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Could It Happen Again?

It was the deadliest epidemic in human history. It circled the globe in a few months, killing more than 50 million people. Some cities and towns saw thousands perish in a few short weeks. In some remote villages, more than half the population died. The epidemic emerged out of nowhere, sickened and killed millions, then disappeared as quickly as it had come.

Shocking as it may seem, this horrifyingly deadly epidemic occurred not in the Middle Ages, not in the time of the waves of bubonic plague that devastated Europe centuries ago, but barely a century ago.

The Spanish flu epidemic that traversed the globe from September 1918 through March 1919 left an estimated 50 million dead. If this figure is accurate, then as many died in this pandemic as in the worst outbreaks of bubonic plague in previous centuries.

Epidemiologists estimate that if a similar killer-flu virus emerged today, modern travel would allow it to spread worldwide in four days rather than the four months it took in 1918. The recent rapid spread of Covid-19 bears this out. By some estimates, 100 to 200 million could die in a similar pandemic today!

Scientists are still trying to unravel the secrets of that epidemic. How could an influenza virus—known primarily for its ability to produce aches, fevers and coughs—turn so deadly?

In recent years researchers have begun to see that the world of microorganisms is far more diverse—and unstable—than they had thought. As new technologies have enabled scientists to unveil and study the genetic makeup of living things, some of their discoveries are increasingly disconcerting.

The incredible variety and diversity of life we see around us is mirrored in the microscopic world—also all around us, but largely unseen and unnoticed. Just as people and animals reproduce and pass on their diverse genetic traits to their offspring, so do the other tiny creatures all around us.

And occasionally mutations happen. With viruses, that usually means decreased virulence. But in some cases the new form is more harmful. Scientists believe this is what happened in 1918. Apparently a strain of flu mutated and crossed from animals to people. That strain then spread around the world in the mass movement of soldiers and civilians during the throes and aftermath of World War I.

Somewhere along the way the virus apparently mutated further. Its genetic makeup differed so greatly from other flu strains that many people had no natural immunity and thus were defenseless. The mutated virus claimed millions of victims before it ran its course and apparently disappeared.

This crossover from animals to people is not without precedent. HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) and Ebola like-wise crossed from animals to human beings, and our lack of any natural resistance is why these viruses have killed so many.

Some researchers think the flu virus of 1918 first migrated from birds to pigs before it spread to human beings—and thus we hear of the periodic desperate slaughter of chickens, ducks and geese in some Asian countries when a different flu strain jumps from these domesticated birds to people.

And while health officials rightly worry about the ongoing devastation wrought by HIV/AIDS (which still kills close to a million people annually) and occasional deadly outbreaks of Ebola or something similar, their real worry is another killer flu pandemic. This is why they have been so concerned about the Covid-19 pandemic.

Could a global catastrophe like the 1918 flu outbreak happen again? At the moment, it appears that the Covid-19 pandemic will not prove as deadly as first thought. But it has had a terrible global impact in various other ways. And much remains unknown. For example, it’s too early to tell whether it will largely go dormant in the northern hemisphere’s warmer summer months, only to reemerge with a vengeance in colder weather as did the 1918 variety, when it took even more lives than in its first wave.

Since widespread vaccine use is yet a ways off, there is still plenty of concern. The full impact of the reeling global economy is yet to be seen, and we have far to go before the world returns to some semblance of normality.

The media have been full of breathless reporting on this current pandemic, but something has been noticeably missing. That’s any kind of biblical perspective on this pandemic and its effect on the world—not to mention its effect on you.

We encourage you to read the articles in this issue to discover what the Bible has to say about such epidemics and their effect on humanity—as well as the prophetic reality of far worse epidemics to come.

With much of the world shut down and people told to stay in their homes, this is a good time for us to think—to consider where we are spiritually, to consider what God wants and expects us to do, to make choices we may have put off far too long.

God’s Word indeed has much to say to us in times like this! But keep in mind that beyond the terrible times prophesied to come awaits the long-promised world of tomorrow. To discover more about this magnificent age to come, be sure to download or request our free study guide The Gospel of the Kingdom. And in the meantime, be sure to regularly check our website ucg.org/tags/coronavirus for more updates. You need this biblical perspective!
I am writing this article on my wife’s birthday during the Covid-19 pandemic. The woods next to my home are beginning to come to life. Faint wisps of green are signaling the life of spring in the northern hemisphere. Watching the birds work as they gather material for their nests, you wouldn’t know the world is in the grip of its most catastrophic pandemic in more than a century.

Here we are dealing with the lingering impact of an event no one would have expected when we turned the page to 2020. As of mid-April when this goes to press, more than 2 million people have contracted the virus and more than 120,000 have died in this worldwide plague. Entire economies have been turned upside down. The social compacts between government and citizens will be permanently altered, and we may be sorting through the aftermath for years.

At the peak of this crisis our Beyond Today staff made the decision to scrap an issue that was soon to go to the printer and create a new one focusing on this pandemic. We believe putting this event in a biblical context will help you cope with what’s happening and be better prepared when, not if, something of this magnitude happens again.

What will we learn?

Jesus Christ referred to an increase of “pestilences” or disease epidemics along with other disasters in the buildup of events leading to His return (Luke 21:11), and many wonder if we’ve reached the final stages of this progression. Revelation 6 describes the infamous “four horsemen of the Apocalypse,” which in parallel to Jesus’ prophecy represent spiritual deception, war, famine and plagues of disease and disaster. Have we reached this point?

While these conditions have always been a part of human history, a marked increase will occur in the end time. We have seen such increase since the world wars of the past century, but the final ramp-up is still ahead. Revelation 6:8 indicates these end-time catastrophes will kill a fourth of the earth’s population.

With the global population now approaching 8 billion, it is clear that we have not yet approached this scale. (To learn more, see “Epidemics and Bible Prophecy” beginning on page 17)

Bible prophecy is clear that other key prophetic events must occur before we reach that point. So while the global Covid-19 pandemic fits within Jesus’ warning of increasing epidemics leading to global fear and other troubles, this is more of a foretaste of far worse things to come. We still have further to go before the final devastating events preceding Christ’s return.

We will come out of this time of pandemic. You will eventually return to work, school and familiar routines, albeit perhaps a “new normal” as some have speculated. No doubt, treatments for this virus will help people recover. And a vaccine will likely be developed that counters this new strain of virus. But we should expect continuing difficulties. And this will by no means be the end of dangerous viruses.

What you should ask yourself now is this: What have you learned through this experience? What will you yet learn? How will you deal with the next crisis?

There will be a next crisis, and more after that. It’s vital you understand these crises in a biblical context. Now is the time to develop a biblical worldview to understand what has happened and what the Bible says will happen in the years ahead.

Once this pandemic recedes, the issues of trade, nationalism and globalism will return to the front burner. International relations will be impacted by this crisis. We may well begin to refer to the world of past years as “BC”—before Covid-19. The world that follows will be different.

Again, what are you learning from this, and how will you react to the time beyond when the next crisis hits?

Two previous crisis “dress rehearsals”

For broader perspective, let’s look back over the past two decades. America and the world have experienced two significant crisis points in that time.

First was the attack on the United States by Islamic terrorists
We are at a moment in history in which we can learn vital lessons so we are not caught unaware when larger, even more impactful, prophesied events occur in the future.

on 9/11. New York’s World Trade Center was felled by two hijacked airliners. A third airliner was flown into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. A fourth jetliner thought to be heading for either the U.S. Capitol building or the White House crashed into a Pennsylvania field when passengers stormed the cockpit of the hijacked and doomed jetliner. That black day changed America’s national security behavior and resulted in a game-changing war in the Middle East that continues these many years later.

America initially saw a moment of national unity and a brief respite in political division. I remember members of Congress massing on the steps of the Capitol Building singing “God Bless America.” There was a national prayer service and a moment of turning to God for answers. President George W. Bush called the nation to greater service as he mounted the counterattack on global terrorism. While there was a surge of patriotism, political unity soon vanished and we all went on with our lives.

The war that came to America didn’t change the inner core of its people. Great national sins of abortion, pornography, drug addiction and moral decay continued. While church attendance surged for a short time, it soon returned to pre-9/11 figures.

America’s spiritual life continues to decline, having little impact on the politics and social behavior of the people. The moral rot and spiritual decay are entrenched. No reform, however well intentioned, has brought America to its knees before God in a great national repentance.

Second came the financial crisis of September 2008, wherein the entire financial center of America came within a few days of collapse. While this event began primarily in the United States as a result of a high-stakes financial game involving subprime lending, it spread into a worldwide economic downturn.

In America, major Wall Street firms such as Lehman Brothers vanished overnight. Banks and markets faltered under the weight of bad loans. Confidence in the economy was on the verge of collapsing. Stories are told of crisis meetings in Washington, frantic conversations held among officials searching for solutions to problems none of them were prepared for.

Some analysts say that America was within 48 hours of all ATM machines shutting down and refusing transactions. There was even concern over credit card readers not working at supermarkets and gas stations.

Imagine the panic that would have set in! The fabric of society would have begun to unravel. Thankfully that did not happen. But stocks collapsed. Major companies like General Motors needed government assistance to stay in business. It was a hard moment that came just a few weeks before the presidential election. The financial crisis significantly impacted the November election that put President Barack Obama in office. America and the world recovered from this financial crisis. Global stock markets came back.

Fast forward to today, 12 years later. The United States was doing well with the stock market at an all-time high and the country experiencing the lowest unemployment figures ever. Then came the Covid-19 pandemic. Overnight we were dealing with an event most had never experienced in their lifetimes.

How should we view these world-changing circumstances? I look at them as “dress rehearsals” for what the Bible says will be larger, even more impactful events at the close of this age.

Each of these crises has contained elements that accompany the ride of the four horsemen of Revelation, even though what we’ve seen is relatively small in comparison to what is coming. We are at a moment in which we can learn vital lessons so we are not caught unaware when larger prophesied events occur.

Christ’s prophecy of the end of the age

Let’s look more closely at what Jesus Christ said we should learn at this pivotal moment in human history.

Jesus was the greatest of prophets. This dimension of His mission is woefully neglected and misunderstood by those who claim to speak in His name. Never has it been more important than now for you to understand what He taught about this present age of mankind.

While with His disciples on the Mount of Olives, some privately asked Him: “Tell us, when will these things be? And
what will be the sign when all these things will be fulfilled?” Jesus’ answer began with warnings about spiritual deception, wars, earthquakes and global troubles which would include famine and pestilence (Mark 13:3–8).

As earlier stated, all these troubles have been with us for centuries. They remain with us today. Verse 8 ends with Jesus saying, “These are the beginnings of sorrows” (emphasis added throughout). For “sorrows,” your Bible may have a marginal reference or different translation noting these are “birth pangs.” And indeed they are—increasing in frequency and intensity in signaling that a new age is about to begin.

Jesus then says, “But watch out for yourselves…” (verse 9). He lists persecutions and betrayals His followers would experience. Through all this He encourages endurance and promises He would be with them. They would not be alone (verses 9–13).

The next few verses give more details of the events surrounding His coming. A key marker is verse 14, which speaks of a particular event yet to occur: “So when you see the “abomination of desolation,” spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing where it ought not” (let the reader understand), “then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.”

This prophecy would have more than one fulfillment. Christ’s reference was to an event that first occurred about 200 years earlier, when a pagan idol was set up at the Jerusalem temple and swine’s flesh offered as a sacrifice on the altar. His disciples, aware of their nation’s history, knew precisely what He spoke about.

But Jesus said a similar event would happen again. And it did when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70. But that was not the end time that Jesus foretold. It was a forerunner, and its primary fulfillment is yet to take place. We do not see it happening under the present political configuration in Jerusalem. Conditions must change. We conclude, then, that as Jesus said in verse 7, “the end is not yet.”

But we are to watch and understand our times (verses 33, 35, 37). As we read Jesus’ statements about spiritual deception, war and other troubles, we see His emphasis on our need to understand these events in their historical and prophetic context.

We look back over the nearly 2,000 years since this prophecy was given and we can easily see how these events have occurred in waves through the centuries. There was a time when powerful combinations of church and state power killed people of faith who dared believe contrary to the edicts of the Roman Catholic Church. Religious wars between Protestants and Catholics, Muslims and Christians, and even Muslims against Muslims have taken the lives of millions of people.

Modern warfare, sadistic governments and other troubles have also been a scourge on the earth, claiming the lives of well over 100 million. Jesus said, “And unless the Lord had shortened those days [through intervening], no flesh would be saved” (verse 20). The human race wiping itself out could only happen in our day with the invention of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. Christ’s emphatic teaching to us is this: “Take heed; see, I have told you all things beforehand” (verse 23).

Watch and pray

In verse 33 Jesus again brings us to what we are to do now as we consider the large lessons from this Covid-19 pandemic. He warns us, “Take heed, watch and pray, for you do now know when the time is.” Today we do not know when Christ will return. Yet we are to “watch and pray.” What exactly does this mean?

“Watch” and “watching” in a biblical sense have a broad meaning that flows from the prophecies of Ezekiel, the prophet who was told he was like a watchman who stood on the walls of the city and warned the people of approaching danger (see Ezekiel 33:1–7). The message of warning was to the people to prepare for a time of danger and siege and all that might bring, including famine and pestilence. They were to take precautions to meet the trial so they could withstand, endure and prevail.

Christ uses the term “watch” to tell us to be aware and alert and discern the conditions of the world around us and to understand where we are in the progression of God’s prophetic plan for this world. But more than that, we are also to be...
Certain lessons from the handling of this present crisis will not be forgotten by those who desire a transnational global order.

We will soon see these and other related trends return and continue, aligning with Bible prophecy.

