

WALKING IN THE SHADOW OF DEATH



A FOCUS Kenya Special Edition Study Series
Faith, Hope and Love in Time of Distress

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Faith, Hope and Love in Times of Distress

A FOCUS-Kenya Special Edition Study Series- Study 1

INTRODUCTION

We are living in an unprecedented time of global distress, which began with the outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan City of China in December 2019. Like in a wartime situation, the entire world seems united in a sigh of apprehension that this pandemic might escalate into a contagion of apocalyptic proportions. While fake news and misinformation abound, the impact of COVID-19 cannot be casually dismissed. It has resulted in deaths, disruption of the economy, fear, anxiety and psychological distress. As we enter the fourth week of March, there are 423, 493 cases, close to 18, 910 deaths and 109,153 recovered¹, and these figures keep growing by the day as the statistics indicate. It is an unprecedented experience that echoes some of the major crises the world has faced over the millennia since the small pox, which throughout history, killed between 300-500 million people, the Bubonic or “Black death” plague in Europe, Africa and Asia, wiping out between 75–200

¹ These figures are given as at 25/03/2020, 10.31AM based on WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) outbreak situation and are bound to change. Online.

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

million people in 1346–1353, among many others before, like the plagues of Justinian and Antonine during the Roman Empire period.² Even as the world continues to put measures to roll back the pandemic, including the desperate quest for a vaccine by scientists, there are critical questions that many people will be asking: Why has this pandemic come at this time? Is there hope for our survival? Why is God allowing this to continue unabated? How does the word of God address the reality that has confronted the world? What hope does the gospel offer for the world in such circumstances? How can we witness to this hope in such a context?

Despite the prevailing distress, Christians can draw upon the resources of the faith, hope and love that God has availed to us, through reflection on the Scriptures, earnest prayer and intercession, our testimony and sharing the love of Christ through compassionate service. This is the essence of the proposed devotional and study series, *Walking in the Shadow of Death*. The proposed title of this devotional and study series draws inspiration from the Psalmist’s portrayal of the believer’s life as a pilgrimage under God’s providential care, culminating with a rich welcome to the banquet of his abundant goodness, in his eternal presence (Psalm 23:1-6). This confident assurance is not only in the good times of “green

² Online. <https://www.mphonline.org/worst-pandemics-in-history/>. Accessed on 20/03/2020

pastures” and “peaceful streams,” but also in the bad times, the seasons of life when the believer has to “walk through the valley of the shadow of death” (vv. 2, 4). Indeed, as long as life is all calm and blissful, talk about faith comes easy. But this is not always our life’s experience. As Bill and Gloria Gaither featuring the song-bird Lynda Randle intimate in their inspirational song, it is in the seasons of darkness and fear-inspiring valleys of life’s crises that our faith is really put to the test.³

Synopsis of the Devotional & Studies

After establishing the context of our lives in a sin-broken world, this devotional and study series help individuals and small groups to engage in biblical and theological reflection, and practical implications of calamity and humanitarian crises; the need for steadfast faith in God for our deliverance and preservation; the necessity of compassionate solidarity as a community of faith, and with the needy, suffering world; the place of repentance and intercession in seeking God’s intervention. The series culminates by re-envisioning the Christian hope and need for discernment, as we await the Lord’s imminent return and establishment of the new heavens and new earth, where God will “wipe every tear from their

³ Popularized by Bill & Gloria Gaither. God on the Mountain lyrics © Manna Music, Inc., Gaviota Music Inc.

eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain” (Rev. 21:4). Welcome to the devotional and study series!

PART I: REALITY OF CALAMITY AND CRISIS

Study 1: We Live in a Broken World

Study Passages: *Genesis 3:1-24; Romans 8:18-25*

A. Devotional Article



When Priscilla Jane Owens (1829-1907) penned the words of the classic hymn, “*Will your anchor hold in the storms of life?*” she would have had no idea

how relevant that question would be in such a time as this.⁴ The current crisis of COVID-19 not only reveals the vulnerability and fragility of human life, but also the brokenness of our world. As we come to terms with the new norm of life under the pandemic—423, 493 cases, close to 18, 910 deaths and 109,153 recovered⁵, ever-

⁴ Online. <https://www.hymnal.net/en/hymn/h/331>. Accessed on 24/03/2020

⁵ These figures are given as at 25/03/2020, 10.31AM based on WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) outbreak situation and are bound to change. Online. <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

tightening quarantine regulations, disruption of the economy and the resultant public distress—there is an urgent need for a clear perspective of the context in which we find ourselves. This is critical if our theology and faith in Jesus will withstand the pressure exerted by the questions and concerns the crisis raises. So then, how can our Christian faith account for our present circumstances and experience of life? If we are to answer this question with confidence, we need to go back to the beginnings—how the Bible depicts the reality of life after the Fall (Genesis 3).

In his book, *God's Big Picture*, Roberts observes that the first two chapters of Genesis “present us with a vision of how the world is meant to be.”⁶ The resounding affirmation that “*God saw that all he had made, and it was very good*” includes not only the biodiversity, but also mankind, the *crème de la crème* of God’s creation (Gen. 1:31). Indeed, God’s original creation was flawless—not only in the essential goodness of its design, but also in its aesthetic excellence; nothing needed panel-beating or face-lift! Tragically, though, the Serpent’s unsolicited visit to Adam and Eve left in its wake the disastrous consequences of a broken creation. While the Genesis account doesn’t delve into the origins of the evil, its existence and destructive effects are undeniable. What began as

⁶ Vaughan Roberts, *God's Big Picture: Tracing the Storyline of the Bible* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2002), p.27.

an offer of enlightenment, so that man “will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:5) did not culminate in freedom, but deep awareness of human vulnerability, shame and bondage of guilt. These would distort mankind’s relationships with God, fellow man and the rest of creation. Life would no longer be a blissful existence in the Garden of Eden but a painful, toilsome existence in a broken world. A world abounding in “thorns and thistles,” with the inescapable reality of death in the end (Gen. 3:18, 19).

Behold the context of life in the world after the Fall! While we know that God is at work redeeming the world, and making everything new through Jesus Christ, we must acknowledge first that we are not in the Garden of Eden; our parents were banished from it (Gen. 3:24). Nor are we in the Holy City of God, in the new heavens and new earth; this is still a future promise, realized at the end of this world order (Rev. 21:1-4). Rather, we are pilgrims in-between the Garden and the City, traversing the wastelands of life that is riddled with sin’s imperfections. The list is depressing to think about: imperfect relationships, marred by fear, jealousy, envy, hatred; imperfect bodies with broken immune systems, vulnerable to age and Corona virus; imperfect ecological systems; limited medical knowledge that won’t guarantee vaccines and remedies to every conceivable disease, including COVID-19; corrupt

governance systems that exploit the powerless and perpetrate social injustices!

Certainly, we must acknowledge that the magnitude of sin’s destructive consequences is far-reaching. It has deeply impacted every aspect of created order, human culture and society. As we wrestle with the current public health crisis, it is sobering to remember that COVID-19 brings us back to the reality of our universal fellowship of suffering with the rest of creation. This “groaning as in the pains of childbirth” is instigated or intensified by the curse of sin and its “bondage to decay” (Rom. 8:21, 22). While knowing this does not minimize our personal or communal suffering, it provides us with a working theological framework critical for sustaining our sanity and sense of balance in these perplexing times. Even as we hope for a speedy resolution of the current crisis through concerted efforts of the government and scientists, we know that one day, the whole creation “will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21). This is the Christian hope that keeps us going.

Such a hope keeps us anchored to a firm ground, especially in the turbulence of these uncertain times.

But the question is: *Will your anchor hold?*



B. Study Questions

1. After reading the article above, what key insights or perspectives have you learned about the nature of life in a broken world?

2. Read Genesis 3:1-24 and make your observations on:
 - The Serpent’s strategy of persuading the Woman to eat the fruit (vv. 1-6)
 - The consequences of Adam and Eve’s obedience to the Serpent (vv. 7-13)
 - God’s response to the Serpent, Eve and Adam? (vv. 14-24)

3. Considering the outcomes of the interaction between the Serpent and the Woman, what do you think was the mission of the Devil (the real influence behind the Serpent), and its long-term implications for humanity?

4. Read Romans 8:18-25 and make your personal observations:
 - In light vv. 22-23, what main point do you think Paul means by the reality of “groaning as in the pains of childbirth” of both creation and humanity?
 - In what ways are calamities such as COVID-19 an expression of the above reality?

C. Take Home

As we saw in the introductory article, the consequences of the Fall are far-reaching, bringing humanity into “a universal fellowship of suffering” with the whole creation (including the whole of suffering humanity). In light of this understanding:

- What should be our attitudes towards the COVID-19 global crisis, including those nations and people who have been adversely affected?
- How can you do to embody (actualize, put into practice) your changed attitudes?

