


OUT OF THE DARKNESS

The Psalms



SOUTHSIDE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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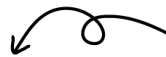
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OUT OF THE DARKNESS

In dark times where do you turn? When faced with the darkness outside and inside us how do we cope? In the past, God's people have faced dark times with a wide range of feelings and questions -- particularly feelings towards and questions of God. So, where did God's people turn with such feelings and questions of God? When God's people faced the darkness outside and inside them, how did they cope?

If we look back in time to see how God's people faced and coped through these dark times in the Bible, there's no other place that provides us with the realness, richness, and rawness like the Book of Psalms. The Psalms are a collection of the cries of the hearts of God's people recorded throughout the unfolding history of the Bible, from the days of Moses, to King David and to the Exile. However, this collection of writings most likely came to its final form (the Book of Psalms as we know it) in the time of the Exile -- this was a dark time for God's people.

But what do we mean by 'darkness'? Well, rather than feeling the joy and gladness of God's presence, we feel "darkness, helplessness, weariness, a sense of failure, defeat, barrenness, emptiness, dryness descend upon us." (1) It's these moments in our Christian experiences that challenge our faith to the point where we can feel for the first time that our faith doesn't appear to 'work.' These moments are marked by "having more questions than answers, as the very foundation of our faith feels like it is on the line. We don't know where God is, what he is doing, where he is going, how he is getting us there, or when this will be over." (2) God uses these moments to bring to light and free us from our unhealthy attachments and idols, so we would grow and deepen in our attachment, intimacy and love of Him.

The Psalms raise these very questions and feelings for us, provide us with a roadmap for navigating them and give words to the paralyzing-silence that darkness often has on us. What this means is, the Psalms show us how a spiritually mature person walks and talks through dark times, they model what emotionally healthy spirituality looks like. Because, it is far too easy and it happens far too often that we use our faith to hide from what we are really feeling and thinking about life and God.

And so, the Psalms show us what emotionally healthy spirituality looks like when the writers express thoughts and feelings like,

I am scared (Psalm 2)

I am angry (Psalm 4)

I am ashamed (Psalm 44)

I am loved (Psalm 18)

I am joyful (Psalm 84)

I am sad (Psalm 42)

For example Psalms 22,

“My God, why have you forsaken me?”

But it's not only Psalm 22 that we see the heart of our Lord Jesus cry out. Jesus refers to the Psalms more than any other Old Testament book. In fact, the Psalms don't just find themselves on the lips of Jesus, the Psalms are actually fulfilled in Jesus' life. In other words, the Psalms are all about Jesus. He says in Luke 24:44,

“This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”

This genuine human existence that is expressed in the Psalms, the words, emotions, and experiences anticipate, point to and are fully embodied in Jesus. What this means is, the prior and primary purpose of the Psalms is to show us who Jesus is. Well, at least that's what Jesus says.

Because these are the words of God's people and more precisely, the words of Jesus, the only way we can make these our words, our prayers, our songs is through belonging to Christ. It's in Christ that we share in his life, relationship with God as a child of God, belonging to the people of God.

The psalms show us that there is a hope out of the darkness. They show us who Jesus really is and model to us the type of prayers, the kind of raw and real words we're able to bring to God. They remind our souls in dark times who our God really is and who we really are in Christ. So, in our season of darkness, in these days of COVID-19, it's a time where we might feel darkness, helplessness, weariness, anxiety, pain, a sense of failure, defeat, barrenness, emptiness and a dryness descend upon us, but we're not without hope. For as we come to God, we're brought to see Jesus, who brings light, comfort, peace and strength (2 Co 4:7-18).

But I will trust in your
unfailing love: my heart
rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing the Lord's praise,
for He has been good to me

Psalm 13

PSALM 13

PERSONAL GROWTH

For the choir director. A Psalm of David

1 How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

2 How long will I store up anxious concerns within me, agony in my mind every day? How long will my enemy dominate me?

3 Consider me and answer, Lord my God. Restore brightness to my eyes; otherwise, I will sleep in death.

4 My enemy will say, "I have triumphed over him," and my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

5 But I have trusted in your faithful love; my heart will rejoice in your deliverance.

6 I will sing to the Lord because he has treated me generously.

My reflections

Honesty. *David is in agony and can't feel the presence of God. He cries out that God has ignored his pain and his sorrow. It is almost a howl, and the fact that it is included in the Bible tells us that God wants to hear our genuine feelings, even if they are angry at him. David never stops praying, however, and that is the key. As long as we howl towards God and remember his salvation by grace (verse 5), we will end at a place of peace. If Christians do that by hearing Jesus praying verses 1-4 on the cross, losing the Father's face as he paid for our sin, we will be able to pray verses 5-6 indeed.*

Prayer. *"Tempest-tossed soul, be still; my promised grace receive; 'Tis Jesus speaks - I must, I will, I can, I do believe." Lord, this reminds me that believing the promise of your presence in my suffering takes time, and grows slowly, through stages in prayer. So I will pray until my heart rejoices in you. Amen. (3)*

3. TIM KELLER, MY ROCK; MY REFUGE.

PSALM 13 GROWTH GROUP

Passage: Psalm 13

Big Idea: In the middle of darkness, God invites us to be real and to remember that even in our present darkness, light will come.

Israel

1. What does this psalm tell us about the experience of the author/Israel at that time?

Jesus

2. How does this psalm point us to moments in Jesus' life where he might have experienced and prayed this psalm?

Us

3. How *do* we share in the experience of the psalm/Jesus?

4. How *don't* we share in the experience of the psalm/Jesus?

5. Because of our relationship with Jesus, how do you think God wants this Psalm to shape how you speak to Him?

Us & God

Turn your thoughts from Question 5 into a prayer for yourself and the group.

PSALM 13

FAMILY GROWTH

Southside Kids

Families keep a lookout for this weeks email with Kids activities and videos.

Family Discipleship Tip

Discipleship is an intentional relationship. We've got to have a plan if we want to disciple our kids in the way of Jesus.

