

CANCER BANKRUPTCY PANDEMIC WAR RECESSION DEATH

When **LIFE** *Is Out of Control*



When, in late 2015, medical imaging confirmed my suspicions that my Adam's apple was far out of line, I was 52 years old. Certainly not too young to die. But too young, I must confess, to feel so completely out of control.

In the weeks that would come, I was told that I had a mass the size of two praying hands pressed together. It spanned my neck and reached down toward my heart. It threaded its way between my esophagus and my trachea and had shut off the jugular vein on my left side. Eventually,

BY JEFF HOPPER

I was told it was cancerous, a rare liposarcoma, operable, but only after regimens of radiation and chemotherapy.

In the years that have followed, I have enduring three major surgeries and am just beginning a third run of chemo, this time after a failed attempt at a kinder, gentler immunotherapy trial. Despite lots of prayer, in our home and from many who have prayed for us from points around the globe, many of my cues come from the doctors who have

been given to me by God to help me stay alive. In the rapidly developing world of cancer treatments, so many of which are proving effective, staying alive this year can mean staying alive for five more. But it can also mean living on the short-term and admitting, over and over again, that there are no guarantees. So there you have it: Most of the time my life is not in my own hands. I decide what to wear today, but only after I've been given the day at all.

And now here, the season in which I write these words, is the coronavirus. So I am not alone. Just as I have

entered the semi-sequestered world of extra caution that comes with the compromised immune system that accompanies chemo treatment, many of you are joining me at home. You can do far less than you're used to, and maybe far less than you need. Your hours are not in your control—and if you have little ones at home right now, you probably feel this all the more.

Not to dwell on this for too long, because by the time some of you read this, COVID-19 may be more of a thing of the past than a thing of the present, here are a few ways I see the virus as a thief out of our control:

- A disease has emerged from “nowhere” and impacted your life. You did not invite it or live carelessly to get it. You have followed every directive to keep the sickness as far away from you as possible. But it still threatens you, when you go get your groceries or consider whether to visit with your grandchildren. It fills your TV news feeds and the headlines of whatever other sources you rely on.
- Your church is not meeting together as a physical congregation. Many of these people are the lynchpins of your social and spiritual support. You can connect by phone and other technological options, but it's not the same as bowing heads together or taking the communion elements as the gathered body of Christ.
- Concern of the economic impact of businesses too long shut down by the virus' distancing demands has probably reached your home. Your retirement plans may need adjustment, your child's excel-

lent career is jeopardized, your door may need to be opened to a loved one who suddenly cannot afford his or her own rent.

Just a few weeks ago, you saw none of this coming. In some ways, it all feels like a bad bout of food poisoning. A nice evening on the town turns into a gut-clearing night on the bathroom floor. You hear yourself say, “I'd rather die,” which is a high note of drama, but not all that far from what you're truly feeling. But food poisoning is something we've had before, and something we can count on to go away.

When life really wars against our idea of control, it does so in three harsh ways: without a view of the end, with a nihilistic mindset, and with a desperate cry for help. One of the principal ways we can combat these forces is to look to the past. There, we find perspective that can be hard to lay hold of under the pile of present weight. For instance, when we spend time reading about the influenza pandemic of 1918 or the polio scares of the pre-Salk era, we find that our present concerns are not unique. Remember, those born in 1960, were born as close to 1900 as they were to 2020.

But we can go much farther back and gain not only the human perspective on the three harsh attacks of our illusion of control. We can turn to the Scriptures, and principally the Old Testament, where life pivoted quickly for individuals and nations, and where we can find the truth of God's word—including a fourth grand perspective that points us to the hope that is always ours.

'How long, O LORD?'

When we adopt a discipline into our lives—be it for Lent or for fitness or to complete a project—the thing our

mind most wants to know is, *How long will this commitment take?* That is, we want to see the end result and attach it to a specific date. When we can do this, though we are surrendering control to the discipline, we maintain ultimate authority over the discipline's demands, because we know when it will end. Forty days will always be more of a challenge than four days, but we can position our expectations and endure more willingly if the end is pre-determined.

So often, it is not.

In the lamenting Psalm 13, David opened with words that we have all wondered during immeasurable episodes of our lives: “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” All our well-stated, specific prayer requests fall to the wayside when we cannot see clearly ahead. We are guessing at the outcome and at the progression of life that will be required of us to get there. We may not be living in full darkness, but the fog of unknowing is enough to bring depression and even strong despair.

If we can gain perspective by reaching back into the accounts of the Old Testament, we may be helped significantly here by recalling the prison life of Joseph, God's servant in Egypt. Joseph's full story is told in Genesis 37 – 50, but let me offer a highlighted review.

