

What Will You Do Now That God Has Pushed the Reset Button for 2021?

Did you ever wonder if 2020 was just a bad dream? I've had that fantasy many times since the COVID-19 pandemic started in March of last year. But I always wake up and realize the nightmare is real!

Life hasn't been easy. Some of us got infected with the virus, or we know people who got sick or even died. People with loved ones in nursing homes haven't been able to visit in months. Many Americans lost jobs or experienced a drop in income. Families have had to deal with closed schools and shuttered businesses.

And besides the pandemic, we've had forest fires, racial tension, political turmoil and the most named tropical storms since meteorologists started keeping those records.

The pandemic has had a devastating impact on churches, too. After months of virtual meetings, churches that now are meeting in person have learned that many of their members are too afraid to be around people, or they've grown too accustomed to watching church in their pajamas at home. Church budgets have been slashed, and pastors are wondering if having 50% of their previous members will be the new normal.

We've been challenged. We've been hit with overwhelming discouragement. We've been stretched to a breaking point.

Yet those of us who love Jesus know we can't despair. The pandemic didn't take heaven by surprise. God has been with us during our worst trials, and He promises to work all things together for our good.

When my ministry travel was canceled in March, I had no idea where I would get my income. I had a few freak-out moments. Then the Lord underscored these words from John 15:2: "Every branch in Me that bears no fruit, He takes away. And every branch that bears fruit, He prunes, that it may bear more fruit."

There's an uncomfortable truth in this verse. If we want to grow spiritually, and if we want more spiritual fruit, we must submit to the Father's plan, not ours. He cuts things away so new growth will appear.

British preacher Charles Spurgeon, when preaching about John 15, said: "All fruit-bearing saints must feel the knife." Ouch! That means we can't just skate along in comfort, always getting what we want. If we desire the fruit of a mature Christian life, we must welcome the unexpected interruptions He uses to reset our lives.

Pruning is a painful and embarrassing experience. If you've ever seen a row of pruned trees, you know what I mean. They are ugly. They look stripped and hopeless. Grapevines that have been pruned look dead. Are you willing to live the pruned life?

Going Under the Knife

Pruning cuts off what is ineffective. This pandemic has been painful, but when we look back in a year we'll realize that God used it to eliminate things in our lives that weren't working. Some churches, for example, realize they were pouring tons of financial resources into programs or buildings that had no real impact. Pruning has revealed what is essential for us to make a powerful, book of Acts-style impact on our communities.

Before Jesus came, John the Baptist had to prepare the way. He called people to repentance and a cutting away of the old. Whenever God is about to do a new thing, He lays the axe to

the root. He recalibrates us so we don't go back to our old ways. He can't put new wine in old wineskins.

A tree that has never been pruned looks good. But unless the dead wood is cut away, along with the showy leaves, we will never see new blooms. We need the knife. The church will not look the same in 2021. The way we did things in previous seasons won't work in this next move of God. Ask Him to trim away the dead branches of stale religion in your life and in your church.

Right now we are an ugly sight, stripped of our packed buildings. We have been reduced to basics. But with the cutting comes something fresh and powerful, something that is so much better than church as we knew it prior to the pandemic.

More than anything, pruning brings us into a deeper connection with Jesus, the "true vine" (John 15:1). He promises that those who submit to His cutting process will abide closely with Him. Isn't this what we want?

We can't abide in Him if a thousand other things are distracting us. Life prior to this pandemic was too busy and too cluttered. Jesus wants our gaze to be on Him. The process of pruning cuts away everything else so we can love Him and trust Him fully.

When I invited the Lord to reset my own life during this turbulent time, He showed me three important steps I needed to take. I invite you to take the same journey:

Refocus

The Lord showed me that the church has been weighed down by fear and worry because of what we listen to. So many Americans are depressed because they are glued to the mainstream media for hours each day. The constant barrage of negative news has triggered anxiety and caused insomnia. The media's dishonest

manipulation of information has created a mental health crisis that in some ways is more serious than the virus itself.

Sometimes Christians are as guilty as secular journalists for creating this toxic atmosphere of negativity. I can't count how many times people have sent me emails and videos about the latest conspiracy theory or a certain pastor's doom-and-gloom prophecies. It's no wonder some believers are throwing up their hands and saying they hope Jesus returns soon.

But God does not want us to have a gloomy perspective on the future. Psalm 2 tells us that His throne in heaven is the most permanent, stable place in the universe. We don't have to worry about God's enemies because He promises to "speak to them in His anger, and terrify them in His fury" (v. 5b, NASB). He's in charge. Why don't we rest in that reality?

I have a prediction. The pain of 2020 will pass. Life will go on. The pandemic will end, we will take our masks off, flights will resume, the global economy will start humming again, churches will reopen, and we will discover that even in the darkest days God was at work.

That doesn't mean we won't struggle. We will face ups and downs, hardships, persecution and every other form of spiritual resistance. But nothing will stop God's work. We must get our eyes off the problems around us and look up. We must see His throne—and trust in His sovereign power. We must stop wringing our hands in fear and begin lifting our hands in prayer.

