



Faith, Hope, and Love

Global Ministries

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What We Can Expect from God Now: Seven Spiritual Truths for Troubled Times

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Introduction

I want God to stop the coronavirus *immediately*. I’m worried for myself and especially for all the people I love and care about. I pray for God to protect me, my family, and everyone everywhere. But as the numbers of sick and dying keep increasing, especially here in the USA, so does my anxiety.

What if God doesn’t help? Already, hundreds of thousands of people have died worldwide, and many more will. Given our experience so far, is it even reasonable to expect that God will do *anything* in midst of this COVID-19, global crisis? If so, what? If God won’t stop the onslaught, what can we expect from God?”

These questions have been and continue to be very relevant to me, personally. Our first child died in a miscarriage. My mother suffered from a long, debilitating, losing battle with Alzheimer’s disease. I was diagnosed with a terminal disease the day after my first son was born. Etc. All these experiences have made me wonder, “Can I trust God? And if so, for what?”

These questions are always with me, because there are no answers that fully satisfy me intellectually or that completely assuage my grief and angst. There is so much we wish we understood about God, but just can’t. Yet, what we believe about God and how we act on our faith still makes a huge difference in our ability to cope with adversity and face an uncertain future.

Focus

How has this global pandemic affected your faith?

In the midst of all the fear and uncertainty, what are you expecting from God?

Seven Spiritual Truths for Troubled Times

In this special talk, I’m going to present seven spiritual truths for troubled times, which I wrote about on my blog site from March to June (www.spirit-ledleader.com). They are insights that grow out of the Bible and have been validated in my own experience and by the experience of millions of Christians over the years. They are truths, not because anyone can prove them to be true by scientific testing. They are true because of how they have qualitatively improved the minds, hearts, and lives of those who believe and live by them. First, I will present an overview of the seven truths. Then, I will go into more depth on several of them. At the end, there will be time for questions.

- 1. Remember your limited ability to understand the will and ways of God. Take whatever God offers.**
- 2. Expect God to be at work in your life, leading and guiding you.**
- 3. Expect God to build your character, strengthen your faith, and lovingly restore your hope through your suffering.**
- 4. Expect to share in Christ’s sufferings. Expect to share in his glory.**
- 5. Remember—nothing can separate you from the love of God.**
- 6. Expect more peace, as you put your anxieties in God’s capable hands.**
- 7. Expect to be renewed, as you accept your limitations and wait on God.**

Spiritual Truth 1: Remember your limited ability to understand the will and ways of God. Take whatever God offers. (Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 24:13-22)

If we examine our expectations for God carefully, most of us will discover that we expect God to act in ways that fit with our ideas and desires. They may be prompted by something we read in the Bible or heard a preacher say, but upon close inspection, most of us are wishing and hoping and expecting God to do what we want him to do. And what happens when God doesn't come through for us as we hoped or expected? We are easily hurt, confused, distressed, or even become angry. So, the question becomes, is God to blame or is it our faulty expectations? Biblical writers repeatedly tell us that we should not be so surprised when God does not meet our expectations. The reason is simple. You and I cannot know or understand the mind of God, and God is often at work in ways that are unseen and can only be discerned in retrospect.

What we need to understand

Through the prophet Isaiah, Yahweh (the Lord God) explains to Israel that God's ways are not our ways. He writes:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways,
and my thoughts than your thoughts.
(Isaiah 55:8-9, NIV)

Isaiah is saying that we must give up trying to understand the perplexing or surprising things God does (or doesn't do). Instead, we should focus on what we can understand and benefit from. In this particular context, Isaiah is talking about God's desire to meet their core spiritual needs. Though Israel might not be able to grasp God's reasoning for how he was working in the world, they could benefit from God's love, mercy and grace, if they reached out for what God was offering. They could repent of their sins and let God satisfy their deepest spiritual needs and longings. He writes:

Come, all you who are thirsty,
come to the waters;

and you who have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without cost.
Why spend money on what is not bread,
and your labor on what does not satisfy?
Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,
and you will delight in the richest of fare.
Give ear and come to me;
listen, that you may live.
(Isaiah 55:1-3, NIV)

In times of distress, we may be so pre-occupied with our fears and desperate longing for help that we miss out on what is available. As long as we cling to trying to get what we cannot have (be it answers to unanswerable questions, guarantees of safety, assurance of health, comfort from the wrong sources, or something else that is very important to us, but out of our reach), we will remain in turmoil and unsatisfied. If, instead, we leave aside what we cannot understand and focus on reaching out for what is within our grasp, we will experience greater inner peace. We will become better prepared to face our troubles and will start to see better how God is at work in us and through us for good.