Think when. The Sunday Church Livestream is already one planned time we sit down together as a family. But there are other times we usually plan to be together that we can make the most of, like meal times, breakfast or dinner can be good opportunities to engage with our kids and God.

Think what. Help your family be prepared by communicating your desire to sit down together as a family to talk about our relationship with God. Also, before starting, make sure you have what you need, a Bible, pens/pencils/crayons, paper, activity sheets, craft materials, etc.

Think how. Be prepared yourself. One way you could do this is by firstly doing and then sharing what you discovered in the Personal Growth section.

Southside Youth

Your teenagers have an assignment this Thursday to ask you a couple questions - so watch out for that! And here's some of the questions Southside Youth will be grappling with as they look at this weeks Psalm:

Reflect:

- What stood out to you from this Psalm?
- Are there any questions that you have?

React:

- What do you think David is feeling in this Psalm?
- How does this Psalm make you feel?

Respond:

- What are some things that you are worried or anxious about at the moment?
- How can this Psalm bring you hope?
- How can you act differently this week because of what you have learnt?

Think about ways you can speak with your teenager about what they're learning in God's Word. Could be reflections around the dinner table, or a planned catch up with them.

Here's some other questions they are considering each week that may be fun to dig into together as a family:

- What is something that was enjoyable or encouraging this week?
- What is something that was difficult or disheartening this week?
- What is something I learned or have been reminded about God?
- What would I like to ask God to help me with?

Even though I walk through
the darkest valley, I will fear
no evil, for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they
comfort me.

Psalm 23

PSALM 23

PERSONAL GROWTH

A Psalm of David

1 The Lord is my shepherd; I have what I need.

2 He lets me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters.

3 He renews my life; he leads me along the right paths for his name's sake.

4 Even when I go through the darkest valley, I fear no danger, for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.

5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

6 Only goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord as long as I live.

My reflections

Peace in the midst. *God has a celebration meal with us not after we finally get out of the dark valley but in the middle of it, in the presence of our enemies. He wants us to rejoice in him in the midst of our troubles. Is our shepherd out of touch with reality? Hardly. Jesus is the only shepherd who knows what it is like to be a sheep (John 10:11). He understands what we are going through and will be with us every step of the way, even through death itself, where “all other guides turn back” (Romans 8:39).*

Prayer. *Lord, if I fed on your love, grace, and truth, I would not be in any want. In this life I will never attain that, yet, you are always with me, and someday you will lead me to my true country, the home I've been looking for all my life. Help me rest in that. Amen. (4)*

PSALM 23

GROWTH GROUP

Passage: Psalm 23

Big Idea: In the middle of chaos, it is God - the good shepherd - who promises to be with his people. Where God's presence is, there his peace and his power is as well.

Israel

1. What does this psalm tell us about the experience of the author/Israel at that time?

Jesus

2. How does this psalm point us to moments in Jesus' life where he might have experienced and prayed this psalm?

Us

3. How *do* we share in the experience of the psalm/Jesus?

4. How *don't* we share in the experience of the psalm/Jesus?

5. Because of our relationship with Jesus, how do you think God wants this Psalm to shape how you speak to Him?

Us & God

Turn your thoughts from Question 5 into a prayer for yourself and the group.

PSALM 23

FAMILY GROWTH

Southside Kids

Families keep a lookout for this weeks email with Kids activities and videos.

Family Discipleship Tip

Discipleship is an intentional relationship. We've got to have a plan if we want to disciple our kids in the way of Jesus.

A key mark of Discipleship is reading the Bible together. Read the Bible with your kids. As you read you could get your kids to draw pictures of what they hear happening. Then you could invite your kids to retell the story in their own words from the pictures they have drawn.

Southside Youth

Ask your teenagers this week what they are learning in their Youth Books. Here's some of the questions Southside Youth will be grappling with as they look at this weeks Psalm:

Reflect:

- What stood out to you from this Psalm?
- Are there any questions that you have?

React:

- What do you think David is feeling in this Psalm?
- How does this Psalm make you feel?

Respond:

- David describes many seasons of life, what season do you relate with at the moment?
- How can this Psalm bring you hope? How can you act differently this week because of what you have learnt?

Think about ways you can speak with your teenager about what they're learning in God's Word. Could be reflections around the dinner table, or a planned catch up with them.

Here's some other questions they are considering each week that may be fun to dig into together as a family:

- What is something that was enjoyable or encouraging this week?
- What is something that was difficult or disheartening this week?
- What is something I learned or have been reminded about God?
- What would I like to ask God to help me with?

I praise you because I am
fearfully and wonderfully
made; your works are
wonderful. I know that full well

Psalm 139

PSALM 139

PERSONAL GROWTH

You discern. *God knows everything (verses 1-6) and fully exists everywhere at once - he is omnipresent (verses 7-12). This should be a comfort (verse 10) but it feels more like a threat ("you hem me in," verse 5) because we feel the need to hide from God (Genesis 3:7). In Christ, however we are clothed with Jesus' righteousness (Philippians 3:9). When we know that, we can bear to let God expose us and to overcome our distorted self-views, which are so confused and biased. When someone we know is absolutely committed to us points out our flaws, though it is hard, we can still listen. The upholding love enables us to accept the unpleasant truth, and then the prospects for growth become unlimited. So it is with God.*

Prayer. *Lord, I confess that when things go wrong in my life, I seldom stop to consider whether you are lovingly trying to show me something that needs to change. Friends tell friends the truth, even when it hurts. So help me to be open to your friendship and critique. Amen. (5)*

PSALM 139 GROWTH GROUP

Passage: Psalm 139

Big Idea: An understanding of who God is (the God in control) transforms my present thoughts.

Israel

1. What does this psalm tell us about the experience of the author/Israel at that time?

Jesus

2. How does this psalm point us to moments in Jesus' life where he might have experienced and prayed this psalm?

Us

3. How *do* we share in the experience of the psalm/Jesus?

4. How *don't* we share in the experience of the psalm/Jesus?

5. Because of our relationship with Jesus, how do you think God wants this Psalm to shape how you speak to Him?

Us & God

Turn your thoughts from Question 5 into a prayer for yourself and the group.

