey, come to God's temple to worship.

Jesus is our peace

In John's vision, the sea of glass was like a clear crystal. The clarity and solidity of crystal remind us that when we come before God, we enjoy peace and tranquillity. In His presence, we will not be affected by worldly troubles.

“The clarity and solidity of crystal remind us that when we come before God, we enjoy peace and tranquillity. In His presence, we will not be affected by worldly troubles. Today, when we come to worship God in His temple, are our hearts peaceful?”

Today, when we come to worship God in His temple, are our hearts peaceful? Peace is not an external display. Some believers appear to be listening quietly to the sermon, but in their hearts, they are like Martha—troubled and distracted by many things, unable to hear God's word (Lk 10:40). But some successfully emulate Mary—when they come to church, they resolutely put aside all their worldly cares and quieten their hearts to worship God. Such worship is truly like heavenly worship because, before the throne, we see a crystal-clear sea of glass.

SEA OF GLASS IN LIFE: MANAGING FEAR AND ANXIETY

But now, thus says the LORD, who created you, O Jacob,

And He who formed you, O Israel:

“Fear not, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by your name;

You are Mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you.

When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned,

Nor shall the flame scorch you.”

(Isa 43:1–2)

Fear is a natural human instinct. God understands this. So, throughout history and through the Scriptures, God has provided reassurance for His people. This passage brings to mind two of history's greatest miracles.

First, “passing through the waters” reminds us of Israel's miraculous crossing of the Red Sea (Ex 14). With Pharaoh and his army in hot pursuit behind, and the Red Sea in front, the people of Israel were terrified: they would either be killed or drowned.

“ Perhaps we are struggling through deep waters and fiery furnaces. Do not be paralyzed by fear. Let us open our eyes to see the presence of God. Trusting in God’s abidance and deliverance will quieten our anxious hearts. ”

Moses was the exception (Ex 14:13). He remained calm and unafraid because he saw God’s presence. He knew God would make a way and lead them through the waters.

Second, “walking through the fire” reminds us of the miraculous delivery of Daniel’s three friends from the fiery furnace (Dan 3). These three Jews chose to be thrown into the furnace rather than compromise their religious principles. When the king urged them to reconsider, they still refused to worship the gold image (Dan 3:17–18). They believed that God was able to deliver them, and even if He did not save their physical bodies, He would deliver their souls into His kingdom. They demonstrated this extraordinary lack of fear because they remembered they had God’s presence.

At present, we may be living in a country or area where COVID-19 infections are spiraling out of control. Perhaps we are struggling through deep waters and fiery furnaces. Do not be paralyzed by fear. Let us open our eyes to see the presence of God. Trusting in God’s abidance and deliverance will quieten our anxious hearts. Open our ears to hear God tell us: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; you are mine” (Isa 43:1). God has redeemed us with His blood and the Holy Spirit. We are the children of God, the almighty Creator of the heavens and earth. The heavenly Father takes care of the birds in the skies, and we are much more important than these. But the crucial question is whether we are willing to place our lives into His hands.

Consider the bird who perches on a tree branch. It never fears that the branch will break, resulting in a plunge to certain death. This is because the bird does not put its trust in the strength

of the branch, but in the wings God has given it. Similarly, for us, we are “perched” in the situation we find ourselves in. Our faith in God is like the wings of the bird. Is our trust rooted in our circumstances, the wealth, or influence we possess? Or do we trust in our wings? No matter how sturdy the branch, it will still snap in a fierce storm. But the wings of our faith allow us to soar and overcome these calamities.

For some Christians, sin and time spent away from God may have left their wings wounded. This is why they struggle with life. If we are in this situation, we must return to the Lord, who heals the broken and broken-hearted (Ps 147:3).

CONCLUSION

Currently, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to dominate headlines; it has been called the crisis of a generation due to its far-reaching health, economic and social impacts. But crises are also opportunities. In the end time, there will be pestilences in various places. This crisis is an urgent warning to review the state of our worship and faith.

The Book of Revelation fascinates readers because of its detailed description of the events leading up to Jesus Christ’s second coming. But an important focus for believers is the heavenly worship that John saw in his vision. God wants us to look up and see the door open. He wants us to rise to see the throne in heaven. These are reminders that our spiritual gaze must always be firmly turned heavenward. Specifically, we must see the almighty and holy God and come into His presence. When we do so, our lives of worship will have the right motivations and attributes of repentance, reverence, and dedication. Though the stormy

winds howl around us in the bitter sea of life, our eyes are on the crystal-clear sea of glass in heaven, and our hearts will remain at peace. God gives His children wings of faith. Even though we may pass through many waters or fires, the Lord will lead us, His beloved children, along.

Based on a sermon by
Barnabas Chong
Singapore

The Widow Sought God's Help

A certain woman of the wives of the sons of the prophets cried out to Elisha, saying, "Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that your servant feared the LORD. And the creditor is coming to take my two sons to be his slaves." (2 Kgs 4:1)

This passage records an episode in the ministry of the prophet Elisha. The wife of one of the sons of the prophets was experiencing considerable hardship. Her husband had died, and her family was laden with debts. She sought help from Elisha, who gave her some instructions. She followed them, and

her problems were solved. Let us consider this widow's faith from the perspectives of each of the leading players—the widow, Elisha, and the Lord.

THE WIDOW'S FAITH

Firstly, did this widow have faith? She came to plead for Elisha's help, so she must have had faith. Seeking help from Elisha, a prophet of God, was the same as seeking help from God. She must have known that God could save her from her troubles. Today, when we ask God for help, do we approach Him with the same faith as this widow?

Secondly, how deep was her faith? Let us consider her situation. Her husband had been a son of the prophets. This being the case, why did he meet such a fate? People often believe that good things happen to good people, while bad things befall those who are evil. If we subscribe to such thinking, we would wonder why this prophet deserved to die. Perhaps he had been a false prophet or one who oppressed people. But the Bible records clearly what the widow said to Elisha: "You know your servant feared the LORD" (2 Kgs 4:1). So why would a God-fearing prophet meet an early demise?

His death had a significant impact on the widow. Since her husband had been faithful, she could have questioned why God would allow this to happen. Her whole household feared God, yet they were so deep in debt that creditors were threatening to take her sons away.

“Today, when we ask God for help, do we approach Him with the same faith as this widow?”



We think nothing of seeking God when we face problems with straightforward solutions. The widow here faced seemingly insurmountable challenges. If we were in such a situation, would we confidently seek God?

It would be understandable for a person to give up all hope in such difficulties. Negative thoughts could have overwhelmed her: *God hasn't helped me. My family has been plunged into despair. God could help, but, instead, He has no love! He doesn't care if I live or die. Why should I worship or seek Him?* But this widow was one of faith. In such dire circumstances, she had the faith to seek God's help through Elisha.

In difficult times, we may struggle with negative thoughts. But the Bible tells us not to fear, for God is with us (Ps 23:4; Josh 1:9). Though the widow seemingly had no one to pull her out of trouble, she still believed in God. She knew and continued to fear God. She did not curse or challenge God. In times of tribulation, we must also continue to believe and trust in God.

"[Cast] all your care upon Him, for He cares for you." (1 Pet 5:7)

We do not cast our cares on God just because He is able, but because He cares for us. When we are praying in tears to God, we must remember this verse. God invites us to cast all our cares on Him. While we know this, there could still be some unbelief within our hearts. That is because when we reach out to God, we often expect instant help. We expect God to prevent the problem from occurring in the first place. However, the verse tells us to cast our cares upon Him, meaning that all of us will have cares in this world. God will not prevent us from experiencing trouble, but He will help us with the troubles we do have.

“ God can and will make everything beautiful in its time. The only question is whether now is the time. If we continue to have faith and hold on to God's word, when the time comes, God will complete the work. ”

“ Though the widow seemingly had no one to pull her out of trouble, she still believed in God. She knew and continued to fear God. She did not curse or challenge God. In times of tribulation, we must also continue to believe and trust in God. ”

I live with my brother's family. One day, while he and my sister-in-law were out, I had to babysit their two-year-old and two-month-old. I could manage the older child by playing nursery rhyme videos. However, I had no idea what to do with the baby. I could not figure out why the baby was crying. I was holding the crying baby in one arm, and with the other arm, I was trying to handle the toddler who was climbing all over me. I had no idea what to do. I could only rely on God. I played the hymn *Jesus Loves Me*, and, thankfully, the baby calmed down and fell asleep. When I shared this with my brother, he told me the baby sleeps to any music. But when I later tested this, it was not the case. It was indeed God who helped me.

This episode triggered another thought in me. In that situation, God helped me instantly. But at other times, I have prayed and fasted for weeks, with seemingly no answer from God. At the time, I had wondered if the content of those prayers were wrong. But after this experience, I realized that perhaps God had already extended His help—only the time had not yet come for me to experience it. God may have already answered our prayers, but we need to wait with faith to see God's help manifest in our life at the right time.

"He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out

the work that God does from beginning to end." (Eccl 3:11)

God may not let us know everything from beginning to end. But we trust that God can and will make everything beautiful in its time. The only question is whether now is the time. If we continue to have faith and hold on to God's word, when the time comes, God will complete the work. If we read this verse with faith, then we can hold on in any situation. Whatever circumstances we are in, we can bring forth our faith and rely on Him. When it appeared as though God had forsaken her family, the widow came to seek God. She maintained the hope that God could and would help her in His time. This is the faith we should have.

ELISHA'S PART

So Elisha said to her, "What shall I do for you? Tell me, what do you have in the house?" And she said, "Your maidservant has nothing in the house but a jar of oil." Then he said, "Go, borrow vessels from everywhere, from all your neighbors—empty vessels; do not gather just a few. And when you have come in, you shall shut the door behind you and your sons; then pour it into all those vessels, and set aside the full ones." So she went from him and shut the door behind her and her sons, who brought the vessels to her; and she poured it out. Now it came to pass, when the vessels were full, that she said to her son, "Bring me another vessel." And he said to her, "There is not another vessel." So the oil ceased. (2 Kgs 4:2–6)

Why did Elisha want the widow to pour out the oil herself? Why did Elisha not use a more direct approach to help her? He could have turned stone into gold to pay off her debt. Instead, he gave her precise instructions: gather pots, close

the door, and pour out the oil from her jar into the collected pots.

No matter what they thought about Elisha's directions, the widow and her sons simply obeyed, believing that every vessel would be filled with oil. Going through this process in itself was necessary for them to build up their faith. They needed God's grace to pull them out of their dire situation—they had the faith to seek God, but did they have the faith required to obey the voice of Elisha? Through this action of oil pouring, they demonstrated their belief and obedience. And as they watched pot after pot being filled to the brim, they experienced the gift of God and the abundance of His saving grace. This whole experience confirmed in the most wonderful way that God is true and faithful, and all glory belongs to Him.

THE GRACE OF GOD

Then she came and told the man of God. And he said, "Go, sell the oil and pay your debt; and you and your sons live on the rest." (2 Kgs 4:7)

First and foremost, God addressed the widow's most urgent need: paying off her debt. It was not just financial relief; it also saved her sons from being used as collateral. Without this, she would have lost not only her husband, but also her sons. She would have become a widow of widows. God rendered help to lift her out of this predicament immediately. What other grace did He bestow upon her?

The last part of this verse says, "you and your sons live on the rest." Elisha understood this was necessary all along. Beyond the repayment of their debts, they needed help to sustain their livelihood. The grace intended was not just to solve the present problem, but also to provide for their future. We do not know how long the money would last, but we know she was truly helped.

Today, our jobs could be at risk, especially amid the current pandemic. If it is just for a month, perhaps we can stem the tide. But as the days turn to months, no matter how much savings we have, we may meet with financial

“ If we reflect upon our own lives, we will see that God has also helped us with many different layers of grace. With each layer, our faith is strengthened and built up in Him. Let us always reflect on how God builds up our faith. ”

difficulties. Let us not be overly worried. In the Lord's Prayer, we ask God to "give us this day our daily bread." We can recall how the Lord provided manna for the Israelites in the wilderness. God will give us enough food for each day, at the very least.

God provided the necessities for the widow and her sons. As long as we believe in and rely on God, He will also help us. We must be clear, though, that God will provide us with the things we need, and not necessarily the things we desire. For example, when the Israelites craved meat in the wilderness, God gave it to them, along with punishment for their complaints and attitude. God did not punish them when He provided the necessities, such as manna. This reminds us to trust in God for our essential needs. Let us assess what our genuine necessities are so that we do not become overly worried and complain, or desire more than what we need. Even in straitened times like these, let us continue to strengthen our faith and trust in God.

Because the widow's family feared and sought God, they experienced His deliverance and saving grace. Likewise, if we fear God, He will help us in our time of need. We see this truth being fulfilled in the lives of full-time workers today. This includes, but is not limited to, preachers and administrative staff working in the church. Throughout this pandemic, it has become apparent that more full-time workers are needed in the ministry. Who could have predicted that a virus would prevent us from coming to church to worship? Now that most of us have experienced some form of lockdown, in which we could not physically gather at our local churches, it brings into focus the current and future need for workers to support

pastoral and evangelistic outreach. Of critical importance is being able to share the truth and teachings of God to members in virtual or other settings, beyond the church premises. Who will step up to this work? Who will encourage members and lead them in their faith?

Some are discouraged by a worker's meager salary, his uncomfortable lifestyle, or even the stress and challenges a worker faces. So they dare not offer themselves for full-time ministry. But instead of focusing on these, let us take courage and be determined to serve the Lord, entrusting all our daily cares to Him. Let us have faith that God will take care of us as we serve Him with our lives.

CONCLUSION

In this short story of Elisha and the widow, there are many layers of grace from God, amid seemingly insurmountable challenges and an uncertain future. If we reflect upon our own lives, we will see that God has also helped us with many different layers of grace. With each layer, our faith is strengthened and built up in Him. Let us always reflect on how God builds up our faith. Even during challenges, adversity, or a pandemic, let us be determined to seek the Lord, for He will surely provide.

Grace, Mercy, Peace

“Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ our Savior.”

Receiving such a greeting from a church member may make us feel that he or she is either fooling around or being a little pretentious. However, the epistles in the New Testament reveal that this was in fact a common greeting the early Christians exchanged with one another. More importantly, the New Testament authors, who were inspired by the Holy Spirit, included this salutation in their respective letters (1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2; Tit 1:4; 2 Jn 1:3). Taken in that light, these

words highlight what the Holy Spirit thinks is important to every Christian—grace, mercy, and peace. This article examines these three indispensable elements of our Christian lives.

GRACE

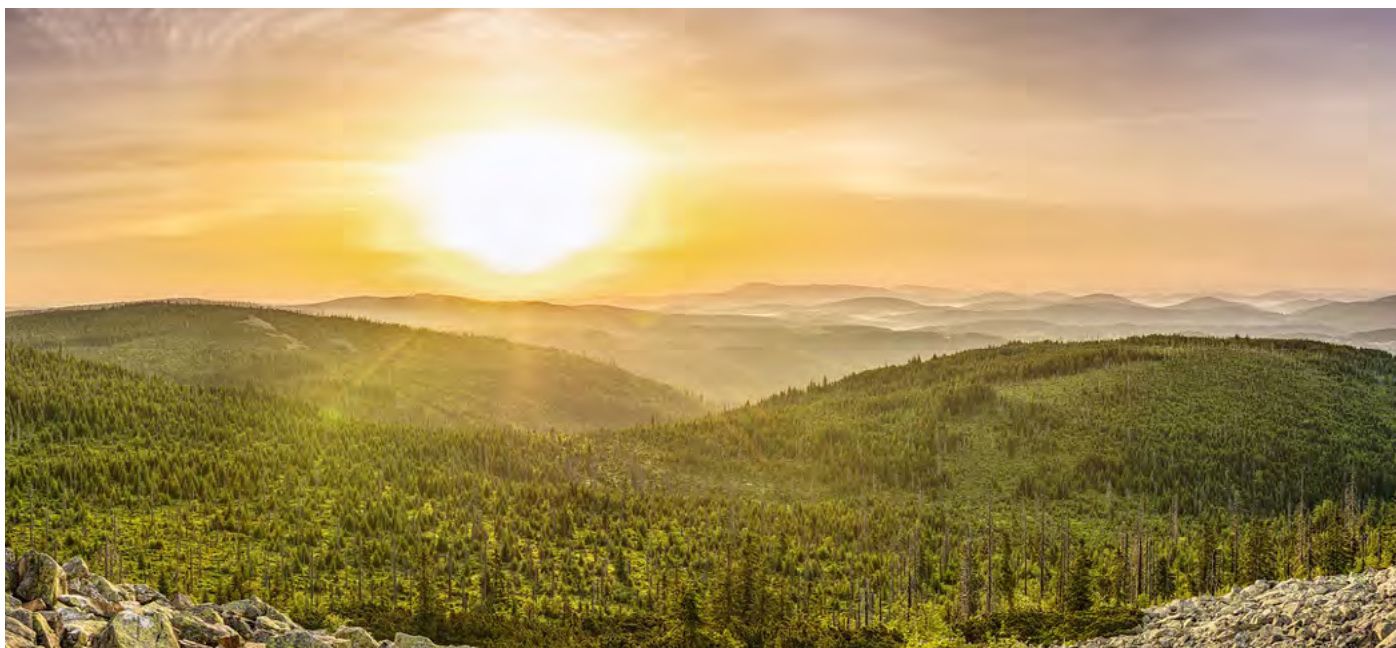
The *Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary* defines “grace” as “the unmerited favour of God toward man.”¹ There are thus two critical aspects of grace: first, the help or favor that God gives

1 “Grace,” *Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Bible Study Tools, accessed September 15, 2020, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/bakers-evangelical-dictionary/grace.html>.

to us; second, our lack of worthiness to receive such help or favor (Eph 2:8–9). Unsurprisingly, the word “grace” is used much more in the New Testament than in the Old. This is because Jesus is Himself the grace of God to humankind.

Consider the miracles that Jesus performed during His ministry. Many of these were performed on individuals who did not deserve the miracles. The resurrection of Lazarus illustrates this (Jn 11:1–45). No one at that time believed Jesus could raise Lazarus from the dead. The disciples who followed Jesus did not believe, nor did Lazarus’ two sisters, Mary and Martha. (Lazarus, being dead, would have been completely unaware!) Jesus performed the miracle anyway. Another example was the Samaritan woman at the well who scoffed at Jesus’ words (Jn 4:1–42). Despite her response, Jesus patiently revealed the truth to her. Jesus’ ministry shows us that the grace

“There are thus two critical aspects to grace: first, the help or favor that God gives to us; second, our lack of worthiness to receive such help or favor.”



God gives us is truly a favor that we do not deserve.