A FOCUS-Kenya Special Edition Study Series - Study 2

INTRODUCTION

In our previous study #1, we sought to define the reality of our circumstances, by establishing that the context of our lives is in a sin-broken world, riddled with imperfections everywhere. While acknowledging that God is at work redeeming the world, we agree with the Scriptures that the whole creation, including the human community, is united in a universal fellowship of suffering (Rom. 8:22-23). In this regard, we concluded that the calamities and humanitarian crises we face, including the COVID-19 are really some of the manifestations of the ugliness of the curse of sin. Though we presently suffer under such imperfections, we can rest in the hope that one day, the whole creation shall be liberated from its bondage to decay, when the Lord Jesus returns to establish the new heavens and earth. This understanding not only helps us to have a balanced understanding of our present struggles, but more importantly, enables us to develop the right attitudes towards others, including unbelievers, as fellow sufferers who need greater understanding and compassion; we all groan together. As we now turn to the next study, we shall focus on the reality of calamity and crises at the national level, in the Devotional and Study #2.

Debrief: *How did the last study impact you? A few people can share briefly...*

PART I: REALITY OF CALAMITY AND CRISIS

Study 2: When Crises Come: *Groaning in National Pain*

Study Passage: *Judges 6:1-32; Judges 2:10-15*

A. Devotional Article

Like it or not, the pain of Spain, Italy, the USA and other countries with the heaviest blows from COVID-19 is your pain, and my pain as well. We are, after all, children of one global village, and a mad dog is out on the loose! Nobody knows who or when this messenger of death bites next.

As the world continues to grapple with the reality of the Pandemic, it is increasingly clear that an inevitable cup of suffering is on the offering, at the communion table of our shared pain. This will mean different things for different people. While Corona has so far shown no discrimination between the high and lowly, the haves and have-nots, the ordinary people may be forced to drink down to the dregs of this bitter cup! Perhaps it is this reality that has led Kenyans to medicate their pain on social media with their usual satirical jokes on newly acquired terminologies. For example, a hilarious WhatsApp TikTok clip shows the late President Mugabe calling out a class register, with each student bearing a COVID-19 related first name, e.g. COVID Ncube, Corona Bebe, Social Distance Mutaza, Mask Mugabe (who replies “pregnant” instead of “present”)! In

another one, a Kikamba remix of Adolf Hitler shows Hitler exhorting his lieutenants to stay indoors because of the looming coronavirus. The civic education ends with an irresistible promise of a free *Musinga*, that is, a king-sized bottle of beer each! Little wonder that Kenyans have recently been ranked the happiest people in East Africa!⁷

That being said, this positive outlook of life, and the capacity to laugh at serious issues, belies the far-reaching global and local implications of the Corona calamity. With the realities of Kenyan economy, this pandemic is the real proverbial salt to the wound! According to Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 83.6% of the Kenyan workforce is in informal employment⁸ and certainly can't afford the impending financial disruptions. Needless to say, we are only beginning to feel the birth pangs of the fuller impact, as overstretched health systems stagger with shortage of space and medical kits; pockets and disposable incomes begin to shrink as workers take pay cuts and unpaid leave; and as public transport and business operations come to terms with the recent 7PM-5.00AM

⁷ Online.

<https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2001365231/report-kenyans-the-happiest-people-in-east-africa>. The World Happiness Study was done by the UN, revealing Kenyans as says Kenyans are more positive and hopeful than citizens of the other countries in the region.

⁸ Kenya National Bureau of Statistics. *Economic Survey 2019*. Online. <https://www.knbs.or.ke/>. Accessed on 29/03/2020.

curfew. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has observed that "We are in an unprecedented situation where a global health pandemic has turned into an economic and financial crisis. With a sudden stop in economic activity, global output will contract in 2020."⁹ As the advisory opinion continues, inevitably, "an exceptionally high number of countries will need IMF emergency financing."¹⁰ Already conscious of this, Kenya has recently appealed to the IMF to inject at least Ksh. 115 billion into the economy "to enable the country weather the coronavirus storm."¹¹ This comes at a time of a significant reduced economic activity due to the 'lockdown' measures by the government, and there is no telling how far this could go.

When we consider the crisis of God's people in Judges, we find Gideon a frustrated man who provides us a window into the soul of the nation's collective pain. The mood of the times is well-captured in the notable refrain, "In those days Israel had no king; all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes" (Judg.17:6; 2:25). Talk of survival for the fittest! Gideon's strategy of threshing

⁹ Online. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/million-infected-worldwide-deaths-surge-live-updates-200326230320792.html>. Accessed on 27/03/2020, at 5.21PM, at 14:10 GMT

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Online. <https://www.nation.co.ke/business/Kenya-seeks-Sh115bn-to-bail-out-economy-amid-Covid-19-pandemic/996-5503260-12fvk52/index.html>. Accessed on 28/03/2020, at 12.06PM.

wheat in a wine press says it all: People have been forced into a miserable retreat of self-preservation in the face of dangers looming in the open fields and country lanes. Not unlike the fears of coronavirus infection. As Daniel Block explains, the rationale behind Gideon’s action is simply a pragmatic strategy of self-preservation. Indeed, threshing wheat in the winepress trenches was unusual. The norm in Ancient Near Eastern cultures like Israel was to thresh grain on windy hilltops, where chaff could be easily blow away.¹² Surely, in such situations, which fool would want to attract the attention of the marauding Midianites: “Come baby, come—and get me!”

Perhaps more obvious than the presence of the devastating, locust-like enemy hordes (6:4-5) was the felt absence of God. The wonder-working God of their history seems to have become strangely passive during their distress, or was He? (Judg. 6:13; cf. vv.7-10). It is this disturbing “absence” that causes Gideon so much distress. Psychologists have termed this kind of distress as *cognitive dissonance*, a situation where, in Gideon’s case, the prevailing narrative of God’s greatness and past triumphs appear to be contradicted or challenged by the nation’s present experience of

¹² Cited by Alice Camille and Sean McDonough in “Joshua & Judges and Work,” *Theology of Work Project, Inc.* Online. <https://www.theologyofwork.org/old-testament/joshua-judges-and-work>. Accessed on 27/03/2020.

suffering. This is what we hear in Gideon’s question to the Angel of the LORD: “Sir, if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? And where are all the miracles our ancestors told us about? (Judg. 6:13ff). In these rhetorical questions, we find an embodiment of the collective cognitive dissonance of the nation of Israel. But now, it was time for confrontation with the reality of their covenant unfaithfulness, a problem traceable back to their abandonment of the knowledge and ways of Yahweh (Judg. 6:7-10; cf. 2:6-15). If indeed the nation is to find redemption from their present calamity, this must be the beginning point: a courageous recovery of true worship and covenant faithfulness by God’s people.

No matter how insulated we might feel in the uneasy security of our “winepresses,” Gideon’s story reminds us that we are joined in the hip with the nation, and the world, in their painful predicament of COVID-19. We may stock up, wash up, save up, close up—and indeed we shall. Still, like in Mordecai’s challenge to Comfy Esther (Esther 4:14), cowing in fear, or withdrawing in aloofness to the pain of the wider society may not guarantee our redemption! As God’s people, we must rise to meet three challenges that confront us. Firstly, we must hold fast to the narrative of our faith in God; He who worked miracles and wonders in the past can do it again, in our time. Secondly, we must be willing to rise with courage to confront the gods behind the idolatry of our contemporary culture, as we

rebuild the broken altar of true worship. Lastly, we must be open to the possibility that God wants to use us as His instruments of heroic initiatives of redemption, especially for such as time as this. Are you willing?

B. Study Questions

1. After reading the *Perspective Article* above, what key insights or perspectives have you learned about the nature of the pain inflicted by a national calamity, such as COVID-19?

2. Read Judges 6:1-10 (*cf.* Judges 2:10-15), and make your observations on:
 - What is the genesis of the predicament of God's people in 6:1-6 (*cf.* 2:10-15)?

 - In what specific ways was the nation of Israel afflicted?

 - How did God respond to the affliction of his people, and what does this reveal about his character, and his attitude towards the suffering of the nation (vv. 7-10)?

3. In light of God's instructions to Gideon, and his actions in vv. 23-32, what insights can we draw regarding God's strategy for redeeming the nation of Israel from its predicament?

4. When you consider Gideon's concerns in v. 13, in what ways can you identify with him in regard to the painful realities we face as a country during this COVID-19 calamity?

C. Take Home

5. As an individual or Christian community, what specific things can we do to align ourselves to be agents of God's redemptive work, especially in alleviating the pain of fellow Kenyans, during this period of COVID-19 lockdown? *Share some specific initiatives.*

A FOCUS-Kenya Special Edition Study Series –Study 3

INTRODUCTION

In study #1 we established that we live in a sin-broken world, and consequently the whole creation, including the human community, is united in a universal fellowship of suffering expressed in various ways including humanitarian crises like COVID-19 among other calamities. At the same time, we acknowledged that God is at work redeeming the world, and therefore we can rest in the hope that one day, the whole creation shall be liberated from its bondage to decay. In study #2, we recognized that though different people experience different forms of pain and suffering in varied places and times, we are always partakers of each other's cup of pain. We, therefore, groan together as families, communities, nations, the entire human race and the whole of creation. The next chapter engages the reality of suffering and pain at individual level. Welcome and let's get real and personal!