**How sudden is suddenly?**

In less than two weeks we watched the world go from a sense of normality to urgently reacting to Covid-19, changing the everyday lives of hundreds of millions of people. Its suddenness left many with no time to prepare. Schools and businesses were closed. Major sporting events from the Tokyo Olympics to NBA basketball and all major sporting events around the world were abruptly canceled.

Airline schedules were reduced by 80 percent and more, grounding most major carrier airplanes and placing airlines in financial jeopardy. The Congress of the United States passed a multi-trillion-dollar aid and stimulus package, by far the largest in history. All these are unprecedented events, and all virtually overnight. Even as I write this we are all still trying to comprehend the magnitude of what has happened.

Christ said: “Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time is. It is like a man going to a far country, who left his house and gave authority to his servants, and to each his work, and commanded the doorkeeper to watch” (verses 33-34). He is the Master of the house and we are the servants, each with a mandated authority and work.

“Watch therefore,” He continued, “for you do not know when the master of the house is coming—in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning . . . .” (verse 35). That’s how it is for us at this moment. We do not know when Christ will return, but we know he has a command from Him to watch, pray and continue the work He’s given us to do.

His Church has the authority of the Kingdom of God behind it. We at Beyond Today understand our part in proclaiming the message announcing the coming of God’s Kingdom. This comes with authority to explain what the prophecies of God’s Word say about today’s world events. It includes the authority to make known to you and all who listen the paramount truth that God is creating His own spiritual family, beginning in this age with His Church, the Body of Christ. This is the work we are called to do—a work God wants you to become part of.

Jesus concludes His directive for us to watch here in warning: “. . . lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!” (verses 36-37).

Suddenly, as we have now seen, means without warning, when least expected.

**The fig tree’s leaves**

Shortly before this in the same teaching session with His disciples, Christ gave a short parable about the fig tree. They were familiar with fig trees, as they were found in abundance in the Holy Land at that time. Figs were very important to the economy—a staple of diets and an important source of income and trade. The destruction of fig trees and other agrarian commodities was tied to apocalyptic prophecies in the Scriptures.

Christ said: “Now learn this parable from the fig tree. When its branch has already become tender, and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. So you also, when you see these things happening, know that it is near—at the doors! Assuredly, I say to you, this generation [the generation alive at this time of the end] will by no means pass away till all these things [the events leading to Christ’s return] take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away” (verses 28-31).

As I see the appearance of the green leaves on the woodland vegetation, I think about this passage. It’s not fig trees—the leaves of which came out in the land of Israel before the early wheat harvest at about this time of year—that I see here. But the lesson of seasonal change remains graphic and powerful. Jesus tells us there will be a moment when all that He taught about the end of the age would be near and “all things” will come to pass. Those who are watching for the green leaves of the fig trees will know and act with prudence and wisdom.

We are at a moment when God is taking the measure of the nations. A pestilence has spread among all peoples. Financial worry is everywhere. But rest assured, God is fully aware of what is happening. He has allowed this just as He allows all the affairs of man to happen. God is giving the nations an opportunity to stop and consider His Word and our lives.

What will you learn from this pandemic?

Will you use this moment to seek God while He may be found, and His truth understood?

“What manner of persons ought you to be?”

Earlier I mentioned two previous crisis moments that hit the world—9/11 and the 2008 financial crisis. After both, the world went back to normal. Disney World reopened, and stock markets went back up. We went about our lives as if nothing dramatic had occurred. Yet what about now?

Do not waste this crisis moment by thinking that a return to normal in the weeks and months ahead means nothing significant has happened. Something significant has occurred. Something very significant. God has shown us the utter fragility of life and modern civilization—that no one is immune. You need to act!

During this pandemic our Beyond Today web traffic has shown a spike in activity as people come to us looking for information about what this means. We see people hungry for material on Bible prophecy. And prophecy is indeed important. It can help you understand much about God and His plan. And critically, it should motivate you to change your life based on the sure hope of God’s guiding hand on human affairs.

Hear what Peter says about prophetic events: “Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness . . . ?” (2 Peter 3:11). He is saying an understanding of prophecy should compel us to live a holy, godly life. Because we know a judgment is coming, we should prepare to meet the next moment of trial with faith and courage. Now is the time to prepare your life. Now is the time to seek God and prepare your life for the age to come!
The global economy was blazing upwards, topping $80 trillion, considerably above the $18 trillion level of the early 1980s when the first millennials were born. Multiple millions of people were flying on some 102,000 flights per day, chalk ing up more than 52 billion miles annually. Millennials, now the largest generation in the United States—having surpassed the boomers this past year—had come to represent more than $600 billion of buying power in the United States alone.

Employment was up, particularly in the United States, with thousands of new jobs being created each month and record low unemployment. The stock market broke record after record. There were a few concerns, but life was good.

And then suddenly, in the first quarter of 2020, the robust global economy shattered.

A Wall Street Journal headline summed up the unprecedented pause in the economy as “A $3.6 Trillion Wake-Up Call.” By early April, half of the world’s population was on mandatory lockdown.

Billion, trillion—these are huge numbers that are personally hard to grasp. What it may mean on a personal level is that thousands of companies now totter on the brink of bankruptcy. Our favorite restaurants may be shuttered for good—the employees out of a job. We ourselves or friends and family may be unemployed. That’s on top of the worrying heath concerns. And some in other parts of the world may fare much worse.

How did we get here?

In the latter part of last year, something triggered a microscopic moment. A “novel,” or new, form of coronavirus came into existence and began to spread. It was labeled SARS-CoV-2, with the respiratory illness it causes named coronavirus disease 2019, abbreviated as Covid-19. The tiny pathogen barely 100 nanometers wide (millions can fit on the head of a pin) jumped from an animal to a nameless human being and brought the world to its knees.

While the virus has proven mild for most, many showing little or no symptoms, it has been quite severe and even fatal among a smaller percentage that nevertheless represents a large number of people. Attempts to prevent fatalities and spread out infections to keep medical services from being overwhelmed, threatening even more lives, have had a major impact on virtually the whole of human civilization.

Given the virus’ unrelenting spread, you may well know people who were severely infected and even some who’ve died. Maybe you’ve had your own serious experience with the disease. You could be among those who’ve lain helpless in an ICU ward, barely aware of the hissing and clicking of a ventilator alongside you pumping essential air into ravaged lungs. As you read this, you likely count yourself among the fortunate.

The virus has left a grievous toll in the first four months of 2020. For most, nothing was left untouched. The coronavirus inserted itself throughout the sweeping arc of human experience—physical, economic, emotional, mental and, yes, even spiritual.

Where once we thought ourselves invincible, where once we thought science could solve any challenge, where once we thought we could rein in the power of nature to what English writer Joseph Conrad called “the shackled form of a conquered monster,” we found ourselves instead living in a world of newfound peril. In fact, we found this menacing peril in a form so tiny we could not even see where it lived or attacked.

We found ourselves, our economic livelihood—indeed our families and those most close to us—to be fragile, vulnerable, at risk in a world suddenly turned hostile, precarious and out of our control.

Whatever your experience of the past few months, the coronavirus crisis of 2020 is not something you or billions of other people who sat on lockdown and dodged a viral bullet will ever forget.

In a Post-Pandemic World, Choose to Change!

Staying home in self-quarantine during the recent pandemic has given many of us time to think deeply about the state of the world and our own spiritual condition. Will we go back to our old ways? Or will we recognize that it’s time to think differently?

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like—is already being called a “new normal,” coming on the heels of a destabilized global imbalance with the rules completely rewritten. As part of this, there will be more focus on the emergence of future threats and the implementation of restrictive preventative measures to try to head off terrible scenarios.

This isn’t pleasant to think about. But there is a dependable way to powerfully shore up your life—one that receives more attention in difficult times, as we’ve been experiencing. It’s a way that brings real hope and confidence, even in the middle of a pandemic and concerns about other calamities to come.

A return to reality

Before we take a look at that welcome good news, let’s fully appreciate who and what we are as human beings. As several historians, scientists and epidemiologists have noted in the past few months, people have forgotten, perhaps even intellectually pandered over, just how fragile we are.

We don’t think about the fact that up through the 18th century, many children died in childbirth, right along with their mothers. Many never lived to see their third birthday. For those who did, reaching 40 was a milestone. A great many never made it that far.

Advances in public health, food production, medicine and societal hygiene changed all that. But even with the now-mundane miracles of modern health care and sanitation, the fragile vulnerability of human life always lay covered by a thin veneer. People don’t like to think of the potentially harmful unseen microbes all around us and among us.

You’ve probably read or heard that numerous scientists and government planners warned for years of the dangers of our global society being throttled by a host of contagious diseases. And with good reason! An outbreak of Ebola hemorrhagic fever savaged its way across West Africa for two years, finally sighing to a halt in 2016 after killing more than 11,000.

A concerted worldwide marshaling of medical resources, and the fact that the virus killed its hosts before they had time to spread it very far, barely prevented what the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said could have been a global catastrophe.

Perhaps astonishingly in retrospect, in the pause that followed the Ebola outbreak, the World Health Organization (WHO) predicted that a number of identified contagions, including a variant of the coronavirus, could result in a pandemic like today!

The point? Human life is chancy.

Incredible leaps in medical discoveries, treatments and life-saving advances have elevated human life expectancy well past where it was before modern times. A century has passed since the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918, when a particularly virulent influenza virus infected 500 million people worldwide and wiped out 50 million of that number, more than twice the number of deaths from World War I.

That was then, we thought. That could never happen again, we assured ourselves. But with recent events we’re realizing that yes, it could happen again.

A moment to pause and reflect

The economic, emotional and intellectual devastation springing from the global onslaught of Covid-19 has led many to contemplate anew just how fragile human life is. Consider the title of a recent article in London’s Daily Telegraph: “At times like this, we realize just how powerless mankind really is” (Philip Johnston, March 17, 2020).

Cataclysmic events arrest our attention. We have no choice. Going forward, people won’t reflect on 2020 without some thought of the Covid-19 crisis.

Ironically, the autobiography of the celebrated and controversial filmmaker Woody Allen appeared during the sweeping waves of the coronavirus. Titled Apropos of Nothing, Allen spoke of his work in the context of “the malignant chaos of a purposeless universe.”

The universe can certainly be dangerous, particularly when we don’t respect it. But purposeless?

It can be fearful, even exhausting, to consider the various threats facing the human race. But the good news is that the universe and all of us do in fact have a purpose—a purpose that brings hope!

Here’s the pivot point: Are we experiencing a moment, on a cosmic scale, in which we are essentially being given the opportunity to stop and think? To consider that perhaps the way we live life suddenly doesn’t work anymore?

What does this mean for us?

In times of inescapable widespread disruption, the relative importance of various aspects of our lives may quickly change, and we realize the need to reprioritize. In a post-coronavirus world, we have more impetus to take action.

Increased awareness

In short, we’ve become more aware.

We see with greater clarity that material things, overly ambitious motivations and position in life may come with a price that is much too high to pay. We become aware of the need to change, the need to consider different options and solutions.

We may once have thought that science had all the answers. But now, as an invisible virus has threatened everything we once held dear, we may recognize that while science is certainly important, it can’t give us all the answers.

We may have thought that science had all the answers. But now, as an invisible virus threatens everything, we recognize that while science is important, it can’t give us all the answers.
Exercising free will

As human beings, particularly those living in societies with a strong democratic tradition, we hold the capacity to exercise free will. As we become aware of the need for change, we exercise our free will to take responsibility for our actions. We have a choice.

We can choose a life that brings real hope, a life that can weather the toughest storm, a fulfilling life that offers happiness and real satisfaction. Or we can exercise our free will to go our own way, stumbling through by trial and error, subject to forces like the coronavirus that take away things we once thought had meaning.

Consider this: A loving God once set these two ways of life before an ancient people who would become profoundly influential. Speaking through His servant Moses, God presented them with this choice: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse….” (Deuteronomy 30:19, English Standard Version, emphasis added throughout.)

What was the critical option? Continuing in the same verse: “…Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live” (ESV).

Through the bestowal of free will, God grants you the same choice. Now, given the influence of wayward society, many of us may not previously have been fully aware of God and what He represents. Indeed, much of society has veered away from the critical, life-saving knowledge preserved for us in the Bible—the very Word of God. Still, the choice is before us.

What will you decide?

An unusual and powerful word

As we become aware of the possibility of having a powerful relationship with a God who cares, a God who sent His own Son to bridge the gap between God and man, we may rightly ask, what do I need to do?

The answer lies in the meaning of a New Testament Greek word. Its basic verb form is metanoé. The noun form is metanoia. The sense of the word from its component parts is “to change one’s mind” or to “think differently.”

As awareness enters our lives, particularly in the wake of widespread disruption from the global infection of Covid-19, we find that we must begin—in a very profound way—to think differently.

The English word usually used to translate this Greek term is one you are likely familiar with, yet perhaps without realizing this broader sense. That English word is repent.

“Oh, no,” one may object. “I may need to do a lot of things, but I certainly don’t need to ‘repent’!” That reaction comes in part from resistant human nature but also likely from the accumulated—though inaccurate—historical definition of repentance being associated with toxic shame and guilt.

The Bible talks about a “godly sorrow” that is highly motivating and leads to life (2 Corinthians 7:10-11). It involves a profound awareness that one has been going the wrong way and misapplying free will. It includes spiritual zeal to reverse that misapplication, to change one’s mind, and embark on a new path of spiritual transformation.

A person can humanly be genuinely sorry for having embraced a flawed way of life that has brought harm. But godly sorrow goes beyond that, involving a recognition and repudiation of one’s wayward past and a passion to truly set things right, leading to really thinking differently.