Reflection questions

1. What questions do you really want God to answer for you?
2. Though you may not understand what God is doing or why God does not seem to be helping more, how are you taking advantage of what God is offering to do for you?

Spiritual Truth 2: Expect God to be at work in your life, leading and guiding you; and act accordingly. (Proverbs 3:5-6; James 1:5-6)

It was early March. The COVID-19 crisis was mounting globally. No confirmed cases were yet reported in Myanmar, but the novel coronavirus was spreading throughout the world and heading toward my home state in Minnesota. I was in Yangon, preparing for a month of ministry to approximately 200 pastors in three weeklong workshops, in Mandalay, Kanpetlet (Southern Chin State), and Sittwe (Rakhine State), respectively. What should I do? Should I play it safe and get out of the country immediately? What was the most loving thing to do, as a husband and father? What was the most responsible thing to do as a minister and teacher? Should I press on to conduct these workshops for the sake of these pastors, who had been counting on this training for themselves and the benefit of the churches they serve—or get home, ASAP?

In retrospect, the answers seem clearer. But at the time, as is often the case in the midst of impending crisis and uncertainty, the “right” choices were not so obvious. In this situation, for me, the values of caring for my family, protecting my own health, and fulfilling my ministry commitments and responsibilities were in raging conflict within me.

For so many of us, we pray for guidance in such circumstances, but the answers don’t always come readily. Our inner turmoil makes us feel anxious or confused. If the crisis is big enough, instead of making a Spirit-led decision, a fight-flight-(or) freeze response might kick in. That is, we may boldly ignore the danger and attack the problem head-on but may do so blindly or foolishly. Or, we may run away as fast as we can, only to discover later that we had panicked.

The danger was not as great as we feared, and we missed the opportunity to serve those who were counting on us. Or, we may become so anxious that we freeze, unable to make any decision; but by our indecision we fail to make a measured, wise, timely response. Any one of these fight-flight-or freeze instincts may be quite natural to us and common, and sometimes even helpful in times of danger; but Spirit-led decision-making relies on more than impulses, intuition, or personal intelligence.

What trust in God looks like

As my wife, staff members, ministry partners and I agonized over these questions, the Holy Spirit reminded me that I needed to trust God to guide us in our decision-making. Instead of having to bearing all the weight of these unanswered questions on my shoulders, I felt relieved remembering that I was not alone in this anxious time of uncertainty. God was there to help. I needed to believe it, and act like it. Solomon put it this way nearly 3000 years ago:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own
understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make your paths straight.
Proverbs 3:5-6 NIV

If we rely (exclusively) on our own wisdom and understanding in times of crisis or difficult decision-making, we may easily misread the situation or jump to the wrong conclusions. The biblical path of discernment, in contrast, leans heavily on God as leader and guide. First, we are told to “acknowledge” the Lord God in all our ways—that is, we have to slow down, humble ourselves, and surrender our will to God’s. Then, we must “trust in the Lord with all our hearts,” meaning, we must rely on the Holy Spirit to lead and guide as we proceed with gathering information and weighing our options. Clearly, this kind of trust is not passive. It’s involves actively reaching out to God for wisdom to see things clearly and to better perceive what cannot be seen with our eyes or minds alone. It is only through this kind of God-centered discernment process that we can hope to make the best decisions. James talks about the process this way:

If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind.
James 1:5-6 NRSV

It’s not our circumstances that make us unstable, it’s our lack of faith. In times of crisis, Spirit-led decision-makers do not abandon reliance on God, who is often more silent than they might like. Rather, they **both** take responsibility to assess the situation, seek help in discerning the best course of action, and then make thoughtful (not impulsive) decisions when they need

to *and* simultaneously trust that God is very much present and active to lead and guide them, often behind the scenes, so-to-speak.