Debrief: *How have the last two studies shaped your understanding and perspective on handling crisis situations like COVID-19? A few people can share briefly...*

PART I: REALITY OF CALAMITY AND CRISIS

Study 3: When Crises Come: *Groaning in Personal Pain*

Study Passage: *Job 1–2; 1 Peter 4:12-19*

A. Devotional Article

Philip Yancey wrote a book titled, ‘*Where is God when it Hurts?*’¹³. The relevance of that question in light of COVID-19 pandemic cannot be overemphasized. Over 1 million people have been infected. Thousands have died. Millions have lost their jobs. The world is under the threat of a global economic recession, and no one knows how long this will last. There is pain and brokenness across the world and at individual level. As the reality of the pandemic unfolds, and as the world races against time to find a lasting solution, you might find yourself struggling with some questions, for example:

- If God is aware of the devastation COVID-19 is causing to humanity socially, emotionally, economically, how come it is taking so long for him to respond to the cries of His people?
- If He has a solution, when is He going to unveil it to the world?

¹³ Online. <https://philipyancey.com/where-is-god-when-it-hurts>. Accessed on 04/04/2020, at 12.14pm, GMT.

As we saw in Study #2, such questions are not new, neither are they awkward; they go back thousands of years. They were asked in the Old Testament by people like Job and the writers of the Psalms. The greatest and common struggle with the concept of God in the face of suffering is probably what the well-known Christian scholar C.S. Lewis called *The Problem of Pain*. In his book bearing the same title, he says, “Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.¹⁴” COVID-19 is not the ONLY cause of pain confronting us and the world today. There are other illnesses, abuse, broken relationships, betrayal, physical injuries, crime, death, just to name a few. In light of such brokenness, pain and suffering how should we respond as individual believers?

The Bible vividly captures the brokenness of Job, a man of great wealth and social standing in his day. In two successive days, he lost all his wealth and possessions, children, and health to an unforeseen calamity and deadly sickness! His friends could not muster any adequate words to comfort him. His world became dark, desolate and devastated.

¹⁴ Clive Staples Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), 91.

Now, think about it:

- Does it strike you that Job was not privy to the conversation between God and Satan that gave occasion for the afflictions, pain and suffering that befell him?
- Isn't it significant and instructive that all this befell him in spite of the fact that he was "blameless and upright, one who feared God and shunned evil" (1:1,8)?
- Isn't it noteworthy that God draws the line (boundary) of the extent to which Satan should afflict Job (1:12 and 2:6)?

As you reflect on these questions, it helps to consider these three thoughts:

- *God is not the creator of evil and suffering.* On the contrary, He declares in Genesis 1:31 thus, "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good." However, we live in a fallen world as a result of man's disobedience to God, a reality that carries with itself pain, suffering, decay and death (Genesis 3). All of humanity undergoes this, and as Billy Graham rightly observed, "Nowhere does the Bible teach that Christians are exempt from the tribulations and natural disasters that come upon the people of the world. Scripture does teach that the Christian can face

tribulation, crisis, calamity, and personal suffering with a supernatural power that is not available to the person outside of Christ.¹⁵"

- *Though suffering isn't good, God can use it to accomplish good.* Romans 8:28 appeals to what is within our knowledge, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." In other words, regardless of the nature or magnitude of pain and suffering, God promises to cause good to emerge out of it. It is important to observe that there is no timeframe as to when such good emerges. N.T. Wright observes that "Jesus doesn't explain why there is suffering, illness, and death in the world...He doesn't allow the problem of evil to be the subject of a seminar. He allows evil to do its worst to him. He exhausts it, drains its power, and emerges with new life"¹⁶. In other words, He is the God who suffers with us¹⁷. The story of Joseph (Genesis 37-40) presents a classic

¹⁵ Online, <https://thelife.com/making-sense-of-suffering>, Accessed on 2/04/2020 at 6.07PM

¹⁶ Nicholas Thomas Wright, *Simply Good News: Why the Gospel Is News and What Makes It Good* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2019).

¹⁷ Online, <https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2016/03/why-would-a-loving-all-powerful-god-allow-suffering/476436/> Accessed on 2/04/2020, 5.43PM

example of God using adversity to accomplish his purposes. As Charles F. Stanley observes, while Joseph certainly did not know why he had to be sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, falsely accused by his Egyptian master's wife and dumped into prison among other pains, scriptures seem to focus more not on questions he may have asked himself, but rather on his commitment to please God through his devotion and humble spirit and the accomplishment of God's purposes through his suffering.

- *The day is coming when suffering will cease, and God will judge evil.* It is natural to wonder: "If God has the power to eradicate pain and suffering, then why doesn't He do it?" You see, just because He hasn't done it yet doesn't mean he won't do it. A day is coming when He will do it and establish a new world order in which there will be no more suffering (Rev.21:1-4). This hope inspires faith and empowers us not to give up but to put our total trust in God while we take responsibility in doing what we must do like social distancing and maintaining hygiene to avert COVID-19. He alone has the ability to deliver and restore us

through the winds of adversity that rake across our lives now and ultimately when He takes it all away.¹⁸

B. Study Questions

1. From the article above, what key insights or perspectives have you learned about the place of pain and suffering in the context of a good and sovereign God?

2. Read Job 1-2 and reflect on the following set of questions:
 - a. Which words would you use to describe Job (vv.1-5)?
 - b. Take note of the events that unfold in Job 1:6-12 and Job 2:1-7. Who are the main participants? Where do the events take place? What is the outcome?

3. Notice how fast and furious the news of loss, destruction and bereavement trickled in to Job (1:13-19). Notice also the urgency and finality of the reporters.

¹⁸ Charles Stanley, *Overcoming Adversity: How to Respond to Life's Pain and Problems* (Oxford: Victor Books, 1995).

- a. What economic damage do you think this brought to Job? (to estimate Job's economic value, include also the economic value of the land mass he would require to hold this magnitude of livestock, using today's currency– see vv.1-3).
 - b. What emotional strain and pain do you think Job endured? (see also 2:8-13).
 - c. How did Job respond to this unfolding reality? (see also 2:8 and 10).
 - d. How does Job's experience compare with some of your own painful experiences?
4. Reflecting on how Job handled his situation, and Peter's advice in 1 Peter 4:12-19, what should be the Christian's attitude to personal pain and suffering, and personal experiences of calamities, natural disasters, crisis and tribulations, including COVID-19?

C. Take Home

The COVID-19 pandemic is turning out to be a global and personal pain, surpassing 1M infections as and over 60,000 deaths, of 5th April 2020. Sadly, no one knows how long the pandemic will last or how many more will be infected, or even die as a result.

Already, the IMF has officially pronounced that the global economy is entering in a recession, far worse than the global recession of 2008, thus leading to massive job losses and the eventual struggle for basic needs for millions of families. Write a personal journal entry reflecting on the question of pain and suffering, especially in light of the COVID-19. What concerns do you still have about the problem of pain and suffering? How does this influence your perspective of God? Be honest about your feelings, opinions, and questions.

A FOCUS-Kenya Special Edition Study Series- Study 4

INTRODUCTION

Part #1 of this study series focused on the reality of calamities and crises covering three topics; living in a broken world, groaning in national pain and groaning in personal pain. We recognized that living in a sin-broken world predisposes us to suffering of all kinds both at individual and communal level. We further appreciated that the whole creation is united in a universal fellowship of suffering as a result of sin. The COVID-19 pandemic we are currently facing should therefore be seen as part of the manifestations of the world's brokenness as a result of sin. However, we also acknowledged that God is at work redeeming the world from this bondage and thus, there is hope both for now and ultimately when all evil will be destroyed and there will be no more pain and suffering. Part #2 of this study series shall focus on the subject of faith and God's deliverance in times of calamities and crises. In this part, we will explore God's nature, courageous faith and trust in God as the only option and sure path for victory, and the need to confront our doubts and reset our focus on faith in Jesus despite the prevailing storms.

PART II: FAITH AND GOD’S DELIVERANCE IN CALAMITIES AND CRISES

Study 4: God’s Nature: Re-affirming the Basis of Our Confidence—Isaiah 40:1-31

A. Devotional Article

For any child, confidence in a parent can be driven by several factors; the goodies mum brings from shopping, parents attending school events, words of kindness or affirmation, among other things. These may singularly or collectively make a child ascribe greatness, dependability and trust to a parent! In many ways, this is the mirror image of how we relate with God. As such, our dependability on and believability of God’s promises hinges greatly on our knowledge and experience of him.

As the Coronavirus spread across the nations, high-tech laboratories have been busy seeking remedies and many prayers have been offered for God to intervene. There has been anticipated hope – hope that the curve will be flattened in some countries, that it will not cross and enter certain geographical borders, that it will kill fewer people, or that it will not affect individuals and close friends and relatives. In Kenya and Africa, we even hope that God will exercise discretion by not allowing the curve to take a similar pattern - in the light of our limited available medical infrastructure.