PSALM 139

FAMILY GROWTH

Southside Kids

Families keep a lookout for this weeks email with Kids activities and videos.

Family Discipleship Tip

Discipleship is an intentional relationship. We got to have a plan if we want to disciple our kids in the way of Jesus.

Actively listen to your kid's story, by being curiously-compassionate about what they are saying. Use phrases and questions like,

"Go on..."

"Tell me more about ..."

"What happened then?..."

"That would have been nice/hard..."

Southside Youth

Pray with your teenagers this week about what is going on in the world. Here's some of the questions Southside Youth will be grappling with as they look at this weeks Psalm:

Reflect:

- What stood out to you from this Psalm?
- Are there any questions that you have?

React:

- What do you think David is feeling in this Psalm?
- How does this Psalm make you feel?

Respond:

- Understanding that God is in control helps us to think differently about things going on in the world.
- How can this Psalm bring you hope?
- How can you act differently this week because of what you have learnt?

Think about ways you can speak with your teenager about what they're learning in God's Word. Could be reflections around the dinner table, or a planned catch up with them.

Here's some other questions they are considering each week that may be fun to dig into together as a family:

- What is something that was enjoyable or encouraging this week?
- What is something that was difficult or disheartening this week?
- What is something I learned or have been reminded about God?
- What would I like to ask God to help me with?

Lord, you are the God that
saves me; day and night I cry
out to you. May my prayer
come before you; turn your
ear to my cry.

Psalm 88

PSALM 88

PERSONAL GROWTH

The darkest depths. *The Psalmist feels overwhelmed and forgotten. This prayer will end in darkness, without a note of hope. But the psalm title tells us the author Heman, a leader of the Kohathites guild of musicians who wrote many of the psalms, some of the greatest literature in world history. His experiences of darkness turned him into an artist who has helped millions of people. In his despair he thought God had abandoned him, but he hadn't. Christians know that Jesus took the ultimate darkness of God's wrath (Matthew 27:45). Since he took the abandonment we deserve, we know that God will not abandon us (Hebrews 13:5. He is there with us, even when we can't feel him at all.*

Prayer. *Lord, these psalms teach that we can bring you our anger, fear, and despair and lay them before you unfiltered. You understand. Yet as I do so I pray you will make yourself real to my heart so that, like a morning fog, these things can be burned away by the light of your presence. Amen. (6)*

PSALM 88

GROWTH GROUP

Passage: Psalm 88

Big Idea: In moments of despair God invites his people to pray to him in honesty - sometimes there is no answer, but God is not absent.

Israel

1. What does this psalm tell us about the experience of the author/Israel at that time?

Jesus

2. How does this psalm point us to moments in Jesus' life where he might have experienced and prayed this psalm?

Us

3. How *do* we share in the experience of the psalm/Jesus?

4. How *don't* we share in the experience of the psalm/Jesus?

5. Because of our relationship with Jesus, how do you think God wants this Psalm to shape how you speak to Him?

Us & God

Turn your thoughts from Question 5 into a prayer for yourself and the group.

PSALM 88

FAMILY GROWTH

Southside Kids

Families keep a lookout for this weeks email with Kids activities and videos.

Family Discipleship Tip

Discipleship is an intentional relationship. We've got to have a plan if we want to disciple our kids in the way of Jesus.

Also explore what your kids are saying by asking, why, what and how questions.

Check if you're hearing them right, by asking...

"It sounds like..."

"Are you saying that..."

"So you feel/think that..."

Southside Youth

This week's Psalm is pretty dark, check in with your teenagers and see how they are reacting to it. Pray with them through their fears.

Here's some of the questions Southside Youth will be grappling with as they look at this weeks Psalm:

Reflect:

- What stood out to you from this Psalm?
- Are there any questions that you have?

React:

- Have you ever felt what the Author is feeling in this Psalm?
- Write down some thoughts you have had.

Respond:

- In moments of despair God invites his people to pray to him in honesty - sometimes there is not an answer, but God's is not absent.
- How can this Psalm bring you hope?
- How can you act differently this week because of what you have learnt?

Here's some other questions they are considering each week that may be fun to dig into together as a family:

- What is something that was enjoyable or encouraging this week?
- What is something that was difficult or disheartening this week?
- What is something I learned or have been reminded about God?
- What would I like to ask God to help me with?

**But as for me, it is good to be
near God. I have made the
Sovereign Lord my refuge:
I will tell of all your deeds.**

Psalm 73

PSALM 73

PERSONAL GROWTH

A Psalm of Asaph.

24 You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me up in glory.

25 Who do I have in heaven but you? And I desire nothing on earth but you.

26 My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart, my portion forever.

27 Those far from you will certainly perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.

28 But as for me, God's presence is my good. I have made the Lord God my refuge, so I can tell about all you do.

My reflections

Nothing but you. *The psalmist breaks through. "Whom have I in heaven but you?" (verse 25) means "If I don't have you I have nothing -- nothing else will satisfy or last." We rightly want to be reunited with loved ones in heaven. What makes heaven, heaven, however, is that God is there. Those who have gone before are not looking down at us fondly but rather are caught up in a never-ending fountain for joy, delight, and adoration. Augustine writes: "God alone is that place of peace that cannot be disturbed -- and he will not withhold Himself from your love unless you withhold your love from him." Life in glory with God (verse 24) will suffice for healing of all wounds, that answering of all questions. Jesus has promised.*

Prayer. *Lord, I thank you for how suffering drives me like a nail deeper into your love. It is not my earthly joys but my griefs that show me your grace is enough. "I live to show your power, who once did bring first my joys to weep, and now my griefs to sing." Amen. (7)*

7. TIM KELLER, MY ROCK: MY REFUGE.

PSALM 73

GROWTH GROUP

Passage: Psalm 73

Big Idea: In this world the only source of strength is not in this world, but in God - our portion forever.