According to John, when Jesus came in the flesh, He manifested the unique glory of the Father's only begotten—a glory that is full of grace and truth.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. ...And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. (Jn 1:14, 16)

John emphasizes that we have received the fullest of His grace. In his description, John uses the superlative to describe the grace that believers have received—grace overflowing in its abundance. However, when we read this verse, do we find ourselves murmuring “Amen!” and wholeheartedly agreeing that we have indeed received the fullest grace of God?

Gratitude for Grace

Gratitude ensues after we receive help or a gift. Indeed, when we receive something we greatly need, we will feel immense gratitude towards the one who supplies it. During the current pandemic, there have been heartwarming news reports of communities, cities and countries around the world appointing certain times to applaud on their doorsteps and balconies, to support their frontline workers and medical staff. These grassroots campaigns—coordinated via social media—erupted as the COVID-19 crisis peaked in those respective countries, and displayed a natural outpouring of gratitude towards those working tirelessly and at great risk to themselves.

On the other hand, what lies behind the absence of gratitude? Is it because we have not been given what we need? Or is it because we feel our wants have not been granted?

God Gives All that We Need

We know that the grace of God is good and is what we *need*. But we still long to have our *wants* fulfilled. We cannot help feeling: *If God gives me what I want, I will say amen to the fullness of grace that I*



have received. In his letter to Titus, Paul tells us that Jesus did not come to give us what we want. Instead, the grace of God appeared to give all people salvation (Tit 2:11). Regarding salvation, God has held nothing back; He has given us all that we need. Paul exhorts us:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ. (Eph 1:3)

Paul does not say that Jesus has blessed us with every *physical* blessing, though it does not mean we have not received any. Indeed, many of us enjoy significant material blessings. However, what is worth remembering and being grateful for is that Jesus has blessed us with every *spiritual* blessing. There is no spiritual blessing that Jesus has withheld. Too often, unfortunately, we desire the physical more than the spiritual. Should God then change His approach and give us what we want instead of what He thinks we need?

Reflect on an example familiar to all of us. Do we give our children everything and anything they ask? As responsible guardians, we would first consider whether the child's request is good for him or her because the child is not quite able to discern between right and wrong, or good and bad. For example, there are many reports of children

swallowing toxic substances, having mistaken them as treats.

From our human perspective, we think we know what is good for us. And like a child, we ask our heavenly Father for these. But God's divine perspective transcends our limited one. If God does not give us what we want, then consider whether what we want is truly good for us. Often, God does not give us what we want, but gives us what is good and what we need.

Keep Appreciation Alive

Perhaps the lack of gratitude does not stem from a greater desire for material blessings. We may be believers who appreciate all our spiritual blessings. But with the passage of time, our gratitude may have waned. Turn the clock back to the time when we first believed in Jesus, or when we first received the Holy Spirit. Recall how we felt that everything around us had changed—our mindsets were changed, and we were convinced that salvation and the grace of God were all that we needed. Yet, over the years, the intensity of our conviction has lessened. Our thinking has changed again. But Jesus has never changed. He has given and continues to provide us grace upon grace—the fullness of His grace. So, on our part, we ought to constantly examine whether time has dulled our

“ God’s mercy is critical for us all. Had Jesus not shed His blood to wash away all our sins—even supposedly “minor” sins—we would perish. Through His blood, our sins were forgiven in baptism, and Jesus continually gives us mercy each day of our lives. ”

appreciation. We need grace, but we also need to appreciate it.

MERCY

Grace and mercy are two sides of the same coin. Grace gives help and favor though we are undeserving; mercy withholds punishment that we deserve. To fully appreciate grace, we first need to understand mercy because mercy only exists where there is punishment, and punishment means there is a standard that defines what it means to be deserving or undeserving. A person is punished because he has not kept to the required standard and is, therefore, deserving of punishment. The Bible tells us this as well.

For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. (Jn 1:17)

In comparing Moses with Jesus, the elder John depicts the proper sequence of things: the law came first. Without the law, there would be no standard for us to follow and, thus, no measure for “worthiness.” The law represents God’s standard for us, without which we would be unable to understand or appreciate grace and truth. In the Book of Romans, Paul states that only with the law is there punishment. Without the law, there is no transgression. For example, in Singapore, there is a law against littering in public areas, and everyone is taught from young that littering is wrong. However, that may not be the case in other countries. When I visited some plantations back in Sabah, Malaysia, I was discomfited by the sight of my father tossing durian seeds out of the house, right onto the ground outside. But he had done no wrong because there was no anti-littering law. (Some would argue that

such biodegradable “litter” is good compost for the soil!) Nevertheless, that is the function of the law—to set the standard by which everyone under the law’s jurisdiction ought to live.

New Mercies Every Day

Through God’s law, we know what is right and wrong. Consequently, anyone who falls short of this standard of God is a transgressor of the law—a sinner. Sinners do not just refer to robbers, arsonists, murderers, or other perpetrators of what society deems as horrendous crimes. All have sinned (Rom 3:23). And since the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23), God’s mercy is critical for us all. Had Jesus not shed His blood to wash away all our sins—even supposedly “minor” sins—we would perish. Through His blood, our sins were forgiven in baptism, and Jesus continually gives us mercy each day of our lives.

Through the LORD’s mercies we are not consumed, Because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness. (Lam 3:22–23)

No one can stand before God. We were destined for destruction, and the only reason we have avoided this fate is because of His abundant mercy. The Lord supplies the mercies we need, and they are renewed every morning.

“ Jesus does not leave us peace by giving us a trouble-free life. Instead, He grants us peace that will prevail even when we have a life full of challenges. ”

More Mercy Than We Deserve

While suffering from rebuke or punishment, we may feel that we are receiving more than our due. But God is a merciful Father, and Ezra assures us that God’s punishment is actually less than what we deserve.

“And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, since You our God have punished us less than our iniquities deserve, and have given us such deliverance as this.” (Ezra 9:13)

We have experienced—be it with our parents or as parents ourselves—that parental love prompts us to soften the punishment intended for our offspring. Thus we should never doubt that when the loving and merciful heavenly Father has to discipline us, His errant children, He will extend to us grace and mercy and help us to become perfect, just as He is perfect.

PEACE

The Bible teaches us that the peace professed by Christians is different from the conventional understanding of peace in the world.

“Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” (Jn 14:27)

Jesus does not leave us peace by giving us a trouble-free life. Instead, He grants us peace that will prevail even when we have a life full of challenges. I once met a Christian who professed the faith that Jesus would heal a person of all ailments; Christians with faith would, therefore, never die from sickness. But this is not what the Bible teaches.

Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. (2 Cor 4:16)



these difficult times. “Grace, mercy, and peace will be with you from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love” (2 Jn 1:3). Amen!

Paul tells us that our outward man gradually deteriorates. In other words, our physical bodies are not impervious to sickness or ailment. God may heal us if He so wills, but it does not mean that Christians are immune to all types of illness or even death in this life. The world’s understanding of peace is a life without problem, ailment, or difficulty. This is not the peace that we have been promised.

A Different but Enduring Peace

*“...He Himself took our infirmities
And bore our sicknesses.”* (Mt 8:17)

These words recorded in the Book of Matthew is a prophecy from the prophet Isaiah (Isa 53:4), which has a dual fulfillment. The first fulfillment took place when Jesus healed the sick and the infirm around Him. The second fulfillment pertains to us and will only be truly fulfilled in the life to come. Infirmities and sickness are consequences of sin; they are the precursor to death, which comes about through sin. But when Jesus bore our sins away through His death, He also removed the consequences of sin. Thus, the peace that we have comes from the knowledge that everything we go through today is temporary, and we have a life to come—a life without sickness, pain, and tears—in the kingdom of God. Such knowledge gives

us a broader perspective and helps us to endure. Whatever trouble, loss, pain, or ailment that we are suffering now pales in comparison to the indescribable inheritance we stand to gain when Jesus comes.

When our vision of the kingdom to come is obscured, remember the promise that “the Lord will deliver [us] from every evil work and preserve [us] for His heavenly kingdom” (2 Tim 4:18). Such faith in a faithful Lord is the source of our peace. Even if we lose everything now, God remembers us in our hour of need; and He will preserve us for redemption in His coming kingdom.

CONCLUSION

The knowledge and appreciation of grace, mercy, and peace are indispensable to a Christian’s life, and even more so with the COVID-19 pandemic threatening our health, life, and livelihoods. As we try to grapple with the situation, whatever it may be like in our communities, we take comfort in knowing that God’s grace may not always be what we want but will definitely be what we need. And as a loving Father who loves His children, God extends to us more help than we are able to see now. Finally, we take comfort in knowing that everything we are now going through is temporary, and God will preserve us, especially in

Evangelism during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Lockdown

Philip Shee
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The global response to the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in countries tightening their borders and restricting overseas travel. Many have also implemented further lockdowns domestically, with business activities curtailed, schools, and even church services suspended. Against this backdrop, overseas missionary trips have ground to a halt. Conventional evangelism activities cannot be executed as we are unable to meet people and invite them to church. What does this mean for the great commission of our Lord to preach the gospel to the entire world?

IN SEASON AND OUT OF SEASON

“Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season” (2 Tim 4:2). This is a reminder that the work of evangelism must continue under all circumstances. While current conditions have brought

“ [This] is not the time for us to stop the work of evangelism. We must find a way to continue this vital work without compromising the necessary precautions taken to halt the spread of the coronavirus.”

unanticipated challenges, we must have the correct mindset to remain ready to preach at all times.

*He who observes the wind will not sow,
And he who regards the clouds will not reap.*
(Eccl 11:4)

*In the morning sow your seed,
And in the evening do not withhold your hand;
For you do not know which will prosper,
Either this or that,
Or both alike will be good.* (Eccl 11:6)

The above passages remind us how we should sow the seeds of the gospel (cf. Mk 4:3–8, 14–20; 1 Cor 3:6). It reinforces the message that the current global pandemic is not a time for us to stop the work of evangelism. Instead, we must find a way to continue this vital work without compromising the necessary precautions taken to halt the spread of the coronavirus.

THE GOSPEL CANNOT BE CHAINED

As we face the physical hindrances



to our work of evangelism, it is useful to be reminded that the apostles' ministry faced challenges similar in scope, but different in form. Travel and communications infrastructure were not as advanced in those days, and reaching out to a mass audience was not easy. They also faced constant persecution, dangers, and opposition throughout their ministry, as described by Paul:

Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. (2 Cor 11:25–27)

The apostles were often arrested and imprisoned. Nevertheless, the spread of the gospel continued despite these restrictions, with God's intervention and the relentless dedication of the early church.

And they laid hands on them, and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. However, many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of men came to be about five thousand. (Acts 4:3–4)

At that time a great persecution arose against the church at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. ...Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word. (Acts 8:1b, 4)

The two passages above give us a glimpse of the evangelistic mindset of the early church. Regardless of circumstance, challenge, or restriction, even in their flight from persecution, they resolutely preached the gospel wherever they went. Even while fearing for their safety, evangelism did not take a back seat.

And when the apostles' movements were restricted through imprisonment, God intervened directly to open the way. He delivered them from prison so

that they could continue their ministry (Acts 12:3–12; 16:23–36). In the case of Paul in Philippi, God's intervention even paved the way for him to preach to and baptize the jailer and his family. Yet again, we witness the progress of the gospel even in the face of opposition and restriction.

During his house arrest in Rome, Paul could no longer travel to preach the gospel. It would be natural to assume that this would have finally locked down the spread of the gospel. After all, the preacher was now bound. However, the gospel itself was not bound, as shown in the passage below:

Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him. (Acts 28:30–31)

Not only did the gospel continue to be preached, but Paul also wrote his prison epistles during this time. And these epistles became part of the New Testament Scriptures. If his freedom had not been restricted, his time and energy might very well have been focused on traveling and preaching. If this had been the case, he would have been physically able only to reach a small audience within this limited timeframe. Instead, he completed these letters during this period, enabling the word of God to transcend space and time, reaching countless people over an indefinite period. Today, while we will never meet Paul physically, we continue to receive his preaching through his epistles. We also use the same Scriptures to preach to others. It is, therefore, fitting for Paul to acknowledge that, for

the gospel, he suffered “as an evildoer, even to the point of chains; but the word of God is not chained” (2 Tim 2:8–9).

While the nature of restrictions faced by the early church differ from ours today, there are clear parallels we can draw. Hence, even with the limits imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the door of the gospel remains open. As long as we stay focused on evangelism, there will be avenues by which we can still preach the word.

TURNING CHALLENGES INTO OPPORTUNITIES

*In the day of prosperity be joyful,
But in the day of adversity consider:
Surely God has appointed the one as well
as the other.* (Eccl 7:14a)

When life is smooth sailing, people busy themselves in their worldly pursuits, ever striving to achieve the next milestone, or indulging in the next pleasurable experience. Adversities usually trigger people to reflect on the more profound meaning and purpose of life, reminding them of the sobering reality of the fragility of life. As they grapple with future uncertainty, they may feel a sense of helplessness and anxiety, despite their worldly achievements.

In the work of evangelism, we often grapple with how to get the conversation started or how to keep it going. Times of adversity present an excellent opportunity for us to share our hope in Christ. When anxiety, doom, and gloom dominate conversations, we can seize the opportunity to present an alternative—that we can have peace that surpasses all understanding because Jesus has overcome the world (Phil 4:6–7; Jn 16:33).

“Times of adversity present an excellent opportunity for us to share our hope in Christ. When anxiety, doom, and gloom dominate conversations, we can seize the opportunity to present an alternative—that we can have peace that surpasses all understanding.”



The conversation may turn to the negative impact of the pandemic on the economy, which has gone from boom to bust within months, with businesses failing and individuals losing their livelihoods. We can then highlight the uncertainty of riches in this world, and how we should not build our trust in them but trust instead in the living God (1 Tim 6:17). Finally, we can conclude by encouraging them to lay up treasures in heaven rather than on earth (Mt 6:19–20).

The rapid spread of COVID-19 and sharp rise in COVID-related deaths, even in the most developed countries, highlight the fragility of life and powerlessness of man. But we can share the meaning of human life, its brevity, and the hope of eternal life. We can also share about God, who ultimately has power over life and death.

Surprisingly, the physical restriction of movement and large-scale gatherings has opened new opportunities for evangelism. With the church utilizing modern technology to livestream services over the internet, we are now able to invite our friends to join us virtually for worship. With many working from home and reducing their social activities, they may find themselves with more time on their hands, and be more inclined to accept our invitation. Family members who have yet to believe may also be more willing to join our regular online services, together with our church members who are tuning in. Even with restricted overseas travel, we can arrange to reach out to our pioneering areas over the web.

This period has already proven to be fruitful for our church around the world. Friends have accepted invitations

to participate in online evangelistic services. Regular Bible studies are being held via video- and teleconferencing for interested friends seeking to understand the truth. And we are even facilitating cross-border Bible studies, where preachers from one country can teach their fellow citizens, who are working overseas as migrant workers, in their native language. In the absence of physical church services, God is still bestowing the Holy Spirit and moving truth-seekers to be baptized.

While not exhaustive, the above highlight how we can turn challenges into opportunities to preach. We can engage with the issues close to people's hearts, and take advantage of the convenience and the avenues opened up by modern technology.

Finally, while it remains unclear how the pandemic will develop, and when it will be brought under control, the commission of the Lord to preach the gospel to the end of the earth remains a crucial pillar of our faith. For this reason, even as we respond to the points made above, let us also continue to pray “that God would open to us a door for the word” (Col 4:3).

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Adapted from a sermon by
Steve Hwang
New York, USA

The Lord Shut Him in the Ark

So those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as God had commanded him; and the LORD shut him in. (Gen 7:16)

Many of us, even non-Christians, are familiar with the story of Noah and his ark. God commanded Noah to build the ark and to enter it with his family of eight and every kind of animal and bird, both male and female. Before the flood came, Noah obeyed God and did all that was commanded of him. But what is noteworthy is that the hand that finally sealed the door of the ark belonged to God: “the LORD shut him in.”

Today, in 2020, the government has shut our doors. Many of us have stayed at home—in lockdown—for forty days and, in some cases, longer. But how does our confinement compare with Noah’s? What can we learn from being shut in? Why did God shut Noah and his

family in the ark? What was lockdown in the ark like? Finally, how did they come out of their lockdown? These are some questions discussed in this article.

WHY DID GOD SHUT THEM IN?

Before God flooded the earth, He “saw that the *wickedness* of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen 6:5, emphasis added). He later revealed to Noah: “The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the

earth is filled with *violence* through them; and behold, I will destroy them with the earth” (Gen 6:13, emphasis added).

Even before the Mosaic Law was established, since the time of Adam and Eve, the people had rebelled against God’s perfect will to satisfy their desires. It must have been a truly terrifying and immoral time to live in, where men, women, and children thought only of evil. The wickedness was so much that

“Many of us have stayed at home—in lockdown—for forty days and, in some cases, longer. But how does our confinement compare with Noah’s? What can we learn from being shut in?”



“Today’s pandemic is not without God’s mercy. Despite human attempts to explain the virus through bats and pangolins, and blame its spread on poor hygiene, government cover-ups, and political and medical ineptitude, the pandemic is the work of God, just as the flood was.”

“the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart”(Gen 6:6).

We often perceive the God of the Old Testament as vengeful and unforgiving, yet the Bible teaches us that the God we worship is full of love, mercy, and justice. This destruction was not lightly done, nor was it pleasing to God. The author of Hebrews reminds us that our Lord transcends time—He is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow (13:8)—so He does not experience regret as we do. Yet, at this time and in this space, the Bible expresses that the Lord was “sorry.” Only such great sadness and grief would move God to destroy what He had lovingly created. The Lord shut Noah and his family in to save them from His destruction.

A LOCKDOWN CHANGES EVERYTHING

The waters prevailed fifteen cubits upward, and the mountains were covered. And all flesh died that moved on the earth: birds and cattle and beasts and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, and every man. All in whose nostrils was the breath of the spirit of life, all that was on the dry land, died. So He destroyed all living things which were on the face of the ground: both man and cattle, creeping thing and bird of the air. They were destroyed from the earth. Only Noah and those who were with him in the ark remained alive. (Gen 7:20–23)

The flood had irrevocably changed the environment and people’s lives: destroying the biblical records of giants—strong, great in stature, and living even to nine hundred (Gen 6:4)—introducing the four seasons

(Gen 8:22), and the eating of meat (Gen 9:3). Similarly, for us today, our lives have been changed by the COVID-19 pandemic. What we once considered to be everyday occurrences—traveling, shopping, dining out, doctor’s consultations, family visits—these, too, have changed, and we must establish a set of “new norms.”