The cry for divine help has been so loud and widespread that some atheists have not been amused when world leaders organize prayer meetings, or even insinuate that help can come from the ‘skies’! For these atheists, God is not just inactive, he is non-existent and therefore irrelevant to the Coronavirus discourse. Indeed, many self-proclaimed atheists have increasingly fronted the narrative that science and not Faith is what is relevant and able to curb the COVID-19 problem. Curiously, when calamities happen,¹⁹ many non-believers tend to be a bit more open to a possibility of divine intervention, while many Christians tend to wonder if God’s love and power would prevail over the circumstances. God’s nature and suffering in calamities is an old puzzle that resurfaces anytime a calamity strikes – how can he be loving and able when calamities like Coronavirus persists with their huge impact on humanity? This often upsets the faith of some believers, and therefore, calls for a renewed sense of confidence to trust and seek God’s intervention.

¹⁹ In the previous chapters in this series, we have established from Scripture that God caused some of the calamities and Crises in response to Israel’s incessant sin (Judges). We also recognize that in some instances the calamities are attributed to Satan (Job 1-2). Whereas, we may not ascertain who has brought Coronavirus to the world, we can be sure that God has allowed it to happen.

In reading the book of Isaiah, God had used the Assyrian kingdom which was a ruthless and hostile nation to punish Israel (The Northern Kingdom) for their sins (Isaiah 7: 1-24, 2 *cf.* 2 Kings 17: 1-23). However, Judah (The Southern Kingdom) was spared, but they too did not keep God's commandments. Though the LORD delivered them from the hands of the Assyrians (Isaiah 37), he promised to hand them over to captivity in Babylon because of their sins (Isaiah 39: 1-8 *cf.* Daniel 1: 1-2). The impending calamity was clearly a consequence of Judah's incessant sin. God has occasioned a 70-years long suffering for them in Babylonian captivity.

Chapter 40 is the beginning of the promises of God's comfort and salvation to Israel after emphasis on judgement in the first 39 chapters. It sets the tone for redemption from sin, which would change both the people and their circumstances.²⁰ It is a promise of restoration in the light of "the full outworking of that judgement."²¹ The words of Isaiah 40: 1-31, therefore, come in the face of this impending and inevitable shadow of gloom, destruction and despair. In this passage, the message of God's deliverance from a calamity and promises of future prospects are resounding. With

²⁰ Walvoord and Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 1032.

²¹ Barry G Webb, *The Message of Isaiah*, ed. J. A. Motyer (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsityPress,2016),162, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=1427031>.

the impending circumstances, Israelites must have asked similar questions as we would ask today – Is God who he says he is? Is he seated on the throne? If he is seated on the throne, is he asleep on the throne? Will he deliver from calamity and crisis? Often weariness of calamities and crises can create a God who is made in man’s own image. The Israelites needed to have a renewed vision of who Yahweh is.

Since the Israelites are facing an unknown future, any message of hope must have the marks of dependability and reliability. Isaiah’s prophecy of hope is, therefore, premised on the truth about who God is, and his covenantal relationship with Israel. The promised deliverance of Israel depended on **God’s nature** and his **unique relationship with them**.²² The majesty of God is described in this text in a dramatic way to draw the attention of his people who are facing an uncertain and difficult future.

Contextually, this promise of rest and comfort for God’s people is certain irrespective of the circumstances (The COVID-19 crisis included). This is the good news; our confidence. We must live it and lift our voices in proclaiming it.

²² Walvoord and Zuck, 1091.

B. Study Questions

1. What are the key issues that stand out for you from the article above?
2. Read through Isaiah 40: 1-8; 9-14, and 26-31 and make observation of the following:
 - a) God's promise to Jerusalem.
 - b) God's nature.
3. What do you think is the relationship between God's promise to Jerusalem and his nature as observed in question 2 above?
4. What lesson(s) have you learnt from this study and how would you appropriate it (them) in the various challenging circumstances in life?

C. Take Home

If we are to have courageous faith and confront our doubts in the wake of any calamity and crisis, we must see God for who he is -loving, able, and sovereign. Ponder over ways in which this study has allayed your fears and despondencies, write these reflections down, commit them to God in prayer and share with other people.

A FOCUS-Kenya Special Edition Study Series- Study 5

INTRODUCTION

From the previous studies (1-4), we have discussed calamities and their sources, implications at an individual and community level and also God's greatness and power to deliver us when we put our confidence in him. This lays a foundation for this study as we reflect on God at work through human actions. The study helps us to appreciate the outworking of God's deliverance as a mystery that enjoins courageous human action; and that God's deliverance may not necessarily come through the usually established structures since God is sovereign and will use anyone who dare believe in the possibility of his deliverance. As we put our faith and confidence in God's greatness, what ought we to do in response to that faith, believing that God can use even the least one of us to bring his deliverance? This devotional will focus on the famine situation in Samaria and God's deliverance using human agents, challenging us to rise in faith to face the realities that threaten our very existence.

Part II: Faith and God’s Deliverance in Calamities and Crises

Study 5: God at Work through human Actions

Study Passage: 2 Kings 6:24–7:20

A. Devotional Article

William Cowper’s famous hymn, *Light Shining Out of Darkness* opens with the famous line, “God works in mysterious ways, His wonders to perform.” Did you know that these words are not explicitly in the Bible? Yet, these words were inspired by faith in a sovereign God who is at work behind the events of history, even in personal experiences, to accomplish his works of redemption. At a desperate point in his life, following several unsuccessful attempts to commit suicide, the English Poet and hymn-writer William Cowper found God’s grace and deliverance, in a way that only God could.²³ It is amazing how God carries out his divine will and plans to save lives and deliver his people in ways that men cannot imagine. I mean, who could have imagined that God would use a young shepherd, David, to kill Goliath, ending a long season of the humiliation of Israelites by the Philistines? Who could have imagined that God could use Esther, a slave girl turned into a queen, to save the Jews from annihilation? Think also of Gideon, Joseph, and many others. It is notable how God has used frail human beings

²³Online. <https://www.guideposts.org/faith-and-prayer/bible-resources/is-that-in-the-bible>. Accessed on 19th April, 2020.

who as they arise in faith and courage, they have fulfilled God's divine agenda in their time.

We have also most recently seen a set of courageous Kenyans, now famously referred to as ‘the Ebola Champions’ who stepped out in a time of crisis and went to Liberia and Sierra Leone to help fight the Ebola menace. The team went out to face a very deadly disease leaving their families behind and risking their very lives and together they conquered Ebola and saved many lives.²⁴ God used them to deal with the menace that was threatening to wipe out so many people.

As we face COVID-19 crisis in the world today, we are already seeing so many people stepping out to assist, be it in medical supplies, civic education, and other forms humanitarian support. Some health care workers have become infected and some have lost their lives in the process of the fight against this disease. However, God has continued to use them to bring deliverance and slow down a disease that is so threatening. We salute them for the many lives they have saved through their selfless service to humanity and God. From this, it seems that God’s deliverance will come through human agents as we take some practical steps of faith and courage.

²⁴ Online. <https://www.nation.co.ke/news/Kenyan-health-workers-West-Africa-in-Ebola-fight/1056-2582212-6ki82qz/index.html>. Accessed on 10th April 2020.

In this study, we reflect on God's deliverance of Samaria from famine and siege. While their enemies laid a siege against them, they faced a great famine within the city (Lam. 4:9). For, it should seem, the Syrians designed not to storm the city, but to starve it.²⁵ This was so bad so that people were eating donkey heads, dove dung and even worse, their children. While the king and leader of the people cannot offer any help to the city, it is the vulnerable, marginalized lepers through whom deliverance comes. At the end of the day, it is such less than ordinary folks who become God's agents of deliverance, and not the faithless, strong and mighty, represented by the king and the commanding officer who not only blame God for the famine, but also doubts God's deliverance.

Unlike the king, however, the four lepers, who would be the least expected people, take a different decision and thus become the instruments that God uses to save a whole city. They went out with courage and faith that the enemy might just spare them. Their action to go to the camp of their enemies (Arameans) became God's divine plan to fulfil his promise through Prophet Elisha and therefore saving Samaria from both the famine and siege. It appears here that God works through human action to bring his deliverance. This shows that God may use those who step out in the belief that

²⁵ Online. https://biblehub.com/commentaries/mhcw/2_kings/6.htm. Accessed on 15th April 2020

deliverance is possible, even where all the odds are against their circumstances.

I hope that this study stirs our hearts to reflect on God's mysterious outworking through his people to accomplish the needed deliverance and the need to be part of God's deliverance plan.

B. Study Questions.

1. Read through the devotional article and share the insights that you draw from it.
2.
 - a) Highlight the events in this passage.
 - b) From the passage, compare and contrast the actions of the officer/captain and the king to that of the four leprous men.
3. What is your understanding of this statement in v.5, “...*for the Lord had caused the Arameans to hear the sound of Chariots and a great army.*”?

4.

- a) Looking at how God delivered the Samaritans from the famine as per the Prophet's word, what lessons can we learn about courageous human actions?

- b) What are some of the bold steps of faith we can take in responding to the COVID-19 and other crises in our lives, trusting that by God's help, deliverance will come both for ourselves and others?