When Jesus Christ began His ministry, He proclaimed, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent [metanoé, think differently!] and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15, ESV).

Experiencing forgiveness, peace and joy

In response to greater awareness of God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ and Their desire for a close relationship with us, we set out on the process of beginning to think differently—to repent. This typically leads to an understanding that we need forgiveness for past wrongs and release from guilt, blame and shame—and from sin’s consequences of misery and death.

We begin to see the need for a personal Savior.

Being forgiven through turning from our former ways and accepting Jesus Christ as personal Savior leads to a new level of peace. Becoming students of His way, making the personal decision to “choose life,” we begin—even in the face of worldwide upheaval resulting from a microscopic virus—to have a new peace and confidence that passes human understanding (Philippians 4:7).

Despite going through an uncertain time of dangerous infection and severe economic downturn, an outcome of acting on awareness, exercising free will to make the right choice and beginning to think differently leads to not only peace but a new feeling of real joy!

This new joy springs from new confidence, which comes from spiritual hope, a hope that defies mere human logic. The apostle Paul wrote to Christ’s followers in Rome, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope” (Romans 15:13, ESV).

In gaining awareness, we further find that “thinking differently” also includes a new and critical capacity to believe. We find that “whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Hebrews 11:6, ESV). To succeed in this new way of thinking differently, we must believe both that God exists—a part of becoming aware—and that God rewards those who seek Him.

Again, what about you? The world is in denial. It is largely unaware of the real power and purpose that comes with an understanding of God.

Will you remain in denial, resistant to receiving the extraordinary power that brings, hope, forgiveness, peace and even joy? Or will you embrace a new life of thinking differently, of real repentance that leads to life?

The choice is yours. Choose to change. Choose life!

LEARN MORE

How can you find real peace in a world of turmoil? It won’t be found in continuing with your life as it’s always been, but in doing what our Creator tells us to do. To learn more, download or request our free study guide Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion.

BTmagazine.org/booklets
Jesus posed a startling question to His disciples in Luke 18:8: “When the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?”

Faith in God is diminishing day by day, year by year. Statisticians and researchers have produced many reports showing the decline of faith in America and the Western world.

When a crisis strikes our world—be it a war, a terrorist attack or a health pandemic—we often see a short-lived return to faith. More prayers go up to God for a short while. Recent Pew research polling has found that most people are praying more during the coronavirus outbreak than before.

But the pattern we’ve seen before is that as a great crisis is resolved and fades, life goes back to normal. Churches are mostly empty again. What are people thinking, and does it matter?

Why should we be concerned about what society at large believes? As long as we do what’s right, how does the world’s rejection of God affect us? Of course we sorrow over what we see, and there is a danger of wrong ideas rubbing off on us if we’re not careful. But there’s more.

It’s been proven that faith in the God of the Bible has a huge, positive impact on society. This is not something that can be accomplished by atheists or religious “nones,” as many list their affiliation. A culture based on Judeo-Christian principles, as shown by decades of research, develops the most stable, law-abiding and prosperous model for a society or nation.

If a nation strays from this religious basis, what can we expect? Economic upheaval. Failings in governance and justice. Unhappiness. Drug epidemics. Violent crimes. Family breakdown. These are the results of a nation distancing itself from God and His way of life. We see it happening right now, all around us.

In Luke 17:5, “the apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith.’” They obviously saw the works Jesus did and heard the high standard of His teaching—realizing they needed more faith!

Amazingly, as the end of this age draws closer, people tend to exercise less faith. They don’t seek it as they once did. Perhaps technology plays a role in this. Perhaps there are too many distractions that compete with faith in God. It’s not until we are faced with a life-altering situation—like the Covid-19 pandemic and financial disruption, which can mean loss of livelihood for many and actual loss of life for some—that we look up for greater answers and seek God more.

Society needs increased faith in God—but sadly it is headed in exactly the opposite direction. We must resist this pull, praying for God to increase our faith so we don’t succumb to the spirit of the world.

Here are some key reasons why faith in God has diminished.

1. **Today we have more solutions to our previously unsolvable problems.**

   There have been medical advances to handle our ever-growing number of ailments. More medical care is available and extended to more people. With recent epidemics, doctors and scientists have been relatively quick in finding and implementing treatments to help alleviate the severity of the problems.

   But it’s not only medical advances that are seemingly solving our problems. Many people believe that, given enough time, scientists will solve all of humanity’s problems. They do not put their faith in living God’s way or following the admonitions of Jesus Christ, but instead solely trust in science.

   Of course we should consider that with new diseases there can be significant lag until solutions are found. There may be some that come with such severity and suddenness that society is overwhelmed and too far gone before needed treatment exists. And some problems will never be solved this way. Medical science was clearly not prepared for the novel coronavirus. It’s certainly not prepared for every eventuality. God, however, is.

2. **We have more wealth and various social systems, so people are not without help of some form.**

   Social welfare and various forms of government assistance have for some time been given to more than 50 percent of the U.S. population. Other countries have an even higher percentage. And now assistance has shot through the roof with the recent stimulus. Yet for a long time before, more and more people have been putting their trust and faith in government at the expense of faith in God!

   Interestingly, social scientists will tell you that once more than half of the population becomes dependent on the government, there is no turning back. Wouldn’t it be great if more than half of the population put its reliance on Almighty God instead?

   Again, human governments the world over were woefully unprepared even in physical terms for Covid-19—leading to greater suffering and troubles. And the full eventual results of government policy in dealing with the matter are yet to be seen but could be dire. Man can’t effectively predict the future. But God can!

3. **We have more knowledge now and more means of finding solutions.**

   Since the advent of modern technology, there is always a new way of doing things, of understanding things, which will somehow supposedly make your life better. Of course, this becomes the goal—to make your life better, not to live a more godly life.

   Yet when you dig a little deeper, you will find that things are not better. Despite technology and more solutions, more wealth in some countries, more government assistance and more knowledge, people are actually not any happier. And
Turning to God in the Face of Cataclysm

Some have recognized the present crisis as a moment for spiritual reflection and renewal. The following is excerpted from a remarkable March 26, 2020, Wall Street Journal article “A Coronavirus Great Awakening?” by Robert Nicholson, director of a nonprofit organization for Christian advocacy in the Middle East. It reminds us that at times like this we should turn to God and seek His will.

“Could a plague of biblical proportions be America’s best hope for religious revival? As the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II approaches, there is reason to think so . . . Gazing at the ruins [of that war] from his window at Cambridge University, British historian Herbert Butterfield chose to make sense of it by turning to the Hebrew Bible.

“The power of the Old Testament teaching on history . . . lay precisely in the region of truths which sprang from a reflection on catastrophe and cataclysm;” Butterfield wrote in ‘Christianity and History’ (1949). ‘It is almost impossible properly to appreciate the higher developments in the historical reflection of the Old Testament except in another age which has experienced (or has found itself confronted with) colossal cataclysm.’

“Americans [then], chastened by the horrors of war, turned to faith in search of truth and meaning . . . Today the world faces another moment of cataclysm. Though less devastating than World War II, the pandemic has remade everyday life and wrecked the global economy in a way that feels apocalyptic.

“The experience is new and disorienting. Life had been deceptively easy until now. Our ancestors’ lives, by contrast, were guaranteed to be short and painful . . . We reduced nature to ‘the shackled form of a conquered monster,’ as Joseph Conrad once put it, and took control of our fate. God became irrelevant.

“Who will save us now that the monster has broken free? . . . Butterfield wrote [further] . . . ‘We of the twentieth century have been particularly spoiled . . . all our ancestors . . . betray in their philosophy and their outlook a terrible awareness of the chanciness of human life, and the precarious nature of man’s existence in this risky universe’ . . .

“The pandemic has humbled the country and opened millions of eyes to this risky universe once more.

“Sheer grimness of suffering brings men sometimes into a profounder understanding of human destiny,” Butterfield wrote. Sometimes ‘it is only by a cataclysm,’ he continued, ‘that man can make his escape from the net which he has taken so much trouble to weave around himself.’

“For societies founded on the biblical tradition, cataclysms need not mark the end. They are a call for repentance and revival . . . Great struggle can produce great clarity.

“The ancient Hebrews . . . turned their tragedy, turned their very helplessness, into one of the half-dozen creative moments in world history,” Butterfield wrote. ‘It would seem that one of the clearest and most concrete of the facts of history is the fact that men of spiritual resources may not only redeem catastrophe, but turn it into a grand creative moment.’

“Could a rogue virus lead to a grand creative moment in America’s history? Will Americans, shaken by the reality of a risky universe, rediscover the God who proclaimed himself sovereign over every catastrophe?”

Faith misplaced

Again, Jesus asked if He would find faith on the earth when He returned. Well, there is widespread faith—but it is sorely misplaced. People trust in the wrong things. Jesus was talking about true, rightly placed faith in God. And on a worldwide scale, the answer to Jesus’ question, then, will for the most part be “no.”

A prophecy of the end time, right before Jesus Christ returns to the earth, shows that humanity as a whole will not have faith in God. They will refuse to follow the teachings of Jesus even in the face of cataclysmic events that take millions of lives. We read in Revelation 9:20-21:

“But the rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, that they should not worship demons, and idols of gold, silver, brass, stone, and wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk [looking to wrong forces and tangible things to help them]. And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.”

When the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith—the right kind of faith—on the earth? Not a whole lot. Despite the pain and suffering, prior to Jesus’ return humanity will not return to faith in our Creator. Mankind as a whole will not repent.

Will you be the exception?

The exception will be the people of God, His faithful servants led by Jesus Christ, being prepared for Jesus’ return to lead and teach true Christianity throughout the world.

Let’s heed the warning given to you and me. Don’t be one of those who abandon faith in God! As the apostle Paul writes, “Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron” (1 Timothy 4:1-2).

We must remain faithful! We must not let the world see our conscience. When Jesus Christ returns, He must find faith in us.

After writing of people being pulled away into destructive desires, Paul says: “But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses” (1 Timothy 6:11-12).

We are called to the way of properly placed faith—of heart felt trust in the Creator God of the Bible who made us. Truly seek Him and obedience to Him in a world growing more faithless and more hopeless every day.

Don’t give in to the spirit of the world. The danger of that will grow when the current crisis passes and all returns to a certain state of normality. Turn to God now in hard times, and hold on to Him when things calm down. Don’t let down in times of relative ease. And don’t put undue trust in the world around you to solve its problems. It ultimately won’t. Look to God for that—to the very end.

Will Jesus find such faith when He comes? Yes. Where? I pray He will find it in you!
Covid-19 and **Rampant Fear**

The Bible foretells a rise of disease epidemics and other calamities, but it also foretells mass panic. Put your trust where you should and don’t give in to fear.

by Darris McNeely

The pandemic spread of the recent novel coronavirus strain Covid-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) has, following an explosion of cases into a worldwide pandemic in 2020, given us another real-time example of how quickly world conditions can change and give rise to fear and panic.

Stock markets were destabilized, with whole nations diverting resources and attention to containment and cities and regions quarantining citizens. It’s been like a storm that rises quickly on the horizon and, before anyone can discern what’s happening and take shelter or other precautions, it slams into society and upends normal life.

This virus is serious for several reasons. First, like flu viruses, it causes death in a significant number of cases, the elderly being most vulnerable. Second, as of this writing, there is no vaccine, and development takes months. Third, many who have the virus show no symptoms, making it hard to tell who does or doesn’t carry it and may be spreading it others.

But perhaps more serious is the reaction to this virus because of our interconnected world. With growing cases, people everywhere have been on lockdown. Huge numbers have lost jobs. Many are worried and scared—very scared.

**Dismayed at what may come and lack of state protection**

Fear is a common reaction in the face of a pandemic outbreak—fear of the unknown, fear of where this could lead. Will it kill a few thousand or hundreds of thousands? What will happen to the economy? What will the impact be on jobs? On travel? On political elections? On international relations? People wonder whether we’ll ever see “normal” again and regain control of events.

In a *Geopolitical Futures* column earlier this year, international strategist George Friedman wrote about the reaction to the virus. He commented: “The threat of the virus is not only that we may die, but that the fear of death will cause the world to heave up out of control. The virus first emerged with authority in China, a country dominated by the idea that the state’s power governs all things. This belief holds a fractious nation together in pride at how the state had made China great.

“The coronavirus showed the limits of human power, even in China. Beijing insists that it will deal with the virus and that its edicts will stop its spread, but the reality is that China is being overwhelmed, both by the disease and by the fear of the disease” (“Thoughts on the Coronavirus,” March 3, 2020, emphasis added throughout). While China has made strides in bringing down the number of fatalities, Friedman’s underlying point is crucial: Our global world fosters trust and reliance on the state. People look to the leader, the party, the system, the government to provide for our needs and protect us from enemies—whether a foreign power or a tiny, invisible virus. The Bible shows that in the years ahead, world conditions will get so bad that people will cede sovereignty to a totalitarian system called the Beast, a supranational political, economic and spiritual power promising order and security (Revelation 17:13; 13:3-4).

Such misplaced confidence underlies some of the panic we’ve seen over Covid-19 and the casting of blame in the face of it. Friedman goes on to say of such “unpredictable events that wreak economic and geopolitical expectations . . . We search for explanations. Since we no longer believe that they are here as God’s punishment for our sins [—not that this must be the case, but how many these days would even consider it?—], they must have been caused by biological warfare units, or have spread because of the incompetence of scientists and politicians. Where priests used to comfort us, now leaders do, and now we hold the leader responsible not for causing the virus, but for not acting quickly enough to protect us.”

Gradually the state has over the years effectively become the secular religion, and not just in communist or other despotic nations. The size of government has grown massively while religion has declined. In the Western world, God, the Bible and organized religion no longer hold the position in people’s minds they once did.