Undeniably, the flood would have hugely impacted the lives of Noah, his family, and all the living creatures in the ark, not to mention the very landscape of the earth. However, as prepared as Noah was—he preached the way of God for one hundred years—many were utterly unprepared. Despite Noah’s warnings and calls for change and preparation, the floodwaters hit them when they least expected, and they perished according to God’s will. Today, some countries have prepared wisely.

Yet, others have struggled to keep up with the demand for medical supplies and experienced empty shop shelves in the first few weeks of the lockdown. Most tragically, ever-mounting deaths have devastated developed nations such as those in Europe and America.

GOD’S WILL IS ABSOLUTE

When God was aggrieved by humanity’s wickedness, His decision to destroy the earth was not without His mercy. Noah preached to others and tried his best to warn those around him. Similarly, today’s pandemic is not without God’s mercy. Despite human attempts to explain the virus through bats and pangolins, and blame its spread on poor hygiene, government cover-ups, and political and medical ineptitude, the pandemic is the work of God, just as the flood was.

When the flood came, only eight humans were saved; the rest of the world’s population perished. We now see similar, heart-rending scenes on the news: mass deaths, healthcare workers exhausted and in tears, loved ones dying alone, and funerals attended by a handful of people while family and friends stay away. The death toll statistics are equally as alarming. Coronavirus has now claimed more American lives than all wars, domestic terrorist threats, and mass shootings



combined since 1945¹ and more British lives than the World War II Blitz.² In April, national US news reported that crematoriums were operating around the clock as their workload had more than doubled.³ In Colombia, a company has designed cardboard hospital beds, which can be folded into coffins.⁴ This pandemic is just a foretaste of what will happen in the future: we must not take the warnings lightly, but be prepared and seek salvation today.

LOCKDOWN IN THE ARK

“And this is how you shall make it: The length of the ark shall be three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. ...And behold, I Myself am bringing floodwaters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die. But I will establish My covenant with you; and you shall go into the ark—you, your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives with you. And of every living thing of all flesh you shall bring two of every sort into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female.”

(Gen 6:15, 17–19)

Staying in the ark preserved the lives of Noah and his family. The ark was constructed entirely according to the measurements of God. At 80,000 square feet, with three levels, it was more extensive than an American football field. At the time, other boats were not built according to God’s precise measurements, and of course, they were destroyed.

Today, spiritually speaking, are our homes built according to God’s

measurements? Do you teach your children according to the Bible? Do you treat your spouse according to biblical standards? Are your concept of wealth and material possessions the same as God’s? If we build up our home, ourselves, and our families based on God’s measurements—His teachings and His guidance—indeed, we will be prepared and ready to be saved, just as Noah and his family were.

We often imagine the ark floating peacefully on the water, as depicted by many children’s books. However, this was no ordinary flood. The Bible tells us that “on that day all the fountains of the great deep were broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened” (Gen 7:11b). The force of the water would have been greater than a tsunami. However large the ark was, it would have been tossed about by the waves. Later, the description continues: “The waters prevailed and greatly increased on the earth, and the ark moved about on the surface of the waters” (Gen 7:18). This description reflects our situation today: as we shelter in the haven of our homes, our lives will continue to be rocked by outside forces. Noah and his family, while looking after the wild creatures inside the ark, would have had to remain steady in heart and in faith, to ride out the flood and trust in God’s plan. Similarly, we must remain steadfast and focused during this pandemic, no matter the waves of negative news, and however impacted our lives may be by the lockdown.

PATIENTLY ENDURE LOCKDOWN

Noah was six hundred years old when the floodwaters were on the earth. (Gen 7:6)

And it came to pass in the six hundred and first year, in the first month, the

first day of the month, that the waters were dried up from the earth; and Noah removed the covering of the ark and looked, and indeed the surface of the ground was dry. And in the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dried.

(Gen 8:13–14)

If you count the number of days Noah and his family were shut in the ark, you will see that they were in there for a total of not just forty days, but 422 days—more than a year!

When the lockdown was first announced, many could not stand even one week at home, let alone a month. Stuck in flats with no gardens, at home with children climbing the walls, and caring for vulnerable family members—for many, it has been a terrible experience. But compared to Noah and his family, we really cannot complain. Their one source of natural light would have been the window at the top of the ark. They were surrounded by animals, eating, moving, and defecating in the same space! Those of us who can go for daily walks, shop online, and have access to online entertainment during this lockdown are blessed indeed!

Paul writes that we “glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Rom 5:3–4). Being in a lockdown requires us to endure. Pre-lockdown, our lives consisted of going from place to place, being busy, living fast, and having no time to stop, think, reflect, and evaluate. We did not focus on persevering, developing character, and, finally, nurturing hope. Now, while we may be longing to return to work, to our fast cars, fast food, and fast lives, the Bible

1 Anthony Cuthbertson, “Coronavirus tracked: How US deaths from Covid-10 compare to other great tragedies,” *Independent*, June 3, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/coronavirus-us-death-toll-update-covid-19-vietnam-war-9-11-terror-attack-a9531146.html>.

2 “More people have probably been killed by coronavirus than were killed during the Blitz,” Full Fact, June 24, 2020, <https://fullfact.org/online/deaths-coronavirus-blitz/>.

3 Rick Jervis, “It’s carnage: Crematoriums run around the clock to meet demand from coronavirus,” *USA Today*, April 20, 2020, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/04/20/coronavirus-crematoriums-meet-demand-cemeteries/5148779002/>.

4 “Hospital bed designed for coronavirus transforms into coffin,” *CNN*, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2020/05/18/colombia-coffin-shortage-coronavirus-pkg-vpx.cnn>.

“ Are our homes built according to God’s measurements? Do you teach your children according to the Bible? Do you treat your spouse according to biblical standards? Are your concept of wealth and material possessions the same as God’s? ”

teaches us that we must endure. We cannot miraculously take away pain and suffering: endurance, perseverance, and resilience through hardships will eventually reap the reward of joy. This is something that many cannot accept. It is the reason why some people leave a job after one year because they cannot stay with long-term projects, and the reason why resilience is now explicitly taught in schools. If Abraham had this attitude, he would have given up on God's promise—after all, he was already seventy-five when God promised him descendants, and he had to wait another twenty-four years for this to be realized. There is a purpose behind the lockdown. God wants us to use this time wisely, to slow down, and to learn patience, like Noah, who went through a period of endurance training.



LEAVING LOCKDOWN

Finally, when the waters subsided, God allowed Noah to leave his lockdown, but it was not as simple as opening the door and walking out. Noah spent time observing and, again, waiting patiently for the right time to leave the ark. First, he sent out a raven that did not return. Then he sent out a dove, not once, but three times. The first dove left and returned, as water still covered the earth and it had no place to land. The second dove returned with an olive branch in its beak, signifying new life on earth. Finally, the third dove left and did not return, signaling just the right time for Noah and his family to step out of the ark.

After being confined with his family and the world's greatest zoo for a year, Noah must have been longing to leave. Yet, he knew he had to observe, check for safety, and patiently wait on God's explicit instruction: "Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons

and your sons' wives with you" (Gen 8:16). Noah did not willfully ignore the lockdown (as some people have done, as reported by the news) or decide for himself when would be the best time to leave. He obeyed God and followed instructions.

Today, even though many countries have opened up, it does not necessarily mean it is safe to return to business as usual. We still need to observe, check for safety, and patiently wait on the Lord. Some churches have started to worship with small numbers, and other churches may be considering doing the same. The key is to put it to prayer and ask the Lord when the best time would be to resume services. It was God who told Noah when he should leave the ark, and, likewise, it will be God who tells us when to leave our lockdown. When that moment finally comes, we can be at peace, knowing God directs our movements.

When we do, finally, leave the lockdown, we must follow in Noah's footsteps and build an altar to praise and thank God:

Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And the LORD smelled a soothing aroma. Then the LORD said in His heart, "I will never again curse the ground for man's sake, although the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; nor will I again destroy every living thing as I have done."
(Gen 8:20–21)

The number of people who perished in the flood seems unimaginable. There were only eight survivors. The same applies when we think of the magnitude of COVID-19 cases and COVID-related deaths. Noah knew to offer thanksgiving, and we, too, should offer prayers of thanksgiving.

We have seen how our situation today parallels Noah's. Do not be angry or stressed over staying at home because this is saving your life. We may feel as though we have been cut adrift, as the floodwaters rise around us. But only a heart at peace, steady in God's hope, will keep us going. Endure, hope, and be patient.

“It was God who told Noah when he should leave the ark, and, likewise, it will be God who tells us when to leave our lockdown. When that moment finally comes, we can be at peace, knowing God directs our movements.”

Vincent Yeung
Cambridge, UK

From Cherith to Horeb

COVID-19 has caused havoc in our lives, putting us under the constant threat and shadow of death. Being forced to stay at home without physical contact with the outside world is an entirely new experience for many of us. Those under quarantine may not be able to see their parents, spouse, or children. We have heard stories of dying patients calling their loved ones to say the last farewell. Those who remain healthy may be suffering from “lockdown loneliness” due to restrictions preventing them from meeting friends and family. A survey of 5,260 adults in the UK conducted between April to May 2020¹ showed that 50.8 percent of those aged

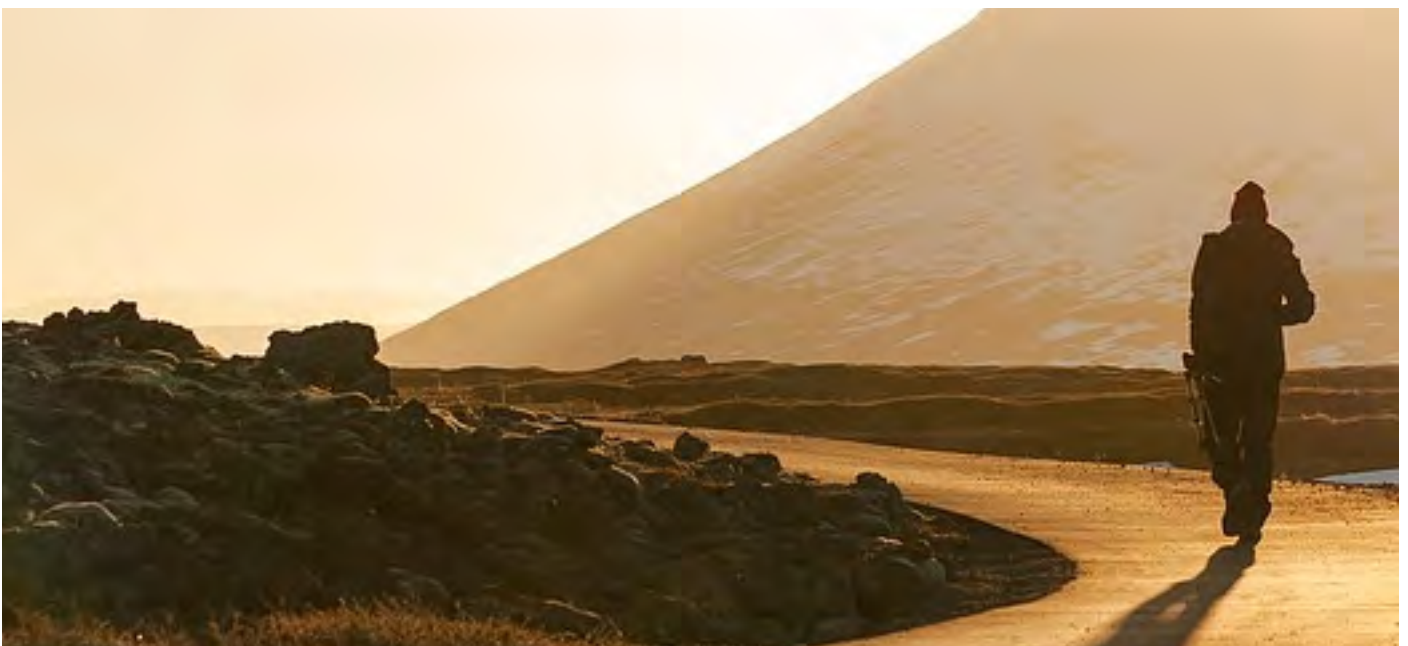
sixteen to twenty-four were affected by “lockdown loneliness”—this equates to over seven million people across the UK. On top of this, the economic and social fallout has caused stress levels to rise. Anxiety and depression often isolate people socially, robbing them of the ability to lead meaningful lives. So, on top of the health risk that COVID-19 poses, we have a growing mental health crisis on our hands.

From the spiritual perspective, Christians are forced to stay away from church during the lockdown. There is no physical contact and fellowship with brethren outside our immediate household. Activities that we took for granted are no longer available. We have to stand on our own two feet, pray, and read the Bible alone. Despite the plethora of online services, interaction is minimal. The upside is that we have

many choices in terms of sermons, training sessions, and service times. But all these advantages come with the temptation of skipping, or even pausing, services to do our own things.

There are different types of isolation: enforced isolation, imposed by external forces—legal or illegal—which we have no choice but to accept and endure; and self-imposed isolation, which we choose because we believe we are self-sufficient, or we feel rejected by the world. These two types of isolation can be interrelated—enforced isolation may cause someone to develop a habit of self-sufficiency, or bring out their innate tendency toward seclusion. Elijah went through many stages of isolation, more than most characters in the Bible. We can learn how he overcame, and succumbed to, the impact of isolation on his journey of faith.

¹ Helen Pidd, “Study finds half of 16- to 24-year-olds hit by ‘lockdown loneliness,’” *The Guardian*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jun/08/study-finds-half-of-16--to-24-year-olds-hit-by-lockdown-loneliness>.



THE ORDER OF DIVINE PURPOSE

Elijah is first mentioned in 1 Kings 17:1. The Bible does not provide much information about him—he was simply a sojourner who moved from place to place. His first task was to proclaim a prolonged drought (1 Kgs 17:1), which he did, as God had commanded him. But as an inhabitant of the land, he too was affected by the emerging calamity—drought would inevitably lead to poor crops, resulting in famine. God did not give a reason for the drought, and Elijah was, of course, not responsible for leading the whole country into it, just as we are not responsible for COVID-19 but are impacted by it nevertheless.

After Elijah completed this first task, God instructed him to go to the Brook Cherith that flows into the Jordan, to drink from it, and to be fed by ravens (1 Kgs 17:3–6). Eventually, the brook dried up, and God commanded him to go to Zarephath, where a widow would keep him (1 Kgs 17:7–9). The drought lasted for at least three years (1 Kgs 18:1), but God preserved Elijah's life through two unexpected sources—the ravens and a desperate widow who was on her last meal (1 Kgs 17:12). At this point, we may wonder why Elijah and the widow, both faithful to God, had to suffer during this nationwide crisis, caused by factors beyond their control.

We can view events from two different perspectives: the order of causal sequence and the order of divine purpose. The former observes the physical world from the outside and views events as consequences of human action or the laws of nature. The latter is experienced from within and sees God's purpose and intent behind everything. From global events such as climate change, war, and famine, to the most random-seeming incidents, God's faithful will see that God has His plan.

The widow generously offered Elijah her last meal because she had lost all hope of surviving the famine. However, God had a higher purpose to keep Elijah and the widow's family alive. He also preserved another seven thousand faithful believers in Israel during this trying time (1 Kgs 19:18). Elijah and his fellow servants may have experienced

“When we face tribulation in life, whether great or small, we can be assured that there is a higher purpose behind every event and that God will be with His faithful ones.”

hardship, but God's promises and care for His loyal believers never fail.

Through the ages, God's chosen people have experienced adversity at various points in time, but God has never failed those who kept their faith in Him. When Sennacherib besieged Judah in 701 B.C.E., the people suffered, but Isaiah consoled them. Although they had to endure “the bread of adversity and the water of affliction,” God guided, revived, and healed them (Isa 30:20–26). The apostle Paul was “burdened beyond measure” in Asia, but undergoing these troubles and the subsequent deliverance enabled him to comfort others in trouble later (2 Cor 1:8, 4, 10). When we face tribulation in life, whether great or small, we can be assured that there is a higher purpose behind every event and that God will be with His faithful ones.

ENFORCED ISOLATION

A severe drought curtailed Elijah's sojourn. It is unclear whether he had any human contact at the Brook Cherith. His activities in Zarephath were confined to the widow's household. We can assume that his social circle was small and that he did not interact with other servants of God. However, even in this enforced isolation, he continued to have a close relationship with God and trusted in Him. The words of God were not far from his mouth; he knew exactly how God would keep him and the widow's family alive during the famine (1 Kgs 17:14). He trusted in God's goodness, and his prayer was answered; the widow's son came back to life, through which God was magnified (1 Kgs 17:24). Elijah did not shy away from meeting Ahab even though Ahab sought to have him killed (1 Kgs 18:10, 17). He single-handedly defeated Baal's 450 prophets by trusting in God's promise, faithfulness, and purpose toward His people (1 Kgs 18:24, 37–40).

We can see from Elijah's words and

actions that his faith and relationship with God were not diminished by the passage of time or amid isolation. God purposefully created situations—the great drought, the confrontation with false prophets, the fire from heaven, the torrential downpour (1 Kgs 18:45)—to revive the faith of His people (1 Kgs 18:37, 39). They were confused and could not decide whether Baal or the Lord was God (1 Kgs 18:21). God could have chosen another of His servants to carry out His work. But He chose Elijah, and Elijah responded to the calling and trusted in God wholeheartedly before the promised rain materialized.

Elijah and God's people suffered tremendous hardship during these three years of drought, but they emerged from the adversity as better people (1 Pet 1:5–7). We may likewise experience severe hardship due to COVID-19—we may lose our wealth or our job, or be hit particularly hard by food shortages. We may be suffering physically or mentally. No matter what form of cross we are carrying, we should endeavor to emerge from this situation a better person.

We do not know what the future holds, but we should make the best use of the extra time we may have now to develop ourselves spiritually and improve our relationship with God. Elijah did not waste time in isolation, but emerged as an influential figure, ready to turn the tide and move the hearts and minds of his fellow countrymen. What about us? Will we squander our time on Netflix or online shopping during the lockdown, or will we redeem our time through Bible reading, online services, prayer, and reflection?