C. Take home

We all may feel small and insignificant in the sight of a global pandemic that has hit even very advanced economies with better health care. We may be wondering whether our small contribution counts. From the passage, we see God using helpless and desperate lepers to save a whole city. God can, therefore, use our small efforts individually and collectively to become a solution to the current crisis. God can use you to save your relatives, village, town, neighbours or even our country. **So, what are you going to do as an individual? As a team? Write it down and ask God to give you faith and courage to do it.**

A FOCUS-Kenya Special Edition Study Series - Study 6

INTRODUCTION

As a section of Part #2 of this study series, which focuses on the subject of faith and God's deliverance in times of calamities and crises, this study will be on confronting our doubts. It builds on study 4 and 5 which explored God's nature and some of the ways in which he works out deliverance through human action. The need to confront our doubts and reaffirm our faith in Jesus holds the key to overcoming swelling billows of life's trials and calamities.

PART II: FAITH AND GOD'S DELIVERANCE IN CALAMITIES AND CRISES

Study 6: Where is Your Faith?

Confronting Our Doubts

Study Passage: Mark 4:35-41

A. Devotional Article

We have all travelled from one point or another countless times. Rarely do we remember most of those journeys, unless something spectacularly so good or so scary happened to us. A few years back, a family member was travelling from South Africa back to Kenya and had a fright almost like the one experienced by the disciples of Jesus on the Sea of Galilee. Somewhere just before landing in Kigali to connect a flight to Kenya, the plane was caught in a sudden storm. When she landed in Nairobi at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport (JKIA), she almost kissed the ground as she hugged us at the thought that she would never have seen us again!

The context of the story of disciples caught in a storm on the lake is the teaching of the parable of the sower, the seed and the different grounds (Mark 4:1-32). The sower is Jesus himself while the seed is the word from his mouth. In his teaching, Jesus emphasizes in verse 13 that understanding this parable was key to understanding all the other parables. Therefore, in verses 14-20, he

explains the different conditions of the hearts as either hard ground (path), rocky, thorny and finally good soil.

Like any teacher, Jesus takes the disciples through an immediate Continuous Assessment Test (CAT)! When evening comes, he gives his word to go on the other side. The disciples obey, the events unfold, a storm is brewed, the boat is nearly swamped, the disciples fear death and so wake up Jesus from sleep. The disciples' fright in the storm is expressed by the frantic question, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" (v. 38). This question is relatable to our current context in the world. It seems that Jesus' response to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" was an admonishment because he had already demonstrated to his disciples who he is and what he is capable of doing. They were with him all along: as he drove out unclean spirits (Mark 1: 23-27); healed Simon's mother in law (Mark 1:30-31); healed the sick and demon possessed (Mark 1:32-34); healed the leper (Mark 1:40-45); healed and forgave the paralytic (Mark 2:3-11); restored a withered hand (Mark 3:5). And they had witnessed unclean spirits fall before him when they encountered him (Mark 3:10). Moreover, we must not forget that in Mark 3:13, he had appointed them to be with him, and sent them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons. These notwithstanding, they still feared the storm!

In our context today, we not only have the benefit of knowing who Jesus is, but also the history of his incarnation and earthly life experiences. As rightly pointed by Yancey in his book *Where is God When It Hurts?* our faith must be built on the truth of the incarnated and risen Christ. He has been there from the beginning, even in the midst of a fallen world, and he transforms pain and uses it to teach and strengthen us (if we allow it to turn us toward him). Jesus promises supernatural help to nourish our spirit even if our physical suffering goes unrelieved. This is the great hope upon which our faith must be anchored.²⁶

During these times of COVID-19, we have become more and more aware of the fact that danger lurks everywhere. Our simple and complex social rituals have been suspended indefinitely as they are deemed life threatening to most if not all of us. As the disease ravages the world and humanity at such a time as this, it is possible that it is also giving us, the body of Christ, an opportunity to analyze, shake and check the condition of our individual hearts in line with our faith in God's word.

It is true that we must all do what must be done to keep safe in this crisis. However, as we do so, we cannot ignore the attention that we are being called back to reexamine our faith versus doubt

²⁶ Yancey, P., 1996. *Where is God when it hurts?* Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, p.221-245.

levels and once again re-calibrate our hearts to true faith in the undisputed Lord of nature, Jesus Christ. At the moment, the temptation to rail against God for allowing the pain of COVID-19 is very easy, more so when it presses too close, and it may feel as if he doesn't care (Mark 4:38). But we must not allow fear to sink our faith in the sea of doubt and disillusionment. This momentary suffering must not sow unbelief, but rather reinforce faith; this is the underlying value of the pain.

In our prevailing frightening, worrying, near-death experiences and journeys in life, even beyond COVID-19, Jesus still asks us the same two questions he asked his disciples: "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" (Mark 4:40). These are key questions that this study invites us to wrestle with, and reaffirm our ground of faith in the midst of the ongoing pandemic.

B. Study Questions

1. From the devotional article, share what stands out for you.
2. Outline the events in Mark 4:35-41.
3. Why were the disciples amazed by what happened? In your view, what did they not understand?

4.

- a) Share instance(s) where the circumstances of life made you question your faith in Jesus or doubt God's word. In what way do you identify with the disciples in this passage?

- b) In view of the COVID-19 pandemic going on all over the world, what aspects of your life have been deeply affected? What are the fears arising from these situations you are facing now or think you might face in the near future and in what way has this study helped you?

C. Take Home

Being a follower of Jesus, what do you think you need to do to combat fear and confront your doubts at this time? List 2-3 biblical promises you can hold on to now as you weather the storms in your life.

STUDY 7

INTRODUCTION

Part #1 of this study series focused on the reality of calamities and crises covering three topics; living in a broken world, groaning in national pain and groaning in personal pain. In Part #2, the focus was on the subject of faith and God’s deliverance in times of calamities and crises. God’s nature, courageous faith and trust in God as the only option and sure path for victory, and the need to confront our doubts and reset our focus on faith in Jesus despite the prevailing storms was covered. This part (Part #3) will be on *Community in Times of Calamity*. Two topics shall be covered: *Waiting for Miriam: Solidarity in Suffering* and *Radical Love: Reviving Our Heritage*.

Part III: Community in Times of Calamity

Study 7: Waiting for Miriam: Solidarity in Suffering – Numbers 12:1-16

A. Devotional Article

In this devotional, we shall focus on the example of Miriam’s predicament, and how the response of God’s people can model for us the biblical principle of the “brotherhood of suffering” and solidarity with those who are afflicted among us, and indeed in the wider society, with whom we share in our common humanity.

In recent history, there hasn't been a calamity that has unified human suffering globally like the COVID-19 pandemic. Earthquakes, civil wars, and other disease outbreaks have been specific to certain geographical locations. We have heard of the Haiti earthquake, the civil unrest in Middle East or Ebola in Liberia, all of them national or regional. The COVID-19 began in Wuhan but has now become a worldwide disease touching everyone with no respect to economic, social or spiritual statuses. It has made the rich and the poor share a common voice of desperation. This unseen enemy has given us a rare privilege of true solidarity in suffering. A mother in down town Kisii cries for her children the same way as a mother in downtown London. How unifying can a calamity be? This reality has jolted us to the core of what it means to be fragile human beings.

As humans, our efforts to survive and to preserve ourselves are often corrupted with the sinful nature of our human condition, as manifested in quests for self-preservation that engender social injustice, greed and selfishness. These are signs of brokenness, which is a deviation from God's image of justice and love. As believers whose image has been restored, we are called to exercise concern for others even during calamities. This call creates a foundation for what is now known as 'The Golden Rule' which says

you should treat others as you would like to be treated. The golden rule is about abiding and deep-seated concern for the welfare of your neighbor (whether it's your next-door neighbor or those half way across the world) rooted in an understanding of our mutuality and interdependence. Our faith is never meant to be private possession but instead a contagious public good²⁷. In this regard, COVID-19 has given us a great opportunity to show solidarity with those who are suffering.

This is the time to live out the Ubuntu philosophy deeply embedded within African culture which means “I am because we are”. The spirit of *ubuntu* is founded on compassion, dignity for others and seeks the welfare of the community at large because self is rooted in community. Where *ubuntu* reigns the love of God and love for the neighbours reigns; such love is not just about solidarity but sacrificial²⁸. We are living in unprecedented times where the lockdown stops us from physical interaction, however this doesn't limit the extent of our love to our neighbors. Each of us can identify with the effects of this pandemic and indeed, everyone could well say, *nakufeel*.

²⁷Taylor, A. (2010). *Mobilizing Hope, Faith Inspired Activism for a Post-civil Rights Generation*. Madison: InterVasity Press.

²⁸ *ibid*.

History gives us profound examples of the universality of *ubuntu*. During the Holocaust in 1940s, one of the world's worst genocides Casper Ten Boom, a Dutch watch maker, risked his life and that of his family to rescue many victims of the holocaust²⁹. Many of the people they rescued became Christians as a result of practical love and care they experienced from the Ten Boom family. Corrie Ten Boom, a daughter of Ten Boom family, was honored by evangelical Christians as an example of Christian faith in action. One of her quotes comes in sharp light in showing solidarity in suffering. She held that "It is not my ability, but my response to God's ability that counts,"³⁰ expressing the need to rely on God.

