**Thoughts on Following Jesus through a Pandemic**

Isolated, anxious, suffering—his finances were destroyed and he was so sick he wanted to die. When he wasn’t crying out for answers, he debated truth and the right response to the crisis—heated arguments that left friendships tattered. It happened some 4,000 years ago—but could be today. Different people. Different context. Same issues.

Job’s story brims with questions about suffering and what we can expect of God. Right sounding answers always wound up being wrong because none had the perspective or the insight to understand. And, surprisingly, God never gives answers. Instead he turns the tables and says, “I’ll ask the questions—you listen, ponder and learn.” And God’s questions have enough bite to knock Job down. But this is the moment of grace. In surrendering his clamor Job is free to experience God’s goodness afresh. This is no exposition of the book, but the book of Job is true to life, relatable and I think useful to align our hearts with God during this pandemic.

My greatest need right now may not be answers, but searching questions, questions that may knock me down, but that carry the hope of better things in the end. What if I let go of my “right” to understand, my “right” to be heard, my “right” to have God act certain ways and my “right” to have him do so right now? What if I focused on listening?

I have been asking God to use our current hardship to surface idols buried in my heart, and in yours. I want him to search me—to do what’s necessary to give me fresh experiences of his grace and goodness . I am praying that he will open your heart as well. It won’t come automatically, or easily; you will have to work for it. Are you willing?

Five questions have surfaced for me through COVID-19:

**Am I teachable?**

Opinions are everywhere, but how much godly wisdom am I hearing? My own words—are they shaped by heaven, or lesser things? Do idols of expectation, comfort, political agendas, fear, pride and selfishness lurk in my heart? Am I willing for God to challenge me, or am I “doubling down” on my way of life? Do I rationalize what I ought to repent of? What do I most guard? My health? My habits? My hopes? Or am I guarding my heart above all?

***Get wisdom… Get insight… Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life. Ponder the path of your feet; then all your ways will be sure.***

(Proverbs 4:7, 23, 26)

God works everything for our good. This promise from Romans 8:28 comforts us in hard times, but there’s more:

***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 among many brothers.*** (Romans 8:29)

It is easy to point ***TO***my circumstances and say, “that’s the issue, God, meet me there,” when God may be pointing ***THROUGH***the circumstances to my heart, saying “that’s the real issue, let’s meet there!” God’s goal is to make me like Jesus. Some things are painful because of the pressure of the Artist’s hand molding my heart and life.

**Am I trusting?**

Southern Californians expect the ground to shake, yet our hearts still race when it does. We expect uncertainty in this world, but when it comes, anxiety and fear loom large. COVID-19 is shaking many to the core. Our world is suddenly very fragile. Much that we count on will no longer support the weight of our lives.

In this moment God is asking, “Will life be ruled by fear or run by faith? Will anxiety win the day or will you anchor more deeply in me?” God often shines brightest when our world is darkest—do I have the eyes to see and the will to settle my heart in him?

Two tools to strengthen trust are (1) keeping his promises ever before me and (2) walking in prayer.

 ***“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”*** (John 14:27)

***“I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have tribulation, but take heart; I have overcome the world.”*** (John 16:33)

***Then Jehoshaphat was afraid and set his face to seek the Lord… “O our God… we do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.”*** (I Chronicles 20:3, 12)

Anxiety and fear are powerful things. We may need to do more than remember promises and pray—but we dare not do less! Houses built on God’s word are the ones to stand through storms. Those who walk with God never walk alone. At the heart of everything going on around us God asks a simple question: “Are you going to trust *me*?”

***Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.***

(Philippians 4:6-7)

**Am I gentle?**

The growing lack of grace in our conversations—especially when culture and politics are in view concerns me. Some appear to have avoided coronavirus only to contract “coronavicious”—a disease that creates anti-social distance, erodes love, and when contracted by Christians, undermines our testimony and hurts the gospel. May I suggest that we humbly opt out of the drama, the passive aggressive conversations and the acerbic interchanges choking both news and social media?

***Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.*** (Ephesians 4:29)

The command has no loop-holes. If I’m serious about following Jesus I get no exceptions.

***…Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.*** (James 1:19-20)

***...Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world…*** (Philippians 2:14-15)

James speaks of trial and Paul is imprisoned, unsure if he will survive. These are written for the worst of times. It is never okay to grumble. My anger will never accomplish God’s plan. We seem particularly vulnerable here when we disagree with our political leaders—especially when stakes are high. Yet it is precisely then that prudent words and guarded hearts best shine for Christ. How many snide comments, Facebook rants and chip-on-the-shoulder conversations do I engage in? Am I acting more like an angry activist or the follower of a crucified Messiah?

Some are resistant to the government’s rules for dealing with COVID. We must not do this.

***Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed…*** (Romans 13:1-2)

No exceptions are listed.

Let that sink in.

I don’t get to “review” policies and opt in or out based on how well I believe rulers are thinking or leading. Nor is it okay for me to indulge in angry tirades or berate those God has placed in authority over me. Having leaders I don’t respect and that don’t seem to be godly doesn’t “let me off the hook” either. This was written when Nero was emperor. He was far wickeder than anyone to ever cross the stage of American politics.

Civil disobedience can be biblical, but the bar is high. The Hebrew midwives were ordered to commit murder, Daniel and his friends were ordered to worship false gods and Peter and John were ordered to stop preaching Christ. These are moral absolutes. None are rooted in the politics of the day. My central question has to be, “Can I obey Jesus and the government?” If the answer is yes, my responsibility is clear.

I have the right, even the responsibility to shape government through elections and respectful argument. I do not have the right to disregard or sneer. I am responsible to put on the gentleness (meekness) of Christ instead.

***Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness and patience…*** (Colossians 4:12)

**Am I loving?**

***“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”*** (John 14:34-35)

***“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.”*** (Luke 10:27)

Jesus staked his reputation on how we love—it is the greatest command. Crisis can push this to the periphery of my vision. I must not let it. When things get hard, I want to tighten my grip on control and protect myself, my family and my interests. Yet no circumstances or peril lift my obligation to love. Love considers the needs of others first. Love is always willing to sacrifice.

We started well, but the days grow long and our hearts grow restless. Our leaders promise small adjustments soon, but hardship will grind on for months. This is where the true character of Christ will show. Can I continue to consider the needs of others, and if necessary, sacrifice for their sake? Can I continue to reach out and show kindness? Can I continue offering grace?

**Whose kingdom am I really seeking?**

***I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus… Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ…***

 (Philippians 3:14, 20)

***Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.***

(Colossians 3:2)

***Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.”*** (John 18:36)

 ***“Do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or “What shall we drink?” or “What shall we wear?” …your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”***

(Matthew 6:31-33)

My values should transcend the world system and my mission should extend beyond this place and time. It’s amazing how easily I lose sight of this when my way of life is threatened. Sickness is terrible; isolation and loneliness as well; so is the loss of income. But my identity, my security, my significance and my joy come from a deeper place. Followers of Jesus will suffer, struggle, even die during this crisis. Yet my focus should not be reduced to, “How can I best navigate through this hard time?” “How can I minimize my hardship and maximize my comfort?” Or “Where’s the closest exit from this mess?” These aren’t bad things, they just aren’t the point of my life—or yours.

In this unprecedented season the whole world has been knocked down—pretensions of self-determination and illusions of control have been unmasked. This is hard, but it can also be the moment of grace, if I let God be heard. Do I hear God asking me, “What really drives your life?” “Do you want to maximize your comfort, or do you want to maximize my glory?” “Do you just want out of this mess, or are you willing to partner with me in it?”

Whose kingdom am I living for anyway?