SELF-IMPOSED ISOLATION

After this, Elijah's life took an unexpected turn. He was so scared by Jezebel's threat that he ran for his life (1 Kgs 19:2–3). He traveled forty days



and nights, far away from the land of Canaan, to Horeb, the mount of God, and hid in a cave, sulking (1 Kgs 19:8–10). After performing the great spectacle on Mount Carmel, the anti-climax was like falling off a steep cliff. Elijah had just experienced the most powerful manifestation of God’s power in his life, yet his heart melted at the threat of a mere human. God had kept him safe for three years. Fire and rain came down from heaven when he prayed, and God demonstrated that He was by his side. But nothing had changed: Ahab and his cohort still sought to kill him. Perhaps Elijah thought, *I have given my all, yet the response was not what I expected. What else can I do to convince them to believe? Should they not be dumbfounded by fire from heaven, and the deluge after three years of drought?*

We do not know what was in Elijah’s mind. But his answers to God’s repeated question, “What are you doing here?” (1 Kgs 19:9, 13) give us a clue. He focused

on himself: “I have been very zealous. ...I alone am left. ...they seek to take my life” (1 Kgs 19:10, 14). He was the good guy, and everyone had deserted God except him. Yet, despite everything he had done, Ahab and Jezebel had rejected him and sought his life.

Previously, Elijah’s isolation was forced on him by the drought, but now he isolated himself out of his own choice. He had given up on everyone as he believed that everyone had given up on him. He forgot that when the people reject God’s servant, they are in fact rejecting God (1 Sam 8:7). So, Elijah decided to hide as far away as possible, somewhere no one could find him. Why did he claim that he was alone? Obadiah told him that he had hidden a hundred of God’s prophets to keep them from Jezebel’s murderous pursuit (1 Kgs 18:13). Perhaps Elijah was always reclusive and did not take note of others’ devotion to the Lord. He did not enquire about his fellow workers, and perhaps he did not

realize they were serving God alongside him.

During his three years of isolation, Elijah strengthened his faith in God, but he neglected to change certain aspects of his character. His service to God remained self-focused. Our service to God should not be self-centered and task-oriented—it is about the pursuit of holiness and the denial of self. It should never be “our business,” but God’s business. In isolation, Elijah was self-focused and pursued perfection without taking an interest in others. He became like the first group of workers in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, who believed they should receive more because they had done the lion’s share of the work and were, therefore, more valuable than those who had only toiled for a short while (Mt 20:1–16). The workers’ attitude blinded them and made them see “evil” in the goodness of the housemaster (Mt 20:15). They had little interest in the other workers, who represent the church as a whole. Such workers do not love God or accept His goodness, although they claim otherwise. An evil eye makes the whole body full of darkness (Mt 6:23). Therefore, we should learn from Elijah’s mistake and not forget that we are just one worker among many. We

“Elijah did not waste time in isolation, but emerged as an influential figure, ready to turn the tide and move the hearts and minds of his fellow countrymen. What about us?”

“Elijah strengthened his faith in God, but he neglected to change certain aspects of his character. His service to God remained self-focused. Our service to God should not be self-centered and task-oriented—it is about the pursuit of holiness and the denial of self.”

should fulfill the wish of the Master with gratitude and humility, reminding ourselves that our work cannot come at the expense of other members.

Spiritual cultivation is not an end in itself; we pursue perfection not out of self-interest, but because this is the will of God for us. Our relationship with God is always intertwined with our relationship with our brethren. As stated in 1 John 4:20–21, our love for our brethren reflects how much we love God. In the same vein, our attitude toward God’s goodness to others reflects our relationship with God. So, as we seek to strengthen our faith during the lockdown, we should be mindful that we do not become solitary, self-centered, and in the habit of separating ourselves from our brethren.

CONCLUSION

Due to the current pandemic, we have been forced to isolate ourselves from society and our fellow church members. The Latin poet Decimus Juvenalis once wrote: *propter vitam vivendi perdere causas*, which means “to lose what makes life worth living for the sake of living” (*Satire VIII*). This phrase reminds us of Jesus’ words: “For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it” (Mk 8:35; see also, Mt 16:25; Jn 12:25). The pandemic has changed our behavior; some people are so afraid that they will struggle to return to a normal life. If our fear of death deters us from engaging with God and our fellow believers after the lockdown is relaxed, we may preserve our physical life, but would it be a life worth living, from a human and divine perspective? The acid test is when the lockdown is lifted, and we can legally go back to church again. Will we be too scared

to return? When we start attending church services in person, will we be spiritually energized and empowered by God’s Spirit and His words, having strengthened our relationship with Him during the lockdown?

The COVID-19 pandemic came out of the blue, and we do not know when it will end. In Elijah’s time, God abruptly called a drought and abruptly ended it after three years. We do not know the higher purpose of God, but the pandemic serves as a reminder that life is unpredictable, and we do not control our future. God preserved Elijah and His other servants during drought, famine, and Jezebel’s slaughter. We should, therefore, have faith in God’s providence and trust in His kindness, faithfulness, and mercy (Lam 3:22–23). Use our time during the lockdown wisely—refocus our priorities, reflect on our weaknesses, and cultivate and equip ourselves spiritually—so that we are ready and empowered to magnify His name and serve Him with the right heart and mind. Whilst we do this, let us not neglect fellowship in this lockdown but learn to care for the well-being of others, appreciating their company and contribution, to make our faith whole.

Based on a sermon by
Ezra Chong
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Redeem Your Time Wisely

See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is.
(Eph 5:15–17)

When most of the world entered a period of lockdown due to COVID-19, many of us felt as though we suddenly had more time. Under strict government measures, all hospitality services and many businesses closed their doors. Members of the public were instructed to stay at home. With more time on their hands, many took up baking, cooking, exercise, DIY projects, gardening, and so on. But some were also overwhelmed. They had to care for and homeschool their children, shield the vulnerable, and work remotely from home. Those employed in essential services and industries saw their workload increase, with the added anxiety of being more

“The wise know how to redeem their time. ...While we may have thought about this instruction before, this lockdown period is a blessing that allows us to reflect: Have we used our time according to God’s will? Is it time to make a change?”

exposed and vulnerable to catching the virus while working outside the home. In such cases, the lockdown has highlighted the limited hours in a day.

Regardless of how we have been living our lives during the lockdown, Paul’s words to the Ephesian members continue to ring true: we must walk circumspectly, live wisely, and redeem the time that has been given to us. In the English Standard Version and the Revised Standard Version of the Bible,

“redeeming the time” is expressed as “making the best use of the time”¹ and “making the most of the time.”² With lockdown being the new normal, how can we truly make the most of our time now, and when it ends?

¹ The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

² Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1946, 1952, and 1971 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.



THE FOOLISH AND THE WISE

When Paul uses the phrase “walk circumspectly,” he refers to the way we lead our lives—our behavior, our speech, and our attitude. He talks about two types of people: the foolish and the wise. Using Paul’s explanation, the foolish are those who neither understand how to use their time nor understand the will of God. On the other hand, the wise *do* know how to redeem their time, and do so, living according to God’s will. While we may have thought about this instruction before, this lockdown period is a blessing that allows us to reflect: Have we used our time according to God’s will? Is it time to make a change?

Redeem Your Time Wisely

When Paul wrote the word “time” in Greek, the word he used has the root *καιρός* (*kairos*) which refers to an opportune moment or a fitting time for action, rather than the fixed concept of time. He intended the believers to take action and grasp hold of the time given to them. Developing this concept further, the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* states that *kairos* refers to “a time when conditions are right for the accomplishment of a certain action: the opportune and decisive moment.”³

Today, we are living in that “right” time, when we can, and should, accomplish important matters. Thus, we should take the time to think, and commit to taking action. However, our thinking, determination, and actions must be in line with God’s will, as Paul clarifies in verse 17. No matter how positive our choices may seem, be it establishing family time at home, taking a daily walk in the park, or socializing via Zoom, God’s will should underline our actions. In this way, we may be counted as wise and not foolish.

GOD-GIVEN TIME

There are two periods of time we can discuss here: the first is during the lockdown, and the second is when lockdown is fully lifted. The word “lockdown” is familiar to us now, but it has never happened before on such

“No doubt, these challenging times may have brought about unforeseen difficulties at home, with our families or with our work. Prayer will give us the strength to overcome, to be guided by our Lord, and to find peace in a chaotic and frightening world.”

a global scale. For almost all of us, it is the first time we have experienced an epidemic becoming a pandemic, spreading so quickly, so viciously and so worryingly. Scientists, sociologists, politicians, and historians have debated and researched the origins of the pandemic. But as Christians, we know that, spiritually speaking, there is a higher purpose and reason for this occurring in our present time. The adverse outcomes of this pandemic have been undeniable. However, in His way, God has given us time.

Before the lockdown, we may have felt freer. However, we may also have been busier: too busy to have breakfast, too busy with work, too busy to speak to our children, busy rushing to church, busy cooking dinner. Now that we have no choice but to stay at home, we realize that family time and prayer time are God-given blessings. With the world having slowed down, we should also slow down. Then we can reflect on how to make the best use of this time and take action to strengthen our faith and relationship with God.

MAKING THE BEST USE OF TIME

Relationship

The Songs of Ascent describe the Israelite pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem, situated on Mount Zion, three times a year. To reach the temple, the Israelites would have journeyed through valleys and wilderness while singing Psalm 15 and Psalms 120 to 134. These songs gave three key reminders to the people of God: to take heed of their relationship with their family’s faith, their relationship with the temple, and their relationship amongst themselves.

On making the best use of our time,

we can learn from the Israelite pilgrim what our priorities ought to be. Although this is a difficult period where fear and uncertainty abound, we can use this time positively by turning to God, spending time in prayer, establishing our relationship with God, and drawing close to Him. On reflection, we may realize that our family altar has been neglected and needs to be re-established. Now that we do not need to rush to church on a Sabbath, we can slow down to prepare our hearts and make full use of online services and fellowships.

Faith

Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified. (2 Cor 13:5)

If we have not examined ourselves in a while, God has given us time to think seriously about our faith, the faith of our children, and our relationships with brothers and sisters. It is a great time now to rekindle daily prayers with our children and discuss with them what they have learned from their online religious education classes. Even more so, the internet allows us to access church services from around the globe, with services streaming during the week, not just on the Sabbath. Some church choirs have established virtual sessions, and online fellowships and Bible studies have become parts of a new routine to look forward to. Additionally, many members have invited non-believing friends and family to evangelistic services to listen to God’s word. These are the positive blessings that we can, and should, enjoy during the lockdown.

³ “*Kairos*,” *Merriam-Webster*, accessed July 22, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/kairos>.

Be Watchful

Luke 21:36 reminds us:

“Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

This verse refers to the end of the age, when many signs will be given to us. One of those signs is pestilence, and we undoubtedly count this global pandemic as a clear sign of the end time. What does our Lord Jesus instruct us to do then? We must be watchful and consider our current situation, to examine ourselves, and to strengthen our faith day by day, week on week. At the same time, our watchfulness must be coupled with continual prayer. If we are feeling anxious or fearful: bring it to prayer. If we are feeling overwhelmed: take it to prayer. No doubt, these challenging times may have brought about unforeseen difficulties at home, with our families or with our work. Prayer will give us the strength to overcome, to be guided by our Lord, and to find peace in a chaotic and frightening world.

Transformation

When the lockdown comes to an end, will our faith and relationships have improved? Will we have changed for the better, or will we remain the same as before the lockdown began? Romans 12:2 exhorts us to “not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”

Transformation starts with the renewal of our minds. Today, our mindset must change: if we used to live only for our daily routines and to maintain

social expectations, or if we lived with lukewarm faith, now is the time to renew our minds and pursue after God’s good and perfect will. With time to think and reflect, we can pray and ask God to renew our minds through the Holy Spirit, so that the time we have gained may be fruitful.

AFTER LOCKDOWN

One thing is sure: life after lockdown will be very different from life before COVID-19. While we wait for businesses, restaurants, and schools to resume normal operations, many companies are looking to change the way they work. For example, New Zealand is looking to trial a four-day working week, and many organizations may allow their employees to work from home more often, or even as a norm. Nevertheless, our lives will eventually return to the same level of busyness we experienced before. When it does, will we fall back to the past or look forward to the future?

We may discover a new zeal in our faith and relationship with God during the lockdown. But after the lockdown ends, will we continue to pursue after God, to focus on our families, and to care for the well-being of the church? This is a difficult question that warrants serious and careful consideration. We need to maintain and uphold our new routines as the new normal: continue our daily prayers and Bible reading with our family members; attend those extra fellowships and Bible studies; and give ourselves quiet time to reflect and examine our faith. God has given us time now, but He will still provide us with time afterward to either retreat to our pasts or move towards a stronger and closer relationship with Him. The choice is ours.

CONCLUSION

Today, we must understand why God has given us this special and opportune time. We should grasp hold of it now, deciding to act and renew our hearts and minds. Otherwise, we will later regret our inaction and passivity.

We pray that God will grant us wisdom to understand His will for our life—for now, and for beyond the lockdown and the pandemic. May all glory be to our Lord Jesus Christ!

“Today, our mindset must change: if we used to live only for our daily routines and to maintain social expectations, or if we lived with lukewarm faith, now is the time to renew our minds and pursue after God’s good and perfect will.”

Complete Faith: Whatever God's Will May Be

Hosea
Ipoh, Malaysia

The Bible records the wonderful testimonies of God's deliverance. There was Lot, who was brought out of fire and sulphur by angels. There was Hezekiah, whose life was extended when he was about to die. There was Peter, who was freed from a secure prison by an angel. And there was Paul, whose boat did not sink in the storm because God had already assured him of safety.

The Bible describes the outcomes for people who obeyed the commandments

of God and those who did not. We know that the former receive peace, health, and blessings in abundance. There are many biblical examples of God's people who received His protection, healing, and deliverance. On the other hand, the disobedient were punished with curses, calamities, pestilences, illnesses, and afflictions.

These accounts lead us to a simple equation: as long as we keep God's commandments, His peace and joy will definitely come upon us. And from there,

we extrapolate, as long as we make our offerings to the Lord and serve Him, He will shower us with abundance. Hence, many churches—particularly megachurches—will declare that it is impossible for those with unwavering faith in God to meet with misfortune. Is such a theological stance correct?

IF THIS BE SO: FAITH IN GOD AND HIS WORKS

In Daniel chapter 3, we read how Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, built an enormous image of gold. Its height was sixty cubits and its width six cubits—approximately the height of a six- to seven-story building, and the width of a small car. The king then invited high officials from all over the provinces to gather before the golden image. He commanded these people of different nations and languages to fall down and worship the image once

“Many churches—particularly megachurches—will declare that it is impossible for those with unwavering faith in God to meet with misfortune. Is such a theological stance correct?”



“ If we question God’s works, we would essentially be questioning His attributes, which means that we doubt Him. In the case of Daniel’s three friends, their response to the king reflected their unwavering faith that the God they worshiped is the Almighty God who will deliver them. ”

they heard music played from various instruments. When that moment came, everyone except Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, the three friends of Daniel, did so.

The enraged King Nebuchadnezzar commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego be brought before him. And Nebuchadnezzar said to them:

“Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the gold image which I have set up? Now if you are ready at the time you hear the sound of the horn, flute, harp, lyre, and psaltery, in symphony with all kinds of music, and you fall down and worship the image which I have made, good! But if you do not worship, you shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?”

(Dan 3:14–15)

The king gave them one last chance to choose between life and death. But instead of submitting quickly and gratefully, they told the powerful Babylonian monarch:

“O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king.”

(Dan 3:16–17, ESV)

In a nutshell, the three men were saying that a second chance to choose or speak further was unnecessary. They were prepared to die. Nevertheless, they had full confidence in the deliverance and

protection of God. This is the kind of faith many of us have or ought to have. What should the basis of such a faith be?

Critically, we must have faith in God’s divine attributes and His works. God’s attributes include love, mercy, compassion, goodness, holiness, and righteousness. Salvation is one of the works aligned with these attributes. Other works of God arising out of His attributes include His creation, punishment, protection, and examination of man. We must believe that God’s works cannot and will not contradict His divine attributes. Since the two are inseparable, if we question God’s works, we would essentially be questioning His attributes, which means that we doubt Him. In the case of Daniel’s three friends, their response to the king reflected their unwavering faith that the God they worshiped is the Almighty God who will deliver them.

From the Scriptures, we have seen God deliver men thrown into the fiery furnace, and repeatedly save His people from the hands of powerful monarchs. When the Israelites were trapped between Egypt’s pursuing army and a deep sea, God parted the Red Sea for them to cross. When a man died of an illness, God raised him to life. This is the God we worship and serve today. We must have the faith aptly articulated as an “if this be so” faith—the absolute

“ We must have the faith aptly articulated as an “if this be so” faith—the absolute conviction that God is able, and that nothing is impossible for God. ”

conviction that God is able, and that nothing is impossible for God.

TESTING GOD VERSUS FAITH IN GOD

While we believe wholeheartedly that our God can do anything, faith is not an excuse or opportunity for us to test God. Matthew 4:3 records that when Jesus was hungry in the wilderness, Satan said to him, “If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.” Jesus could have easily done this. But He not only refused to, He also said, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Mt 4:4b). These were the words of God (Deut 8:3). What Jesus said was absolutely right, though this statement would not assuage His hunger. However, between being hungry and testing God, Jesus chose to be hungry. Between food and the word of God, Jesus chose the word of God.

It was not that God lacked power, or that there was a problem with Jesus’ faith. However, believing in the heavenly Father and the Father’s power did not mean that Jesus could test God. Satan challenged Jesus to turn the stones into food to prove He really was God’s Son. But Jesus was not led by the flesh. Nor did He allow hunger to impair His judgment. He knew that if He fell for Satan’s ploy and turned the stones into bread, He would have tested God and dishonored His holy name.

Imagine we were in a similar situation today: if we lack spiritual wisdom, we may feel the need to defend our status as the child of God. We may be driven by a sense of bravado to respond to Satan’s challenge—to “produce” a miracle that confirms God is with us. We would justify to ourselves that we are protecting God’s honorable reputation. We may also think that such occasions are an excellent opportunity to prove

1 The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

our status as God's child, flaunt our heavenly Father's power, and silence God's enemy by showing that God is protecting us. And so we call on God, and push Him to perform the miracle we want to see, without first reflecting whether this is the miracle God wants to perform. In times such as these, we need to honestly ask ourselves: What are we trying to prove? That we are right? Or that God is true?

When the three friends of Daniel defied the king's command, they were not trying to prove that they were sons of God. They were not trying to flaunt God's power by showing that they would never be physically harmed. Their starting premise was simple: they believed that there is only one true God, and man must not bow down to any other. Obeying the king's command to worship the golden image was in direct violation of the Ten Commandments, the absolute foundation of their faith. So their words and actions were driven not by a desire to test God, but by a reverence for God.

This is thus the crucial difference between testing God and having faith in God. In the former, we elevate ourselves above God, treating Him as our on-call miracle performer. But in the latter, we do all things to honor God and God alone.