Following the aftermath of long civil war in Sierra Leone between 1991-2002, a trail of family damages arose – deaths leading to orphan-hood, widowhood and poverty. Dr. John Jusu, a Christian man, decided to act on what was already accepted *ubuntu* among his people.³¹ He took guardianship of widowed women and their

²⁹ Corrie Ten Boom House. (n.d.). Retrieved from History of the Museum: <https://www.corrietenboom.com/en/information/the-history-of-the-museum>. Accessed on 27th April, 2020.

³⁰ McDaniel, D. (2015, May 21). *40 Powerful Quotes from Corrie Ten Boom*. Retrieved from Crosswalk.com: <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/inspiring-quotes/40-powerful-quotes-from-corrie-ten-boom.html>. Accessed on 27th April, 2020.

³¹Smith, L. (2019, December). *Scholar Leaders International*. Retrieved from Scholar Leaders Insight: <https://www.scholarleaders.org/wp->

children to give them a ‘husband’ and ‘father’ they missed – of protection and provision. His solidarity as a countryman who had suffered similar problems compelled him to reach out beyond his own family.

In 1444 BC around the time the book of Numbers was written, the children of Israel were facing a prolonged predicament living in perpetual uncertainty in the desert. Even though they had a promise to enter the Promised Land, they faced disease and hunger in the process. They had suffered together as a nation and when only ONE of them suffered, their *ubuntu* came alive. The story recorded in Numbers 12:1-16 has insightful lessons to true sense of solidarity with the suffering. The Israelites were in a hurry to cross the desert to the Promised Land, but would they halt the journey for any reasons? Would they wait for Miriam?

B. Study Questions

1. Compare and contrast the attitude and actions of Moses with those of Miriam and Aaron and how God responds to both.

<content/uploads/2019/12/Marginalized-Trio-Jusu.pdf>. Accessed on 27th April, 2020.

2. What do you think is the attitude demonstrated by the Israelites' waiting for Miriam in spite of what had happened to her in this passage?
3. What similarities do you see the in actions of Ten Boom family, Dr. John Jusu and Israelites in Numbers 12:1-12?
4. In reference to COVID-19, in what practical ways can we show solidarity with those who are suffering?

Take Home

Despite the gains being made in the fight against COVID-19, one of the emerging concerns is the stigmatization of Kenyans who have been placed under quarantine, or those who have recovered from infection. This has many implications for their livelihoods and their psychological wellbeing. In light the story of Miriam and the response of the Israelites, what practical actions will you take as an individual or a study group to change this narrative (positively influence society's negative attitudes)?

STUDY 8

INTRODUCTION

As a section of Part #3 of this study series, which is on *Community in Times of Calamity*, this study will focus on *Radical Love* and it will build on the rest of the other seven studies (Study 1-7). The context under which the topic *Radical Love* is addressed is but not limited to the moments of crisis.

PART II: COMMUNITY IN TIMES OF CALAMITY

Study 8: Radical Love

Our Christian Heritage

Study Passage: Luke 10:25-37

D. Devotional Article

At the core of Christianity is selflessness as guided by the words of our Lord Jesus in Mat. 7:12, “*So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.*” Essentially this is the best form discipleship (John 13:35). While responding to the expert of Law on which is the greatest law, Jesus taught that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind as the first and the greatest commandments and that second to this is to love our neighbours as ourselves (Mat. 22:34-45 Cf. *Luke 10:25-37.*). He also taught that love makes us perfect even as our Father in heaven is

perfect (Mat. 5:43- 48). Paul emphasized it further in Rom. 13:8, “*Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.*” The church of Christ is expected to love since we know and rely on the love that God has for us and He is love (1 John 4:16).

As we noted in our previous study, “Waiting for Miriam,” the COVID-19 crisis has presented the church with a wide room to show love to the world. History is replete with instances where believers went out of their way to reach others with selfless love. The most spectacular moments were witnessed in times of pandemic like the one the world is currently facing. For instance, historians have noted that Christianity spread further during the Antonine plague in the 2nd century as believers reached out to the sick with care and love. These brethren saw an opportunity to share the good news during the calamity. Whereas the world was terming the calamity as a punishment of a capricious deity to the community, the Christians called it an outcome of the rebellion of sinful mankind against a loving God and presented hope to the hopeless society. This resulted to wide spread of the Christian faith.³²

³² <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/daily-life-and-practice/the-antonine-plague-and-the-spread-of-christianity/> . Accessed on May 4, 2020.

When the famous Bubonic plague visited Europe in 1527, it found Martin Luther in a desolate state after suffering a heart attack which was followed by a recurring depression. Despite his miseries, while responding to the question by Rev. Johann Hess, pastor of Breslau, on whether believers should flee the city to escape the plague, Luther was not short of words. *“Those in positions of authority, he said, ‘should remain because for them to leave the community without governance is a great sin.’* He admonished those in charge of families not to leave them and that guardians should not leave those entrusted to them. Without giving a blanket command, Luther encouraged as many clergymen as possible to remain and noted, *“For when people are dying they need a spiritual ministry which strengthens their consciences...”* and that, *“No one should dare leave neighbours unless there are others who will take care of the sick in their stead and nurse them.”* For Luther, the plague provided an excellent platform for the church to exercise what both our Lord Jesus and St. Paul taught in the Scripture.³³

This resonates well with the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10: 25-37. Jesus told the parable in answer to an expert of the law who had asked him, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25). Jesus threw the question back to him, asking him what

³³ <file:///C:/Users/Paul%20Kihiro/Documents/A%20-%20FOCUS/DLC/luther-on-plague.pdf> – Accessed on May 13, 2020.

the Scripture said. The man rightly responded, “*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, *‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’*” But having been bent on justifying self, he posed a second question, “*Who is my neighbour?*” This is a good question and Jesus responded to it by giving an illustration of radical love in the character of a Samaritan. This is radical in the sense that one considered by the Jews culturally as an enemy and an outsider is portrayed as a neighbour. The COVID-19 crisis has presented to us a good opportunity like no other to show the world the kind of neighbour(s) we are and to demonstrate radical love.

E. Study Questions

1. Highlight the reflections that you draw from the devotional article.

2. Read Luke 10:25-37 and describe the event(s) in the passage.

3.
 - a) How would you describe the action of the Samaritan in comparison to that of the Priest and the Levite as told in parable?

- b) Considering the kind of relationship that the Jews had with the Samaritans as highlighted in the last paragraph of the devotional article, why do you think Jesus used the illustration of the Samaritan, a Priest and the Levite in response to the expert in the Law?
4. Considering the events mentioned in the article and the bible passage, in what ways can we individually and corporately demonstrate neighbourliness (radical love) in the current crisis of COVID-19?

F. Take Home

Corona Virus Pandemic and crises of various kinds leave many people in very vulnerable and risky situations – both the victims and those seeking to help. In light of this, suggest and list down some of the possible actions the contemporary church can take to serve the vulnerable and indicate what you as an individual or a study group are committing to do as part of the church.

STUDY 9

INTRODUCTION

Part #1 of this study series focused on the reality of calamities and crises covering three topics; *Living in a Broken World*, *Groaning in National Pain* and *Groaning in Personal Pain*. In Part #2, we focused on faith and God's deliverance in times of calamities and crises, underscoring God's nature, courageous faith and trust in God, and confronting our doubts as the only option and sure path for victory. Part #3 focused on community in times of calamity, covering two topics: *Waiting for Miriam: Solidarity in Suffering* and *Radical Love: Our Christian Heritage*. This Part (Part #4) will focus on seeking God's intervention in calamities, covering two topics: *Washing Our Hands and Hearts: Essence of True Repentance* and *Standing in the Gap: God's People as Intercessors*.

Part IV: Seeking God's Intervention in Calamities

Study 9: Washing Our Hands and Hearts

Essence of True Repentance

Study Passage: 1 Chronicles 21: 1-31

A. Devotional Article

Every calamity, hurricane, typhoon, earthquake, wars and famines, epidemics and other disasters are a symbolic reminder that the end of this world's history is coming close; and that we should be prepared. Disasters reveal: the unmatched power of God; immeasurable depths of sin, and indispensable need for repentance.³⁴ This is a fact that is evident throughout Scripture where God uses natural calamities and plagues to draw people to himself through repentance and changing their ways (2 Chronicles 6: 26-27 *cf.* Jeremiah. 18:8-10).

During this period of COVID-19 pandemic, the world leaders have seen the need to seek God's intervention to this crisis through prayers of repentance, protection and healing. On Saturday,

³⁴ Rev. H.A. Bergsma (September, 2005): The Call to Repentance Emphasized by Disasters. Publications committee, Free Reformed Churches of Northern America.

