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### **Finding Meaning in the Covid-19 Pandemic**

Many of us started 2020 with different hopes and expectations for the year. Yet, less than 3 months into this New Year, our world is battling an unprecedented crisis. The situation is grave as we are not only facing a health pandemic; we have to also cope with an economic recession.

Furthermore, the impact of COVID-19 is more than just physical and social. It is also psychological, affecting the emotional and mental state of a person. Many people might feel overwhelmed and helpless because they worry about the possibility of catching the virus, and yet at the same time, they also are concerned about the possible loss of income leading to much fear and uncertainty. During a conversation with a personal friend, he commented, *"The news is so depressing every day; it makes it hard to focus at work."* I think many among us might share a similar sentiment. In short, I guess we can say that it has been a heart-rending start to the year.

Many of us would have adjusted to the new routines at work and at home due to the virus outbreak, and we would have asked questions like, *"Why must our lives be so inconvenienced by all of this?"*

People who have been infected with the virus would perhaps have asked these questions: *"Why? Why me? Why did God allow this? Why does God allow such a plague to devastate us?"* Maybe you have been asking these questions too.

That "why" question is not a new one; it goes back thousands of years. It was asked in the Old Testament by Job and the writers of the Psalms, and it was especially relevant during the 20th Century, where we witnessed two World Wars, the Holocaust, devastating famines in Africa, the killing fields of Cambodia, the emergence of AIDS, the genocide in Rwanda and the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo. And the 21st Century did not start any better. There was the calamitous Indian Ocean Tsunami, there was 9/11 and then now there is Covid-19. Why do all of these horrific things happen if there is a loving and powerful God? If God is so good, why does He not do anything about it?

You may or may not have asked these questions about why our world is infected with pain and suffering, but my guess is that you will when they strike you or a loved one with full

force. And with Covid-19, no one is spared, everyone is affected. And so this is a perfect time to reflect on such questions, to wrestle with them, to keep the faith, and to emerge as better, stronger disciples of Christ through the crisis.

As we look to Jesus in the midst of the crisis, He was painfully direct in saying that they would come. Unlike some other religious leaders who wrote off pain and suffering as mere illusions, Jesus was honest about the inevitability of suffering even for those who are in Christ. In John 16:33 he said, *"You will have suffering in this world."* He did not say you might, He said that it will happen. We who are in Christ are not sheltered from the sufferings of this life here on earth.

But, why? If you ask me the question, *"Why did God allow the Covid-19 virus to spread around the world? Why did He allow this to happen?"* the only answer I can honestly give consists of four words: *"I do not know."*

In 1 Corinthians 13:12 we are told, *"Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity."*

The verse tells us that someday we will see with clarity, but for now things are foggy. We cannot understand everything from our finite perspective. And frankly, the people and their families who are currently suffering from the Covid-19 infection don't need a big theological treatise right now. Any intellectual response is going to seem trite and inadequate. What they desperately need now is the very real and comforting presence of Jesus Christ in their lives. And I am so grateful that so many churches and ministries are helping them to experience that.

Yet it is still important for us to grapple with the question of why God allows all these to happen. Even though we cannot understand everything about it, I believe we can understand some things. We may not be able to make out the details of why certain things happen, but there are key biblical truths that can lead us toward some conclusions that will bring comfort to our hearts and souls. So here is the first Biblical truth:

### **1. God is not the creator of evil and suffering.**

This answers the question you hear so often: *"Why didn't God just create a world where there was no tragedy, suffering, natural disasters and diseases?"* Guess what the answer is? He did! Genesis 1:31 says: *"God saw all that he had made, and it was very good."* God's original creation was untainted by sin and evil. In fact, the Bible says that it was very good.

You might be wondering, if God is not the author of tragedy or evil or death, then where did these come from? Well, God has existed from eternity past as the Father, Son and Spirit, together in a relationship of perfect love. And when God decided to create human beings, He wanted us to experience love as well. But to give us the ability to love, God had to give us free will to decide whether to love or not to love. Why? Because love always involves a choice.

My son, Zion, had a soft toy with a button, and when you pressed the button, it would say "I love you". Did that toy love my son? Of course not. It was programmed to say those words.