BUT IF NOT: STEADFAST BELIEF IN GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

"But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." (Dan 3:18, ESV)

After declaring their confidence that God would deliver them, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego added that

“A complete understanding of God is both a belief in His almightiness and an acceptance of His sovereignty. When we recognize God's sovereignty and have the faith to say “but if not,” we will be able to submit to all His arrangements and to His commands.”



even if God was not going to deliver them, they would still not serve the Babylonian deities. This is an equally important aspect of faith. We must not stop at the stage of Daniel 3:17, declaring “If this be so...” and manifesting our trust in God's deliverance. True faith encompasses the following verse, where we also declare, “But if not...”. This second aspect demonstrates our acceptance of God's sovereignty.

God is almighty and can do all things. He can heal, deliver from death, or save anyone at any time. But as the sovereign Creator, He has the absolute right to decide whether He wants to act. As His creatures, none of us can supersede His sovereignty. And as His believers, none of us should challenge it. However, not every believer has this “but if not” faith. Some are unable to accept that God's plans for them are different from their

own. If they are sick, God must heal them. If they are in trouble, God must deliver them in the way, and at the time, that they (and not God) decide. They believe that as long as they obey His words, attend church frequently, pray regularly, serve Him diligently and offer willingly, God has no choice but to protect them, heal them, and grant their requests. Although their lips mutter, “Thy will be done,” their hearts think, *God, You have to answer our prayer because of our faith in You, our godliness, and our loyalty towards You!* This is tantamount to wresting sovereignty from God.

A complete faith encompasses both “if this be so” and “but if not.” A complete understanding of God is both a belief in His almightiness and an acceptance of His sovereignty. When we recognize God's sovereignty and have the faith to say “but if not,” we will be able to submit to all His arrangements and to His commands.

He went a little farther and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.” (Mt 26:39)

When Jesus was on earth, the heavenly Father wanted Him to die on the cross.

“As children of God, the most important things are to obey and practice His commandments, to love Him with all our heart and might, and to love others. We may be afflicted and persecuted on earth, but our endurance will not be in vain.”

Jesus prayed three times over this matter, not wishing to drink the bitter cup (Mt 26:36–44). However, His “but if not” faith can be seen from His words “nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.” He believed in the heavenly Father’s better and more beautiful will. He submitted to God to the point of dying on the cross.

When we can submit to God’s sovereignty, we can accept whatever situation He puts us in, whatever lesson we have to learn. This “but if not” faith is beautifully manifested as humble submission. Biblical examples show us that faithful people of God may not always enjoy materially rich or plain-sailing lives. They may not always enjoy good health and safety. Job, the upright man who feared God and shunned evil, was afflicted—all his children died, and his body was covered with sores (Job 1–2). Jeremiah, the prophet of God, preached God’s message faithfully, but was thrown into an empty well (Jer 38). Lazarus lived the difficult life of a beggar, was covered with sores, and yearned to eat the crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table (Lk 16:19–31).

Some received deliverance, such as the three friends of Daniel. However, others did not. Jesus’ disciples were faithful workers, but God did not give each of them a nice, peaceful death in old age. According to church history, the apostle Paul was beheaded, and Peter was crucified upside down. Some exemplary believers were raised to heaven without going through death, like Enoch (Gen 5:21–24). But some died a horrible and agonizing death, such as Stephen, who was stoned (Acts 7:59–60). No matter what, as children of God, the most important things are to obey and practice His commandments, to love

Him with all our heart and might, and to love others. We may be afflicted and persecuted on earth, but our endurance will not be in vain (Rev 6:11).

CONCLUSION

If we have been fervent in hearing and practicing the word of God, but still experience afflictions, pestilences, illnesses, or other difficulties, let us not doubt God’s almightiness or His faithfulness. We have to fully believe in His great love and continue to trust that nothing is impossible for Him—He can save, heal, and protect. Such faith should not include the intention to test God. Also, we need to believe in God’s sovereignty, and that He has His timing. God has prepared a better arrangement, an ideal way, a more beautiful will. Whether God’s will and path for us be smooth or otherwise, it will be for our good (Rom 8:28). Cling on to this promise, and we will be able to submit to all of God’s plans.

May God help us to cultivate this complete faith that allows us to truly declare:

“If this be so” that we have to suffer sickness, God will deliver us; “but if not,” we will still praise Him.

“If this be so” that we are faced with pestilence, God will destroy it; “but if not,” we will not abandon our faith.

“If this be so” that we encounter difficulties, God will solve our problems; “but if not,” we will not leave Him, and we will remain faithful until death.

Testimonies

from the COVID-19 Front Line

Editor's note: Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the doctors, nurses and health-care workers of the world have been fighting to save lives, every day, on the front line. Even while working long hours, under extreme pressure and, at times, limited resources, they claim duty, not heroism, drives them on. However, by simply doing their duty, they are more exposed to the virus, with the tragic result being that many have lost their lives. In this collection of testimonies, three True Jesus Church members who work in health-care recount their experiences with COVID-19, and how God's grace comforted and, ultimately, preserved them.

A Brush with COVID-19

Yoke Fah Chong
London, UK

COVID-19, caused by a novel strain of coronavirus, started an epidemic in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019 before swiftly spreading across the globe. At the time of writing (June 20, 2020) the pandemic has infected 8.5 million people and claimed the lives of over 400,000.¹ This microscopic virus has turned the world upside down—changing cities into ghost towns, and decimating

economies and industries overnight. The world will never be the same again in the wake of this pandemic.

Nobody in my country of residence, the United Kingdom (UK), took it seriously to begin with—neither the government nor the citizens, myself included. With almost nine thousand kilometers between Wuhan and London, from a nation that borders the eastern edge of Asia to a country off the western coast of continental Europe, you could be forgiven for having a blasé attitude.

¹ All COVID-19 statistics in this article sourced from: "WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard," World Health Organization, covid19.who.int.



“ It was like God had wrapped me up in a cocoon of peace. My family members and church brethren were more concerned about me contracting the virus than I was. This peace was not down to my mental fortitude. It came from God. ”

During the SARS outbreak of 2003, also originating from China and caused by another strain of coronavirus, only Asian countries were affected. As a hospital doctor at that time and having learned of only four reported cases of SARS in the UK, I assumed that it would be the same this time.

It was not until the virus struck Europe in early 2020, and the casualties started rapidly mounting up in Italy, Spain, and France, overwhelming their health-care systems, that we began to pay attention. The British government and the National Health Service (NHS) scrambled at the last minute to prepare for the inevitable, but it was too little, too late. When COVID-19 hit our shores, we were woefully unprepared for the onslaught. The government had to resort to the blunt instrument of a national lockdown to contain the outbreak as there was no other viable option.

Broaching the topic of the pandemic, a preacher quoted from Psalms:

*Because you have made the LORD, who is my refuge,
Even the Most High, your dwelling place,
No evil shall befall you,
Nor shall any plague come near your dwelling.*
(Ps 91:9–10)

The word of God resonated with me and instilled a quiet confidence in God's protection. Another overseas preacher contacted me and asked me how I was coping, knowing that I work in the medical field. I shared this biblical passage with him. He concurred but also turned my attention to verses 11 and 12, which were employed by Satan to tempt our Lord Jesus to throw Himself from the pinnacle of the temple. It was an apt reminder for me to do my best to

protect myself while trusting in God's word. Trusting God is not an excuse for complacency, negligence, or failure to play our part.

In the beginning, there was only one reported case in my district, but the situation deteriorated at an alarming rate. The numbers climbed steeply. Soon, there were reported cases of my patients contracting the virus, and then, news of some of them dying from it. The next group of victims in the line of fire would be the health-care workers.

At the general practitioner (GP) surgery where I work, we have eighteen members of staff, including doctors, nurses, receptionists, and a manager. Staff started falling ill and had to self-isolate, with the most severe case ending up in the intensive treatment unit (ITU) on a continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) machine to help her breathe. At its worst, in mid-May, there were only six of us left standing—a skeleton crew of two doctors and four receptionists. On top of that, the test for COVID-19 was only available for the most serious cases. Only three members of staff were ill enough to qualify for the test, and all three tested positive. The remaining nine who were ill had no clue whether they had the virus, so they had to self-isolate for the full fourteen days before they could be allowed back to work, even if they had already become entirely asymptomatic.

“ The results came back the next day, and my antibody test was positive! This meant that, at one point, I had contracted the virus, overcame the infection, and was no longer infectious. ”

To make matters worse, due to a worldwide shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE), only hospital staff were afforded full protective gear in some areas. For medical personnel working in the community, we just had to make do with whatever the NHS could spare. Throughout it all, I did not feel any tinge of anxiety or fear; it was like God had wrapped me up in a cocoon of peace. My family members and church brethren were more concerned about me contracting the virus than I was. This peace was not down to my mental fortitude. It came from God.

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.
(Phil 4:6–7)

On Tuesday, June 9, all the members of my GP surgery were offered the antibody test for COVID-19 as part of the government's new plan to test health-care workers. We jumped at the chance and got tested.

The results came back the next day, and my antibody test was positive! This meant that, at one point, I had contracted the virus, overcame the infection, and was no longer infectious. Thank God for His protection and His grace.

I had not exhibited any cardinal symptoms or signs of COVID-19 infection: fever, dry cough, shortness of breath, loss of taste and smell, or gastrointestinal disturbances. All I could recall was one weekend when I had been off-duty, in early May: I had felt fatigued, to the extent of almost dozing off while attending the Sabbath day online service. I had to stand up and walk to wake myself up. Monday was a

“If God had taken me away this time, most certainly, I would not have made the grade to gain entry into heaven. My spiritual cultivation will need to move up a few more gears to scrape even a pass.”

public holiday, so I had an extra day off before going straight back to work the following day.

By June 20, there had been 39,776 deaths in the UK from COVID-19, the bulk of which was from London. I am reminded of the aforementioned psalm:

*Surely, He shall deliver you from the snare of the fowler
And from the perilous pestilence. ...
You shall not be afraid of the terror by night,
Nor of the arrow that flies by the day,
Nor of the pestilence that walks in darkness. ...
A thousand may fall at your side,
And ten thousand at your right hand;
But it shall not come near you.*
(Ps 91:3–7)

It is truly by the wonderful protection of our Almighty God and merciful Father, and the unfathomable love of our Lord Jesus Christ, that I was able to emerge from this deadly viral infection

unharméd. All praise and glory to our God in heaven!

My colleague, who had ended up in ITU on a CPAP machine, related to me how the constant struggle to breathe, even with assisted ventilation, was so soul destroying that she had lost the will to live and, at one point, just wanted everything to end. God was truly merciful to spare me from such an ordeal.

As I contemplate my brush with COVID-19 and why God had saved me, I arrive at the following conclusions:

First, all epidemics are signs pointing to the fast-approaching second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (Mt 24:3, 7, 43–44), and it is imperative to ready ourselves before it is too late.

Second, if God had taken me away this time, most certainly, I would not have made the grade to gain entry into heaven. My spiritual cultivation will need to move up a few more gears to

scrape even a pass. As Paul remarks, “But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” (1 Cor 9:27).

Finally, I have done a meager amount for our Lord, in stark contrast to what He has done for me. The hymn *Must I Go, and Empty-Handed?*² serves as a wake-up call for me. The first verse and chorus asks:

*“Must I go and empty-handed,
Thus my dear Redeemer meet,
Not one day of service give Him,
Lay no trophy at His feet?”*

*“Must I go, and empty-handed?
Must I meet my Savior so?
Not one soul with which to greet Him:
Must I empty handed go?”*

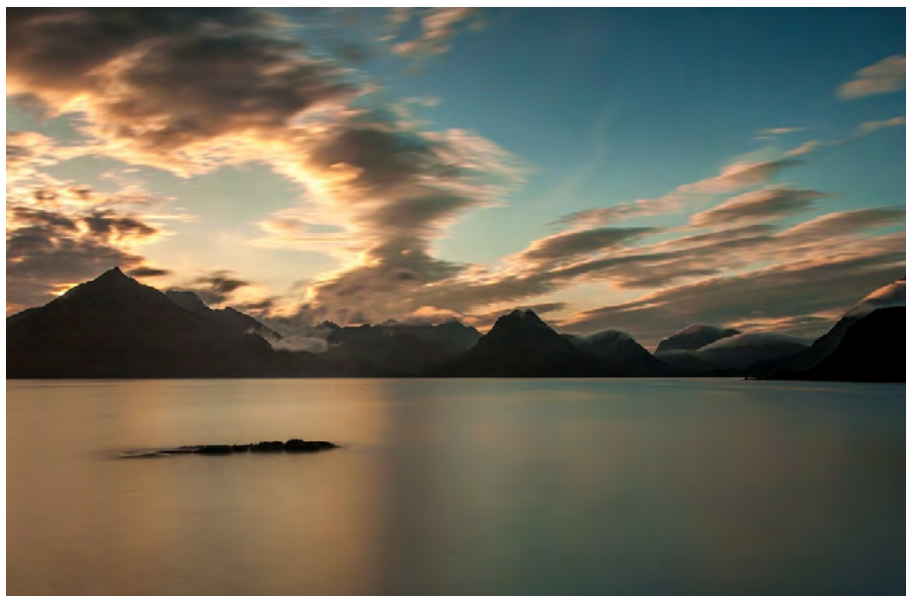
The final verse sums up what I should do from now on:

*O ye saints, arouse, be earnest,
Up and work while yet ‘tis day;
Ere the night of death o’ertake thee,
Strive for souls while still you may.*

May God help us so that we can all emerge from this pandemic—having been reminded, having repented and been renewed—to live our lives according to His will, and ready to meet Him when He comes again.

² By Charles C. Luther (1847–1924).





Micah Ly
Paris, France

Peace Beyond All Understanding

Hallelujah. May the peace of God be with us all.

Around mid-March 2020, I found myself developing COVID-19 symptoms, primarily extreme fatigue. I do not know how I caught the virus, although I presume I contracted it at work since I am a medical doctor. When I learned that my COVID-19 test was positive, I was quite at peace. Somehow, I knew that God would help me get through this trial.

I was ill for at least one month. During this period, I experienced many COVID-19 symptoms—fatigue, nausea, loss of appetite, loss of taste, hypersensitivity of the hair roots, and loss of weight (around three to four kilograms)—but they were not severe. I had no fever, nor did I suffer from coughing or breathing difficulties. God is merciful; I did not even have to take a single paracetamol (also known as acetaminophen) to reduce the pain or fever. I simply stayed at home and

waited to recover, without having to be hospitalized.

I would like to share some reflections concerning my experience with COVID-19.

First, during my convalescence, I learned to trust in God totally, as there is no cure available for COVID-19. This illness forced me to stay at home, and, in hindsight, it gave me more time to pray, read the Bible, and reflect on my relationship with God. This period offered precious extra time, which we often lack in our busy lives.

I am also thankful that God protected my family—I could have infected my wife and my children as I was in contact with them daily. Of course, as soon as I learned of my illness, I quarantined myself in the basement of the house. Thank God, my family was not infected. God's mercy is indeed great!

Second, during this time at home, I

was filled with peace—a peace that Paul describes as surpassing all understanding (Phil 4:7). We know that everything is in the hands of God. Whatever happens, God knows the best for us. We do not need to fear or worry; God is our refuge (Ps 46:1).

*No evil shall befall you,
Nor shall any plague come near your dwelling.* (Ps 91:10)

God always seeks to preserve His children from evil. He did this in the past (Ex 8:18–19; 9:4; Zech 2:9, 12), and He is still doing it today (Mt 23:37; Phil 4:6–7).

Since the start of this pandemic in France, COVID-related deaths have continued to increase, reaching 30,494 reported deaths on September 1, 2020. There has been a significant loss amongst the medical staff in this fight. But once again, God watches over His children. The love of God is always the same because He is faithful. Our only worry is whether we want to be under His protection, and what we should do to remain under this protection. Times of trial and isolation are excellent opportunities for self-examination and reflection on our relationship with God.

After this ordeal, I am convinced that our God is living, omnipotent, and merciful. This understanding has further strengthened my faith: that if we walk on God's path day by day, we can truly experience God's faithfulness and the peace that He promises.

Third, I realized that the power of intercession is beyond measure. The ancient saints experienced it; I also experienced it. During my illness, many brothers and sisters prayed for me and asked after my condition. Such gestures of love touched me deeply. I would like to thank all of them for their concern and prayers, which aided my quick recovery. May God remember their love.

Let us not forget to pray for one another, especially as our Lord Jesus is always there to intercede on our behalf (Heb 7:25).

May all glory, peace, and power be unto our heavenly Father! Amen!

Roxanne Chan
London, UK

God's Preservation During the Pandemic

Hallelujah, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, I testify. When the pandemic hit the UK, I was shocked. Not only did I witness the fallout on the news, but I also saw it firsthand as a nurse looking after COVID-19 patients in the hospital. It seemed surreal, as if we were all in an apocalyptic film. As Jesus told us in Matthew 24, one of the signs of the end time is pestilence. Indeed, no matter how it originated, COVID-19 is a sign from God that the end time is at hand.

We had our last Sabbath at church before the national lockdown on March 21, 2020, and amongst the members, we said we would not know when we would see each other next. Though I had echoed this phrase, I did not realize the full extent of what it meant until we departed from church that evening. There was a stark contrast between observing Sabbath at home and observing at church. There are many distractions at home, and it is not the same as being with other members and worshipping together in one accord in the church hall. I regret not cherishing those moments more, and taking for granted the blessing of being able to gather with one another.

ON THE FRONT LINE

During the first few weeks of the pandemic reaching London, the hospital was very chaotic. Research on this new virus was scarce, so we were updated daily on these matters according to the latest information available to the government. We had extra training on what personal protective equipment (PPE) to wear in different situations. At first, official guidelines stated that we did not need to wear PPE when looking after patients who do not have the five main symptoms (dry cough,

fever, shortness of breath, sore throat, and fatigue). So, every day, we would look after patients in the same way as we always had, including being in close proximity to them when giving personal care.

As time progressed, more and more of my colleagues fell sick. There was an uneasiness in the air at work, and we were all afraid that we would contract the virus or carry it home to our loved ones. Things became real when one of the nurses at my hospital passed away after contracting COVID-19. During one shift, we observed a one-minute silence to remember those colleagues who had succumbed to the virus. The atmosphere was heavy, as a colleague shed tears.

Health-care professionals are seen as people who can save lives but, during this pandemic, it has become clear that only God has control over our lives. He gives life, and He can take it away. There is no quick cure or vaccine for us to use. Although this situation seems hopeless, one message shared during a Sabbath service stayed with me: "...all things work together for good to those who love God" (Rom 8:28a). This pandemic is a warning to make us realize how

much we have been neglecting God in our lives. If we had been putting our studies, businesses, careers, or worldly enjoyments first, the lockdown caused all these activities to pause momentarily so that we could return to God.