Friedman concludes: “But we have come to expect to be protected, and when we are not our imaginations turn to the apocalypse. The successes of science and the claims of politicians have led us to believe in human invincibility so that the arrival of the virus is a violation of the social contract between the state, science and us. There are limits to power, and that, above all else, frightens us.”

Fear is a major aspect of coming dire events prophesied in the Bible. The end of the age is marked by not only increasing war, famine and disease pandemics but by increasing fear of these things and worsening calamity. Even if the coronavirus pandemic itself does not turn out to be as catastrophic as many have predicted, as appears to be the case, people’s response to it—in either dismissal or panic—can have
devastating effect. This should be a wake-up call for all of us. It also gives us lessons in what to expect going forward.

**Warnings of increasing panic**

Government cannot guarantee your safety or immunity from catastrophe. Much in nature is beyond the control of human beings. Far better for us to learn this now so as to be prepared when much bigger calamities erupt on the world. We can all start right now by not reacting with paralyzing fear.

Notice what Jesus said in His Olivet prophecy, as it is called, about events as the end time approaches: “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be great earthquakes in various places, and famines and pestilences; and there will be fearful sights and great signs from heaven” (Luke 21:10-11).

Great earthquakes and famines combined with pestilences will be terrifying to experience. Coupled with heavenly signs unlike anything ever seen, you can imagine the human reaction. But there’s more to it than that.

He continues, “And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; men’s hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken” (verses 25-26, emphasis added throughout).

Consider for a moment that there have long been earthquakes, pestilences and other calamities around the world. But people in other places often didn’t hear about them—or news of them would arrive at a much slower pace.

Today, because of our modern interconnectedness, we hear it all instantly and see it in real time! News from China, Italy, Africa, Europe or other parts of the country we live in seems to be next door even when it’s not. And that drives an increase of fear everywhere—of mass panic.

It’s made even worse by the sensationalism of the news media. Fear sells, and so we have more of it. Bad news draws attention to cable network shows and drives traffic to Internet sites.

One serious consequence of both genuine health concerns and overhyped ones is that the economy is being severely damaged—bringing far worse hurt overall than the health crisis alone probably would. And the negative economic reporting and forecasting plays into yet more fear—which perpetuates the cycle.

Notice Jesus warned of not only terrible events to come, but of a terrifying expectation of worsening events and resultant widespread fear.

The Bible long before warned of such fear as part of the curses for disobeying God: “Your life shall hang in doubt before you; you shall fear day and night, and have no assurance of life. In the morning you shall say, ‘Oh, that it were evening!’ And at evening you shall say, ‘Oh, that it were morning!’ because of the fear which terrifies your heart, and because of the sight which your eyes see” (Deuteronomy 28:66-67).

We of course don’t want to minimize this virus in any way, but it is good to step back and survey what is happening.

Regardless of how widespread and/or dangerous this pandemic proves to be, we should not buy into fear—not if we are wise and heeding what Scripture tells us. Of course, we must take wise precautions in the face of danger—and the wisest of all is knowing where to put our trust and acting on that.

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**Christ’s faithful followers need not fear**

While not giving in to fear, we also must not reason that we should just live it up as though nothing matters. Jesus goes on to say to His disciples in Luke 21:

“But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. 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” (verses 34-36).

A disciple who is in a watchful, ready state of mind will not be caught off guard when such events occur. That is why Jesus spoke about them. He wants His followers to “lift up your heads” (verse 28) when these awful, age-ending events occur.

Today when earthquakes occur in remote poor regions of the world where buildings fall like cards or tornadoes roar through a city leaving buildings in piles of sticks and bricks, it is terrible. Multiply that by many levels of magnitude and to saturation everywhere in the coming calamities at the end of the age and the scale boggles the mind. Yet uncontrolled fear will not rule those who hear Christ’s teaching and do what He says.

At the end of His famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus showed the difference between those who watch and obey and those who ignore the warning and go about their lives as if nothing will happen or just hunker down in fear while remaining unrepentant. It is the difference between building a foundation on rock and building on sand:

“Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock.

“But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was its fall” (Matthew 7:26-27).

Covid-19 and the fallout that has accompanied it have come up like a sudden storm on the world horizon. We don’t yet know how severe it or its economic impact will ultimately be. But Bible believers do know that it is a harbinger of greater and more deadly storms to come. For now we have a moment to learn—a moment to examine our foundation—a wake-up call. Are our lives built on the rock or on sand?

Do not give in to fear. Do not panic and despair. This is a time to lift up your head and heart to God and seek Him while He may still be found. He hears those who seek Him and who humble their hearts before Him!
The Snare of Sudden Change

Events like the coronavirus pandemic show how quickly things can change. Jesus foretold that end-time events would catch the world off guard. But you can prepare right now.

by Justin Palm

Many things are lost to history. We try to read what we can, study the history books, watch the documentaries, ask the right questions of those who lived through history, and understand the chapters that came before the day we were born. But we just can’t know everything. Some or most of the big events, yes, but not all the in-between stuff, the small and medium things. And sometimes it takes us longer than we would like to learn even the big things.

It was not until I was 17 that I learned about the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic. I was shocked by the staggering death toll and the things that happened in America during that crazy and sad time. The bodies piled up. The wearing of masks. The overrun hospitals. The societal changes. And I wondered why I hadn’t heard about it before.

One thing often lost to history is the timing of events—how slowly or quickly conditions developed. Sometimes there’s a slow buildup, then a tipping point, and then a crash. Think Rome. At other times events happen fast—really fast—like a rug being pulled out from under us. Think 9/11. The hijacked planes literally came out of a clear blue sky.

The latest world crisis—the coronavirus pandemic—is another example of how rapidly things can change. Predictions at the beginning of January 2020 about what the year would bring made no mention of a global shutdown of businesses, travel, economies, staggering job losses, fear, hoarding and growing thousands of dead around the world.

The world didn’t see it coming. Even medical experts who raised their voices of warning could not have predicted the exact nature of the pandemic and the response.

What can we learn from other times in history when world conditions changed quickly? And does Bible prophecy shed any light on what’s going on today?

When Germany was transformed in 100 days

As we come to the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II, let’s look back at some of the events in Germany in the 1930s that led to that conflict. There has probably never been a period of mankind’s history that has been analyzed to the same degree as that of World War II. There are so many aspects to this climactic horror that books and movies about it seem to be endless—rightly so.

A new book titled Hitler’s First Hundred Days by historian Peter Fritzsche details how rapidly Adolf Hitler took control of Germany. Looking at this period shows us how rapidly things can deteriorate today, as we consider the years ahead, particularly in Europe.

Here’s what a New York Times reviewer said about the new book:

“Historian Peter Fritzsche shows how Hitler and the National Socialists wasted little time after he was appointed chancellor on Jan. 30, 1933, in crushing what remained of the Weimar Republic and installing ‘the 20th century’s most popular dictatorship.’

“The changes were audacious, and they were swift. On Day 4, Hitler and his conservative allies censored any press that showed ‘contempt’ for government. On Day 7, he established links between his brownshirt paramilitaries and the official law-and-order apparatus of the state.

“The Reichstag fire on Day 29 gave Hitler the pretext he needed to get President Paul von Hindenburg to sign an emergency decree suspending civil liberties, and the Reichstag elections a week later consolidated the Nazis’ grip on power. On Day 61, the Nazis organized a nationwide boycott of Jewish businesses, and six days later purged the civil service of Jews” (Jennifer Szalai, “A Sobering Look at How Quickly Hitler Transformed Germany,” March 17, 2020).

Shocking but true! In just 100 days—a little over three months—Germany was no longer the same Germany. It was something completely different, darker and dangerous.

The reviewer continues with this observation about what the book lays out:

“There’s something particularly clarifying about the hundred-days framing, especially as it’s presented in this elegant and sobering book, which shows how an unimaginable political transformation can happen astonishingly quickly . . .

“Fritzsche’s hundred-days narrative takes us up to May 9, 1933, when Germany had become unrecognizable from the republic it had been just a few months before. The fragmented opposition to the Nazis had been either co-opted or destroyed. The country’s
new ‘constitution,’ of Nazi rule by emergency decree, amounted to what one émigré scholar called a permanent ‘state of siege.’ On Day 101, there were book burnings organized by Nazi students; on Day 166, sterilization laws were announced.9

Just like Germany in the 1930s, world conditions can change rapidly today. The coronavirus crept up on all of us. And as the days have gone by, life has seemed so surreal—like nothing we’ve seen before. The global economy was transformed in a matter of weeks. And major geopolitical changes may yet follow. The pandemic has shown us that we cannot always see things coming, that even the experts fail in predicting what are called “black swan” events—rare and unexpected occurrences with potentially catastrophic consequences.

But what if there were a source, an authority, we could turn to for answers about our future? There is! But sadly most do not take a serious look at what its pages tell us.

The future revealed

Most people, including professing Christians, do not know the details of prophecy as revealed in the Bible. But God has not left us in the dark about what lies ahead. In a number of places, Jesus Christ clearly explained what would happen before His second coming. He said that before the arrival of the Kingdom of God—which will establish universal peace and prosperity—horrible events would come upon all nations. As the saying goes, “It’s always darkest before dawn.”

Jesus warned of the time of His coming and accompanying earth-shaking events, “It will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth” (Luke 21:35, emphasis added throughout). A snare is used to trap animals in hunting. Often well-hidden, snares take their quarry suddenly and unexpectedly. With this analogy, Jesus warns all those who have “ears to hear” what is coming in the years just ahead.

Just before this, Jesus explained what His followers must do to prevent being caught off guard by the “snare” of end-time events: “But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life [distractions], and that Day come on you unexpectedly” (verse 34).

Christ then says, “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” (verse 36).

God recorded these things in His Word to warn us ahead of time. He wants us to escape! He wants to repent and turn to Him. He does not desire that anyone die, but that all men repent and live! Notice what He said through the prophet Ezekiel: “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live” (33:11).

It is not God’s plan to allow the human race to be wiped out or to annihilate itself, even though He will allow terrible calamities to come on the world. God is working out a purpose to teach humanity important lessons so that we turn to Him. He created all human beings for an incredible future, and you can learn about this purpose for your life in the pages of the Bible. Ultimately, God’s wonderful plan will be carried out, and all peoples will learn to live in harmony with others and with God.

The good news

Despite all the bad news around us, Jesus said in Luke 21:31 that we can take comfort in knowing that the Kingdom of God is just around the corner. Notice: “When you see these things happening [referring to calamitous end-time conditions], know that the kingdom of God is near.”

There is still hope! There is light at the end of the tunnel. While we live in what the Bible calls the time of the end, this does not mean the human race or the earth are coming to an end. Rather, it means the age of man’s misrule under the influence of Satan is ending, to be followed by the return of Jesus Christ, who will usher in the world-ruling Kingdom of God. As Christ’s gospel message proclaims, the world will then experience a glorious disease-free era of peace and stability during which all peoples will learn to live according to God’s righteous way of life.

But again, there will be dark days before that—the worst time of trouble the world has ever seen.

We have not yet entered the final phase of this dark period. We may yet see a stretch of a “new normal” after the current crisis is behind us. Regardless, current events clearly show that the world really can be turned on its head overnight—and at some point this is going to happen on a vastly greater scale.

While most people will not wake up and heed God’s warning now, you can be an exception!

Dramatic prophesied world crises do not have to hit you without warning. You can know exactly what Jesus foretold would come on an unprepared world. Pandemics like the coronavirus are just one of the conditions He said would occur before His return.

Now is the time!

A powerful passage from the apostle Paul puts an exclamation point on Christ’s warnings: “For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, ’Peace and safety!’ then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober” (1 Thessalonians 5:2-6).

So what will you do? Will you sleep or stay alert and watch? What changes will you make in your life today in striving to follow God and obey what He says?

Now is the time to change, to draw close to God in Bible study, prayer and fasting.

Seek God while He may be found (Isaiah 55:6).

There is still time to prepare yourself and to strive to be counted worthy to escape coming catastrophes and to stand before Jesus Christ at His return!  

LEARN MORE

To learn more about what will happen before Christ’s second coming and how you can prepare spiritually, be sure to read our informative study guide Are We Living in the Time of the End? Download or request your free copy today!
The year 2020 dawned with hope and promise. Yes, there were the usual global trouble spots and troublesome leaders, but on the whole things seemed quite positive.

But virtually overnight, conditions changed—dramatically. Worrying reports began to emerge from China about a new virus that had crossed from animals to human beings, similar to earlier swine flu and bird flu. In many ways this new or “novel” coronavirus seemed similar to common cold and flu viruses. But this one was different.

Since this virus originated in animals—most likely bats—and then mutated and made the jump to human beings, the new human hosts infected by this virus had no natural immunity or defenses.

Initially China, and then the World Health Organization (WHO), downplayed the threat of human-to-human spread. But the danger soon grew too great to ignore. It could indeed be spread person-to-person, and unlike normal colds and flu, the transmission and death rates for this virus appeared to be much higher. The elderly in particular seemed prone to fatal lung infections. The death toll quickly mounted into the hundreds, then thousands.

China soon locked down Wuhan, center of the epidemic, banning all traffic into and out of the city. Its 11 million residents were ordered to stay indoors. Shortly after, other cities with millions of residents were placed on similar lockdowns. By the end of January the World Health Organization had reversed course and declared a global health emergency.

In hindsight, this was obviously too little, too late. Within weeks the Covid-19 virus had spread throughout much of the world before most people had a clue what was going on. The epidemic’s spread was greatly aided by the fact that governments were slow to shut down international travel, large numbers of infected people showed no signs of illness, the incubation period was up to two weeks long, no one was sure how the virus was spread and no known detection test or treatment was available.