Israel

1. What does this psalm tell us about the experience of the author/Israel at that time?

Jesus

2. How does this psalm point us to moments in Jesus' life where he might have experienced and prayed this psalm?

Us

3. How *do* we share in the experience of the psalm/Jesus?

4. How *don't* we share in the experience of the psalm/Jesus?

5. Because of our relationship with Jesus, how do you think God wants this Psalm to shape how you speak to Him?

Us & God

Turn your thoughts from Question 5 into a prayer for yourself and the group.

PSALM 73

FAMILY GROWTH

Southside Kids

Families keep a lookout for this weeks email with Kids activities and videos.

Family Discipleship Tip

Discipleship is an intentional relationship. We've got to have a plan if we want to disciple our kids in the way of Jesus.

Having connected and understood them, respond, by sharing yourself. Build a personal connection over the Bible with your kids by sharing personally.

Praying for your kids after they've invited you into their world is another way of bringing God into theirs.

Southside Youth

If you are a Christian, share your story with your teenagers, how you came to know God and how He has grown you in moments across your life.

Here's some of the questions Southside Youth will be grappling with as they look at this weeks Psalm:

Reflect:

- What stood out to you from this Psalm?
- Are there any questions that you have?

React:

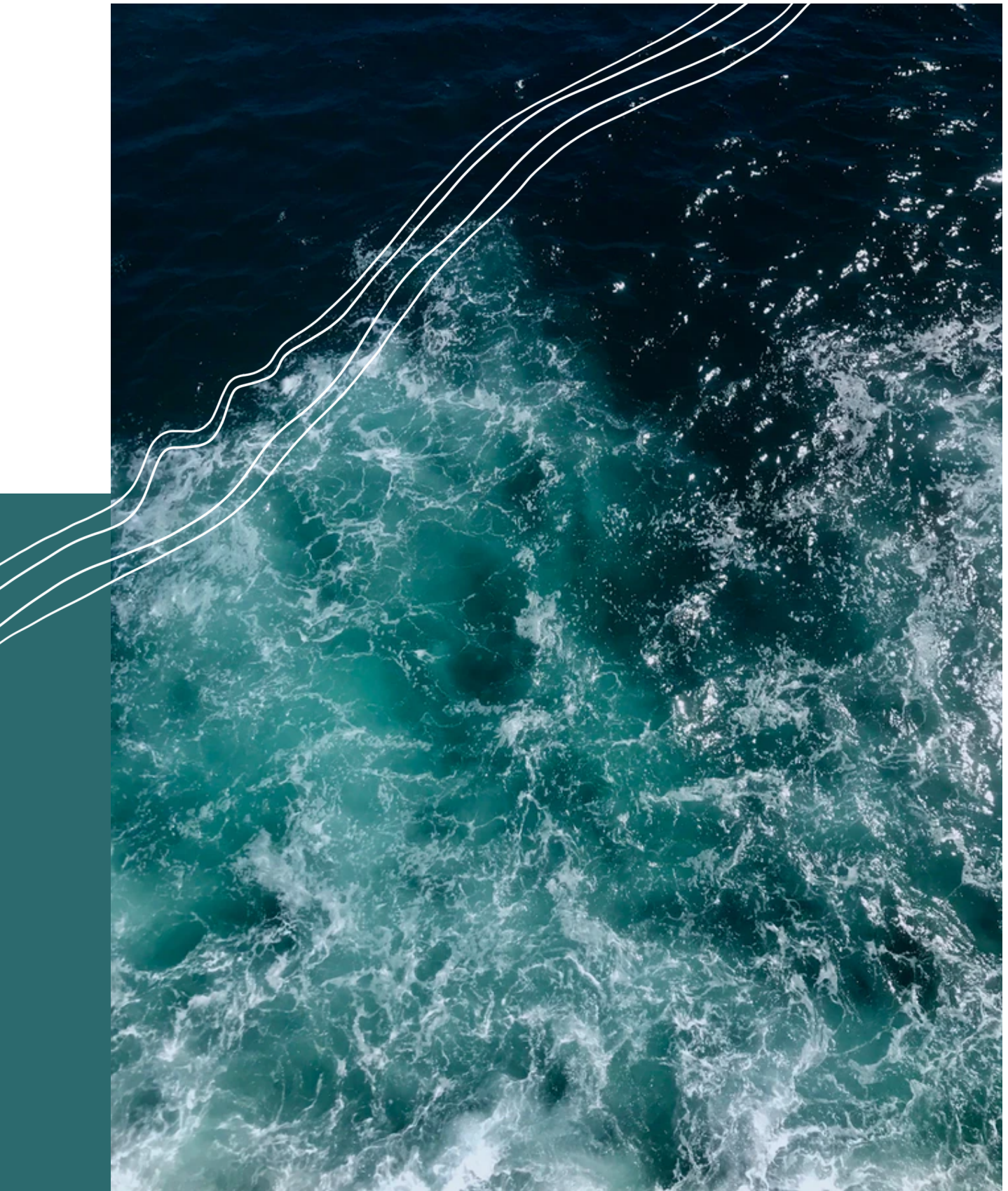
- How does this Psalm make you feel? Would you say that God is your portion forever?
- What do you think that means

Respond:

- In this world the only source of strength is not in this world, but in God - our portion forever.
- How can this Psalm bring you hope?
- How can you act differently this week because of what you have learnt?

Here's some other questions they are considering each week that may be fun to dig into together as a family:

- What is something that was enjoyable or encouraging this week?
- What is something that was difficult or disheartening this week?
- What is something I learned or have been reminded about God? What would I like to ask God to help me with?



WHEN THE DEADLY OUTBREAK COMES: COUNSEL FROM MARTIN LUTHER TGC | JUSTIN TAYLOR



On December 31, 2019, health officials from China alerted the World Health Organization of a new pattern of pneumonia in the city of Wuhan that they had never seen previously. By January 7, 2020, health officials announced they had identified a new virus in the coronavirus family, which they designated 2019-nCoV. Coronaviruses include the common cold and SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome). They spread by being in proximity to an infected person and inhaling droplets when they cough or sneeze, or by touching surfaces where these droplets land and then touching one's face or nose. Since January 7, this new coronavirus has spread to almost every nation on earth with the WHO reporting 118,000 cases and more than 4,200 deaths. Stock markets have crashed, and global travel and commerce have been radically affected.