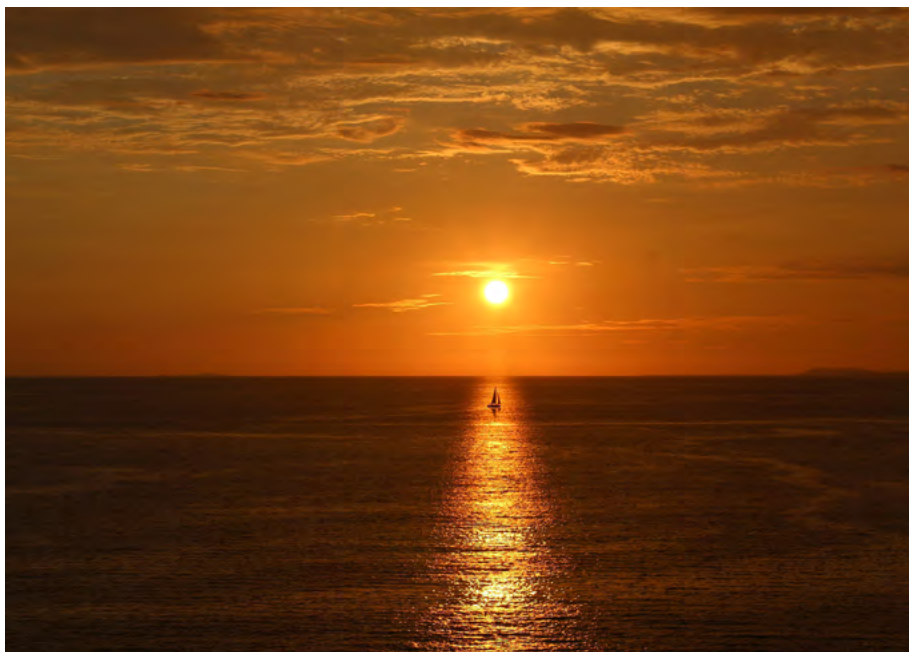
CONTRACTING COVID-19

I am blessed to live with three other church sisters. We often encourage one another, and, during the lockdown, we resolved to observe the Sabbath with a reverent heart at home. But one night at the end of March, just before the rate of COVID-19 infections peaked in London, I suddenly felt unwell. Despite the warm weather, I was shivering in bed under two duvets. I immediately thought of COVID-19 since one of the main symptoms is fever. We did not have a thermometer, so I could not check my temperature, but I was worried about my housemates. COVID-19 is the most contagious when a patient has a fever. When morning came, I was still shivering and, on top of this, I developed a dry cough. That morning, I called my manager and informed her of my symptoms, and she advised me to isolate myself for seven days at home.

TRUSTING IN GOD

Later that day, I shared my symptoms with my housemates and expressed my concerns that they would catch the virus. We had discussed the topic previously since I was putting them at risk while working at the hospital and returning to the flat. Thank God, after the discussion, we concluded that God is almighty and He is in control of all things. Whatever the situation, whatever may happen in the world,

“ This pandemic is a warning to make us realize how much we have been neglecting God in our lives. If we had been putting our studies, businesses, careers, or worldly enjoyments first, the lockdown caused all these activities to pause momentarily so that we could return to God. ”



“ The outbreak of the virus and being in lockdown brought many unknowns. But it was through the unknowns that God gave me a stark reminder that His second coming is indeed drawing nearer. ”

the most important thing is to cling on to God. Should all of us contract COVID-19, there is nothing we can do but to pray for God to execute His will. He has power over life and death, so this virus is nothing to Him. We must learn to trust God in all circumstances. Therefore, with faith, we continued to share the same bathroom and have meals together in the dining room.

We kept this matter in prayer, and I asked a few other sisters for their prayers as well. Thank God, after two days of mild symptoms, I felt a lot better. Though there was a lingering dry cough, I had no other symptoms. Hallelujah! I told my housemates, and we gave prayers of thanksgiving because God had protected all of us and healed me so quickly!

GOD'S UNFAILING GRACE

I had to remain in isolation for seven days, whereas my housemates had to isolate for fourteen days in total because

they had been in contact with me and could have been incubating the virus. So we had to ask other brothers and sisters who live nearby to buy groceries for us. Thank God for their love and support during this time. It is by the love of God that we were so well supported, and we had never eaten so well before! Later, in July, I tested positive for having antibodies to COVID-19. This confirms that I had the virus, yet God protected and preserved not only my life but also the lives of my housemates.

After the seven days, I returned to work. We were still not wearing any PPE when looking after patients. But many patients would suddenly develop symptoms, and we had to treat them as being COVID-19 positive. The rate of deterioration in patients was harrowing. One patient required assistance in drinking from a cup as he could not physically hold it. It was at that moment he became unresponsive. After trying to save his life, the doctors were shocked to find

that he had passed away. There was no apparent cause of death, so they ordered a COVID-19 test to be done on the body. Another patient whom we had looked after for a couple of weeks was acutely unwell. He required a lot of personal care, so we would be very close to him when providing the necessary care. Later, we discovered he was COVID-19 positive. The time we had spent looking after him meant that all the staff had been exposed to the virus. Our hearts sank when we heard this, and every staff member had to be swabbed for COVID-19. Praise God! Once again, God protected me with His mighty hand. Both my swabs came back negative. Despite being in close proximity to the patient while caring for him without wearing PPE for several weeks, I did not contract the virus again.

On reflection, the outbreak of the virus and being in lockdown brought many unknowns. But it was through the unknowns that God gave me a stark reminder that His second coming is indeed drawing nearer. He also humbled me through this experience and taught me to learn to trust and rely on Him. May all glory be unto God. Hallelujah! Amen.

God's Healing Grace

in the Time of Coronavirus

Editor's note: The COVID-19 pandemic has been called the great social leveler, since the richest celebrity, the highest-ranking politician, and the fittest athlete are by no means immune from its effects. Fear of the coronavirus has spread throughout every society. However, it is safe to say that the weakest, poorest, and most vulnerable in our communities are most at risk from the virus and its aftermath. These are the ones who rely on our overstretched public health services—not only when they have contracted COVID-19, but for all health-care emergencies and ongoing treatments. It is against this backdrop that the following collection of testimonies is set. For True Jesus Church members globally, whether we have COVID-19 or some other condition, and whether we have access to health care or not, we know that we need not fear. In our heavenly Father lies our hope for healing and strength to endure all physical suffering. Even in the midst of a global health crisis, we know that we can face all things with God by our side.

Li Lin
New York, USA

God Walked with Me through the Valley

On the night of March 28, 2020, after having headaches and dizziness for a couple of days, I decided to call 911. When they arrived, the paramedics took my temperature twice—it was 103 degrees Fahrenheit (39.4 degrees Celsius). I was feverish and weak, with a heart rate of over 105 beats per minute (bpm). I felt as though I was going to die. It was the middle of a rainy night, but because of the COVID-19 pandemic, my husband was

not allowed to accompany me to the hospital. When I got there, I was first taken to a temporary triage tent outside the hospital. After a quick examination, they confirmed that I had all the symptoms of COVID-19 and brought me into the emergency room.

Throughout this process, I had diarrhea and needed to visit the bathroom every ten minutes. All the nurses were very busy, and I was left unattended. I had



“ I wanted to watch my children grow up. And it was only the Lord Jesus Christ who could grant me this wish. ”

no choice but to slowly make my way to the bathroom, leaning against the wall every few minutes along the way. In my heart, I kept saying, “Hallelujah.” I had to use all the energy and focus I could muster. Thank God, after a while, a nurse appeared, placed me in a wheelchair and pushed me to the bathroom, and later helped to settle me in my bed.

From my hospital bed in the corner, I saw many nurses busy in the emergency room. Every available space had been filled with temporary beds, and the place was overflowing with patients. I lay there, feeling very sad. A nurse soon did a blood test and a COVID-19 swab test on me and gave me some medicine. But after thirty minutes, I developed an allergic reaction and felt very itchy. It took one or two hours before the nurses could attend to me and administer some anti-allergy medication.

My diarrhea persisted in the midst of this, and I was diagnosed as having some liver problems. I needed to stay longer in the hospital. At that point, I did not know whether I had contracted COVID-19.

I thank the Lord for opening my ears during this time. My command of English is poor, and under the circumstances, there was no interpreter available. But amazingly, whatever the doctor said in English, I could understand, and I could also respond in English. God was indeed by my side.

I had to wait in the emergency room for two nights and one day. During this period, I did not know the time of day, and I did not know if I would live. Then, on the morning of April 1, I was moved to a room. Finally, the surroundings were quiet. I asked the nurse if it was confirmed that I had contracted the virus, and she said yes. At that instant, my mind went blank, and I was filled with anxiety.

Because of the pandemic, meal times at the hospital were chaotic and off schedule. Hence, I could not eat and had not eaten for three days. I had to take different types of medication, and my stomach started to feel uncomfortable. This led to severe vomiting. If I drank a glass of water, I would throw half of it back up. Even though I pressed the call button for a nurse, no one came to help me. I had to wait a few hours before anyone came to check on me. I was told my vomiting could be a symptom of the virus. But I thank God that, throughout this ordeal, He gave me enough strength to make my way to the bathroom since help was not available.

To add to this, I did not sleep for four days. I was alone, suffering from diarrhea and continual vomiting while undergoing dialysis for my pre-existing kidney problems. I felt drained and without strength. The saddest thing I had to experience was witnessing the passing of a COVID-19 patient who was in the same hospital room as me. I felt so suffocated and did not know if I could continue. I told myself not to cry because, once I started, I would feel like I could not go on. My family and children were waiting for me at home. But the Lord Jesus Christ was by my side. I cried out to the Lord, silently telling Him in my heart that I wanted to live. I wanted to watch my children grow up. And it was only the Lord Jesus Christ who could grant me this wish. After the prayer, my heart was calm. God had heard my voice.

On the third day, I shared with the two nurses on duty, whom I had never seen

before, that I could not eat the hospital food and was famished. My elder sister had brought me some rice porridge, and one of these nurses was willing to collect the food from her. Because of the pandemic, I was quarantined in an isolation ward, where medical staff wore personal protective equipment and had to dispose of their protective layers before exiting my room. When the nurse presented the food with a flourish, I was moved to tears. It had not been easy for this bowl of porridge to reach me. God heard my cry, and He extended His mighty hand to send this nurse to me.

By the fourth day, my condition improved. I was finally on the road to recovery. It was as if a mountain had been lifted off my body. Though I was still tired, I could video chat with my family members, and my heart was comforted. My blood pressure, heart rate, and temperature returned to normal, and my white blood cell count increased. The doctor informed me that I would be discharged in two days. Without fail, I was discharged and returned home on April 4. I had stayed in the hospital for only seven days, but it seemed much longer.

During my hospital stay, I witnessed many deaths, but I thank God that I could still return home. Because I take medication for high blood pressure, I am classed as high-risk for COVID-19. I thank God for His miraculous work upon me. Although I am still vulnerable, God held my hand in these hardest of times, and walked with me through the valley of the shadow of death. His rod comforted my heart. He saw the tears shed by my family members, and He wiped the tears away. May all glory be to God!

“ I thank God for His miraculous work upon me. Although I am still vulnerable, God held my hand in these hardest of times, and walked with me through the valley of the shadow of death. ”

Teresa Ho
Newcastle, UK

God's Grace is Sufficient

Hallelujah, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, I testify of how the Lord cared for me and healed me.

I have had asthma for over twenty years, and the slightest irritant—such as perfume—can trigger an attack. Within minutes, I would be wheezing and reaching for my inhaler, so I feared catching the coronavirus. Since this virus attacks the respiratory system, its impact on a person with asthma could be dire.

This story starts in March 2020. I work in the National Health Service (NHS) in Newcastle. When schools and businesses closed across England on March 23, 2020, my department continued to work to support the pandemic response preparations. Some of my colleagues had to visit the general practitioner (GP) clinics in our region to help them get ready to treat patients with suspected coronavirus.

In the latter part of that week, a few of my co-workers called in to say they were experiencing coronavirus symptoms. On Sabbath day, my husband, three children, and I attended the online Sabbath services together. It was then that I started to feel unwell. I had a headache, fatigue, and occasional chills, despite being wrapped up. I had a slight dry cough, but nothing severe. By Monday, I knew I was coming down with something, but I did not suspect I had coronavirus as my symptoms did not fit the primary symptoms of fever, persistent cough, and shortness of breath.

Over twenty-four hours, my symptoms worsened. I felt cold, and my whole body ached as if bruised from a fight. By then, my headache was constant,

and I had no relief from the head-to-toe muscle pain. I was so fatigued that I just wanted to sleep all the time. I slept for days in my bedroom, drifting in and out of consciousness; I did not know the time of day. I would only get up to drink water and take paracetamol (acetaminophen), and I was getting weaker and weaker as the days passed. I remember waking up and calling for my husband because my hands were so weak that I could not open the water bottle to take my tablets. I was still feeling cold despite having two duvets and an extra blanket covering me. My whole body was in so much muscle pain that I felt battered and bruised all over, and the headache was relentless. I have never experienced such full-body, all-consuming pain before.

Thank the Lord, my husband was fine at first and could take care of our three children while I was self-isolating in the master bedroom. But by Friday, he was

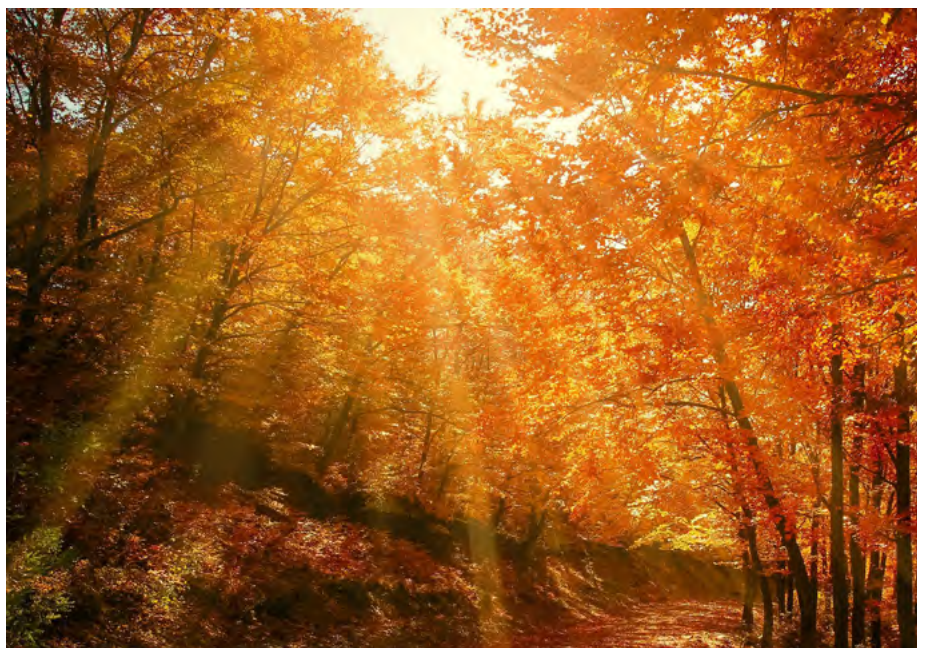
also experiencing symptoms and had to join me in quarantine. Thank God, our three children did not display any symptoms.

It was not until nearly two weeks later that the body pain and headache started to subside slightly. I had relief for a few hours, but then the pain would return. I began to get up and move around to make lunch and dinner for my children as my husband's symptoms worsened. I started to feel better slowly, day by day.

While I was off sick from work, I was not aware of the happenings at my office. A number of my colleagues had tested positive for COVID-19 and were recovering at home. Although I did not go for a swab test at the time, I have since had a blood test confirming I have COVID-19 antibodies.

Looking back, I really thank God for His mercy that I did not experience any breathing difficulties throughout my illness, despite my predisposition to hypersensitive reactions. Although my husband and I took more than a month to recover, by God's grace and mercy, we are both back to full health and have resumed normal activities. Our three children are all safe and healthy, despite a deadly virus having entered our home.

Early in the pandemic, I started to reassess my faith. Not being able to





leave the house to go to church or see my relatives prompted me to refocus my physical and spiritual priorities. I felt a certain closeness to God, which I had not experienced for a while, and my faith grew stronger. There was pain and suffering when I fell ill, but through it came goodness and spiritual strength.

And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

(2 Cor 12:9–10)

Drawing near to God through this experience gave me the courage to bear witness for Him, to share my testimony. I pray that our brethren living in these scary times will be edified.

The Lord God has cared for my family, and He will continue to do so during this pandemic and beyond.

May all glory be to God! Amen.

Sheila Ho
Leicester, UK

The Peace of God will Guard Your Hearts and Minds

Hallelujah, in the name of Jesus, I testify.

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

(Phil 4:6–7)

This verse really resonates with me, as I could witness the peace of God upon my father during the current pandemic and the lockdown implemented by the UK government from March 2020.

My father, Sau Sing Chan, was admitted to the hospital on April 27, 2020, suffering from shortness of breath, lack of appetite, and swelling in his arms and legs. It transpired that he has a

condition called decompensated heart failure—stiffness of the heart—due to his age, having recently turned ninety years old.

As my father does not speak English, I would normally accompany him to any appointments to interpret for him. However, on this occasion, it was not to be the case. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the hospital had stringent rules and would not allow anyone to enter the building with the patient.

Before the paramedics took him to the hospital, we had to explain the situation to him: He was being admitted to the hospital and no one was allowed to accompany him. Once he was in the hospital, no one could visit him. Usually, any suggestion of going to the hospital for check-ups would be met with trepidation. He would come up

“Most of these tests involved a needle, which is one of my father’s greatest fears. He shared with us that, faced with this inescapable situation, he built up his courage and managed his fear by praying, ‘Hallelujah!’”

with excuses like, “There’s no need to go,” or “It’s too troublesome,” or, “If I go in, I won’t be able to leave and will be stuck there forever.” He even resists appointments with his general practitioner. But to our surprise, once we explained what was to happen, he did not seem stressed or worried. He accepted the message that he would be going to the hospital alone, without any fuss.

Later, my father told us that, at the hospital, he had to undergo many tests. First, it was to assess if he had COVID-19, then they needed to determine the cause of his symptoms. Most of these tests involved a needle, which is one of my father’s greatest fears. He shared with us that, faced with this inescapable situation, he built up his courage and managed his fear by praying, “Hallelujah!” and “Help me, God!” He continued to pray in this manner throughout his time in

the hospital. To me, this was amazing, as I have witnessed him shaking with fear during routine flu vaccinations and blood tests.