All across the world, governments and hospitals were woefully unprepared for the growing flood of patients—in spite of repeated past warnings of the probability of just such a pandemic.

Pandemics and Bible prophecy

Pandemics—global epidemics—have been with us for a long time. Covid-19 is simply the latest. Tomorrow we could as easily see another, much more severe plague emerge seemingly out of nowhere to sweep around the globe, leaving misery and millions of dead in its wake.

How does all this fit with Bible prophecy? Does prophecy shed any light on our current conditions and what we might expect in the future?

Shortly before His crucifixion, Jesus’ disciples asked Him what “signs”—events or trends—would precede His return. In response, He listed religious deception, war, famines and pestilences. These, He said, would be “the beginning of sorrows” (Matthew 24:5-8, emphasis added throughout).

This would lead into what is commonly called the great tribulation—“a time of great distress, such as there has never been before since the beginning of the world, and will never be again.” He then added, “If that time of troubles were not cut short, no living thing could survive, but for the sake of God’s chosen it will be cut short” (verses 21-22, Revised English Version).

This is truly sobering to contemplate. Could mankind really face a time in which every living being on earth could face extinction? (Actually, that possibility is already here through...
existing nuclear, chemical and biological warfare capabilities.)

**The four horsemen of the Apocalypse**

Jesus’ prophecy in Matthew 24 is a bare-bones outline of end-time trends and events. He gave a much more detailed prophecy in the book of Revelation, which we are told in its first verse is "the Revelation of Jesus Christ."

In Revelation 6 we find the same four major trends Jesus foretold in Matthew 24—religious deception, war, famines and pestilences—repeated.

The first rider, in verse 2, is mounted on a white horse. Some assume this is Jesus Christ, but not so! Christ does return on a white horse, but not until much later in the prophetic timeline of the book. This first rider wields a bow and wears a crown. But the real Jesus bears a sword and wears many crowns. The first rider is an imposter, representing corrupted and false religion that will deceive most of mankind (see Matthew 24:5, 11, 24).

The second horseman rides a fiery red horse, “and it was granted to the one who sat on it to take peace from the earth, and that people should kill one another; and there was given to him a great sword” (verse 4). This horse represents the bloodshed and horror of widespread warfare Jesus foretold in Matthew 24:6-7.

Revelation 6:5 describes a black horse, and the rider carries scales in his hand. A voice describes the scarcity of food that will strike the earth in the aftermath of war. This represents the famine conditions Jesus foretold in Matthew 24:7.

Then we come to the fourth horse and the apostle John describes it as “a horse whose color was pale green. Its rider was named Death, and his companion was the Grave” (Revelation 6:8, New Living Translation).

*The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* says this about the pale green color of the fourth horse: “‘Pale’ (*chloros*) denotes a yellowish green . . . the paleness of a sick person in contrast to a healthy appearance.” Put bluntly, this horse is the color of death—which is the name of its rider.

In Jesus’ prophecy recorded in Matthew 24, in the wake of religious deception, warfare and famine, another wave of disasters will strike the earth—"pestilences" or disease epidemics (verse 7).

Ominously, John tells us in Revelation 6:8 that “power was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, with hunger, with death, and by the beasts of the earth.”

And besides disease will come other plagues. Jesus further mentioned great “earthquakes” (Matthew 24:7; Revelation 6:12)—a term that, in the original Greek, can also apply to other natural calamities such as great storms and tsunamis.

Amid such horrors, disease epidemics will take the lives of hundreds of millions of people. All told, the death toll will be unlike anything anyone has ever seen!

To grasp how devastating and deadly these plagues can be, let’s briefly review some of the horrendous epidemics of our past.

**Plagues that changed history**

In terms of impact, nothing has matched the “Black Death” or “Black Plague” of the 14th century. This outbreak of bubonic plague apparently started in Asia and marched its way westward into Europe, where it spread rapidly and ferociously. It is thought to have killed a third of the world’s population.

As was typical of diseases at the time, there was no known prevention or cure. Social structure broke down. Populations panicked as entire towns were wiped out. Families were decimated as parents lost children, children lost parents, and men and women lost their spouses.

Yet this was neither the first nor the last time plague would make its deadly march across civilization. Eight centuries earlier, in A.D. 541, an outbreak of plague in the time of the Emperor Justinian shattered his dreams of reestablishing the might and glory of the Roman Empire. Hordes of flea-carrying rats spread the plague through the Byzantine Empire, killing about a fourth of the world’s population—some 50 million people.

In 1894 another plague outbreak in Hong Kong and Canton (or Guangzhou) killed an estimated 80,000 to 100,000 people, then spread from Chinese ports to the rest of the world, bringing 10 million more deaths.

Bubonic plague, though, is far from the only mass killer when it comes to epidemics. In 1817, the first of seven cholera pandemics over the next 150 years started in Russia and took a million lives. Cholera spread to India where millions more died.

Smallpox, leprosy and measles are other diseases that have claimed millions of lives. In 1520, smallpox helped bring down the mighty Aztec Empire in what is today Mexico.

Today epidemiologists are greatly concerned about pandemics like Covid-19—zoonotic viruses that jump from animals to human beings through mutation. HIV is one such killer, and it has claimed some 35 million lives over the last 40 years. Ebola is another, killing its victims so quickly that they most often die before they have time to spread the virus to others.

Just over a century ago, a strain of flu crossed from birds to human beings and took an estimated 50 million lives during its deadly march around the globe.

Today one must also take into account the possibility, if not the probability, of biological weapons being used against other human beings. The idea has been around since the 1300s when Mongol invaders catapulted plague-infested corpses over the walls of cities to let the plague do its killing for them. Anthrax and cholera are only two of a number of deadly infectious agents that we know have been converted into bioweapons by national governments and terrorists.

**God’s warning to man**

Covid-19 has brought much of the world to a state of near-panic. Entire nations have been shut down due to the disease. Government-ordered closures of many thousands of businesses have thrown millions of people out of work. It remains to be seen whether such steps are out of proportion to the danger posed by the virus. However, the economic impact of business shutdowns may well bring a worldwide recession if not another worldwide depression like that of the 1930s.

Yet these things are only a foretaste of catastrophes to come, which Bible prophecy indicates will be multiple magnitudes worse. Can we imagine a world in which we see hundreds of millions of deaths?

This brings us back to God’s message to mankind through the four horsemen. The horrors that they represent—false religion, war, famine and disease—are the consequences of mankind rejecting our Creator and choosing our own way to live—which, as all of human history has shown, results in death (Proverbs 14:12; 16:25).
The Bible is full of warnings and pleadings from God to turn from our sinful ways and “seek the Lord while He may be found” (Isaiah 55:6). He wants us to live righteously according to His laws, which show us how to love Him and our fellow man. He is “not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

The antidote to end-time plagues

Do we have an antidote to the fourth horseman of disease and death? Yes we do, and any of us can claim it.

When God brought His people Israel out of Egypt, He told them: “If you will listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in His sight, obeying His commands and keeping all His decrees, then I will not make you suffer any of the diseases I sent on the Egyptians; for I am the Lord who heals you” (Exodus 15:26, NLT).

But if they disobeyed Him, this is what they could expect: “If you refuse to listen to the Lord your God and do not obey all the commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come and overwhelm you . . . The Lord will afflict you with diseases until none of you are left in the land . . . The Lord will strike you with madness, blindness, and inflammation . . . The Lord will strike you with madness, blindness, and panic” (Deuteronomy 28:15, 21-22, 28, NLT).

Yet after the devastating ride of the four horsemen, the book of Revelation shows the rest of the story—God’s merciful intervention both to correct as well as save the human race from extinction. God will bring peace and freedom from death and disease to the earth in His wonderful Kingdom—but not before mankind has learned the lesson of where our human ways lead us.

The story of mankind doesn’t end with the last of the four horsemen of Revelation. John saw not four horsemen but five. And mankind’s hope lies with the fifth horseman, Jesus Christ, whose ride in Revelation 19:11-16 to intervene in world affairs marks the end of mankind’s misuse on the earth.

This is mankind’s real hope. This and this alone will be the real end of disease and deadly pandemics. The coming of the King of Kings will bring an everlasting Kingdom of peace, plenty and bountiful blessings for the entire human race.

But you don’t have to wait until then to experience the blessings that can come from knowing and having a relationship with Him! Why not act now? Why not dig into God’s Word to learn what He really wants and expects of us, and how you can avoid the horrifying times to come on our world? The choice is up to you!

LEARN MORE
Do you understand where our world is heading and why? Much of the Bible is prophecy—much of it describing the time that lies shortly ahead. To better understand what’s coming, download or request our free study guide The Book of Revelation Unveiled. BTmagazine.org/booklets

Plagues and Other Disasters: A Biblical Perspective

How should we view tragedies, accidents and disasters, regardless of their scale or circumstances? Here are some keys to a proper biblical perspective:

1. God has said in Bible prophecy that terrible disasters, including pestilences or disease epidemics, would grow in frequency and intensity as the end of the age approaches—to shake people out of their complacency and lead them to seek Him (Matthew 24:7; Luke 21:11; Revelation 6:7-8; 16:2, 8-11).

2. Ecclesiastes 9:11 reveals that God allows many events to run their course according to “time and chance.” This means that many tragedies are, for those affected, accidental and unforeseeable.

3. Christ made it clear that those who die in accidents or terrible disasters are not necessarily greater sinners than those who survive (Luke 13:1-5).

4. Personal tragedies or calamities are not necessarily the result of one’s sins (John 9:2-3).

5. Plagues and other disasters should humble us and lead us to repentance, helping us to see our dependence on God to sustain and deliver us (1 Kings 8:37-40; Revelation 16:8-11).


7. Some calamities are made worse by man’s poor judgments and age-long rejection of God and His laws, resulting in worsening environmental, health and economic conditions (Proverbs 14:12; 22:3; Matthew 7:24-27).

8. God is a truly loving God who is working out a great plan for all humanity (John 3:16; 2 Peter 3:9; 1 Timothy 2:4; 1 Corinthians 15:22-24).

9. Converted Christians who die in disasters securely await being raised to immortality in the first resurrection at the return of Jesus Christ (Isaiah 57:1-2; 1 Corinthians 15:51-52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16; Revelation 20:4-6).

10. Non-Christians who die in disasters, those who never had a genuine understanding of God or real opportunity for eternal salvation, will be raised in the second or general resurrection to live again in the flesh with their first real opportunity to learn God’s way, repent and be saved (John 5:28-29; Matthew 12:41-42; Revelation 20:5).

11. The multitudes of humanity who are raised in the second or general resurrection will experience joyful and abundant life under the rule of the Kingdom of God (Ezekiel 37:12-14).

12. The sufferings experienced now in “this present evil age” (Galatians 1:4)—this era of man’s self-rule under the influence of Satan the devil—are writing a lesson of experience about what it means to live in a world cut off from God and His ways.

13. We don’t know all the reasons God brings or permits specific calamities or why particular people are made to suffer by them, but we should trust that in God’s omniscience and ultimate wisdom He knows how to work out what is best for everyone in the end (Romans 8:28; 1 Timothy 2:4).

14. Jesus Christ will eventually return to usher in the rule of the Kingdom of God (Revelation 11:15; Daniel 7:14), under which disasters, sickness, financial devastation and fear will no longer plague mankind.

15. When all of repentant humanity is at last glorified, there will be no more pain, suffering, sorrow or death (Revelation 21:4).

16. All the sufferings of this brief present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory we will ultimately experience for all eternity to come (Romans 8:18; 2 Corinthians 4:17-18).

—Tom Robinson
Practical steps you can take to endure worrisome times

A great many people have been dealing with isolation, stress, uncertainty and fears amid the pandemic, widespread shutdowns and expectations of a severe financial downturn with millions out of work. To help people cope, the CBS News program Face the Nation interviewed Dr. Luana Marques, president of the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, on Sunday, April 5. Dr. Marques, who also teaches at Harvard and practices at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, gave some good advice.

She said: “I think before we even talk about the magnitude, it is important for us to first remind our country that it is okay not to be okay right now. It’s important to remind our country that it’s okay to have strong emotions. And this is why, as we turn on the news every morning and we’re hearing stories of death, of loss of economy, of grief and sadness, we quickly start to feel our heart pounding and we feel the sense of tension, anxiety, and fear. And that is our normal fight or flight response... And that’s okay... up to a point; eventually it does become too much.”

She then offered three practical ways for those sitting at home and starting to feel overwhelmed to “cool off our brain.”

“The first one,” she explained, “is to remember to unplug and to anchor. And what I mean here is give your brain a break from the news a little bit, allow your brain to settle. And I know it’s hard to do it right now. So by unplugging, you’re bringing down that flight or flight. And then what I encourage you to do is to anchor on something that closes your brain off: walking, meditation, calling a friend.”

“The second thing I urge all of us to do,” she continued, “and this is not optional, is to charge up, is to be able to eat, sleep and exercise. Those three things are things that we know help our mental health, but also help your immune system. So figure out what you’re going to do, how are you going to do it and why you’re going to do it. And anchor in something that gets you going. For me, I’ve been walking and exercising because it’s important for me to stay healthy for my family and for my patients.”

“And finally, I urge us to be of service. We know that helping others not only makes them feel better, but also ourselves. So let’s call an elderly neighbor. If you can afford, send food to those that actually need it or,” she suggested, using your skills and talents to help others as you’re able.

All these helpful principles are actually found in the Bible in various forms. Yet there is something else we should do above all that is also found there. When discussing concerns of living day to day and worries over how we’ll manage and get by, Jesus Christ said: “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble” (Matthew 6:33-34, emphasis added). So we must focus on our ultimate future with God and living His way, taking life one day at a time. And He will see us through.