Christians are facing this health crisis with a variety of feelings and serious questions, and as always it is essential to seek our ultimate guidance from the Scripture alone. Yet it is also helpful to look back in time to see how Christians in the past have faced similar crises. And it isn't hard to find lessons in the dreadful circumstances connected with the bubonic plague (Black Death), which devastated Europe in the 14th through 16th centuries. The Black Death came out of China from 1347 to 1350 and killed one-fourth of Europe's population at that time. Later outbreaks occurred in the 15th century as well, leaving deep emotional scars and terror in the memories of many Europeans. When this disease was in epidemic levels, the mortality rate ranged from 30 percent to 90 percent.

'Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague' (1527)

This is the historical backdrop for a fascinating pamphlet written in 1527 by Martin Luther, "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague." In August 1527, the plague had struck Luther's city of Wittenberg, and many of Luther's fellow citizens ran for their lives. Luther's prince, Elector John, ordered Luther to leave immediately to save his own life, but Luther chose to stay to minister to those stricken. Luther himself was surrounded by the disease and its suffering victims. The wife of mayor Tilo Dene virtually died in Luther's arms. So Luther boldly stood in the gap along with many others to minister hope and the Word of God in a desperate situation.

Many Germans from other cities and towns mocked the Wittenbergers for fleeing. One German pastor named Johann Hess wrote Luther asking how a pastor should behave when facing such a plague. The pamphlet was Luther's response, and its wisdom may prove helpful to many Christians even in our 21st-century crisis.

Who Can Leave?

In this tract, Luther began by addressing those with the strong conviction that one should never flee because the plague is God's judgment for our sins, and Christians should stand humbly and accept his will in repentance. While Luther considered such views praiseworthy, he acknowledged that not everyone is equally strong in the faith. Luther also asserted that it should be obvious that people with leadership roles (like pastors, mayors, judges, and physicians) should remain in the community until the crisis has passed. Especially pastors must be like the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:11). Just as strongly, Luther said it would be sinful for parents to abandon their children, or for any person to flee if a family member depends on them. The same applies to our neighbors, for loving our neighbor as ourselves includes being certain they are free from harm. Beyond this, however, seeking to save one's life was natural and biblically allowable, as was using medicine. Luther was no fatalist.

Fear of Death

Concerning one's demeanor, Luther made it plain that fear of death was the Devil's work, and that no Christian should yield to it. Christ's resurrection should make all Christians fearless in the face of the grave. Yet Luther allowed that some are stronger in this faith than others, and may choose to go boldly into the fire of deadly danger, expecting great reward from the Lord for their service, while others are weaker and flee in the normal way. Luther said Christians who trust God and minister directly to the dying should not fear boils and infection, for in the end, caring for the sick is like caring for Christ. Jesus said, "I was sick, and you cared for me" (Matt. 25:36). John wrote that Christ laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for others (1 John 3:16). On the other hand, Luther warned against the over-confident who underestimated the seriousness of the plague and were frivolous toward God.

Word of God

Luther strongly urged those in the presence of the dying to pour into them the Word of God, teaching them both how to live and also how to die in faith. Anyone who is dying in unbelief should be urgently warned to repent while there's still time, but they should call for a pastor while they can still understand his words. Anyone who is aware of outstanding sins should do everything they can to make restitution and receive the Lord's Supper if they are able. So also the dying should write a will as soon as possible.

Practical Steps

Beyond that, Luther advocated practical steps to contain the spread of the disease. We who live after Louis Pasteur discovered his germ theory, and who benefit from the scientific development of medical research and modern hospitals, can hardly imagine how different conditions would have been in Wittenberg in Luther's day. Luther had to advocate for certain public buildings to be set aside as hospitals for the sick rather than allowing the sick to be in hundreds of private homes. He also urged Christians to fumigate their homes, yards, and streets to stop the spread of the plague. And Luther urged that the Wittenberg cemetery should be moved outside the city limits, with its walls decorated with biblical scenes to minister to the grieving.

Love of Christ

Ultimately Luther left all personal decisions on whether to flee to each individual in light of the Word of God. Times like these are intense and serious, and everything we do should be in light of God's Word and the call of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our journey with the coronavirus has just begun, and it may soon fizzle out into the dim memories of the medical history books. But it is also a God-ordained opportunity for many Christians to display the love of Christ in service to their neighbors, and to live out the fearlessness of death that Christ has won for all his children.



HELPFUL PRACTICES FOR ONLINE MEETINGS LIFEWAY CHRIS SURRATT

As you might imagine, having an online group experience is considerably different than sharing a living room or classroom in person. Here are a few tips for participating in or facilitating an online group experience.

Recommend group members to download meeting software at least 30 minutes prior to meeting, just in case they have technology issues they need to work out.

Make sure your face has sufficient lighting.

- Lighting works best in front of your face, not behind.

Make sure your face is centered in the video camera.

- Members probably don't want to see only your forehead or neck throughout the meeting, so position your camera accordingly.

Select the quietest room/location you can find.

- Turn off anything making noise in the background (TV, radio, appliances).
- Put pets in a different room or have them in a place where they will be most quiet.

Only use one device per household.

- When two devices are used in the same room, it produces feedback that affects all group participants.
- If two people feel more comfortable participating with their own devices than sharing the same one, each should have his or her own room for doing so.

Mute your computer unless you're talking.

- If everyone's microphone is turned on at the same time, the sound quality can be an issue and it can be hard to hear the person who is talking. The best policy is to mute yourself when you are not talking.
- If you are muted, make sure to nod your head and listen well so people can recognize you are following them.
- You will be muting and unmuting a lot, so get used to it.
- Also, you'll get called out if you don't unmute, so don't be offended.
- The host may mute you if you don't do this yourself, so don't take that personally.

Be an assertive moderator.