This *both-and approach* requires creating enough space to quiet ourselves and take time to listen for the Spirit’s voice through Scripture and prayer. We will reach out to reliable spiritual guides, pastors, mentors, co-workers, and friends for input. We will not try to push our way forward, regardless of warning signs. Neither will we run away out of fear, unless we must protect ourselves from imminent danger. We also will not get stuck, frozen, unwilling to think things through and make a rational decision in a timely manner. We will fix our eyes on Jesus, considering his example of faith and sacrificial service in setting our priorities. We will trust God with our whole heart, and then take action as the way forward becomes clearer.

Reflection Questions

1. In times of crisis, do you tend to fight, flee (run away), or freeze?
2. How are you taking a *both-and approach* to the current crises? That is, how are you *both* taking responsibility for leadership in times of crisis *and* trusting in God to lead and guide? (Give an example.)

Spiritual Truth 3: Expect your loving God to strengthen your faith, build your character, and restore your hope through your suffering. (Romans 5:3-5; 8:28-29; 2 Cor. 1:8-9; Lam. 3:22-24)

When I look around at how various people have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, I am deeply grateful for the action-takers among us. For example, the heroism and dedication of countless doctors, medical workers, researchers, and other public servants, some of whom are literally risking their lives to save others, is humbling and inspiring.

There are also the positive thinkers, those who are refusing to be imprisoned in their hearts and minds, even if their bodies are locked down. These inspiring, glass-half-full folks are seeing opportunities everywhere and are making the most of them—more time with family, space for creativity and music, quiet and rest, reading and reflection, communication with friends, and so forth. They are learning new things and finding meaningful ways to show Christ’s love to those near and far.

However, for multiple reasons, not everyone can be an action-taker or a positive thinker. For those hit hardest by the coronavirus, lockdowns, or closure of businesses, there is a great deal of pain, fear, and loss. Some feel like Job, whose children were suddenly killed, and health destroyed. All he could do was sit on the ground, weeping or calling out to God, grappling with a tragedy beyond comprehension. A growing number of people globally are grieving the unexpected death of loved ones or the shutdown of their lives and livelihood. They perceive no rhyme or reason in their suffering. They have no idea what hit them or where to go from here.

If this describes how you’re feeling, please know that, sometimes, in the midst of our suffering, we just can’t rise above our distress or despair. Sometimes, we cannot be hopeful, no matter how much we may want to be a positive thinker. *And it’s OK.* Faith in God doesn’t always mean being upbeat and emotionally stable. Faith in God is not just for the action-takers and positive thinkers. Faith includes trusting that he’s holding you even when you don’t have the emotional strength or wherewithal to hold on to him. But there is hope.

In the biblical book of Romans, Paul does not offer an explanation or defense of God for human suffering, but rather focuses on how a loving God works through human suffering for good. He writes:

We...glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Romans 5:3-5, NIV

Paul knew very well that when any of us suffer extensively, we can easily reach our physical and emotional limits. We may reach out to God for help, but when we're not healed or our suffering persists, we may despair, panic, or want to abandon faith in God. But it is at just such a low point that many of us have been wonderfully surprised by God. We may unexpectedly feel peace. We may suddenly perceive his love through the kindness of those around us. We may find new motivation and power to finally put aside the sin that has been controlling our lives. We may unexpectedly see beauty in something or someone just when we may have lost hope of ever feeling that way again.

Through these kinds of surprising touches from God, our faith in God is rekindled. Our ability to persevere faithfully in the midst of our suffering increases. Our encounter with the goodness of God refines and strengthens our own moral character. Our spiritual vitality is renewed. We perceive God's love for us in a fresh way. We see Christ's love being expressed through us, and we feel purpose, meaning, and joy. Hope suddenly springs up within us again—now, not because we have been healed or delivered from our troubles, but because the Holy Spirit has opened our eyes to see God's loving, caring presence in the midst of our circumstances. Right when we were about to give up—or actually had given up already—God touched us.

In the context of talking about human suffering, the groaning of creation, and our sometimes inability to even know how to pray, the Apostle Paul offers these words of perspective and hope:

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family.

Romans 8:28-29 NRSV

And what is the good that God has in mind?

The “good” is not necessarily your healing, prosperity, or anything else that you be asking for in your desperation. The ultimate good that God produces through your suffering is to make you more and more like Jesus Christ, God’s son—more and more full of faith, hope, and love.

Your greatest desire will probably always be for relief from your suffering or for some miracle in your life. Mine usually is. Yet, none of us knows what God will or won’t do. Are you willing to live with that uncertainty, yet keep reaching out to God? Are you willing to let go of expecting God to act as you want him to act, and yet never quit expecting him to work through your suffering for good, according to his priorities and values? This is our faith. This is our hope.