For help in building and maintaining a relationship with God, be sure to also read “Five Tools for Dealing With Trials” beginning on page 22. (Source: CBS News.)

Assessing the prophetic measure of this global pandemic

A week into April a headline declared “CDC Director: Coronavirus Death Toll Will Be ‘Much, Much, Much Lower’ Than Projected” (Joshua Caplan, Breitbart News, April 7, 2020). This lowered projection of deaths in the United States, the article explains, is said to be due to people following social distancing recommendations. The same could be said about other countries.

Yet many argue that the modeling of the impact of viral spread was flawed from the start by overestimating the fatality of the contagion. That seems to be the case. (There is even some question about the accuracy of death tolls since people who die while infected with Covid-19 may be counted as Covid-19 deaths even if that was not a contributing factor.) Of course, there may yet be worse impact in the world’s poorer nations—or perhaps not. Time will tell. You may be seeing this a few weeks after we’re publishing it, so projections may have significantly changed—and they’ll likely change further.

There is a tendency when circumstances don’t “live up to the hype” to play down the seriousness and significance of what are still major events—particularly their role in end-time Bible prophecy. But such a reaction is missing the larger picture.

Jesus Christ said there would be a marked increase in pestilences or disease epidemics and other fear-inducing disasters as the time of His return draws nearer (Matthew 24:3-8; Luke 21:7-11). If the current virus ends up killing far fewer than other epidemics have throughout history, and fewer than more everyday causes of death throughout the world, some would think it hardly qualifies to be classed among what Jesus meant.

But Jesus did not specify a death toll here. Revelation 6:1-8 does say a fourth of the earth would be killed over time by a combination of problems that would include disease, but that’s a grand total, not what each plague would do. In any case, Jesus foretold not only pestilences, but fearful reaction to such calamities. The actual death toll of each particular incident is only an aspect of this.

No one can argue that this pandemic has not been significant. It is one of the biggest world events of modern times—not because of the death toll but because of its global impact. It has shut down much of the planet. It has caused economic upheaval that could lead to more people suffering and dying over time. It has led to societal changes and realignments that will no doubt further advance conditions leading to what is ultimately prophesied for the world scene in the end time. And the more of these things that occur, the more cumulative the effect will be.

If the current crisis is effectively dealt with and society manages to largely recover in coming months, with people settling back into normal routines, that could actually lead to the biggest danger—complacency and more “scorers in the last days” who dismiss such events as having nothing to do with what the Bible says is coming (2 Peter 3:3-4).

We’ll see more people failing to draw proper lessons and take appropriate warning. Some who come to see what’s happened as an overreaction may resist containment measures that are truly needed when a more virulent epidemic comes along. And worse, some will become more stubborn and resistant when it comes to turning to God. Let’s all keep our eyes and hearts open. (Source: Breitbart News.)
Are we seeing a dress rehearsal for the prophetic Beast?

In late March former British prime minister Gordon Brown "urged world leaders to create a temporary form of global government to tackle the twin medical and economic crises caused by the Covid-19 pandemic," saying there was need of "a taskforce involving world leaders, health experts and the heads of the international organisations that would have executive powers to coordinate the response" (Larry Elliott, The Guardian, March 26, 2020).

This won't fly, of course—at least not in the near term. But with worsening events coming in the future this no longer sounds so far-fetched.

Scripture describes a final revival of the Roman Empire that is yet to emerge in Europe and dominate the world. This political power and its ruler are both referred to in Bible prophecy as "the Beast." In this final revival 10 national or regional leaders will receive authority that they will cede to a higher central authority:

"...Ten kings who have received no kingdom as yet, but they receive authority for one hour as kings with the beast. These are of one mind, and they will give their power and authority to the beast" (Revelation 17:12-13). The "one hour" indicates a short time. It's often been understood that this is speaking of the short time frame before these are all brought down when they actively fight against Jesus Christ at His return, as described in the next verse. Yet perhaps it is implying that the final union is actually intended to be a temporary measure during a time of crisis that then takes on more power.

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted inadequacies of the European Union—even causing individual countries to want to close their own borders. Allison Fedirka at Geopolitical Futures points out:

"Europe has always struggled to define what the European Union really means, particularly after the 2008 financial crisis. It was a harsh reminder that all its members have different political and economic needs, and every move it has made since then—financial compromises, Brexit, immigration reform—has only widened the differences, even as it has stoked nationalist sentiment. This bodes poorly for the EU’s ability to confront its latest crisis: a two-front war against a virus and the economic and social unrest it threatens to unleash" ("The EU Wasn’t Built for This," March 20, 2020).

The attempt to act together despite disharmony actually fits with the prophetic description of the final union: "This will be a divided kingdom . . . The people will be a mixture and will not remain united, any more than iron mixes with clay" (Daniel 2:41-43, New International Version). Thus it seems reasonable that it would take extraordinary measures during extraordinary circumstances to keep this power bloc together for a time.

During a time of global crisis the world is ripe for change. Western nations may bear up under the strain, but the toll for the future could be severe. New alignments between national powers are likely to emerge. And power structures within nations are being reshaped.

A headline in The Washington Post tells us, "Dictators are using the coronavirus to strengthen their grip on power" (Joshua Kurtz, April 3, 2020). The author goes on to note: "Authoritarians often take advantage of emergencies—wars, terrorist attacks, high-profile arsons [such as those manipulated by Adolf Hitler and the Roman Emperor Nero], natural disasters—to consolidate power. These catastrophes spark fear, bolster the public desire for a strong governing hand and lead people to rally around their leaders."

This certainly fits the profile of the tyrannical power that is yet to arise in Europe. The Bible says that this system will force everyone to receive some kind of mark of allegiance in the right hand or forehead (symbolic of actions and thoughts), which will be required to buy and sell. While the mark may not be literal, there must be some kind of surveillance and policing of society to enforce what's being described here.

Could this really happen? Even in freer countries this pandemic has brought unheard-of restrictions. Phone data is being used to track people to make sure they are staying home and not getting too close to each other. Device data can also reveal what people are buying and selling—whether essential items only. Churches have been shut down.

The mayor of Los Angeles actually encouraged people to report on neighbors in violation of stay-at-home orders by saying: "You know the old expression about snitches? Well, in this case snitches get rewards." Violating businesses were threatened with having their power and water turned off—truly disturbing! This is not to say that some period of pause and assessment was not reasonable. It is just to illustrate that such a crisis can bring rapid change that takes away liberty.

A stained-glass image on what is known as the Fabian Window, commemorating the elitist socialist Fabian Society, depicts the world on an anvil being heated and hammered into a new shape, with a caption at the top directing that it be remolded "nearer to the heart’s desire." While the current pandemic is not the result of a globalist conspiracy, some have definitely used it to expand government and their own power. And some would like to manipulate the economic upheaval for this purpose.

We can be sure that there are people with nefarious agendas who are looking at this situation and realizing more than ever how to manufacture crises to bring about whatever changes they need to reshape the world. Of course, there will be plenty more actual crises for them to use anyway as the end approaches. Yet we know they will not prevail in the end. (Sources: The Guardian, Geopolitical Futures, The Washington Post.)

How can you make sense of the news?

So much is happening in the world, and so quickly. Where are today’s dramatic and dangerous trends taking us? What does Bible prophecy reveal about our future? You’re probably very concerned with the direction the world is heading. So are we. That’s one reason we produce the Beyond Today daily TV commentaries—to help you understand the news in the light of Bible prophecy. These eye-opening presentations offer you a perspective so badly needed in our confused world—the perspective of God’s Word. Visit us at ucg.org/beyond-today/daily!
Five Tools for Dealing With Trials

What do you do when you’ve tried everything within your power to solve a problem? Here are five tools to help turn trials into godly character.

by Nick Lamoureux

I was in Malawi, Africa, more than 7,500 miles away from home, when I got the text from my father: “Every day we are learning about new changes concerning travel restrictions. We think you should pack up now and find the fastest way home. Things are only getting worse by the hour.”

“We’ll see you on Friday,” I responded.

We’d been living in Malawi for a year, my wife Megan and I having volunteered to serve fellow Church members there. It was a wonderful experience, and it was our intent to return to the United States on March 30, 2020. But all of a sudden at the end of February, the world seemed to turn upside down with the explosive spread of Covid-19. At first, we weren’t really worried, thinking we’d see what this coronavirus was all about when we got back to America at the end of March. As the days passed, however, we realized we needed to start making very specific decisions—and soon.

No doubt you’ve experienced some not so pleasant surprises in life. In fact, this has been the experience of much of the world in the recent crisis—with some having a lot worse circumstances. Of course, facing hardships isn’t a new phenomenon. We all must do so from time to time.

Yet as human beings, it’s easy to lose perspective. What may seem like a huge wave of problems to us should be kept in the context of the care of our Almighty Father. When you and I feel like a huge wave of problems to us should be kept in the context of the care of our Almighty Father. When you and I feel like a huge wave of problems to us should be kept in the context of the care of our Almighty Father. When you and I feel like a huge wave of problems to us should be kept in the context of the care of our Almighty Father. When you and I feel like a huge wave of problems to us should be kept in the context of the care of our Almighty Father. When you and I feel like a huge wave of problems to us should be kept in the context of the care of our Almighty Father. When you and I feel like a huge wave of problems to us should be kept in the context of the care of our Almighty Father. When you and I feel like a huge wave of problems to us should be kept in the context of the care of our Almighty Father. When you and I feel like a huge wave of problems to us should be kept in the context of the care of our Almighty Father. When you and I feel like a huge wave of problems to us should be kept in the context of the care of our Almighty Father. When you and I feel like a huge wave of problems to us should be kept in the context of the care of our Almighty Father. When you and I feel like a huge wave of problems to us should be kept in the context of the care of our Almighty Father. When you and I feel like a huge wave of problems to us should be kept in the context of the care of our Almighty Father. When you and I feel like a huge wave of problems to us should be kept in the context of the care of our Almighty Father. When you and I feel like a huge wave of problems to us should be kept in the context of the care of our Almighty Father. When you and I feel like a huge wave of problems to us should be kept in the context of the care of our Almighty Father. When you and I feel like a huge wave of problems to us should be kept in the context of the care of our Almighty Father. When you and I feel like a huge wave of problems to us should be kept in the context of the care of our Almighty Father. When you and I feel like a huge wave of problems to us should be kept in the context of the care of our Almighty Father. When you and I feel like a huge wave of problems to us should be kept in the context of the care of our Almighty Father. When you and I feel like a huge wave of problems to us should be kept in the context of the care of our Almighty Father. When you and I feel like a huge wave of problems to us should be kept in the context of the care of our Almighty Father. When you and I feel like a huge wave of problems to us should be kept in the context of the care of our Almighty Father.

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Tool #1: Prayer

The day before my father texted me, Megan and I received a phone call from the home office of our employer, the United Church of God (publisher of Beyond Today magazine). The caller expressed concern for our situation and recommended that we consider advancing our departure by 10 days.

In Africa, there are three major international airports: Johannesbourg, South Africa; Nairobi, Kenya; and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. A few days prior to this phone call, both Johannesbourg and Nairobi had canceled all their U.S. flights, leaving Addis Ababa as our only option to fly home via Ireland. However, as each day passed, we noticed many airlines canceling their flights to and from Ireland. We wondered what we should do, and we took the problem to God.

The apostle Paul tells us, “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” (Philippians 4:6-7). Recognizing our plans might need to change immediately with shifting circumstances outside our control, we knew it was crucial to involve God in all our decisions.

My wife and I asked for God’s direction and involvement in our decision. We asked that He give us wisdom to make the best decision. There were many factors to consider: Were there any loose ends we needed to tie up? Would changing our flights cost a lot of additional money? Would we even be able to find earlier flights?

After speaking with nearby Church leaders and with friends, family and some U.S.-based ministers, the answer seemed clear: It was time to go home as soon as possible.

Tool #2: Bible study

We received the above call on a Sunday. On Monday we made the decision to depart on Thursday—just three days away! Talk about last-minute packing! It’s interesting how in a stressful situation, our natural instinct is to immediately drop everything we consider to be nonessential and focus on self-preservation. Megan’s favorite scripture is Matthew 16:26: “For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” Many people who tithe (give a tenth back to God) recognize that God blesses their finances in a way that appears impossible, with the remaining money seeming to go further than the full 100 percent would have gone without tithing. This concept also applies, as my wife and I learned, to our time. “We’ve got a lot to do,” I told Megan, “but let’s make sure we don’t neglect our Bible study just because we’re busy and in a rush!”

It would have been easy to put it off, but all too often if you put something off it will never get done. Also, what’s more important than the Word of God? Of course, a person shouldn’t neglect an immediate, crucial task such as attending to a crying, hungry child or a broken water pipe, but we should take care not to make excuses to put off Bible study.

In hard circumstances, it’s vital that we look to God to direct us and provide a way through them. How can we do that? What can and should we be doing through this process? God has given us five basic tools—prayer, Bible study, fellowship, meditation and fasting—to help us cope with the difficult situations of life such as the one Megan and I found ourselves in. And these tools are not only for the difficult times. They’re crucial for everyday growth as Christians!

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Throughout those quick days of packing, I listened to some of our Ambassador Bible College online classes (available at abc.ucg.org/courses) with pauses every so often to record a few new notes in my Bible. I’ve learned the hard way the lesson that being busy is never a good excuse for neglecting Bible study. A relationship with the Father and Son is a two-way conversation! We have to talk to God through prayer, but we also have to be willing to listen. And what the Bible says is God communicating with us!