*Our help is in the name of the LORD,
Who made heaven and earth. (Ps 124:8)*

All in all, my father was in the hospital for nearly a month. During this time, even though he was prodded and poked, had to face his greatest fear, and was “deaf and dumb” (being partially deaf in both ears and unable to speak English), he felt calm. On the occasions we could video call him, he would seem quite chilled, saying, “It’s up to God when I’m allowed out of the hospital.” He could even have a laugh and joke about things

going on in his ward, and the lack of bacon, egg, and chips on the menu.

“Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” (Jn 14:27)

I genuinely believe that God guided my father throughout this episode. He was not stressed or worried about going to the hospital, he mustered the courage to face his fear of needles, and he was calm and peaceful throughout his stay—this was all God’s doing. Without God at his side, the whole experience would have been very different for him, and for the family who could only watch from the sidelines.

“My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Cor 12:9b)

I truly give thanks to God for guiding my father through this experience. It is also God’s grace that he did not catch the virus during his time in the hospital, at the pandemic’s height. May all glory and praises be unto Him! Amen.

“He was calm and peaceful throughout his stay...Without God at his side, the whole experience would have been very different.”



Yuk Ying Lee
London, UK

The Prayer of Faith will Save

In the name of Jesus Christ, I testify of how God healed me and protected my family and those around me during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. (Jas 5:14–15)

The first thing I always do when my husband or I am unwell is to call the preachers and church ministers to ask for their intercessions. This occasion was no exception.

I am sixty-six years old. In early March 2020, I started to feel very dizzy. On Monday, March 16, I consulted my general practitioner (GP), only to be told that I had vertigo, but the cause was unclear because, physiologically, there was nothing wrong with me. I thought, *I feel so dizzy—there must be a reason!* So, at my friend's suggestion, I decided to go to a local walk-in clinic for a second opinion. After examining me, the doctor told me to go to the hospital's accident and emergency (A&E). Because the dizziness was getting worse, I decided to follow his advice.

I went to the A&E on March 17. There, the hospital doctor ran the necessary tests on me, including an X-ray. I felt like I was breathing normally and did not exhibit any COVID-19 symptoms,

but because my lungs showed signs of infection, the doctor decided to admit me for treatment. It was at this point that I remembered to contact the church ministers to intercede for me.

After three days in the hospital, I was due to be discharged. But then, a doctor told me that I had tested positive for the coronavirus and needed to remain in the hospital. He asked me if I had any difficulty breathing or any other symptoms, to which I said no; but the test result meant I had to be moved from the general ward to an isolation room.

Leading up to my hospitalization, I had been in contact with many people. I attended Sabbath service at the church in Forest Hill as usual, on March 7, and interacted with many brothers and sisters. On March 10, I had dinner with my daughter and her parents-in-law. On March 12, I went for a walk with my friend and did not don a face mask while chatting. And I had also invited my brother-in-law and his wife to our house for breakfast on March 15. Indeed, by the grace of God, everyone I had contact with remained well and did not catch the virus from me.

After I was moved to the isolation ward, I began to feel quite unwell, to the point that I was always nauseous and unable to get out of bed. After three days, I was feeling better, so I was moved back to the general ward. However, after

another couple of days, my oxygen level dropped to ninety (ninety-six being normal.) I did not feel any respiratory distress or difficulty breathing, but I was given an oxygen mask.

Altogether, I stayed in the hospital for two weeks. When I was discharged, I was instructed to recuperate at home. For the first two weeks, I generally felt unwell, suffering from mouth ulcers and fatigue. But by week three, I had more or less recovered. Nevertheless, I confined myself to the upper floor of the house to avoid contact with my husband for six weeks altogether. I am especially grateful that God protected my husband from being infected because he has a heart condition and would be at high risk had he contracted COVID-19. A check-up on July 7 confirmed that my lungs were completely infection-free.

During this time at home, I received many calls and messages from the brethren, sending words of encouragement, and singing hymns to encourage me to stay strong. I am deeply touched by such love, and I want to thank all the brothers and sisters for their prayers and love that they showed my family and me.

Once again, intercessory prayers are very effective. Whenever we are in need, we can always ask the church ministers and our brethren to pray for us.

[P]ray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. (Jas 5:16b)

This experience has, all the more, convinced me of the words in James 4:14–16:

[Y]ou do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that." But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

May all glory, honor, and praise be unto our merciful, loving Father! Hallelujah! Amen.

“ I am especially grateful that God protected my husband from being infected because he has a heart condition and would be at high risk had he contracted COVID-19. ”

COVID-19: Global Updates

European Coordination Center
(ECC)

True Jesus Church in Europe

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus from the brethren in Europe, to all the brethren of the True Jesus Church worldwide.

In 2020, the world faces many problems, both in terms of health and economics. The news reports on these issues every day. However, there is no news on how these problems have affected people's beliefs. Yet, faith is even more important in such difficult times.

At the beginning of this year, many thought that Europe would not be affected by COVID-19. But by the end of February, the virus spread quickly in Italy, and in March, throughout the rest of Europe. Most countries issued national lockdowns, which included the suspension of church services and other church events.

Our brethren in Europe could not gather to keep the Sabbath or have Bible study.

The care and volunteer teams of the European Coordination Center (ECC) were also prevented from visiting the brethren in the pioneering European areas. All convocations and training had to be canceled. Such a situation can easily impact the members' faith, especially if it were to continue for an extended period. In countries like Italy and Spain, our brethren were not permitted to leave home to work.

In Hebrews, it is written:

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering. ...And let us consider one another...not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together.

(Heb 10:23-25a)

If the brethren have to face their problems alone, they could lose faith quickly. Therefore, the ECC looked for



solutions to help them keep the Sabbath and strengthen their faith in Jesus:

Instead of meeting in church, we started online Sabbath services. Thank God, the church in Mannheim, Germany, already had experience broadcasting their Sabbath service on YouTube. Preacher Ko was also available to lead these, so on March 21, the ECC started regular online Sabbath worship for more than two hundred brethren in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Spain, Italy, Hungary, Georgia, Poland, Belgium, and the Netherlands. In parallel, our brethren in Italy used a QQ chat group to conduct Bible studies and Sabbath services.

Our Youth Fellowship coordinators also organized online Bible study groups to take place every evening, in different languages, with translation training in German, English, and Mandarin alongside.

In April, the ECC started a Skype seminar to study our biblical doctrines in depth. The seminar is held twice a week in the afternoons. More than fifty brethren use their extra free time to study the word of God, and we were joined even by brethren from Russia and Argentina.

Jesus commanded us: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). Although it is difficult to preach the gospel during these times of social distancing and lockdown, there are other ways to make God visible to the people.

In Empoli, Italy, our brethren collected money to source five thousand face masks from China and offered them to the local hospital.

In Georgia, we started the process of registering the True Jesus Church and finding a place of worship for our brethren.

At the beginning of May, we were able to purchase a church building in Empoli. The renovation process started straight away so that our brethren can move in as soon as possible.

Since the end of May, some restrictions



Empoli brethren support the local hospital by donating face masks.

“ Although it is difficult to preach the gospel during these times of social distancing and lockdown, there are other ways to make God visible to the people. ”

in Europe were lifted so that we could start meeting in church again. From May 29 to June 1, we held our first spiritual convocation since the pandemic outbreak in Hamburg,

Germany. Of course, we had to abide by the government guidelines to reduce the risk of infection, such as keeping a safe distance from each other, wearing face masks, and hand sanitizing. The

members were happy to be able to meet again. No online service can replace physically gathering in the church, being able to sing, pray and share God's word together. The strong feeling of being one family in Christ returned. Truly, we are "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God," united in the Spirit and body of Christ (Eph 2:19; Eph 4:3-6).

We pray that the brethren worldwide will be able to overcome the coronavirus pandemic and that Jesus will keep us safe in His grace and mercy. May the True Jesus Church be strengthened in faith and grow to spread the gospel into the world.

All glory and honor to our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.



Spiritual convocation in Hamburg, Germany, May 2020.

African Ministry Committee
(AMC)

True Jesus Church in Africa

NIGERIA

June 2020

In the name of Jesus Christ, we thank God for His favor, protection, and love for His church. The entire world is under the threat of COVID-19, and Nigeria is no exception. Under government restrictions, places of worship and businesses were closed when the virus reached this country.

The pandemic has affected our church programs. Services in Lagos State have been put on hold until further notice, and in Rivers State, services are being held in different houses, though we cannot hold other weekly church activities. A few weeks ago, the lockdown was relaxed, but still, only fifty people are allowed in one service session.

In Delta State, services are held in a few

locations, while services in Akwa Ibom State are running as normal because the membership does not exceed the restricted numbers.

Finally, to fully implement government directives, we practice social distancing, regular cleaning, and hand sanitizing. We also use an infrared thermometer to check the members' temperatures as they enter church premises.

According to their abilities, the members are encouraged to help one another during this period, which they are doing.

The spiritual challenges being experienced by members and truth-seekers are the result of places of worship being closed. The church cannot continue to edify, admonish, and encourage members. At the same time, the fear of the unknown has increased, stirring up anxiety.

Physically, most of the members are low-income earners, working as farmers and traders (and so on.) They have experienced financial pressure due to the price hikes of goods and services during the pandemic. To cushion the effect, the church will be assisting such members to return to business.

Looking forward to the lifting of restrictions, the church will organize a national spiritual convocation to change the members' attitude towards the service of God, keep them focused on the things of God, and redirect their behaviors to love God and humanity. We thank God that, as of now (June 2020), no members in Nigeria have tested positive for COVID-19. Hallelujah!

NIGERIA

October 31, 2020

National confirmed cases* 62,691*

National confirmed deaths 1,144

*Source for October 2020 statistics: The World Health Organization, covid19.who.int.

KENYA**June 23, 2020**

It has been about one hundred days since COVID-19 was first reported in Kenya.

There have been 4,797 reported cases in this period, of which 1,680 patients have recovered, and 125 have died.

The pandemic has caused much misery and untold suffering for the general public and True Jesus Church members. The faithful are suffering from mental, physical, economic, and spiritual problems. Because the government moved swiftly to contain the onslaught of the virus, this has resulted in the closure of businesses, places of worship, schools and institutions, jobs being lost, and loneliness, as many were separated from their family members for an extended period.

A recent survey found that of the people asked:

1. 60 percent were unable to pay their rent.
2. 50 percent relied on food donations.
3. 54 percent were earning reduced salaries.
4. There is increased job insecurity.
5. The cost of food has risen.
6. 75 percent could not repay their debts.
7. 81 percent were anxious and stressed.
8. The majority were living under extreme pressure.
9. Mental health problems had gone up.

These effects are deeply felt in the church since they impact directly on the members' spiritual well-being. Indeed, some of our members cannot pay rent, have been laid off from their jobs, have lost their businesses, and have gone

“Physically, our members are facing a strain on their daily incomes, and it is challenging to maintain contact with some members.”

without food. They are anxious about what tomorrow will bring.

The church in Kenya has, therefore, given these encouragements to the workers and the members:

1. Rely on God through prayer and read His word to gain strength.
2. Continue having Sabbath services with family members at home.
3. Pray more.
4. Encourage each other through phone calls, and pray for each other.
5. The workers should keep calling the members to find out their situations and to encourage them.
6. All members should follow all the safety measures laid down by the government and experts.
7. Wherever possible, the members should offer any such help—material or otherwise—that may be required by other members.

Meanwhile, the workers' exchange program has stopped, and our local pastoral work has been greatly affected. However, we thank God that, despite all these, there were no cases of a member leaving the church, or dying from the disease.

We request that our brethren worldwide continue to remember us in prayer. May the Lord Jesus bless, protect and strengthen all True Jesus Church members across the world.

“We request that our brethren worldwide continue to remember us in prayer. May the Lord Jesus bless, protect and strengthen all True Jesus Church members.”

KENYA**October 31, 2020**

National confirmed cases **53,797**

National confirmed deaths **981**

GHANA**June 8, 2020**

The first two cases of COVID-19 in Ghana were reported on March 13, 2020—one imported from Norway, and one from Turkey. On June 8, the Ghana Health Service reported that there had been 240,204 tests done, with 10,358 testing positive (fifty-eight percent male, forty-two percent female). There were 6,713 active cases; 3,645 had recovered, and forty-eight deaths. The virus had spread nationwide, with more than fifty percent of the cases concentrated in Accra.

CHURCH RESPONSE TO RESTRICTIONS

The church has complied with the government's restrictions and strategic measures to combat the virus. In March, notice was served to all True Jesus Church branches in Ghana to observe the ban on social gatherings.

We are grateful to God for His mercy: at the time of writing, there have been no cases of infection reported among the members. There have also been no rule-breaching incidents.

Physically, our members are facing a strain on their daily incomes, and it is



challenging to maintain contact with some members. Spiritually, pastors, ministers, and church board members continue to encourage members through family services, phone calls, home visits, and prayer.

We have had no help or support from any source, either governmental or private, during the lockdown period.

LIFTING OF RESTRICTIONS

The government has announced the lifting of restrictions to commence from June 6. The Ghana Evangelical Coordination Board (GECB) has communicated this to the members. Still, services are yet to pick up due to the logistics of complying with the protocols set out by the government. The same holds for most religious organizations in Ghana. The borders remain closed until further notice, while the ban on social gatherings remains until July 31, 2020.

We, the church in Ghana, collectively are grateful to God and all the members for their continuous cooperation throughout this trying time.

“Our prayer is that the restrictions can be further relaxed...and that the members learn to adapt to this new way of life.”

GHANA

October 31, 2020

National confirmed cases 48,055

National confirmed deaths 320

ZAMBIA

June 2020

COVID-19 came to our attention in December 2019, and the situation in Zambia worsened in January 2020. At that time, the government imposed a lockdown—schools, churches and other public places were closed. The worst-hit areas were Lusaka, where the first cases were reported, and Kafue. The virus then spread to Ndola in the Copperbelt Province, then Chingola,

and later to Nakonde in the northern province, bordering Tanzania. At the time of writing, the cumulative number of COVID-19 cases rose to 1,400, with seven deaths. To date, 950 patients have been released from quarantine centers, and 443 patients have been discharged from hospitals.

After a review, leisure venues such as bars and casinos were closed until further notice. Under the Ministry of Health's guidance, only fifty believers were allowed to gather in places of worship. The church did not allow this to interrupt our services—small congregations gathered for Sabbath services in individual homes, although attendance was poor. Nevertheless, the believers are faring well, both physically and spiritually, under the government restrictions and threat of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Looking forward, the church will continue to educate the members about behavioral change during this pandemic period, and how to adapt to this new normal situation. Now, restrictions have relaxed, and, apart from venues such as bars and taverns, businesses have reopened. Churches are allowed to hold services for up to 150 members, subject to government rules and regulations. The country's economy, and, subsequently, the standard of living, have been adversely affected by the lockdown. Our prayer is that the restrictions can be further relaxed, with the pros and cons balanced, and that the members learn to adapt to this new way of life.

ZAMBIA

October 31, 2020

National confirmed cases 16,415

National confirmed deaths 349

God's Reminders during the Pandemic

Editor's note: Because of government lockdowns and self-imposed isolation, there may be periods when we are unable to gather at church to worship, to fellowship with brethren, and conduct our ministry to God in the usual ways. Not only this, our livelihoods, education, family dynamics, and mental health could have been impacted by the confluence of these circumstances. So, as we adapt to life in the COVID era, we could be forgiven for letting our routines and Christian living standards slip. However, God's expectations of us never change, even in the day of trouble. The following sharings reveal how God continues to guide, teach, rebuke, and encourage our members worldwide to remain faithful during this unprecedented time.

Mei Rong Lin
Port Elizabeth, South Africa

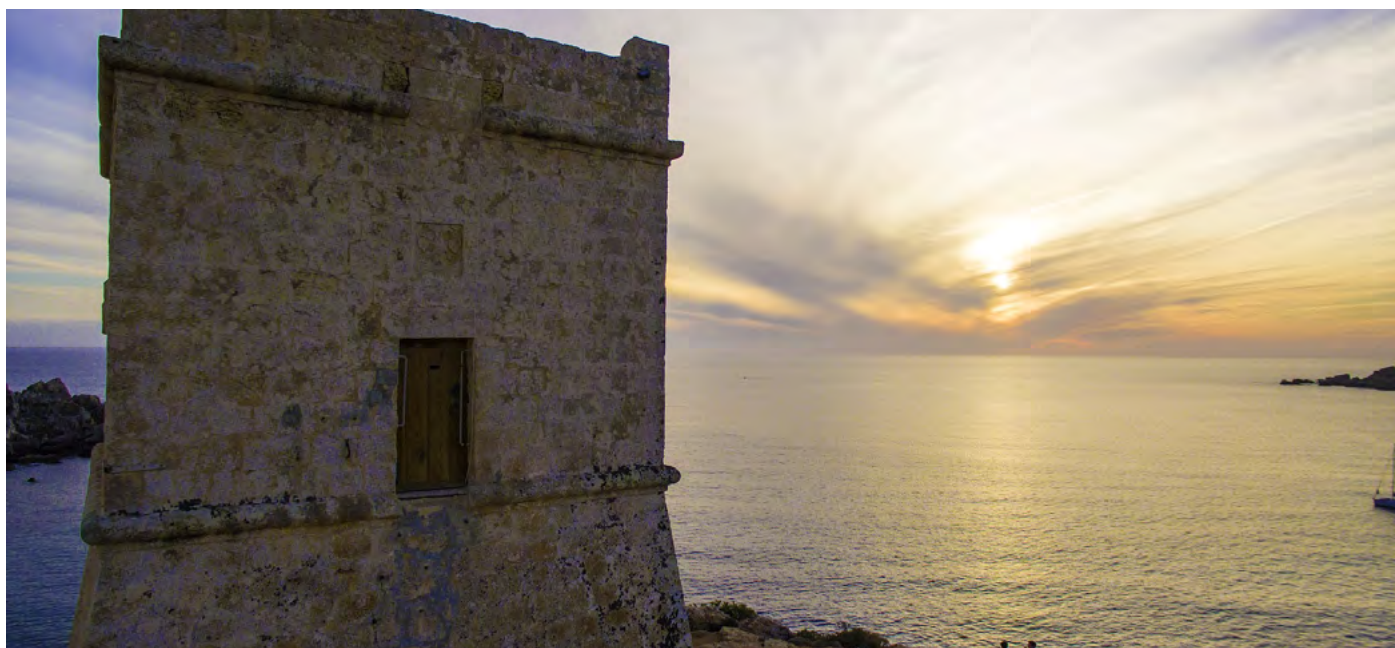
Honor the Sabbath

In the name of Jesus, I share a testimony.