Reflection Questions

1. Where can you see God bringing good out of the present crisis?
2. How can you see God using your suffering to make you more like Jesus Christ?

Spiritual Truth 5 Remember—nothing can separate you from the love of God. (Hebrews 2:18; 13:5; Romans 8:19-28, 38-39)

Sometimes, I wake up in the middle of the night. Sometimes, it’s a bad dream. Other times, I can’t get out of mind the people who are suffering from war, hunger, or looming economic collapse. One very early morning a couple of months ago, I woke up feeling empty and drained. I had hit a wall. I tossed and turned in bed for a long time, trying to pray, trying to go back to sleep, trying to decide if it would be better just to get up. It was going to be a hard day.

What do you do when you can’t see *anything* good coming out of your suffering? What if you expect only more of the same—more uncertainty, more loss, more pain? Or, what if you just don’t have any more energy to try? What do you do when your darkness is just dark?

Consider these words from Scripture:

“Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you,” says the Lord.

Hebrews 13:5 NIV

These words from Hebrews are usually interpreted as a promise of God’s ongoing presence and provision. And rightly so. This is why we don’t panic in hard times. This is why we keep reaching out to God for help in our times of need.

At the same time, the promise of God’s abiding presence is also meant to remind us to look beyond this life’s troubles. The Apostle Paul taught us that all creation is groaning, waiting for the redemption of the world. Likewise, we, too, are groaning, looking eagerly for the day our bodies will be completely delivered from suffering, decay, and mortality. (Rom. 8: 19-23)

In other words, sometimes, we must wait for heaven to find the relief we are longing for. As Paul explained, this is the very definition of Christian hope:

For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

Rom. 8:24-25

To Paul, the most important gift of the Christian faith is not how much God can fix or improve our earthly lives. Rather, our most treasured possession is our eternal bond with our Creator, our Father in Heaven, which comes through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. If this bond of love is secure, and it *is*, then no matter what happens to us in this life, we’re going to be O.K. We have an amazing, wonderful relationship with God that extends throughout eternity that no one can take away from us. By God’s grace, through faith, we have a precious and secure hope that can carry us through the darkest of days.

“Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” Paul asks rhetorically. “Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” (8:35). The answer, of course, is, *No. No one. Nothing.*

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

Romans 8:38-39 NIV

The power of prayer

As I lay in bed on that difficult morning not long ago, not knowing when I would find the motivation to get up, the prayers from Psalms 61 and 62 kept coming to my mind. “Lord, you are my rock.... Lift my feet to the rock that is higher than I.” Whenever I feel so empty or sad, what helps me the most is reaching out to God. I may not have many words to pray, but I keep asking him to do something inside my mind and heart that I cannot do on my own. I pour out my heart to God.

In moments like these, I am not praying for solutions, healing, or even deliverance. I’m just looking for some comfort, maybe renewed strength, or just an ability to feel some joy again. And answers come. Not usually right away. I need to listen and respond to the still, small voice of the Spirit; and in time, help comes. I follow the prompting to open my Bible, get up and go for a walk outside, reach out to good friend, talk to someone who loves me, or turn my attention to someone who needs my love or help in some way. Or, maybe I find the freedom to just sit with

my sadness and not feel compelled to try to make myself happy, as I wait for the Holy Spirit to restore my peace and joy.

Reflection Questions

1. What do you do when you are so discouraged or so worn down that you want to give up?

2. What kind of prayer is most helpful to you in dark and difficult times?

Spiritual Truth 7: Expect to be renewed, as you accept your limitations and wait on God. (Heb. 2:15; Isaiah 40:28-31; Eph. 3:20-21)

In one of the most often-quoted chapters of the Bible, Isaiah 40 offers words of comfort to the people of Israel, who were languishing in captivity in Babylon. They could do nothing to change their circumstances. They were stressed, afraid, and felt a huge weight of guilt. They were suffering the consequences of their sin and poor choices. So, Isaiah writes these now famous words:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.

He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.

Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted;

but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,

they shall mount up with wings like eagles,

they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

Isa. 40:28-31, NRSV

There is so much hope and encouragement in these words. You and I get weary and exhausted. Yahweh (the LORD) never tires and his strength is inexhaustible. As we hit the wall or sag under the weight of our worries, we must look beyond ourselves to the Creator of the universe. The everlasting God is the one who can lift our heavy burdens and renew our spirits.

