

How to Find the Voice of Your Shepherd

Thank God for COVID-19.

This declaration may shock you, but this statement holds the key to moving out of the pandemic and into the next season of renewal, revival and reformation. The key to restoration from COVID-19 is hearing the voice of the shepherd and getting God's perspective on our pain.

Please understand that I am not minimizing the tragic deaths of millions of people, nor am I making light of the massive economic disruption that has devastated most economies around the world.

I'm definitely not saying God created COVID and ordained this global crisis to judge us or teach us a painful lesson. Jesus declared in no uncertain terms, "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11a,14a). Although He said the enemy intends his work to "steal and kill and destroy," He also said, "but I am come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

Regardless of our circumstances, there is one sure way to return to the center of God's will after a season of disruption, and that is to give thanks in all things for "this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you" (1 Thess. 5:1). As many have pointed out, we are not giving thanks *for* all things, but *in* all things. In other words, don't waste your sorrows. Or in the famous words of the former mayor of Chicago, Rahm Emmanuel, "You never want a serious crisis to go to waste." God is present in even the direst circumstances to work "all things according to the counsel of His own will" (Eph. 1:11b).

How does this apply to COVID? In many ways. In fact, there are

a number of things we can be thankful for in the midst of this terrible crisis.

Reigniting the Church

I committed my life to Jesus in the mid-1970s towards the end of the Jesus Movement revival. I moved back to my home city of San Francisco with a group of friends in 1977 to pioneer a new church. During that time, it was rare to find a lukewarm Christian. Most believers I encountered were on fire for the Lord at a significant level. In 1980, a few of us fiery ones came together to form an evangelistic ministry called SOS San Francisco. Our first outreach mobilized over 500 believers who committed to hit the streets of San Francisco for 10 solid days. We deployed teams around the city in public worship, open-air preaching and some authentic, old-fashioned soul-winning. This kind of event was typical of the times immediately following the Jesus Movement revival.

Unfortunately, the church has been complicit with the world. In many ways we have lost our bearings; we are not engaging the world at the level of passion and purpose God has ordained. Jesus calls us to be salt and light. He calls every believer to be a king and a priest (Rev.1:5-6), but many have become mere spectators and consumers. Many followers of Jesus have gradually adopted lifestyles that are complacent and compromised.

Because of COVID-19, most churches in the Western world were forced to close their doors for more than a year and had to scramble to continue to minister to the Lord and to his people in an online format. Although there were notable exceptions, according to some estimates, the average church lost roughly 30% of its members and 30% of its budget during the pandemic. Even online church, which began with a bang, eventually diminished as well. Netflix won the online battle for the viewers' attention.

Finding Our Way

This could be seen as a bad thing, until you consider the words of Jesus in John 6 when he declared himself to be the bread of life (John 10:35a, 48). Following this statement, he challenges disciples to a much deeper commitment by declaring, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you" (John 6:53b). The Bible says at that time, many of His disciples turned away (John 6:66).

Jesus then turned to his Twelve and asked him if they would leave as well, and they responded, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68b). Jesus, in His pursuit of a spotless bride, is not afraid to reduce the quantity of the church to increase the quality of the church.

As we emerge from the pandemic, many are asking, "How do we find our way back to the way things used to be?" But the question we should be asking is this: "How do we find our way forward into the future that God has prepared for us?"

I believe it would be a mistake to return to business as usual. It would be insane return to the programs of the past and do the same things over and over, expecting different results.

We can use this time of restoration to not merely restore the blessings of the past but to pioneer a new future with vibrant, thriving churches and passionate believers who are fully embracing God's call to catalyze the next Great Awakening.

Hearing His Voice

King David was a shepherd before he ever ascended to the throne. He also encountered a myriad of circumstances that taught him how to follow God's guidance in the midst of extreme confusion. He summarizes this revelation in Psalm 23. In this psalm, we see five elements that keep us close to the

good shepherd in the midst of our journey.

Trust in the Lord. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters" (vv. 1-2). The pandemic has left many believers deeply shaken. Most would say that their faith is strong, but if you look at their thoughts, their speech and their behavior, you see a different story. Fear, anxiety and victimization seem to be the normal response to this crisis. When these attitudes arise, the secondary response is "Fight, flight or freeze."