Jesus told us His kingdom is like a seed that grows so large it "becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches" (Matt. 13:32b, NASB). The growth may be slow. But no matter what the media says, nothing will stop Christ's kingdom from expanding. No matter how dark it gets, the light will come. Learn to refocus, and you'll see glimmers of hope everywhere.

Refuel

Unless you were hiding under a rock for the past 10 months, you know gasoline hit record low prices when the pandemic began. In Georgia, where I live, we were paying \$ a gallon in March. Some states reported the price was below a dollar a gallon.

There were two reasons for the price drop: Not as many people were buying gasoline, and Russia and Saudi Arabia are engaged in a price war, causing the oil supply to swing up. Market analysts said they had never seen such a glut of oil.

As I pondered this situation, the Holy Spirit spoke to my heart: "Now is the time to fill up." I knew He wasn't talking about my car's gas tank. Sometimes there are things in the natural world that send spiritual messages. The Lord has been asking the church in this season of lockdown to fill our spiritual reserves.

Jesus talked about the importance of having enough oil. The five wise virgins in Matthew 25 made sure they had enough oil for their lamps, while the five foolish ones weren't prepared. They were locked out of the wedding feast because they didn't consider oil an essential commodity. The Lord wants us to be ready for what's coming.

We've been like the foolish virgins. The oil of the Holy Spirit hasn't been important to us. We can take it or leave it. We don't think we need God's supernatural power because we have technology, comfortable church buildings, economic prosperity, hip preachers and slick contemporary worship.

We figured out a way to do church without God's help. We even have books and church growth gurus to teach us how to manufacture a cool vibe, entertain people for 60 minutes and get them out quickly. Revivalist A.W. Tozer said it this way: "If the Holy Spirit was withdrawn from the church today, 95% of what we do would go on and no one would know the

difference.”

Many churches today are devoid of the Holy Spirit’s power. Our processed version of Christianity doesn’t resemble the book of Acts. I believe God wants to send a global awakening of the Holy Spirit after this coronavirus pandemic. But we must prepare. Do we have enough oil in our lamps? You may need to seek a refilling.

When Paul went to Ephesus he met some men who believed in Jesus in an intellectual way, yet they had never been filled with the Holy Spirit. In fact they didn’t know there was a Holy Spirit (see Acts 19:1-7). This reminds me of many American churches. We go through the motions of church, but we are clueless about Pentecost.

Now is the time to ask the Baptizer to anoint you and refill you. Don’t wait until your regular routine resumes. The last thing we need is to go back to last year’s “normal” setting. What God has in store for us in 2021 is unprecedented. Only those with full tanks will be able to handle it.

Reprioritize

Some people have stayed strictly quarantined during the coronavirus crisis. I know people who haven’t been to social gatherings in months. I’m not going to criticize anyone for following protocols and procedures to protect themselves from the virus.

But just because we quarantine, wear masks and stay 6 feet away from people doesn’t mean the Holy Spirit has gone into hiding. He is still working! And He certainly doesn’t socially distance from people.

I have a young friend in the nation of Malawi named Nickson. In July, he moved to the village of Mpamba to plant a church. His home congregation in Mzuzu, 30 miles away, could only afford to give him \$25 to help. But in one month, Nickson led

51 people to Jesus, and they began meeting for worship under a plastic tent.

Nickson is discipling them in spite of the pandemic. "I came here to be a voice for Jesus to these people so they can become a part of the family of God," he told me. In November, he and his members began construction on a sanctuary.

Nickson's challenges are overwhelming, but he is always smiling when he texts me photos from Malawi. And he doesn't realize his church is growing faster than most churches in the world.

I love to hear testimonies from people like Nickson because they remind me the Holy Spirit is still working today, and that the challenges we are facing can't stop the spread of the gospel. COVID-19 is contagious, but the gospel spreads even faster.

I experienced my own "pandemic miracle" in 2020 when I led an Indian man named Mahipal to Christ. Mahipal worked at a gas station near my house. I was able to disciple him every day because my schedule had been canceled. He learned the Scriptures, and he was baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit. By the time he went home to India in July, he had led 11 other people to faith in Jesus!

My experience with Mahipal taught me that God was not "socially distancing" from people during this crazy time. God wants to get close to people, regardless of what kind of crisis is happening in the world.

I became bolder in 2020 at a time when many people were hiding in fear. I pray you will do the same in 2021. People all around you need the Lord. Let them see your hope and joy, and tell them the reason you are still smiling during a global crisis. {eoa}

READ MORE: Find encouragement to hold on during hard times at

.

J. Lee Grady is an author, speaker and director of The Mordecai Project—an international missions organization confronting the mistreatment of women in developing countries. He was the editor of Charisma for 11 years, and he continues to serve as a contributing editor. He lives in LaGrange, Georgia. You can learn more about his ministry at .

This article was excerpted from the January-February issue of Charisma magazine. If you don't subscribe to Charisma, click [here](#) to get every issue delivered to your mailbox. During this time of change, your subscription is a vote of confidence for the kind of Spirit-filled content we offer. In the same way you would support a ministry with a donation, subscribing is your way to support Charisma. Also, we encourage you to give gift subscriptions at , and share our articles on social media.