14th March 2020, President Trump of the USA is quoted calling the nation to prayer, *“In our times of greatest need, Americans have always turned to prayer to help guide us through trials and periods of uncertainty...I ask you to join me in prayer for all the people who have been affected by the coronavirus pandemic and to pray for God’s healing hand to be placed on the people of our nation.”*³⁵ Similarly, in Kenya, President Uhuru Kenyatta rallied the nation for an interfaith and interdenominational day of prayer. In his speech he said, *“Today is not my day but our day as a nation to seek God’s forgiveness for anything that we may have done wrong individually and collectively as a nation and seek his favor on the challenges we are facing.”*³⁶ Leaders play a very pivotal role in leading their followers to reconciling with God. We see this demonstrated by Nehemiah in the Bible.

A key part of spiritual renewal in the life of an individual or even a group of people is confession of sins. This is not only demonstrated by David in 1 Chronicles 21: 1-31, but also by the

³⁵ Eric Patterson (March, 2020): President’s call for National Day of Prayer for those affected by COVID-19 has deep roots in American History. www.religiousfreedominstitute.org. Accessed on 12th May 2020, 1800hrs.

³⁶ Samwel Owino (March, 2020): Coronavirus: Clerics pray at State House. www.nation.co.ke/Coronavirus-clerics-Pray-at-State-House/1056-5499178-r3kqkyz/index.html. Access on 12th May 2020, 1830 hrs.

people of Israel in Nehemiah 9 which provides a massive sweep of historical information, covering over 1,000 years of redemptive history of God's people. What can we learn about such confession of sin? Firstly, is *the rediscovery of God*. When confronted with God's word, we rediscover how great, glorious and wonderful God is. Like David, we are inescapably confronted with the awesome presence of the living God. Secondly, both the story of David and the people of Israel help us see *the perversity of Sin*. When people have a proper – a Biblical – view of God, they almost invariably become aware of the perversity and foulness of their own sin. This can be seen in 1 Chronicles 21: 1-31. Thirdly is the challenge of *God's grace*. Like in the book of Nehemiah 9: 17b, 19-22 and v. 31 where the people of Israel confessed their sins, David in 1 Chronicles 21: 8, 13, 17 expresses his distress and deep contrition. Consequently, God stops the pestilence with which He has been punishing Israel. As often as we confess our sins we are brought once more to the grace of God. Yes, we must confess and repent of our sins. But we must see here that we confess so that we are forgiven. God's grace is great, free and full. It brings to the fore the challenge that sinning has consequences. In the same breath, King David and the Israelites sinned against God, but they were forgiven, - the due consequences notwithstanding. This study shall focus on

the place of repentance in times of calamity through one of the incidences in the life of David and the history of the people of Israel.

B. Study questions

1. Highlight the main issues that stood out for you in the devotional article.
2. Read 1 Chronicles 21: 1-31 (*cf.* 2 Samuel 24) and make observations on the following:
 - a) The characters in the narrative.
 - b) David's actions and God's response.
3.
 - a) Why was David's action of ordering for the numbering of men of war in Israel considered sinful by God?
 - b) What attitude is displayed by David's actions in vv. 8, 13, 17?
4. Sin can be both at individual and communal level:
 - a) Considering your life both as an individual and member of the society, are there things you need to bring before the Lord in repentance? Share with the group members and pray about them together.

- b) Looking at the world and the COVID-19 crisis in general, highlight ways in which mankind has sinned against God and make a repentance prayer as a group.

C. Take Home

The book of 1 John 1:9 says, “*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins, and purify us from all unrighteousness*”. Take time before the next study and have a special day for prayer and fasting in personal repentance and on behalf of the nation and the world at large on various issues as led by God.

STUDY 10

INTRODUCTION

In the previous study titled *Washing Our Hands and Hearts: Essence of True Repentance*, focus was given to the gravity of sin and the centrality of true repentance. In this study- *Standing in the Gap: God's People as Intercessors* - the attention shall be on the mandate and responsibility of the church (corporately and as individual believers) in intercession.

Part IV: Seeking God's Intervention in Calamities

Study 10: Standing in the Gap

God's People as Intercessors

**Study Passage: 1 Timothy 2:1-6, Jeremiah 29:7-10 and
Numbers 16:41-50**

A. Devotional Article

Intercession is the act of intervening on behalf of another³⁷. In

³⁷ intercession meaning - Google Search [WWW Document], n.d. URL <https://www.google.com/search?q=intercession+meaning&oq=intercession&aqs=chrome.2.69i57j0l7.10139j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8> (accessed 5.26.20).

prayer, it is praying on behalf of another person³⁸. The noun used in 1 Timothy 2: 1 is an expression of this definition. With the reality of COVID-19 and its related challenges, this article is a reflection of intercession as a necessary intervention in dealing with crises.

Intercession in the Bible can be traced back to Old Testament (OT) in the book of Genesis 18:16-33. In this text, Abraham interceded on behalf of the righteous in Sodom and Gomorrah. In many instances, Moses interceded on behalf of the Israelites. Standing out is Moses' intercession during Israel's great apostasy incident in Exodus 32. He pleaded, "*Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written* " Exodus 32: 31-32. Paul interceded for his people-Israelites - that they may be saved (Romans 10). Most importantly is Jesus' priestly intercession in John 17. From the aforementioned examples, it is clear that intercession is a biblical mandate and therefore not an option in Christian pilgrimage.

³⁸ Harrison, E.F., Bromiley, G.W., Henry, C.F.H., 2000. Wycliffe dictionary of theology. Hendrickson, Peabody, Mass, p. 290.

Wayne Grudem in his book *Systematic Theology* states that, “*The prayer of his people affects how God acts.*” He continues to reiterate, “*If we were really convinced that prayer changes the way God acts, and that God does bring about remarkable changes in the world in response to prayer, as Scripture repeatedly teaches that he does, then we would pray much more than we do*³⁹.” The most encouraging part is that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us (Romans 8:26- 27). Apostle Paul states, “*And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God*” (Rom. 8:27 NIV). What an encouragement that the Holy Spirit helps to intercede for us! However, this does not mean He replaces our place of intercession. Rather, as we fulfil our intercession mandate, the Holy Spirit helps us in this endeavor.

As pointed out by Grudem, prayer is an expression of our total dependence and trust in God. It brings us into deeper fellowship with God and gives us an opportunity to participate in advancing God’s kingdom agenda, as creatures made in God’s image⁴⁰. These aspects also apply in the prayer of intercession. In the face of the current

³⁹ Grudem, W., 1994. *Systematic theology: an introduction to biblical doctrine*. Inter-Varsity Press [u.a.], Leicester, p. 461–463.

⁴⁰ Ibid

crisis of COVID-19, it could be possible to only petition God for oneself. Nonetheless, our hearts must be moved by the sufferings of other people too (Christians and non-Christians alike). By the love of God and the spirit of Christ in us as the prophets of our time, we must plead for the course of this world. This study gives you an opportunity not only to reflect on this subject, but also to practice it.

B. Study questions

5. What stands out for you in the devotional article above?
6. Read 1 Timothy 2:1-6, Jeremiah 29:7-10 and Numbers 16:41-50 and respond to the following questions:
 - c) Highlight the instructions in 1 Timothy 2:1-6 and Jeremiah 29:7-10?
 - d) Describe the event in Numbers 16: 41-50.
7.
 - c) What is your understanding of v. 2 in 1 Timothy 2:1-6?
 - d) What do you think was the motivation of Moses' and Aaron's action as indicated in Numbers 16: 46-50?

8.

- a) In light of this study, what has been your experience in making intercession for others?
- b) Highlight the specific area(s)/issue(s) in the current context that require intercession by believers.

C. Take Home

In response to the instructions in 1 Timothy 2:1-6 and Jeremiah 29:7-10, set time every week or as may be convenient for you and intercede for the area(s)/issue(s) identified in question 4 (b). Share the experience with the members of your group.

STUDY 11

INTRODUCTION

This is the last part (Part #5) of this five-part study series. Part #1 focused on the reality of calamities and crises covering three topics; *Living in a Broken World*, *Groaning in National Pain* and *Groaning in Personal Pain*. In Part #2, we focused on faith and God’s deliverance in times of calamities and crises, *underscoring God’s nature, courageous faith and trust in God, and confronting our doubts* as the only option and sure path for victory. Part #3 focused on community in times of calamity, covering two topics: *Waiting for Miriam: Solidarity in Suffering* and *Radical Love: Our Christian Heritage* and Part #4 focused on seeking God’s intervention in calamities, covering two topics: *Washing Our Hands and Hearts: Essence of True Repentance* and *Standing in the Gap: God’s People as Intercessors*. This part (Part #5) will address, “Hope and Sobriety During Calamities” covering two topics: *Keep Watch! Consistency in Faith and Practicing Discernment and No More Tears: Living in Hope*.

Part V: Hope and Sobriety During Calamities

Study 11: Keep Watch!

Faithfulness and Practicing Discernment

Study Passage: Luke 21: 5-38

A. Devotional Article

I was a young girl in the year 2000 (commonly referred to as ‘the second millennium’) when the rumour that Christ’s imminent return was going to take place spread like bush fire! Though I was only in class five, I remember how scary it felt as I wondered if I was prepared enough. I repented almost every minute to escape hell fire and the wrath of an angry God. I heard stories of pastors who encouraged their congregants to sell all their goods and property and spend the proceeds in enjoyment as they waited for Christ to return. Other people went to the mountain tops on the New Year’s Eve and waited, because they got some sign. Such stories have been and will continue to emerge.