We must “wait for the LORD (Yahweh)” by admitting our limitations and human frailty and by putting our hope in what only God can do. And when we do, we will often feel lighter. We will find that we can open up our hearts and minds to the Spirit again. We will become refreshed and more energized. We will be better able to fulfill our purpose in life, to know, love, and serve God. In Isaiah’s imagery, we will “mount up with wings like eagles.” We will “run and not be weary.”

Let anxiety be your teacher

Anxiety is a normal part of human experience that often feels stressful and burdensome. However, if we let anxiety be our teacher, it can reveal something about our situation and our fears that could be helpful.

For example, when we feel anxious, it often means that something important is at stake. We, or someone or something we care deeply about, are threatened. If we stay in the anxious thoughts and feelings, we’ll be miserable. But if we let our anxiety guide us to a deeper understanding of our own values and needs, we may gain new insight into what’s going on and if, what, and when we can do something about it.

Practically, I have found it very helpful to divide my anxieties into one of three categories. First, I have to face and name them. Then, I need to first decide for each one, is there something I can do about this concern? Depending on my answer, I put it into one of three categories: Act, Wait, or Let Go.

Category 1: Act.

If there seems to be something I can do, the worry goes in Category One: **Act**. For example, when COVID-19 started spreading everywhere in the USA, I worried about whether or not my family and I were going to get sick or even die. I immediately realized that, while I could not control the spread of the virus, we could try to protect ourselves. As soon as we took action to do what was within our power to do (e.g., to wear masks, wash our hands regularly, socially distance ourselves from others, avoid crowded places, etc.), our anxiety levels started going down. The danger didn’t go away, but our anxiety lessened because we were doing something to help ourselves.

Category 2: Wait.

If the worry is something that I can’t do anything about now, because I’m waiting on information or someone else’s actions, then it goes into Category 2: **Wait**. For example, will Myanmar Institute of Theology (MIT) be able to open again this semester? If so, when? How will the

required changes affect the quality of education? Will it be safe enough for me to travel there and to live in Myanmar again this September?

I can't know the answer to these questions now. I have to wait to see what the Myanmar government and MIT administration will decide. In the meantime, there is no value in worrying about what they should do or about what I'm going to be able to do. Instead, I need to tell myself, the time is coming when I will know the answers. Until then, I need to wait. I need to turn my attention to what I *can* do something about (Category 1) and to wait to see what God is going to do.

Category 3: Let go.

Finally, many times, the thing I am anxious about is completely out of my control, and there is nothing I can do. For example, I'm wondering, are my students and colleagues in Myanmar and my other global partners going to be O.K.? Will there be an economic depression? Will the world ever fully recover from the pandemic? These kinds of issues are ongoing. They will probably remain as a threat indefinitely. Waiting for answers could go on forever. So, I tell myself, I will cross that bridge when I get to it. Until then, if there's nothing I can do, I'm going to let it go. It's O.K. I don't need to hang on to a worry that I can't do anything about.

Reflection Questions

1. Is there something, anything, you could do to help alleviate your worries? What is within your power that you could do to help yourself right now? (**“Act”**)
2. What worry in your life belongs in the **“Wait”** category?
3. What worry of yours belongs in the **“Let Go”** category? If you put this matter aside for now, how could you better focus your attention and use your energy for some constructive purpose?

Conclusion

How heavy is your load these days?

The more you face your own human limitations and accept that you are only responsible for what is within your power to do, the freer you will become. You will stop trying to carry burdens that are not meant for you to carry. You will rest more peacefully in the Father’s immense love. You will spend your days living fully, being creative, and sharing Christ’s love and light with all those you most care about.

In your own strength, you are going to reach your limits. That’s why you get weary and exhausted. So, stop trying to lift what is too heavy for you, and stop worrying about things that may never happen. Put your burden into God’s hands and wait for him to act in his way and timing. Stop worrying so much about what you cannot control or do, and let the Holy Spirit renew your heart, soul, and mind. The old cliché, “let go and let God,” is actually quite biblical...and helpful. It’s also the way to greater peace and joy.

Now to him who by the power at work within us
is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,
to him be glory in the church
and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Eph. 3:20-21

Questions and Answers