- The moderator/host of the group will need to be welcoming and in charge. Make sure as host you jump on a few minutes early to welcome everyone.
- Redirect the conversation or mute participants as necessary. This may feel rude at times, but it is necessary to manage a good online experience for the group.
- Generally speaking, the moderator should talk 30% of the time and listen 70% of the time.

HELPFUL PRACTICES FOR ONLINE MEETINGS LIFEWAY CHRIS SURRATT

Create a plan for participants to indicate they'd like to talk.

- Since participants will often be muted, having a plan will help you know when to mute and unmute.
- You may try something like raising a hand, answering in a specific order, or another signal.
- Utilize the "chat" features to post questions for discussion.

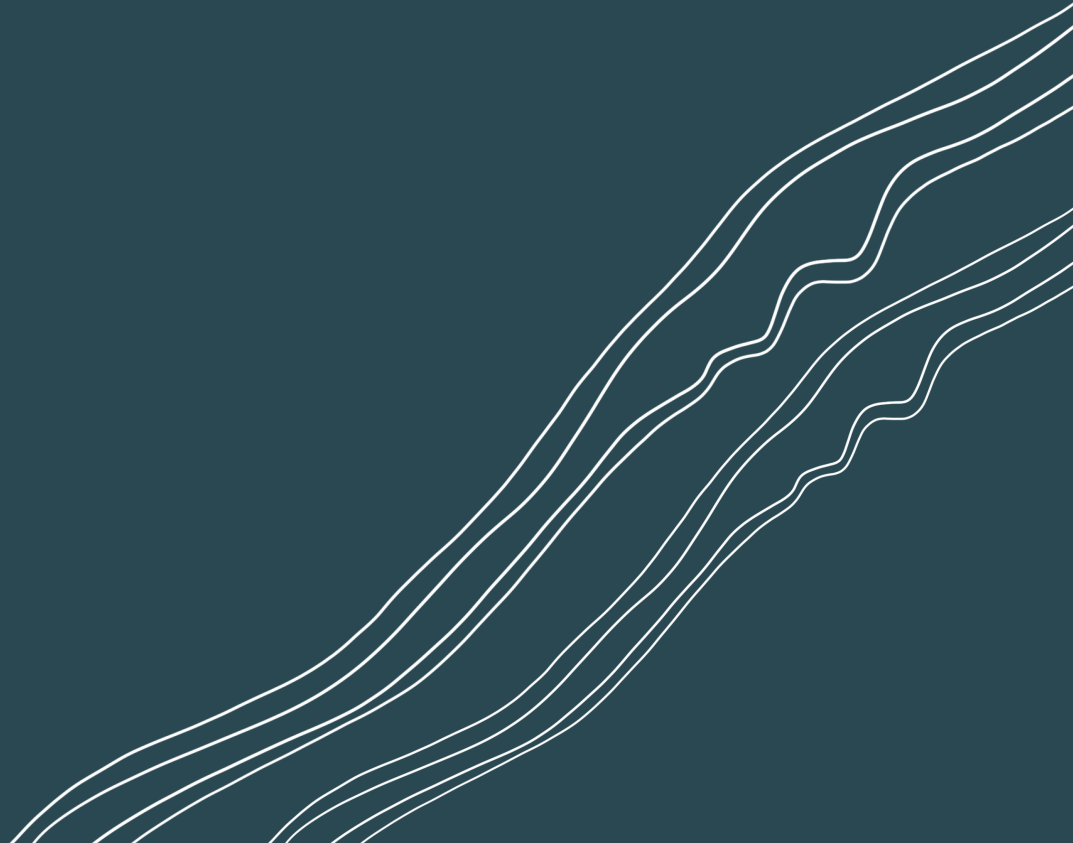
Give your full attention to the group experience, resisting the urge to multi-task.

- When participants are not paying full attention, it can be a big distraction online just like an in-person group.
- When talking, spend some time looking at the camera, not just the screen. This digital form of "eye-contact" goes a long way toward creating a sense of connection and community.

Stay in touch afterwards.

- Assign prayer partners to call each other after group is over and pray with them.
- Or text each other in gender specific text chats to share requests.
- Leverage GroupMe, Facebook Groups, WhatsApp, etc. as a place to stay connected and keep the conversation going throughout the week.

Our groups may not be able to meet physically together for a while, but that doesn't mean they cannot meet at all. Consider making use of these wonderful online platforms with your groups during this season and watch God do amazing things in and through all of you.



THE DARK NIGHT OF SOUL: EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER 6 OF 'EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY SPIRITUALITY' BY PETER SCAZZERO

The image of the Christian life as a journey captures our experience of following Christ like few others. Journeys involve movement, action, stops and starts, detours, delays, and trips into the unknown. It also gives us the long view of the Christian life. Think about it:

God called Abraham to leave his past life in Ur at the age of 75 to go on a journey. God called Moses out of a burning bush to begin a new phase of his journey at the age of 80! God called the Israelites to leave Egypt and embark on a 40- year journey of personal transformation in the desert. God called David to leave the comforts of his job as a shepherd as a teenager to fight Goliath and take a journey that would lead him to serve as king of Israel. Jesus called the 12 disciples to a journey that would change their lives forever. You are on a journey. So am I.

But it is a truth about the Christian life that at one point or another, you will hit a Wall. By a Wall, I am referring to a season in your faith when you will feel stuck.

For most of us the Wall appears through a crisis that turns our world upside down. It comes, perhaps, through a divorce, a job loss, the death of a close friend or family member, a cancer diagnosis, a disillusioning church experience, a betrayal, a shattered dream, a wayward child, a car accident, an inability to get pregnant, a deep desire to marry that remains unfulfilled, a dryness or loss of joy in our relationship with God. We question ourselves, God, the church.

We discover for the first time that our faith does not appear to “work.” We have more questions than answers as the very foundation of our faith feels like it is on the line. We don’t know where God is, what he is doing, where he is going, how he is getting us there, or when this will be over.

Regardless of how we get there, every follower of Jesus at some point will confront the Wall.