Real love always involves a choice.

So in order for us to experience love, God bestowed on us free will. But unfortunately, we humans have abused our free will by rejecting God and walking away from him. And that has resulted in the introduction of sin and evil into the world.

Some people ask, *"I am sure God could have foreseen all of this. Why did He still allow it to happen?"* Well, look at it this way. Many of you are parents. Even before you had children, could you foresee the very real possibility that your children may suffer disappointment or pain or heartache in life, or that they might even hurt you? But you still had kids. Why? Because you knew there was also the potential for tremendous joy, deep love and great meaning.

God knew that we would rebel against Him, but He also knew that many people would choose to follow Him and have a relationship with Him and spend eternity in heaven with Him. And it was all worth it for that, even though it would cost His son great pain and suffering to achieve our redemption. So as we ponder the mystery of pain and evil, we need to be mindful that God did not create them. This then leads us to the second Biblical truth:

## **2. The day is coming when all suffering will cease and God will judge evil.**

Many people wonder: *"If God has the power to eradicate evil and suffering, then why doesn't He do it?"*

But there is a flaw built into the question. Just because He has not done it yet doesn't mean He will not do it. Recently, I hopped on the Korean drama craze and watched *Crash Landing on You* and *Kingdom*. If I had only watched half the season and stopped watching the show, I would say, *"Well, they sure did a terrible job with those shows. There are too many loose ends with the plot. They did not resolve all the issues with the characters."* I am sure the producers of the shows will respond by saying, *"Hey! You only watched half the season; you did not get to see the full picture. Watch till the end."*

In the same way, the Bible says that the story of this world is not over yet. It says the day will come when sickness and pain will be eradicated and people will be held accountable for the evil they have committed. Justice will be served in a perfect way. That day will come, but not yet. In other words, we have only watched half the show.

So what is holding God up? One answer is that He is actually delaying the consummation of history in anticipation that more people will put their trust in Him and spend eternity in heaven. He is delaying everything out of His love for humanity. 2 Peter 3:9 tells us: *"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."*

That is clear evidence of a loving God, a God that cares that much for us. There will be a day when all these sufferings will end. It may not be today, but that day will inevitably come. And this eschatological vision should fuel our hopes in this life! We need to stop living life short-sighted, focusing only on what is in front of us. We need to fix our eyes on Jesus, on what He has done on the Cross, and what He will do when He comes again.

And that leads us to the final point that I would like to share:

**3. In the face of crisis, we decide whether to turn away or turn to God for peace and courage.**

We have all seen examples of how the same suffering that causes one person to become hard and angry, to turn away and to reject God, can cause another person to turn to God, to become more gentle and more loving and more tender, to be willing to reach out compassionately to help other people who are also in pain. Some who lose a child to suicide turn inward in chronic rage and never-ending despair, while another turns outward to help others by founding *PleaseStay*, an advocacy group that raises awareness on youth suicides.

We make the choice to either run away from God or to run to Him. And what happens if we run to Him?

Let us take a look again at what Jesus said in John 16:33, *"I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. You will have suffering in this world. But be courageous! I have conquered the world."*

In other words, Jesus offers us the two very things we need when we are struggling: peace to deal with our present and courage to deal with our future. How? Because He has conquered the world. Through His own suffering and death, He has deprived this world of its ultimate power over you. Tragedy, sickness, pain and suffering do not have the last word anymore. Not even death has it. It is God who has the last word! As the Bible says, *"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."* (1 Cor 15:55-57)

So when tragedy strikes, as it will; when suffering comes, as it will; when you are wrestling with pain, as you will, and when you make the choice to run into His arms, here is what you are going to discover: you will find peace to deal with the present, you will find courage to deal with your future, and you will find the incredible promise of eternal life in Jesus Christ. I hope these words will bring you comfort and strength, to see you through this unprecedented time of our lives.

I will end with a timeless blessing, a benediction that was spoken over God's people thousands of years ago, which I would like to pray over you and your family in this season:

*The LORD bless you and keep you;  
the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;  
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.*

Numbers 6:24-26 (ESV)

**May your days be filled with peace,  
Tim Yong**