



TRAIL THOUGHTS

TREKKING TOWARD GOD'S ADVENTUROUS FUTURE

A QUARTERLY PASTORAL LETTER FROM PAUL MUNDEY, MODERATOR, CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

SPRING 2020

UPHEAVAL

GREETINGS IN THE STRONG NAME OF JESUS!

COVID-19. Unprecedented. Maddening. Extraordinary. Surreal.

But also: upheaval. It's as if everything has suddenly been disrupted, causing the "train of life" to careen, ready to derail.

If it's any consolation, this is not the first pandemic to threaten the trajectory of life. There was the 1918 influenza outbreak, the 2015/2016 Zika occurrence in Central/South America, the 2002/2003 SARS incident, and the 2014/2015 Ebola eruption in West Africa. In each instance, there were deadly results; but in time, healing returned.

Churches contributed to that outcome. For example, during the 1918 influenza outbreak, the Russell Street Church of Christ in Nashville approached the Red Cross, offering their building as a temporary hospital since city hospitals were filled.¹ So even though Sunday services were canceled, Russell Street saints didn't cancel service. In fact, they intensified service, and so must we. Whether through expanded virtual outreach (worship services, Bible study, devotionals, pastoral touchpoints, etc.), monetary support to COVID-19 hot spots, or securing groceries for needy neighbors or shut-ins, we're called to "be the church" despite disruption and upheaval.

Viktor Frankl's classic, *Man's Search for Meaning*, has been a frequent companion of mine during crisis. Frankl's book has multiple truths, including this gem: "So live as if you were living already for the second time and as if you had acted the first time as wrongly as you are about to act now!"² Overall, Frankl is addressing the way we often view upheaval and suffering—not as fodder for maturing life, but as a toxin tainting and spoiling life. However, we have a choice, as Frankl reflects: "Everything can be taken from a man [or woman] but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."³ Face it: we cannot control the current pandemic; there are dynamics surging beyond our reach. But as Frankl reminds us, we *can* control our outlook and attitude. The Apostle Paul models such thought-discipline:

"...We are handicapped on all sides, but we are never frustrated; we are puzzled, but never in despair. We are persecuted, but we never have to stand it alone: we may be knocked down but we are never knocked out! Every day we experience something of the death of the Lord Jesus, so that we may also know the power of the life of Jesus...We are always facing death, but this means that you know more and more of life..." (2 Corinthians 4:7-13 PHILLIPS)

Note Paul's realism—handicapped—puzzled—persecuted—knocked down—but catch his *conclusion*: not knocked out.

What are you concluding during this pandemic? Many surmise we're indeed knocked out—derailing and train wrecking. But, if we prioritize Bible headlines and not social media headlines, we come to a different conclusion.

"God, you're such a safe and powerful place to find refuge! You're a proven help in time of trouble—more than enough and always available whenever I need you. So, we will never fear *even* if every structure of

support were to crumble away...[So] surrender your anxiety! Be silent and stop your striving and you *will* see that I am God...I will be exalted throughout the whole earth." (Psalm 46:1-10 TPT, emphasis added)

Surrender anxiety. Silence striving. And see that I am God.

Needed, true, but so hard to live out. However, there's assistance. Recently Henry Cloud provided practical steps for realizing Godly hope in upheaval. In sum: keep connected, recreate structure, recraft equilibrium, regain control, stay productive.⁴ In upheaval, connection, equilibrium, control, and productivity are all attacked, pulling us toward distress. But if distressed, it's hard to feel safe and secure in anything, including God. I was especially drawn to Cloud's counsel about regaining control: 1) list things within your control and list things out of your control; 2) practice healthy compartmentalizing—limit worry about things beyond your control to 5-10 minutes daily; 3) actively give energy to the things you do control; 4) get creative about the new discretionary time now available.

Wise counsel that, if heeded, will heighten awareness of the God who is "a safe and powerful place to find refuge" (Psalm 46:1 TPT). Once, Bruce Lawson helped a New York executive discover God's refuge and power. Walking in front of Rockefeller Center, they encountered a large statue of Atlas, straining under the weight of the world. Going to nearby St. Patrick's Cathedral, Larson took the executive behind the high altar to find a statue of the boy Jesus, also carrying the world, represented by a small orb in his hand. Unlike Atlas, Jesus is not straining; He's radiating peace. The choice became apparent for the executive: continue to carry the weight of the world and struggle like Atlas or give the world over to God and know peace like Jesus.

COVID-19 presents a similar choice: carry the weight of the world or give it over to Jesus. Give the weight of the world to Jesus, for, as Andrew Murray notes, "God is ready to assume full responsibility for the life wholly yielded to Him." But yielding is not passive—we need to fully engage what we do control. We need to actively enter the renewed space "sheltering in place" provides, looking to God expectantly in that space, even though the structure of our support crumbles away. For God provides safety and power, nevertheless, more than enough, even in times of trouble.

With expectation,



Paul Munday, Moderator, Church of the Brethren

Discussion Starters / Questions

1. Moderator Paul mentions past pandemics, then comments: "there were deadly results; but in time, healing returned." Name a crisis in history or your own life that was dire, but then, in time, saw healing return. How does that fact give you hope during our current crisis?
2. Moderator Paul encourages us to "be the church" despite disruption and upheaval. Dream of creative, new ways we can "be the church" during our current crisis.
3. Reflect on Viktor Frankl's conviction: "Everything can be taken from a man [or woman] but one thing...to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." Name instances when you've either lived, or not lived, that truth.
4. Reflect on Henry Cloud's practical steps for realizing Godly hope in upheaval. What additional steps would you add?
5. Reflect on Andrew Murray's conviction: "God is ready to assume full responsibility for the life wholly yielded to Him." What are healthy ways to live out that sentiment? What are unhealthy ways to implement Murray's teaching?

To Dig Deeper

Viktor Frankl. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2006.

Henry Cloud. "Four Things You Can Do for Your Mental Health During the COVID-19 Crisis." <https://www.boundaries.me/blog/4-things-you-can-do-for-your-mental-health-during-the-covid-19-crisis>

N.T. Wright. "Christianity Offers No Answers About the Coronavirus. It's Not Supposed To." <https://time.com/5808495/coronavirus-christianity/>

¹ <https://christianchronicle.org/how-churches-of-christ-responded-when-the-1918-spanish-flu-killed-millions/>

² Viktor Frankl. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2006, p. 109.

³ Frankl, p. 65.

⁴ https://zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_1ap--ZO6Ra-aJ1hi-ukeCO