The best way to understand the dynamics of the Wall is to examine the classic work of St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, written over 500 years ago.⁵ He described the journey in three phases: beginners, progressives, and perfect. To move out of the beginning stage, he argued, required the receiving of God’s gift of the dark night, or the Wall. This is the “ordinary way” we grow in Christ. A failure to understand this is one of the major reasons many start out well in their journeys but do not finish.

How do we know we are in “the dark night”? Our good feelings of God’s presence evaporate. We feel the door of heaven has been shut as we pray. Darkness, helplessness, weariness, a sense of failure or defeat, barrenness, emptiness, dryness descends upon us. The Christian disciplines that have served us up to this time “no longer work.” We can’t see what God is doing and see little visible fruit in our lives.

This is God’s way of rewiring and “purging our affections and passions”. He does this so we might delight in his love and enter into a richer, fuller communion with him. God wants to communicate to us his true sweetness and love. He longs that we might know His true peace and rest.

To get there, however, false layers and our unhealthy attachments inside us must be burned away. Only then will we be able to actually taste and see that the Lord is good. Only then will we actually surrender to His will and not our own.

At the Wall we learn what true faith is- trusting God even when we don’t feel Him. We may hate Walls, but they are God’s gifts to us. Let me close with 2 thoughts here: First, there is a difference between Wall and trials. The trials we encounter each day are not the Wall or “the dark night of the soul.” Trials are the traffic jams, annoying bosses, delayed airplane departures, car breakdowns, fevers, and barking dogs in the middle of the night.

James refers to this: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2-4).

Walls are David fleeing a jealous king for thirteen years in the desert. Walls are 11 disciples at the crucifixion – confused, disoriented, when all their dreams are shattered. Walls are Job losing his ten children, health, and possessions in a day!

Secondly, it can be difficult to discern precisely when we began the journey through the Wall and when we might actually be on the other side. Ultimately, God is the One who moves us through the Wall. And with that comes mystery. There is a lot we do not understand about the ways of God. His ways are not ours. Yet there are rich treasures at the Wall. Our image and understanding of God is dramatically transformed. We often have God in a small box. The Wall blows open that box and we begin to see God for the sovereign, mighty, loving, good God that He is.

Our work is to stay with God, to persevere, to faithfully wait on Him, to stick with God -- even when everything in us wants to quit and run. Why? For He is good and His love endures forever. Failure to understand and surrender to God’s working in us at the Wall often results in great long-term pain and confusion. I know many people who have been through great sufferings and hit massive Walls. Yet the Walls did not change them. They only bounced off them. They returned to a similar, but different Wall later. Again they bounced off it, often becoming more bitter and angry than before. Yet receiving the gift of God at the Walls that come to each of us, transforms our lives forever in ways that we never dreamed. Enjoy.

THE ONE INSIGHT THAT WILL HELP YOU THRIVE IN THE COVID-19 AGE | ARKOS BALOGH

There's a key insight that will help you thrive in the COVID-19 age. It's an insight found all throughout the Bible. And it's an insight confirmed by modern psychology. [1]

As you know, our world can be a challenging place. Adversity of all kinds (and now COVID-19) threatens to suffocate us. For me, adversity has come in many forms: stress at work, tension in relationships, and now, the challenge of COVID-19.

I'm not immune to adversity.

But during one such time of adversity, I stumbled across a book that opened my eyes. It contained an insight that gave me a light-bulb moment. It changed the way I saw adversity. It changed the way I viewed the world. [2]

And in this post, I'll be sharing that insight with you.

Now, if you come to understand this insight – and apply it to your life – you'll have a powerful mental and emotional lever that will help you lift the burden of COVID-19.

So, what is this insight?

How We Relate to Adversity

To explain the insight, imagine the following scenario. You're in a conversation with a friend, a spouse, a family member. You disagree with them. And the emotional temperature rises.

And before you know it, you're at each other like Tom Cruise and Jack Nicholson in the court room scene from *A Few Good Men*. As you walk away, you can't help but think to yourself *'they always bring out the worst in me – I can't help but get angry and upset with them!'*. In other words, you believe it's *their* actions that lead you to feel and act in a certain way. If I was to model this, it would go like this:

Adversity (e.g. a disagreement) → **Your Feelings** → **Your Behaviour**.

In sum, you think your feelings are held hostage to the events – especially challenges – around you.

And that rings true, doesn't it?

A colleague acts abrasively, and you get upset. COVID-19 upends life as we know it, and you feel scared and anxious.

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Adversity leads directly to your feeling upset (which then impacts your behaviour):
what could be truer than that?

While we might hold to this way of looking at adversity, it turns out it's not true.

Adversity *per se* doesn't *determine* our response to it.

The Missing Step. The Insight That Could Radically Change How You Relate to The World around you.

There's a crucial step that's missing in the above Adversity → Feelings → Behaviour model. The former head of the American Psychological Association, Martin Seligman explains what this is:

[Researchers] Albert Ellis, who along with Aaron Beck founded cognitive behaviour therapy, developed the ABC model. The A stands for adversity. An adversity can be any negative event: a failed vacation, a fight with a close friend, the death of a loved one. The C stands for consequences: how you feel and behave following adversity.'

He continues:

Often it seems that the adversity immediately and automatically produces the consequences. Ellis, however, argues that it is the B – the beliefs and interpretations about A – that cause the particular consequences.' [3]

In other words, the more accurate model is this:

Adversity → Your Beliefs about the adversity → Consequences (your feelings and your resulting behaviour).

Here's the point:

It's not adversity *per se* that causes you to feel and act in a certain way. Rather, your beliefs about the adversity lead you to feel and act the way you do.

Don't let the simplicity of this model fool you. It's a game-changer for how we relate to suffering, including COVID-19.

THE ONE INSIGHT THAT WILL HELP YOU THRIVE IN THE COVID-19 AGE | ARKOS BALOGH

The Lever that Helps Lift The Burden of COVID-19

A lever is a simple device. It's not complex or heavy, yet allows us to do what we could never do on our own: lifting enormously heavy weights. In other words, it's a *force multiplier*, in the physical sense. And knowing that it's your *beliefs* about adversity that shape your response to adversity is a *force multiplier* in an emotional, mental and spiritual sense: It gives you the ability to do enormously difficult things.