1. Fight: We've seen believers respond to the lockdowns with anger and resistance that doesn't look much like Jesus.
2. Flight: On the other hand, we have believers acquiescing to the demands of this crisis and fleeing into the arms of Netflix and social media to self-medicate and escape the stress of the moment.
3. Freeze: Finally, we have those who have frozen in their faith and are failing to move forward in pursuing God's purposes. As a result, they have lost their positive influence in the lives of others. Renewing our trust in the leading of the Lord will restore our ability to represent Him well in the midst of this world's problems.

Walk in integrity. "He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake" (v. 3b). Every trial has two distinct purposes. One is to test the purity of our faith; the second is to continue the purification process. The purity of our faith is unknown until the fire comes. COVID has brought a fire on many levels: the virus itself and the millions who have suffered its effects; the economic impact of shutting down businesses; the spiritual impact of closed churches and limited fellowship with other believers; the emotional impact of feeling powerless and isolated, which produces an increased level of depression in many lives; and the polarizing impact

on our political realm associated with masking, vaccinating and other issues. We must respond in righteousness in each of these areas as we follow our good shepherd through this COVID crisis.

Process your pain. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with Me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me” (v. 4). This has been one of the most confusing and painful seasons in my lifetime. As an itinerant consultant and conference speaker, I’ve experienced a significant decrease in my income because of this crisis. However, personal victory is not ultimately determined by what happens to you but by how you respond to what happens. Jesus reminded us, “In the world you will have tribulation. But be of good cheer. I have overcome the world” (John 16:33b). Sadly, many believers have never learned how to invite Jesus into the valley of the shadow of death, and as a result, they bear their pain by themselves. The key to healing is to process your pain in the presence of the Lord and receive His redemptive perspective. His rod of correction and staff of protection will bring comfort and transformation in your life.

Resist the enemy. “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over” (v. 5). In any crisis, it is easy to become angry at others who perceive the problems differently than you. It’s even possible to see them as your enemy, but this just increases the political polarization. We must remember that the Scripture says that we “wrestle not against flesh and blood” (Eph. 6:12, KJV). People are not our enemies; the devil and his minions are our enemies, and they are roaming about as a roaring lion, seeking whom they may devour (see 1 Pet. 5:8). The devil is real, and he would like nothing more than to neutralize the people of God as a result of this crisis. But I believe that COVID is not a battle we need to fight; we simply need to stay close to the shepherd. We must learn to sit at

His table, receive His anointing and allow His new wine to overflow in our lives. Although Scripture sets forth many spiritual warfare strategies, we find the best battle plan in 2 Chronicles 20:17a (NKJV), “You do not have to fight in this *battle*. Position yourselves, stand still and see the salvation of the Lord.” The good shepherd will defend you in spite of the attacks of the enemy. Draw near to Him, and He will cause your cup to overflow.

Abide in Him. “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (v. 6). This COVID challenge is a great opportunity to learn to abide in Jesus. We must make our home in the Lord. “‘For in Him we live and move and have our being’” (Acts 17:28a). If we abide in Him and His words abide in us, we will bear much fruit (see John 15:6-7). This COVID crisis has tested the faith of many believers. So many of us have drifted and become spiritual consumers and spectators over the years. We have become addicted to the stage and to “celebrity Christianity.” Sadly, when this happens, we become more absorbed with going to church than being the church. God is using this pandemic to reconnect us to His goodness and mercy and to show us how much we need Him in every area of life. He is using it to guide us into a deeper abiding that will strengthen us as individuals and churches in the future.

It’s time for the church to arise. Our shepherd is on the move, and He is calling us to greater things. It’s also time to shake off our slumber and prepare for what God is about to do on the earth. My passion is to help pastors and leaders maximize the mobilization of every member for ministry according to his or her God-given design and destiny.

I thank God for this crisis because God has used it in my life and in the lives of so many others to shake us out of complacency and compromise and to restore our hunger for the presence and power of God. As we emerge from this challenging season, may we join with Him in renewed passion to see His

kingdom come, His will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

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