Tool #3: Fellowship

Although it was ultimately my decision to return 10 days early, I didn’t make it alone. The Bible admonishes us to seek wise counsel, so that’s what I did. Many people I spoke with were able to offer me insight and wisdom from their own experiences and various ways of thinking. But discussing the problems that come our way isn’t the only thing that Christian fellowship—spending time with God’s people—is good for. When we find ourselves in a stressful or scary situation, it can be helpful to reflect on Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, which reminds us that we’re not struggling alone.

It might at times seem like no one understands what we’re going through. (There was a time when the prophet Elijah thought he was the only person left who was still obedient to God!) That feeling can be really discouraging. So as Megan and I rushed to pack the entire apartment into a few boxes and tie up our loose ends, it was very beneficial to our mental stability to talk with friends and family on the phone.

It’s nice to know that there are people out there praying for your success. It’s a pretty comforting (and humbling) thought to know that people are coming before the very throne of the Almighty God in prayer on your behalf. Wow, what an encouragement!

Paul compares God’s people to a body in which every member does its part so the entire body can be healthy and spiritually strong (Ephesians 4:15-16). Hebrews 10:25 tells us, “And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near” (New Living Translation). God knows that regular fellowship with other believers is important!

When circumstances prevent getting together, as we’ve all recently experienced, it’s vital to stay in touch by other means.

Tool #4: Meditation

One of the most undervalued tools God gives us is that of meditation. We live in a world that is constantly speeding up. How often do you and I take the time to just sit and think about God, His Word and His way of life? If we’re honest with ourselves, probably not often enough!

On our 17-hour flight home, I spent many hours thinking and meditating on the past year. I thought about all the prayers God had answered. I thought about what we had (and hadn’t) accomplished. I thought about all the wonderful friendships we had made in Malawi—only possible as a direct result of God compassionately pouring out blessings on His children. I took some time to consider what the future might hold for us.

God is working out His purpose in you and me, and we should make time to meditate on all that God has done for us, and consider how He is accomplishing His purpose within us. We should think about how to apply scriptural principles in our lives every day (Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:1-2), considering how to really live by every word of God (Matthew 4:4). Meditation is crucial in growing to become the kind of people God wants us to be.

Tool #5: Fasting

As most of our readers may know, there are some trials that cannot be solved by our own strength or through prayer alone. Jesus Christ plainly expects His followers to fast—to abstain from food and drink for a time—telling us, “When [not if] you fast…” (Matthew 6:16-17). Fasting should be a regular part of a Christian’s life, teaching us how we must rely on God and prioritize our spiritual life above physical desires.

In the face of the current pandemic and the economic difficulties that will no doubt follow, what should we do? Where should we turn? Should we look to government bailouts? Should we look to rapid production of a vaccine or other treatments? Should we trust our fellow man to solve these problems? No, not ultimately, as the Bible makes clear (Jeremiah 17:5). Rather, we should humble ourselves before the Creator of the universe and petition Him to heal the nations if it might be according to His will.

He tells us in Isaiah 59:1, “Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear.” Yet again, we all must humble ourselves. And we should pray for others to do the same, interceding for them.

Take some time to read through the previous chapter, Isaiah 58, that leads up to the statement just quoted. In this chapter, Isaiah was inspired to explain how a person can have an effective fast. It tells us what we need to do, and the right attitude we should have when we fast.

In these turbulent times, let’s endeavor to put into practice these five tools—prayer, Bible study, fellowship, meditation and fasting. Let’s learn to trust in God, not in man!

LEARN MORE
How can you learn and grow as a Christian? The Bible teaches us about several tools that are key. We explain them more fully in our helpful study guide Tools for Spiritual Growth. Download or request your free copy today—a copy is waiting for you! BTmagazine.org/booklets
The Holy Spirit: Key to Real Change in Your Life

The disciples of Jesus Christ became filled with power, love and a sound mind, receiving God’s own nature within them as His children. The same can be true of you!

by Gary Petty

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even weeks after Jesus’ resurrection, His followers were together in Jerusalem in observance of the annual Feast of Pentecost. Suddenly, the place they were gathered was filled with the sound of powerful wind. What appeared as tongues of fire came upon them, and they began to speak in different languages. In this way, God announced the pouring out of His Holy Spirit, as the prophets had foretold.

Pentecost is celebrated by many churches as a reminder of what happened to these early Christians when God poured out His Spirit on them.

The New Testament is filled with wonderful stories about people whose lives were dramatically changed when they received the indwelling of God’s Spirit. This same miraculous, life-changing Spirit is available today. It is a spirit not of fear but of power, love and a sound mind (2 Timothy 1:7).

Would you characterize your own life this way? Are you filled with fear? Or do you experience spiritual power and serve others with God’s love? Are you constantly wracked with guilt, hatred, lust, envy and confusion? Or do you have a sound mind?

What happens to people when they receive the Holy Spirit of God living in them, as the followers of Jesus did on that great day of Pentecost?

The power those early Christians received on Pentecost is the same power God wants to give you. Many passages in the New Testament describe how God’s Spirit interacts with human beings. In these stories we read about how God’s Spirit produced dynamic changes in their lives.

But it was not for that time only. God, in fact, wants to create those same changes in your life. He wants you to experience the conquering of fear and anxiety, replacing fear with spiritual power, unselfish love and a sound mind.

Let’s take a look at three aspects of the monumental change God’s Spirit can accomplish in your life.

1. God, through His Spirit, gives us meaning, guidance and comfort, resulting in a sound mind.

The human mind, with all of its complexity and abilities, is unable to understand great spiritual truths unless God reveals them to us—such spiritual truths as: Why were you born? Does God have a plan for your life? How can you even know God? How can you find happiness? Why is there so much suffering in the world?

We’re all looking for those “Aha!” moments, when we experience remarkable spiritual insight into life and death. But how can we trust that these moments aren’t just figments of our imagination or purely emotional responses?

We find the answer in the example of Saul of Tarsus in the New Testament. He was highly respected in the religious community, zealous for Jewish tradition to the point of persecuting the early Christian Church. Then one day Saul was literally knocked down and blinded by the resurrected Jesus Christ. Until this time Saul believed in God, but he rejected Jesus as the Messiah or Christ. Here, then, was a real “Aha!” moment, and it changed his life forever.

For three days Saul remained blinded from his encounter until God sent a teacher named Ananias to him. God gave Saul back his eyesight, and he was baptized and received the Holy Spirit. Saul became better known as the apostle Paul, one of the greatest teachers and writers in Christian history.

When you read about the life of Paul you find two important points about his great spiritual “Aha!” moment. First, when Christ revealed Himself to Paul, Paul’s life took a dramatic turn to a new direction God sent him in—and he chose to follow. He had to give up his dreams and desires, his time and effort, his whole life to God. Secondly, in reading Paul’s writings you see that he uses the Scriptures as the Word of God to define the changing path of his life.

Listen to what Paul writes to the Corinthians, combining thoughts from different scriptural passages: “But as it is written: ‘Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him’” (1 Corinthians 2:9). Paul is speaking of what God will do in your life and of the future He wants to give you in His Kingdom, which is beyond your imagination.

It takes an “Aha!” moment to understand what God is doing. But where do these spiritual insights even come from?

Listen to what Paul writes next: “But God has revealed them [His wonderful plans for our future] to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except [by] the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except [by] the Spirit of God” (verses 10-11).

Prior to his conversion, Saul was absolutely sure he had it all together. He had a great deal of biblical knowledge. But without the Holy Spirit, his zeal was misguided, focused on persecuting the followers of the very Messiah he was waiting for.

Paul goes on, “But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor
can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (verse 14). “But we,” he then states of those who have God’s Spirit living in them, “have the mind of Christ” (verse 16).

We can’t know God the Father or Jesus Christ on our own any more than Saul could. God must be revealed to us. This probably won’t involve physical blinding, as in Saul’s special case. Rather, God through His Spirit can unlock the under-

standing and power of His word contained in the Bible. In this awesome book we discover the mind of Christ.

The power of the Holy Spirit in us is more important than outward expressions like speaking in tongues or even miracles. God gives us His Spirit to impart to us the mind of Christ, to lead us to His Word. We all desperately need the Holy Spirit to properly relate to God, understand the Bible and follow the right way to live. There isn’t much benefit in outward show of spirituality if the inner person isn’t becoming like Christ.

So how can the mind of Christ be developed in us? This brings us to a second aspect of the change we undergo in receiving God’s Spirit.

2. The Holy Spirit imparts into our hearts and minds the very nature of God.

We just read that through God’s Spirit we receive “the mind of Christ.” What does that mean?

Let’s face it: All of us are weak and fallible human beings. Many times we flounder through life with a vague realization that for all of our religious feelings and efforts at worship, nothing has really changed in our inner person. Perhaps you find that you’re still the same old person you used to be. Yet real change is possible.

Having the mind of Christ refers to a drastic change in the inner person. Also called “the mind of the Spirit” (Romans 8:27), it comes through God the Father and Christ living in us through the Spirit.

The apostle Peter addresses this change in his letter known as 2 Peter. He states of God in verse 3 that “His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue . . .”

Let’s stop for a moment and think about that. Peter says that through God’s divine power, the followers of Jesus Christ have been given “all things that pertain to life and godliness.”

In the darkest hours of your life or when you are faced with temptation to disobey God, when you suffer doubt, God’s Spirit will give you everything you need in this life, empowering you to overcome fear and replace it with power, love and a sound mind.

And whose sound mind will God develop in you? Well, Paul already told us. The mind of Jesus Christ (see also Philippians 2:5).

Returning to 2 Peter, let’s continue in verse 4: “. . . by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature” (emphasis added throughout). What would a person who has become a partaker of God’s very nature look and act like?

First of all, God’s Spirit doesn’t “possess” us and force us to obey God. It doesn’t erase our free will or ability to make choices. A person with the Holy Spirit dwelling in him can still sin—and sometimes still does. This can be a little disappointing to a new Christian. God’s Spirit doesn’t immediately erase our corrupt human nature, emotional problems, attraction to sin or the difficulties of everyday life. Rather, we must develop God’s character through regular use of God’s Spirit.

The Christian life is a journey. By submitting to the guidance of God’s Spirit, a person will experience a lifelong process of becoming like Christ. Paul’s encounter with the living Christ was only a beginning for him. He then spent the rest of his life trying to imitate Christ.

We must understand that momentary conversion is not enough. Consider this analogy: Let’s say you go to an awe-inspiring concert and have one of those “Aha!” moments. Music is now your passion, and you go home intent on being a virtuoso musician. You try through fits and starts, but you just don’t have the talent or perseverance to master an instrument. You try different ones but to no avail. You sign up for lessons, but go for only a month before dropping them. You know you won’t get better without practicing every day, but instead you just settle into a habit of watching inspiring performances on the Internet once a week.

Might this sound a little bit like your Christian lifestyle? You’ve discovered God. You want a relationship with Him. You try and fail, and you finally settle into going to church once a week—but you experience no real daily change in your life.

Once God gives us the “Aha!” moment, He must also supply us with the ability we need, as in this metaphor, empowering us through the Holy Spirit. You and I can’t develop the mind of Christ on our own. We must receive it from God. And once God gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are required to practice our Christian lives every day, being led by the Spirit and changed by it.

This is why an emphasis on ecstatic speaking in tongues

When a person receives God’s Spirit, he or she literally becomes a son or daughter of God. This relationship allows us to come before our all-powerful Creator as a little child before a loving parent.
some reality of God’s love toward him as a father loves a child. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit that followed made plain to him the awe-inspiring insight into God the Father and Jesus Christ. The indwelling of God’s Spirit allows us to come before the awesome, all-powerful Creator of the universe and cry out to Him as a little child before a loving parent.

As noted earlier, Paul told Timothy that the Spirit God gives us is not one of fear but of power, love and a sound mind (2 Timothy 1:7). Is that evident in your own life? I asked this at the outset, but right now I want you to really look inside yourself, into your inner person, and give an honest answer. Are you filled with fear? Or do you experience spiritual power and serve others with God’s love? Are you constantly wracked with guilt, hatred, lust, envy and confusion? Or do you have a sound mind?

Again, the indwelling of God’s Spirit doesn’t instantly remove dysfunctional thoughts, emotions and behavior from our lives. But as the mind of Christ is developed in you, you will grow to overcome these faults. God wants to forgive you and heal you from your sins. And He further wants to replace your broken heart and mind with the fruit of His Spirit, which Paul lists as “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

The aspect of great change mentioned previously, the direction of God’s Spirit forming in us a sound mind, comes through this second aspect of the Spirit replacing our corrupted human nature with God’s own divine nature. And this is yet part of a third fundamental aspect of our spiritual change—a close family relationship.

3. Through the Holy Spirit living in us we become the children of God

Going back to the story of the apostle Paul, think about the kind of man he was before he was called by God to be a Christian and apostle—when he was a religious Pharisee named Saul. Saul worshipped God and praised Him. He understood Him as Creator and tried to live by His laws. But he didn’t really understand God as Father and the nature of the divine family.

In his “Aha!” moment, when confronted by Christ, Saul was given insight into God the Father and Jesus Christ. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit that followed made plain to him the awesome reality of God’s love toward him as a father loves a child.

Note what Paul wrote to Christians in Romans 8: “Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship . . . [whereby] we cry, ‘Abba, Father’” (verses 14-15, New International Version 1984).

Do you understand the meaning and power of Paul’s words? When a person receives the indwelling of God’s Spirit, he or she literally becomes a son or daughter of God. This relationship allows us to come before the awesome, all-powerful Creator of the universe and cry out to Him as a little child before a loving parent.

I know not everyone can relate to the concept of a loving father, depending on their past personal experience. But Paul tells us that the most loving and caring father-child relationship we can ever experience is with God—in spite of how bad our relationship may have been with our own human fathers. He says we can cry out to God, “Abba, Father!”