During the evening of Friday, March 27, 2020, I was at home participating in a family Sabbath service, watching a pre-recorded online sermon. However, I was not reverent—I was doing other things as I listened, and not paying full attention to the sermon. I was also sitting very casually, with my right leg

resting on another chair. I did not settle myself to observe the Sabbath day and receive the word of God. I felt that my actions were acceptable because the only other people in the house were my family. I did not realize that God was next to me.

The sermon ended, and we were about to kneel to pray when, suddenly, I started to feel a sharp pain in my right foot. I had to steady myself with one



hand on the chair and the other on the wall. My family saw what happened and rushed over, supporting me as I knelt.

After the prayer ended, the pain got progressively worse. At that time, I carefully examined myself. I had fallen short of God's requirements that evening, and God disciplined me to remind me. Even when my family tried to treat the pain by applying ointments, none of them helped. My foot hurt even more!

I knew I owed the Lord a debt for my misbehavior. My family said that if the pain was caused by my conduct failing to meet God's standard, we should pray to the Lord for His mercy.

During the prayer, I asked God: "If what happened was because I had fallen short of Your expectations of me during the evening Sabbath service, then please manifest a miracle to help me understand this. Let the pain in my foot be healed before daybreak."

When the prayer concluded, my family had to help me up. I was sure that I would not be able to sleep because of the pain. I felt so cold that I was shivering the whole night; I could not find a comfortable position for my foot.

Gradually, I fell asleep, and when I woke up, I realized that dawn had broken. My family came to check on how I was feeling. Thanks be to our wonderful Savior! The surface of my foot was no longer painful, and I felt much more comfortable. I could walk by myself, and my foot only hurt if I pressed on it with my hand. As the day passed, it got better, and by afternoon, the pain had gone.

From this experience, I understood that God was warning me. When we have to keep the Sabbath in our own homes in these unusual times, we still need to worship with a reverent heart and listen to God's word wholeheartedly.

May all glory be unto our wonderful Savior!

Hallelujah! Amen!

Justin Leung
Sunderland, UK

Remain Watchful

At the start of 2020, I was not worried about the news of a novel coronavirus detected in China, halfway across the world from the United Kingdom (UK). It seemed so far away and had minimal impact on my life. I figured that it would soon fizzle out. However, the coronavirus soon became a global pandemic, reaching the UK's shores in February 2020. Within a short period, it wreaked havoc on the way we live our lives.

By then, it had become apparent that this pandemic was one of the signs of the end of the age (Mt 24:7). Many sermons and discussions centered on this topic, helping us recognize the spiritual significance of the pandemic.

Like many countries, the UK responded to this threat to human life by restricting social interactions and imposing a national lockdown on March 23, 2020. At the start of the lockdown, I

was resolved to take active steps to get my spiritual life in order. I planned to invest more time in prayer and Bible reading, and deepen my knowledge of our Ten Articles of Faith.

However, as time went on and the government extended the lockdown, my focus started to shift to secular matters. Hobbies and housework, which I usually did not have time for, became my main focus. I repainted the rooms that had previously been painted in awful colors, tidied the messiest areas in the house, and started some garden projects. Working on these things brought me happiness and distraction from the outside world and its chaos.

But this focus shift started to numb the firm spiritual conviction I had at the start of the lockdown. This is the danger of worldly trends and pastimes. Even housework and gardening, which seem so innocent, can distract us and take up





our time. Thank God, through an online sermon, I was reminded not to forget God, especially when our physical circumstances are blessed, and our lives are comfortable (Deut 8:11–14). I came to realize that my schedule was so packed with pursuing my own comfort that I had very little time for God. I had to change my focus.

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Mt 6:19–21)

Our actions are outward expressions of the contents of our hearts (Prov 4:23; Mt 12:35), whether they are for God or the world. So, my question for reflection is, have we spent our time in lockdown wisely? Sometimes our hearts deceive us, and we think that the second coming of the Lord is far away. As a result, we are not vigilant and muddle-headedly journey through our life of faith. But the 2020–22 theme for the True Jesus Church in the UK, set by our general assembly (UKGA), is very apt: Discern the Time and Be Watchful (Lk 12:35–56; Mt 24:42). Through COVID-19, God reminds us that the end is near, and our merciful Father is giving us time to prepare for this eventuality. Therefore,

“ This focus shift started to numb the firm spiritual conviction I had at the start of the lockdown. This is the danger of worldly trends and pastimes. Even housework and gardening, which seem so innocent, can distract us and take up our time. ”

let us use our time wisely, putting spiritual well-being before material comfort, and show our Lord where our priorities and heart lie (Mt 6:33).

Tarintim Durasip
Guong, Sabah, Malaysia

Give What is Owed to the Master

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, I testify. My name is Tarintim Durasip, and I live in Guong, Sabah. I am sixty-five years old. I would like to share a vision I received during the current COVID-19 pandemic—a dream that engraved a message into my heart.

On March 16, 2020, the Malaysian

government announced a nationwide movement control order (MCO) to contain the coronavirus spread.

A student spiritual convocation was originally scheduled to take place in the church at Guong, from March 14 to 17. When the danger of spreading COVID-19 became serious, the Sabah

General Assembly advised us to postpone this convocation. However, the church had already made all the necessary preparations for this event, including purchasing meat for catering. After some discussion, Guong church members and church board decided that the meat would be sold to the church members to avoid waste. After this was done, there was still a surplus of meat remaining. The church board evaluated the price of this meat and entrusted it to Brother Sijan, my son-in-law. Since he and my daughter, Sulinda, live with me, we stored the meat in our freezer at home so that any church member who wanted to purchase more could come directly to us.

THE VISION OF AN ANGEL

On the night of April 15, I dreamed that someone—presumably, an angel—came into our house. He said to me, “You have a debt, and you must pay what you owe.”

I asked him, “What do I owe?”

He answered, “The price is all that you have in the freezer.” He pointed the freezer containing the meat from the church.

I became extremely afraid. I asked him, “How much should we pay?” He told me the amount in Ringgit (Malaysian currency). I became anxious because it was not a small amount. At this point, I woke up.

First thing in the morning, I asked Sulinda the cost of the meat in our freezer. After telling her about my dream, we discovered that the meat’s price matched exactly the amount of tithe she owed the Lord since the start of MCO—and she had not yet offered it.

I told my family that we need to continue to give our tithes and Sabbath



offerings as usual. I also shared the vision and message with my son, Deacon Maleakhi, who passed this on to the church members. Many members were moved and committed themselves to continue offering and tithing, as best they could, during this difficult period.

CONCLUSION

Since the MCO came into effect, many people have found themselves in financial straits. This includes some of our church members whose livelihoods and incomes have been affected by the restrictions. However, God oversees all aspects of our lives. During hard times, such as this MCO period, we should not neglect or delay our offerings to God. I hope that everybody will endeavor to collect their offerings and place them into the hands of God soon. May all glory, praise, and honor be to our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“ During hard times, such as this MCO period, we should not neglect or delay our offerings to God. I hope that everybody will try to collect their offerings and place them into the hands of God soon. ”

Carol To
Aberdeen, UK

Rushing

*Rushing to rise up at the break of day,
Ticking off tasks, meetings to complete,
Racing the clock, trying to break away,
Catching the bus, a day obsolete.
Rushing life's course, come what may,
"I'm sorry, I'm tired," to Him I say.
Closing the Bible just to pray,
Rushing to bed to finally sleep,
Rushing to start again the next day.*

*But then it happened like a thief in the night.
How or why? A virus, a plight.
Without much notice our lives stood still.
There was no more rushing, quietness instilled.*

*To all four corners, the whole world froze.
Busy chapels hushed, their lights once bright.
Piano strings danced their hymns to a close.
Church grounds fell empty, in just one night.*

*Sabbath worship was alone and enclosed
The weekdays dragging into long weekends
Seeing brethren through a screen days on end.*

*Calling and begging, my heart exposed:
"Why do You not answer when I need You most?"
No one hears, no one is close.
In a place of wilderness that no one knows.*

*It's funny how quickly times can change;
When we're consumed in a world that we imposed,
A world with no function, a world disarranged.
"What happened to my job? What happened to my friends?
What happened to my plans? Please say it's all pretend."*

*"Nothing," He tells me.
The truth, I could not see:
The one who was not there,
The one who did not care;
The silences, the pleading, the ears that did not hear;
It was me, O Lord, my love for you degraded.*

"It was for you, My child, it was for you that I waited."

*"You were tired every day so I took away your stress.
I gave you all the time you lacked to escape from all the mess.
It was for you, My child, for you I created
A chance for you to come back to Me,
Far from the will you dictated."*

*"I've been here the whole time, hoping that you knew:
You asked to spend more time with Me—I did this all for you."*

COVID-19: A Spiritual Analogy

Throughout the Bible, the Lord often uses something physical to depict what is happening spiritually. Today, we can also draw many lessons for our faith from the physical conditions of these uncertain and troubling times.

COMPLACENCY

During this pandemic, many people ignore the dangers, despite warnings from the government or health officials. They feel that the risks have been exaggerated. For example, many believed that COVID-19 is no worse than the flu. However, we now know that it is much more deadly than the flu and can cause lasting organ damage even for those who survive. Similarly, we often hear of the dangers of sin but ignore them or take them lightly because we believe it will not affect our faith. But the Bible tells us clearly that “the wages

“ We often hear of the dangers of sin but ignore them or take them lightly because we believe it will not affect our faith. But the Bible tells us clearly that “the wages of sin is death.” ”

of sin is death” (Rom 6:23). There is no such thing as a small, harmless sin, just as there is no such thing as being a little bit pregnant (Jas 1:15).

CONTAGION

COVID-19 is so dangerous and spreads so quickly because many infected people do not show any signs or symptoms for several days, and some remain asymptomatic, allowing them to infect others. Similar to our spirituality today, many people may live in sin but show no apparent symptoms or sickness in their

faith. Like the Pharisees, they outwardly seem strong and devout, but inwardly they are decaying (Mt 23:27–28). Their actions may then infect others into believing that sin is acceptable and that they can maintain a strong faith despite living in sin.

CAUTION

COVID-19 affects every individual differently. Some suffer symptoms as mild as a cold, while others suffer acute respiratory distress that could weaken them for life or lead to death. While, in



general, those weaker, older, or with pre-existing conditions are more likely to be the worst affected, there are also many cases of the young and healthy requiring hospitalization or even threatened with death. In the same way, we cannot predict how sin will affect us. For one person, skipping a Sabbath may briefly weaken their faith, but leave no lasting damage. For another, the skipped Sabbath becomes the start of spiritual decline, beginning gradually but then rapidly deteriorating until their faith is critically low. Unfortunately, we cannot tell which group we fall into until it is too late, so prevention is our best bet (Prov 27:12).

CONSIDERATION

With the pandemic, we are all in this together. It does not matter if you are low risk or healthy; your disregard of safety measures could put everyone else at risk. Similarly, we must consider one another in our faith. Our conscience may be clear when carrying out certain actions, but as Paul says, we must “beware lest somehow this liberty of [ours] becomes a stumbling block to those who are weak” (1 Cor 8:9). “Let no one seek his own, but each one the other’s well-being” (1 Cor 10:24).

COMMISSION VERSUS QUARANTINE

At this time of uncertainty, the safest and most responsible thing to do is to stay at home with our family. Our spiritual home and family is our church. This is our sanctuary and safety zone from sin. But this does not mean we should isolate ourselves from society and only interact with our church brethren. In this world, quarantine keeps people safe, but at the cost of productivity and the economy. Similarly, if we associate *only* with our church members, it reduces our ability to preach the gospel.



SPIRITUAL DISTANCING

As interaction with non-church members is necessary and inevitable, spiritual distancing is the best method to prevent infection. It does not mean cutting off or ending relationships but ensuring that we do not get close enough for the transference of worldly attitudes and ideals. It requires more effort to maintain a relationship at a distance, but this is important for our safety. In terms of our spiritual life, we cannot avoid every sinful person, because then we would have to leave this world (1 Cor 5:10)! But we can limit our exposure and keep our distance from those with different values than us. Jesus gave us an example of how to do so. He befriended sinners but ensured He did not entrust Himself to them (Jn 2:24). He kept an emotional distance and made sure He spent time cultivating Himself in isolation.

SPIRITUAL HYGIENE

Since the advent of COVID-19, we have

become more conscientious in washing our hands when we get home, after interacting with others, and before we eat. Even if we do not see any dirt, we know that we need to take the time to sanitize thoroughly. Spiritually, it is also critical to wash and purify ourselves after being out with friends, and just interacting with the world in general. It does not matter if we think we have not sinned; we should still make a habit of taking the time to purify and cleanse our hearts and souls (Jas 4:8; 1 Jn 1:9).

While the world is currently on high alert in response to the physical pandemic, let us not neglect to also be vigilant in our spiritual lives. Let us use what we see and what we experience in this world to reflect on our spiritual health, and use this precious opportunity to draw closer to God.

“ In this world, quarantine keeps people safe, but at the cost of productivity and the economy. Similarly, if we associate only with our church members, it reduces our ability to preach the gospel. ”

Call for Articles

Issue #92: Youth: Be Rooted + Grow

Articles due

February 1, 2021

Our youth today face challenging times. Not only is adolescence and young adulthood a time of immense physiological and psychological change—and potentially life-defining decisions—but our youths are also coming of age in a time of sociopolitical upheaval, global crisis, and information overload. Technology allows us to work more efficiently and productively, but has also disrupted every aspect of life, for both good and ill. These factors will reshape society and define a generation.

How can our youths remain rooted in Christ and grow in this increasingly confusing landscape?

In Mark 4, Jesus shares about the stony ground in the parable of the sower. The sower's seeds germinated but did not take root due to the lack of earth, and they withered under the scorching sun. Jesus says these refer to believers who do not allow God's word to take root in their hearts, so they stumble when trials befall them.

God has planted His seed in the hearts of the youths, but how do we cultivate it to take root and flourish? If they learn to be rooted and built up in Jesus, and established in the faith (Col 2:7; Eph 3:17), they will emerge victorious and bear good fruit.

However, though our youth may be well-versed in God's word after years of religious education, they may struggle to apply that biblical knowledge in their everyday lives. How do our youth ensure that they are rooted in the truth as they grow up in the age of individualism and infinite choice? How can they establish their faith so that they are unwavering in the face of temptation, struggles and mental health issues? How do we prime our youth to make choices pleasing to God, when worldly ideals, concepts and lifestyles offer such alluring and positive-seeming alternatives?

In this special issue, we will take the opportunity to experiment with different types of features, article genres and presentation styles to appeal to the youth of today. For this reason, we welcome submissions from creatives who are interested in expressing robust biblical teachings through images, illustration and infographics.

General Writing Guidelines

Content

- Content should be biblically sound and adhere to biblical principles.
- The article should be organized and have a logical flow of thought.
- The main point or teaching of the article should be clear to the reader.
- Readers should be able to apply what they have read to their daily lives.
- Do not plagiarize the work of other writers or institutions, published either in print or online. Any quotations, ideas, or concepts taken from other sources must be properly referenced.

Grammar/Style

- Use active instead of passive voice.
- Write concisely.
- Use concrete words and ideas instead of abstract concepts.
- Use "plain English" instead of obscure, academic language.
- Use the NKJV version when quoting Bible verses.
- Use American spelling, if possible. in print or online.

SUBMISSION INFORMATION

Please email articles as Microsoft Word documents to manna@tjc.org, including your name, mailing address, email address, and telephone number.

By submitting an article, you consent for it to be edited and published in Manna, in print and online, distributed globally and promoted on social media. If accepted for publication, your article may also be edited and/or translated for other True Jesus Church publications and websites.

Manna only accepts submissions written by True Jesus Church members. If you are planning to write an article (regardless of topic), please try to adhere to one of the genres below.

Christian Living

A Christian Living article gives practical biblical guidance on real-life issues and how to use Jesus' teachings in our daily lives.
Article length: 1500–2000 words.

Bible Study

A Bible Study explores a passage or character from the Bible and draws out the teachings for readers to apply to their lives.
Article length: 2500–3000 words.

Doctrinal Study

A Doctrinal Study examines an aspect of True Jesus Church beliefs and may present it in comparison to other beliefs.
Article length: 2500–3000 words.

Exhortation

An Exhortation encourages and admonishes the reader in different aspects of the Christian faith.
Article length: 2000–2500 words.

Testimony

A Testimony recounts an experience in the Lord that will encourage and edify the reader.
Article length: 1500–2000 words.

Creative Writing

Creative Writing pieces include poems, parables, or short stories that illustrate a biblical teaching or idea. Keep in mind as you're writing: how will this edify the reader?

Articles of Faith

JESUS CHRIST

Jesus Christ, the Word who became flesh, died on the cross for the redemption of sinners, resurrected on the third day, and ascended to heaven. He is the only Savior of mankind, the Creator of the heavens and earth, and the only true God.

HOLY BIBLE

The Holy Bible, consisting of the Old and New Testaments, is inspired by God, the only scriptural truth, and the standard for Christian living.

TRUE JESUS CHURCH

The True Jesus Church, established by our Lord Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit during the time of the 'latter rain', is the restored true church of the apostolic time.

WATER BAPTISM

Water baptism is the sacrament for the remission of sins for regeneration. The baptism must take place in natural living water, such as the river, sea, or spring. The Baptist, who already has had received baptism of water and the Holy Spirit, conducts the baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. And the person receiving the baptism must be completely immersed in water with head bowed and face downward.

HOLY SPIRIT

Receiving the Holy Spirit, evidenced by speaking in tongues, is the guarantee of our inheritance of the kingdom of heaven.

FOOTWASHING

The sacrament of footwashing enables one to have a part with the Lord Jesus. It also serves as a constant reminder that one should have love, holiness, humility, forgiveness, and service. Every person who has received water baptism must have his/her feet washed in the name of Jesus Christ. Mutual footwashing may be practiced whenever is appropriate.

HOLY COMMUNION

The Holy Communion is the sacrament to commemorate the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. It enables us to partake of the flesh and blood of our Lord and to be in communion with Him so that we can have eternal life and be raised on the last day. This sacrament shall be held as often as possible. Only one unleavened bread and grape juice shall be used.

SABBATH DAY

The Sabbath day, the seventh day of the week (Saturday), is a holy day, blessed and sanctified by God. It is to be observed under the Lord's grace for the commemoration of God's creation and salvation, and with the hope of eternal rest in the life to come.

SALVATION

Salvation is given by the grace of God through faith. Believers must rely on the Holy Spirit to pursue holiness, to honor God, and to love humanity.

LORD'S SECOND COMING

The Lord's Second Coming will take place on the last day when He descends from heaven to judge the world: the righteous will receive eternal life, while the wicked will be eternally condemned.



CONTACT INFORMATION

For additional information on the True Jesus Church, contact us or visit our website. We look forward to hearing from you!

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