How so?

It means you're no longer a hostage to the events around you. You are response-able: you can *choose* how to respond to whatever circumstance comes your way.

Let's dig a little deeper to see how this works.

Your Beliefs Are a Mental Map of Reality

Your beliefs are like a map of reality. We know that a map is not the territory: it's a representation of the territory. And that is what our beliefs are: they're our representation, our view of reality.

As author Stephen Covey points out:

Each of us has many maps in our head...we interpret everything we experience through these mental maps. We seldom question their accuracy; we're usually unaware that we have them. We simply assume that the way we see things is the way they are. [2]

Thus having the right map of reality makes all the difference. And so, if you want to move your life in a God-ward direction, then start by upgrading your map so that it aligns with *reality*: namely *God's reality*. But so often we try and work on our behaviour, or even our feelings about the adversity we're facing. For example, we *try hard* not to panic, as we see essential items flying off supermarket shelves. We tell ourselves to calm down, and not feel anxious. But this rarely works for long. Our feelings and behaviour are driven by our 'maps' of reality. They're the source of our feelings, attitudes, and behaviour. And so, working on our feelings and behaviour *alone* is ineffective in the long term.

Why? Because eventually we'll revert to feelings and behaviour that's consistent with our map of reality. *But if you work on your map of reality – your underlying beliefs and assumptions – and 'upgrade' those to match God's reality, your feelings and behaviour will follow.*

So, what's the first step if we wish to upgrade our map of reality?

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If you want to upgrade your map, you first need to become aware of what your map is.

In the busyness of life, we're rarely aware of what our underlying maps and beliefs are. We just assume that our maps are reality. And we rarely explore them, let alone ask if they're matching reality.

But you can't change what you're not aware of.

And so, if you want to upgrade your map of reality, you first need to understand what your map is.

How do you do this?

A simple way is to do the 'ABC' exercise. In other words, examining your 'Adversity' -> 'Beliefs' -> 'Consequences': [5]

1) When you face adversity, first ask what the consequences are - namely your feelings, and behaviour.

For example, how do you feel when you see empty shelves at supermarkets? Chances are you'll feel anxious.

2) Next, ask why you're feeling anxious: what story are you telling yourself about the empty supermarket shelves? You might believe that empty supermarket shelves mean you'll be worse off, and being worse off is a bad thing for you. And thus, in this (not so) hypothetical scenario, you have your map, your underlying belief that is driving your feelings and behaviour: *being worse off - suffering - is bad for you.*

Let's now examine how today's secular maps of reality are faring in COVID-19.

What COVID-19 has shown about our modern secular maps of reality. They're ineffective in dealing with a crisis.

COVID-19 has seen the rise of many bad behaviours among Australians. Panic buying. Hoarding. Acting selfishly. As we've seen above, beneath these behaviours are maps of reality, driving the behaviours. And one common map believed by many secular (and some Christian) Australians is that suffering is all bad. And so, we should do everything we can do to avoid suffering. Even if it means hoarding to the point of depriving vulnerable members of our community of basic necessities.

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Suffering is all bad, and comfort is a necessity – is a common map our culture holds to.

Not only is it leading to selfish behaviour, but it's also leading to negative feelings and emotions: namely anxiety, and other mental health issues. Thus, our modern secular map of reality is morally and psychologically bankrupt. And so, is there a better map of reality? One that helps us deal with this crisis?

As it turns, out, there is.

A Better Map of COVID-19 The Bible's Map.

The Bible gives us an objective view of reality: reality as it is. A reality in which God is King, and the crucified and risen Jesus is ruling at His right hand. Indeed, the Bible gives us many such mental maps of reality, helping us understand the world as it really is. In fact, when you read the Bible, you're (partly) in the process of upgrading your mental map of reality. When you go to church, the preaching of God's word also helps you upgrade your map of reality. [6]

And what's the Bible's map when it comes to suffering in general, including around COVID-19?

Suffering is often painful, but it is for our ultimate good:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

James 1:2-4

According to God's word, all things – including suffering – are ordained by God for our good (Rom 8:28). Suffering is a form of discipline, sent by a loving Heavenly Father to make us holy (Heb 12:4-11). And when we take these words to heart, and align our view of reality to God's, we're able to thrive in the most awful of circumstances. Including in the midst of disease and death: Let me share with you one telling example I've come across recently, from the life of Henry Venn. Venn was vicar of Huddersfield when his wife died in 1767. He raised his five children, and one day promised to show them 'one of the most interesting sights in the world'.

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He took them, by arrangement, to a miserable hovel, in which young Abraham Midwood was soon to die in great pain. He took his children into the hovel, and said: Abraham Midwood, I have brought my children here, to shew them that it is possible to be happy in a state of disease and poverty and want; and now, tell them if it is not so.

Abraham replied, Oh yes, Sir: I would not change my state with that of the richest person upon earth, who was destitute of those views which I possess ... This is nothing to bear, whilst the presence of God cheers my soul, and whilst I can have access to Him, by constant prayer, through faith in Jesus. Indeed, Sir, I am truly happy: and I trust to be happy and blessed through eternity; and I every hour thank God, who has brought me from a state of darkness into His marvellous light, and has given me to enjoy the unsearchable riches of His grace. [7]

Why did Abraham Midwood respond this way to his sickness, and impending death? It was (in large part) because he had a radically different map of reality to the average secular Aussie of 2020: Midwood had taken on board the Bible's map of reality. Responding well to COVID-19

We don't know when or how COVID-19 will end. Perhaps things will return to some semblance of normality within a few months. Or perhaps we're about to enter a major economic depression. And this state of social distancing will be the new norm for 6-12 months until a vaccine appears. Only God knows.

But what we can do in the meantime is replace our bankrupt secular maps of reality – the ones that demand comfort and happiness now – with the Bible's map of reality. If we do that, we'll respond to COVID-19 in a way that brings joy to our lives, glory to God, and good to our neighbour.





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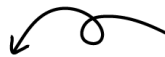
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