Abba is an Aramaic word that expresses a tender intimacy and childlike trust along with respect—“Dear Father,” some translate it. Just think about a little girl who runs to her mom when she’s hurt. According to Paul, only those who are truly “led by the Spirit of God” can experience this intimacy with our Father in heaven.

Of course, there is more to being a child of God than just having the ability to relate to Him with the love and trust of a small child toward a parent. Children don’t stay little forever. They grow up, hopefully still trusting their parents and looking up to them. And most parents still have great love for their grown children, a love that motivates them to make sacrifices for their continuing well-being.

If children didn’t grow up, they would never experience a full life. They could never make it out in the world. Isn’t that the point of raising them—to protect and nurture them while teaching them, helping to equip them for real life? They need to learn how to handle hardship, to not be selfish and to make wise and moral decisions. Parents hope that their children will become well-adjusted adults who can then have the same parent-child relationship with their children.

This dynamic is parallel to our relationship with God when we are led by His Spirit.

We begin like very little children. We need Him, we run to Him with all of our problems, we cry out to Him in our times of need. And He’s there for us.

But He didn’t create us just to receive His love. No, we’re created to grow and to learn to love Him in return—and to love...
others made in His image. Jesus said that the greatest of the commandments is to love God with all of our heart, soul and mind, while the second is to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-39).

As we are led by God’s Spirit we learn to love God—both the Father and Jesus Christ. God’s Spirit helps us to grow into spiritual maturity so that when we obey God we do it because we love Him. Jesus told His followers, “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (John 14:15). To love God is to obey God!

And through His teachings we learn to love our fellow man as well. We learn a Christlike care and desire for all people to know God.

Let’s now consider what Paul said next in Romans 8: “The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together” (verses 16-17, King James Version).

Did you catch that? Paul here says that a person who is led by the Spirit of God becomes an heir to everything the Father owns.

Think about this for a minute. What does God not own? What is excluded in that promise? Nothing. God owns everything! This is the awesome future God has prepared for those who receive the indwelling of His Spirit.

But in the meantime, in the here and now, life can be very complicated and difficult. All of us face times when there seem to be no answers to the problems—when you cry out to God, “Abba, Father!” It might be an illness, or financial calamity, or the unfaithfulness of a spouse. And maybe in the darkness you can’t even pray, as no words come.

Be encouraged by Paul’s experiences with pain, hardship, loneliness and despair. Read what he wrote a little farther on here in Romans 8: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (verse 26, New Revised Standard Version).

Through His Spirit, God is intimately in touch with your thoughts and emotions. He understands you better than you understand yourself. He can guide you when there is no hope. Through His Spirit He will give you comfort when comfort seems impossible. When peace seems impossible, He can give you peace that surpasses understanding (Philippians 4:7).

Saul the Pharisaic leader practiced religion. Paul the apostle had an intimate relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ through the Spirit of God. He and other Christians of the New Testament Church had within them the very power and nature of God to transform their lives—the Holy Spirit that made them God’s children and God their loving Father. You too need this power in your life!
Around 3,000 years ago, the shepherd and King of Israel David uttered two tremendous declarations bookending the best-known and most beloved psalm in Scripture, Psalm 23.

He begins in verse 1 by proclaiming, “The Lord is my shepherd; I have all that I need” (New Living Translation). And at the end he confidently states, “Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life . . .” (verse 6, NLT), concluding, “… and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (same verse).

This framework encapsulates what’s been presented so far in this column’s series about eternity. Between those two bookends a lot of life happens, be it “green pastures” or “the valley of the shadow of death” (verses 2, 4), but the words give purpose to what we are going through in this life.

What does it mean to “dwell in the house of the Lord forever”? We will take a peek into that realm, building on two previous columns. The first, “Fixing Our Eyes on Eternity” in the November-December 2019 issue, spoke to man’s search for meaning and offered biblical solutions that move beyond our very real moments of human frustration and despair. The second, “I Go to Prepare a Place for You” in the March-April 2020 issue, defined eternity as not merely a destination but as a way of traveling, by entering into a close and deep relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ (John 17:1-3).

As we proceed further, it’s noteworthy that Scripture gives more space to the fact of eternity being God’s gift to humanity than it does to describing what eternity is and means. God gives us scriptural snapshots based on what we humanly might comprehend of this limitless existence while in our human sphere.

Such “peeks into eternity” can be highly motivating for us who by God’s grace will enter the ultimate “house of the Lord.” It sustains us in holding dear to Jesus’ invitation of “Follow Me” (see Matthew 4:19; John 21:22). Now let’s step forward, in preview, to glimpse eternity on display.

Home is where the heart is

Home is often described as where the heart is. And that is the key to eternity. Hebrews 11 defines God’s faithful servants down through the ages as those who “died still believing what God had promised them. They did not receive what was promised, but they saw it all from a distance and welcomed it” (verse 13, NLT).

These spiritual pilgrims never settled for the surroundings of this wayward age, but “were looking for a better place, a heavenly homeland. That is why God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them” (verse 16, NLT).

Remember David’s conclusion to Psalm 23? He pinned everything on ultimately dwelling in the house of the Lord forever.

What will that be like?

Growing up in Bethlehem, David experienced the rather rough and functional dwellings of people of his day, but it was home! Why? Home is where your loved ones are. It may not be filled with every furnishing, but it’s filled with love.

Additionally, he would have been familiar with the tabernacle at Gibeon, with its designated Holy of Holies recognized as the earthly home of the God of Israel. It’s where heaven touched earth and they became one, pointing to God’s desire for closeness with His people. As He told the Israelites, “I will take you as My people, and I will be your God” (Exodus 6:7).

The touchdown and touchstone of eternity

We find this desire of God presented in the opening magnified snapshot of eternity revealed in the words of the apostle John: “Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle [dwelling place] of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God’” (Revelation 21:1-3).

Here is the “better place” those listed in Hebrews 11 longed for. Here is the heavenly homeland—yes, home! Here is the heavenly city coming down to the earth.

Welcome to eternity! Not only can we read about this epic event for encouragement and comfort now, but one day we will personally witness this scriptural snapshot of eternity on display come into full focus as the climactic reality of what Jesus told us to pray: “Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).

John captured the personal essence of entering eternity in one of his epistles, writing: “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God. Therefore the world does not know us because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are the children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when he is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is” (1 John 3:1-2).

The promise that “the pure in heart will see God” will at last come true (Matthew 5:8), more so than even Moses was permitted to see when the “I AM” told him, “You cannot look upon My face and live” (Exodus 33:18-23).

How is it possible that we are enabled to move into the “unapproachable light” of God’s presence? (see 1 Timothy 6:16). The apostle Paul pointed out that “eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered the heart of man the things which
God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Corinthians 2:9). To put it bluntly, we simply aren’t capable at this moment of fully experiencing eternity on display. We don’t have the right equipment, but God of course does! And He is going to allow those “who keep the commandments of God and have the faith of Jesus” (Revelation 14:12) to go through a miraculous transformation. As Paul further wrote, “This corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality” (1 Corinthians 15:53).

Yes, we will be in the family of God as the immortal children of God, which is the culmination of God’s stated purpose for humanity. As the old saying goes, “Like father, like son.” God’s gift of immortality will allow us to share in His qualities, as John pointed to in stating that “we shall be like Him.” The apostle Peter even said that we are to be “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 2:4).

This will not make us equal in authority with the uncreated God the Father and Jesus Christ. Unlike Them, we are created from dust and were given initial birth in time and space. As many promises reveal, we will reign with Them yet under Them, as They will forever be supreme. Yet what a privilege it is to be part of the family and household of God. In the Father’s and Christ’s love and grace towards us, They open up eternity and allow us to enter and, most importantly, remain! Eternity will become home—not a mere guest residence or timeshare. Remember David’s confidence that he would abide in the ultimate “house of the Lord forever.” Jesus declares to His followers through the ages, “He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more” (Revelation 3:12). Bottom line? By God’s grace we enter, experience and remain in eternity.

A return to Eden before the curse!

It’s a well-known law of nature that for every cause there’s a correlating effect, and eternity is no stranger to this reality. What enables every other snapshot of eternity on display is the presence of God the Father and the risen and exalted Jesus Christ (see John 17:1-3).

As we progress through the scriptural snapshot of Revelation 21-22, recognize that eternity to come is, in an important sense, a return to Eden before the curse humanity brought on itself through following Satan into sin, with God and man at last brought together again in perfect harmony. In fact, Revelation 22:3 emboldens us to envision God once again in the midst of His creation, as the Father and the Lamb, Jesus Christ, sit on Their thrones in the midst of eternity on display.

Just as the tabernacle of the wilderness and the temple in Jerusalem were set in the midst of God’s covenant people, so this ultimate “household of the Lord,” this holy realm, this perpetual home, will likewise be in the midst of the immortal servants of God in covenant with Him. And another emblem of God’s righteousness and blessing in the midst of Eden will be here too—the tree of life (Revelation 22:4).

The presence of God the Father and the Lamb creates an incredible environment—described with several uses of the word “no.” Humanly we often cringe at the sound of “no,” upset at a denial of what we want. But God uses “no” in this snapshot to tell us wonderful, positive things about eternity.

There will be no more death, no more sorrow, no more crying and no more pain. And that’s just in Revelation 21:1-3. God continues to roll out the “no’s” in that there will be no shut gate because there will be no night (verse 25; 22:5). And again, there will be no more curse (verse 3), because there will by no means be anything wrong that defiles (21:27).

And one more positive round of “no’s” is on full display as the ultimate veil of the physical realm melts away, in that nothing will come between us and the God who loves us and whom we in turn love: “But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light” (Revelation 21:22-23; compare 22:5).

On the last night of His human life Jesus said, “I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2), and here in Revelation we see the fulfillment of Christ’s promise—with God and His redeemed people at last together forever in unending joy and blessing.

But for now we have some homework—and I might say some hard work and heart work—yet to accomplish in heeding Christ’s invitation of “Follow Me.” Until next time, having peeked into eternity on display, let’s hold fast to that vision, letting it motivate us to continue on to our ultimate home with God.

Just as the tabernacle and temple were set in the midst of God’s covenant people, so this ultimate home will likewise be in the midst of the immortal servants of God in covenant with Him.
**The Greatest Sacrifice,** March-April 2020 Issue Feedback

Thank you for the articles “The Greatest Sacrifice” and “Plagues on the Horizon”—particularly in light of the current global situation of Covid-19. People are scared. They are panic buying grocery stock. Some are literally paranoid, walking in public streets wearing masks and armed with spray bottles of antiseptic to ward off anyone coming near them. If people not only read their Bible but also understand it, then there would be no need for this fear.

*Subscriber in Gauteng, South Africa*

The last two issues of *Beyond Today* magazine had some of the best articles I have read! Well-written and very educational. I just watched the video of the *Beyond Today* TV program “Will I Go to Heaven?” on YouTube. It’s the best video I’ve ever seen on the subject. I just wish family and friends could see the real truth and stop believing what they have been taught in today’s churches. Thanks so much for the magazine and the great videos. I’m continuing to learn more about the truth of the Bible every day!

*From the Internet*

I really love your magazines and look forward to when they arrive. The articles are so uplifting and very inspirational. They’re well-researched and always speak to me. I gain insight and reassurance.

*Reader from Ontario, Canada*

**Grateful for *Beyond Today* and United Church of God**

Thank you for enabling me to benefit from the sharing of the Word of God. Your literature gives me insights and understanding of the Bible, in particular about the fate of nations in our own generation. May God continue to bless the hands that provide it free of charge for people to benefit. Thanks.

*Subscriber in Nigeria*

Please renew my subscription to *Beyond Today* magazine. It is so well researched and informative—a true blessing to us spiritually. We love it!

*From the Internet*

I just wanted to write to tell you how much I appreciate the booklets and the Bible study course lessons that have been sent to me. I have learned and enjoyed them so much and also have passed them on for other ladies to learn from and enjoy just as I have.

*Beyond Today* is amazing!

*From the Internet*

I was very excited upon getting your booklets. These are a true blessing. I have barely put them down and am learning so much from them. The Bible, honestly, is very complicated for me. The way your writers break it down is amazing. God has certainly blessed them with an abundance of knowledge and understanding. I thank you for the time your staff takes to publish this literature. It is also a blessing that you distribute it to us for free. You are an answer to my prayers, as I have been praying for a very long time for a way to better understand the Bible. Thank you!

*From the Internet*

Over the years, I can testify that my spiritual growth has come from the publications from your church organization. In seeking God’s truth, I always look to your organization for guidance above all other church organizations.

*From the Internet*

From the time I started watching your videos and reading the literature you provide, my spiritual life has greatly improved. I see great truth in your teachings. Thank you for educating me with the wonderful truth, and may God richly bless you.

*Reader in Zambia*

**Finding a body of believers**

*Beyond Today* has changed my way of thinking, and now I watch sermons from your pastors online too. The messages are mind-opening. I’m a Sabbath keeper but have not gone to church for a long time now, and I’m looking for a place to worship on the Sabbath. Many blessings to you all.

*From the Internet*

I have been unable to find a suitable church to attend. I watch your television show and was wondering if you have a congregation in my area?

*Viewer in Canada*

I would like to know if I have to be a member to attend services with you all? I have had a subscription to *Beyond Today* for years now. I believe in all you teach. I also would like to be baptized. Thank you very much.

*From the Internet*

We have congregations all over the world—we hope there’s one near you! Go to UCG.org/congregations to find the one closest to you. There you’ll also see the name and contact information for the pastor to get more information. Visitors are always welcome. We hope to see you soon!

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