

How to Pray: You Choose

In an article in *Preaching Today* Darrell Johnson discusses his “go-to” scripture when speaking on the Covid-19 pandemic. He chooses Romans 8: 18-39 with the focal verse being 8:28. Before we read this well-known verse let’s take on this True/False question: Did God cause this pandemic? This is a question worth pondering or discussing.

What do you think?

What are the options? There seem to be three obvious ones: First, God caused it to chastise creation; Second, God is ramping up for the end times run as Pre-Millennial Theology teaches; or, we live in a broken, decaying and messed up natural world where natural disasters, disease and pandemics are part of the drill. It also seems we crave “knowing” as many whys as possible even though scripture clearly teaches that we have limited faculties for understanding much of this. 1 Corinthians 13:12 is the “seeing through a glass darkly” verse. It reads like this in *The Message* version:

We don’t yet see things clearly. We’re squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won’t last long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We’ll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us!

Back to the question: my personal theology says no, God had nothing to do with the creation or spread of this virus. It is true that the Old Testament did feature various pestilence put upon the earth, but Jesus changed the relational calculus between God and his created people.

My view informs and equips the way I navigate this crisis and how I engage God in prayer. I agree with Johnson’s choice of Romans 8:28: “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.”

Simply stated: God creates good from the ashes of the bad. God will open up avenues of positives and at some point we will recognize that reality.

Think back on past struggles and difficult times. Did God “create good from the ashes of the bad?”

Johnson also suggests we should be learning from this experience and he created a list of what he has observed thus far that is or could be beneficial to our future.

Ponder or discuss possible things for your own list.

Here's my list:

1. I have reaffirmed my belief that nature will always win. We are no match for nature. You pick-em, hurricanes, water shortages, floods, pandemic, and on and on. This is a humbling but necessary admission.
2. James was correct that we are foolish when we believe we have the power to set the timeline for our lives long term. His line, "You don't know the first thing about tomorrow," is so true and we of all persons should live that reality.
3. Suffering on this scale does bring our greatest solidarity. To keep the solidarity progressing can be a goal as we come out of this global crisis.
4. People are becoming more open to God, possibly more than ever before. It is a definite truth that is difficult to convey Theology in an acute crisis, but in this long drawn out "equal-opportunity" crisis, opportunities to model our faith through living out hope, gratitude and peace abound.
5. More people are praying more often, which leads to...
6. More people seem to be struggling with how to pray, and what to pray for/about, during this crisis season.

If prayer was not one of our spiritual strong points during the good times it might be a struggle now.

Ponder Point: Have you encountered difficulties praying over the past few weeks? What are they?

It's important to remember that prayer is our lifeblood as Christians. Prayer is to spiritual life as oxygen is to physical life. Prayer is critical for the "whole" believer: psychologically, physically, emotionally and spiritually. This is especially true in times of great crisis. Below are two "crisis" prayers (from *Crosswalk.com: 10 Powerful Prayers for Everyone Affected by Covid-19 Crisis*):

For the Isolated

Father God, I have never felt so all alone. I could never have imagined facing something like this on my own and I'm afraid. Please remind me that you are with me. Allow me to feel your presence. Remind me that as your child you have not given me a spirit of fear. Remind me that I can trust you with whatever may come. Lord, this isolation is overwhelming.

For Those Who Live in Fear

I don't even have words for what I'm feeling. My stomach is tied up in knots, my thoughts are skipping so fast I can't keep up. I'm exhausted but I can't rest. My dreams at night are as stressful as my thoughts during the day. Excessive hand-washing has left my skin raw. Social distancing has left me feeling more alone than ever. I could call a friend, but I'm afraid they won't understand. I need help. Please help me to calm down. Help me to stay focused on you. Help me to not be afraid. I feel paralyzed. Please take this feeling from me and give me courage, strength, and an unwavering trust in you.

You can feel the tension, anxiety and stress in each of these prayers.

Ponder Point: List the obvious examples of stress, fear and anxiety in these prayers.

Stress alone can do great damage to our bodies. Stress is the body's nonspecific response to any perceived or real threat or situation. If we feel threatened for any reason our body gears up for action. Chemicals enter our bloodstreams that prepare us to fight or flee, and as a result heart rates increase, breathing quickens, visual acuity grows, muscles tighten for action and blood pressure rises. Stress is necessary for life so some can be positive: *You suddenly react by slamming on your brakes to miss the car that suddenly stopped in front of you.* That's a quick burst of stress-effect and your body begins to recover. If, however, you feel fear or threatened by a real or perceived person or possibility, and your body stays in high stress-mode for extended periods of time, physical damage will occur. It is commonly reported that 75%+ of all visits to primary care physicians are for stress related problems.

Stress damages us holistically.

Ponder Point: What are possible examples of stress damaging our spiritual lives?

If any of us feel frazzled due to the stress and anxiety stemming from the virus that plays out in fears of infection, job loss, financial loss, worries about family, loneliness due to isolation and sadly, on and on, we do have the powerful tool of prayer to mitigate, moderate and buffer these unprecedented negatives.

As Baptists we are taught that daily prayer is a must, but we do not teach one particular method/model for prayer. This would make us "free-range prayers" of sort as we are left to our own devices to create prayer structure.

Ponder Point: Do we need a somewhat set structure for prayer? How might the prayer experience be enhanced by more structure?

There is an age-old model many people follow:

A – Acknowledge

C – Confess

T – Thankfulness

S – Supplication

This model is built upon preparation. You first acknowledge or worship God, you confess sin, you express gratitude to God and then, and only then, are you spiritually prepared to ask God to meet your needs and concerns.

Paul provides a much different model in 1 Timothy 2:1a: *I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving be made for everyone.*

R – Requests: Paul allows for us to ask at the beginning of the prayer experience rather than waiting until the end. Why? Let's face it, there are times when our needs are so great we feel an intense need to go straight to supplication, and there are times we will camp out there for a long time. And that's OK.

P – Prayers: Wait, isn't "prayer" prayer? Yes, but if you work out this wording it means the intimate prayer needs one only shares with God. Requests might be shared in Sunday School or among friends but there are issues God only hears.

I – Intercession: This is offering requests on behalf of someone else. It is also co-operating with God (think of a covenant) to make a difference in someone's life. Rather than God being asked to fix everything it becomes a joint venture to make a difference.

T – Thankfulness: This is when the focus is purely on God and we thank Him for the blessings and gifts we have received. It's possible we do not spend adequate time in this arena of prayer.

Ponder Point: Is the Paul/Timothy model superior to the A.C.T.S. approach and if so, why?

For the next few weeks there will be ample issues to stress over. As believers we can demonstrate the peace and purpose we have in Jesus in the ways we navigate this crisis. Prayer is a powerful tool as we engage this enemy. Choose a format. Choose a model, or freelance. The key is to pray and to engage God. God is not sitting this crisis out; he's in the midst of it with us. Engage Him. Pray. He's already creating good from the ashes of the bad.