One of the questions that has lingered in the minds of many since the dawn of COVID-19 is whether these are the last days. From the days of the prophets in the Old Testament like Daniel, Isaiah, Jeremiah among others, God has continually reminded His people of the day of His return, the day of judgement. Jesus in the passage

in Luke 21: 5- 38 also talks of this second advent and the signs/events that will precede the end of the world. The immediate context of this text is the temple conversation (cf. Luke 19: 45-20: 47). The temple besides being a magnificent structure at the heart of Jerusalem was very significant in the Jewish religion (centre and symbol of the Jewish faith). However, the peoples' practise of this religion stood in stark contrast with the religion that Jesus represented. The religion was man centred and showy- only marked by outward appearance. It is in this context - the difference between these two systems - that Jesus tells of the destruction of the temple at Jerusalem and the future (the coming of the Son of man).⁴¹

Addressing some of his disciples, who spoke with admiration about the magnificence and the external pomp of the temple and how it was enriched with the offerings that were offered there, Jesus interrupts with a resounding reminder, that the very things they behold, a time will come when all will be destroyed. Jesus uses this analogy to remind his listeners of the ultimate destruction of all things at the end of the age and hence the need to have a greater focus on the state of their hearts before Christ returns with judgement. In principle, Jesus urges prayerfulness, watchfulness and

⁴¹ Wilcock, M., Wilcock, M., 1997. The message of Luke: the saviour of the world. Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA.

readiness for his return. All earthly buildings and indeed all earthly things however valuable and permanent they appear to be, are temporal, they shall melt into the thin air and will pass away. We are to shun loving the world and or anything that is in it (1 John 2:15). Jesus therefore dissuades his listeners from the external and temporal things of this world to the internal state of their hearts that will determine their eternity when he returns. He warns them of overindulgence in sensual pleasures and the cares of this life for that would make them unfit for the trying times that were coming and the day of the Lord would find them unprepared. He implores them to stay alert and in prayer that they will have the strength to stand before him holy and blameless.

In vv. 29 – 30, Jesus reminds us to keep watch and be on the lookout for the signs of the times with discernment. He says, “Look at the fig tree, and all trees. As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near” (ESV). Though we may not know the day or the hour of Jesus’ return, he expects us to be prepared and ready for His coming by being watchful, standing firm in the faith and keeping our robes clean as we watch for the signs he gave and discern them. If we adhere to this reminder, then the return of Christ

becomes the good news and a reason for hope in the valley of the shadow of death.⁴²

B. Study questions

1. What key insights have you learnt about the second coming of Christ from the article above?
2. Read Luke 21:5 – 38 and answer the following questions: -
 - a) According to the passage, what will be the signs and events preceding the second coming of Christ?
 - b) What warning and advice does Jesus give His listeners in this text?
3. From the observations made in question 2 (a and b) above, of what importance are the warnings and advice given by Jesus to His listeners concerning the second coming?
4. From what you have learnt in this study:
 - a) What should be your thinking and response concerning the COVID-19 crisis?
 - b) In what ways will you keep watch that you may be able to stand before the son of Man? How will you journey with others in this?

⁴² Online <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/jesus-imminent-return/>
Accessed on 18th May, 2020 at 3:00 PM.

C. Take Home

The COVID-19 pandemic is a reminder that the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ is near. We may not define how near it is, but it is certainly going to happen soon, in the fullness of God's timing, when his bride is ready and the summer leaves have reached their peak. But even if we die before His return, we will meet Him soon. For the Lord is not slow to keep His promise, He is patient with us, not wishing anyone to perish. Write a personal journal entry on your reflections on the second coming of Christ. How can you participate in the propagation of the Gospel during this waiting period?

STUDY 12

INTRODUCTION

This is the last study of this five-part study series (Walking in the Shadow of Death). As the last study of Part #5 under the broader theme of “Hope and Sobriety During Calamities,” the study shall focus on the topic: *Beyond the Pandemic: Living in Hope and Holiness*. In this final study, we shall reflect on the hope of renewal and restoration of all things that God offers to His people, when all sorrows and tears shall be no more, including the kind inflicted by calamities like COVID-19. This should inspire courageous hope and holy living in the meantime: In spite of all the brokenness of the world and suffering we experience; God and his people win in the end.

Part V: Hope and Sobriety During Calamities

Study 12: Beyond the Pandemic

Living in Hope and Holiness

Study Passage: Rev. 21:1-8; 22:1-6; Cf. 1 Peter 1: 3-22.

A. Devotional Article

Everyone loves stories with happy endings, especially those with seemingly hopeless beginnings. In June 2019, the BBC reported the death of Semion Rosenfield, the last known survivor of the Sobibor death camp.⁴³ Sobibor was the most secret of three Nazi camps set up in Poland for the extermination of the Jews, during the horrors of the World War II. The heart-rending movie *Escape from Sobibor*, remade in Russia in May 2018, depicts the pain, misery and frustration of Jewish people during the war, and the desperate hope for freedom by over 600 prisoners. Although more than 250,000 died in this camp, this daring escape made history as the only successful prison break, before Jewish people were restored to their homeland in 1948 through the intervention of the United Nations. Still, *Escape from Sobibor* reveals the tenacity of hope and human will to survive and resist unacceptable historical evils, such as the holocaust. Other tragic experiences in history, like the 1994

⁴³ Online. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48509422>. Accessed on 13th June 2020

Rwandan Genocide, or the Twin Towers bombing in the USA (9/11) and other acts of terrorism, ecological disasters such as tsunamis and hurricanes, or public health crises, such as the COVID-19, have all triggered a deep despair about our present realities, a longing for a better world without all pain and suffering we see everywhere.

While often motivated by unbalanced secular optimism, this longing is not totally out of line with the overall plan of God, who is at work, “making all things new” (Isa. 65:17; Rev. 21:5). This dream of a new order has been expressed in propagation of political ideologies and economic reconstruction programs meant to guarantee high quality of lives and livelihoods, peace and safety and realization of human potential. However, as Stott argues, the Christian worldview, which entails fourfold framework of creation, fall, redemption and consummation, is based on “radical biblical realism.”⁴⁴ This is an honest acceptance of the realities of our broken world as a consequence of the Fall, and commitment to influence the world through Christian service, as we await the return of Christ. It acknowledges that ultimately, it is Jesus Christ, not human innovation, that will establish the new world order in a way no one can accomplish. As Christians, this understanding provides us with

⁴⁴ Stott, John, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), p. 68

hope—not so much of *escape* from the *Sobibors* of this world, but the possibility of a better world and society,⁴⁵ when “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Hab. 2:14). Unlike secular optimism, based on sheer human willpower, Christian hope is guaranteed by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. His victory over sin and death assures us that despite suffering of this present world, He will shield us “*until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time*” (1 Pet. 1:5). This happy ending of God’s story of redemption is the central subject of the whole book of Revelation.

Consequently, such hope should inspire us to live in holiness and serve the living God, as we eagerly await the return of His Son Jesus Christ,⁴⁶ who will bring the final intervention the world desperately long for now. In this last study, we turn to the vision of Christian hope, through the lens of God’s plan of renewal and restoration of creation in Rev.21-22, and its implications for contemporary Christian living.

B. Study Questions

⁴⁵ Ibid, pp.62-69

⁴⁶ Ibid, p.68

1. What key insights stand out for you from the devotional article above? *Share briefly.*
2. After reading Rev. 21:1-8; 22:1-16, discuss the following questions:
 - a) What things did the author see and hear (Rev. 21:1-5; 22:1-6)?
 - b) What does God promise to his people who will be dwelling with him v/s the fate of those who will encounter the second death (21:4, 4; 22:2-5)? *What are the differences?*
3. In your view, how different is the new world order described in these passages from our present world and realities of life?
4.
 - a) In what ways do you think the promises to God's people are important to believers living in pain and suffering, such as the one inflicted by the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - b) In light of the author's exhortation in Rev. 22:10-15 (*cf.* 1 Pet. 1:13-22), what are the practical implications for how we should live as Christians in our present context of life?

C. Take Home

We have seen in our study today the essence of the hope that Christians have concerning God's final intervention in the world, and its implications for the way we should live in our contemporary context. In light of what you have learned, draft a commitment pledge card that captures your convictions and action points. Organize for a session where members of the study group can share their commitments and pray together.

WALKING IN THE SHADOW OF DEATH

After establishing the context of our lives in a sin-broken world, this devotional and study series help individuals and small groups to engage in biblical and theological reflection, and practical implications of calamity and humanitarian crises; the need for steadfast faith in God for our deliverance and preservation; the necessity of compassionate solidarity as a community of faith, and with the needy, suffering world; the place of repentance and intercession in seeking God's intervention. The series culminates by re-envisioning the Christian hope and need for discernment, as we await the Lord's imminent return and establishment of the new heavens and new earth, where God will "wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain" (Rev. 21:4). Welcome to the devotional and study series!