Joseph was the beloved son of the Hebrew patriarch, Jacob. Joseph's father had 10 sons ahead of Joseph, but because Joseph was born to him in his old age and to his favored wife, Jacob “loved Joseph more than any of his other sons.” This favoritism, and Joseph's playing along with it, did not sit well with his brothers and they seized an opportunity to get rid of him, selling him to a passing band

of slave traders. Here was the certain beginning of Joseph's confusion about what God had in store for him.

But Joseph found favor again, this time with the manager of Pharaoh's household, who raised Joseph to a position of daily leadership in his

These were the questions clouding if not diminishing Joseph's hope as he sat day by day in Pharaoh's prison cell.

It was two years later that Joseph's door finally opened. Pharaoh himself had a dream that defied the in-

are led to the ultimate understanding that joy comes in our utter dependence on God. It is there that our own intellect, savvy, and even theological certainty are replaced with the recognition that none of this holds a candle that can penetrate the

Joseph's false peaks of hope surely added to the impatience in his soul. This is no joyous place to live, unless we are led to the ultimate understanding that joy comes in our utter dependence on God.

home. Sadly, Joseph also caught the eye of the manager's wife, who attempted to seduce the younger man. When he rebuffed her overtures, she accused him of rape and Joseph was sent to prison. The hope of a good life was again dashed.

In prison, Joseph was locked up among other former workers in the royal household: a cupbearer and a baker. Each had a dream and submitted his dream to Joseph, who had been gifted by God to interpret dreams. To the cupbearer, he offered hope, but to the baker, Joseph could only give an ominous judgment. In three days, the determinations would come, Joseph told them. To this, he added a request of the cupbearer: "When all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness." Here lay a new possibility of hope for Joseph.

On the appointed day, the cupbearer was restored to his royal position; the baker was put to death. Joseph's interpretations had been accurately realized. "The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him" (Genesis 40:23). Joseph was pushed back into the haze of uncertainty. Did God have any good plan for Joseph? And if so, how long, O Lord, until it would be realized?

interpretation of his magicians and wise men. It was then that the cupbearer remembered Joseph. Summoned from his cell, Joseph gave credit to God and an interpretation to the king. Finally, he was released from captivity—the bonds of his imprisonment and the plaguing doubt of when it all would end. Joseph was rewarded with high position, where he remained in Pharaoh's favor for the rest of his life.

Joseph's story is helpful to us when we find ourselves in a place where the reins of control have been taken from us and we do not know where we are going next, if anywhere. A loss of control can feel like a ride on a wild horse, with every hour shifting and every report confusing us all the more. But it can likewise feel like a week in the doldrums, with no wind in our sails and no change in the horizon. At such times, we ache with David, expressing urgency but being met with silence. "How long must I wrestle with my thoughts," the psalmist went on in Psalm 13, "and have sorrow in my heart?" Joseph knew these times, long before David was writing them down. Indeed, Joseph's false peaks of hope surely added to the impatience in his soul. This is no joyous place to live, unless we

darkness of doubt. Only God can do this. God has been there for Joseph and David and many more we can find on the pages of Scripture. He will be there for us.

'We will die'

When we are laid out on that cold bathroom floor battling the food poisoning we spoke of earlier, we do not really wish to die or think it a likely outcome, despite the utterances of our mouth in the moment. Rarely is our desperation so great, though we may express it so.

C.S. Lewis wrote of the generational hubris that causes us to think of our present good as better than any good that has preceded us. We believe we have life figured out in a way that previous generations did not. It stands to reason, then, that when even our highest scientific and medical smarts are thwarted by something as rampant as a pandemic, we fall into imagining our woes to be worse than those that have come before us, as well. For many people, unreasonable fear takes over. They are not just cautious but deeply paranoid that life will end soon. They are not the first.

Before we head far back to the pages of the Old Testament, let's make a

nearer historical stop into the POW camps of Vietnam. James Stockdale, who died in 2005 at the age of 81, was the most senior U.S. Navy officer held in captivity at the Hanoi Hilton, where he spent seven years. Stockdale told of his experiences to *Good to Great* author Jim Collins. In the midst of his imprisonment, Stockdale said, he was able to keep before him the hope of release: “I never lost faith in the end of the story.” At the same time, he noted that the men who did not make it were those whose optimism was only that—cheery wishes for their release by New Year’s or Easter or Christmas. And when those days did not bring release, these men lost hope, “and they died of a broken heart.” What Stockdale found to be necessary was the balance between hope and reality. In his words, that looked like this:

You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.

the sins of all mankind. Glory was on the other side—Jesus knew this unequivocally—but he did not dismiss the brutal facts of his current reality. He held these in tension.

So did four lepers living under siege in the Old Testament book of 2 Kings. The times were beyond desperate. One mother had implored the king to intercede, for she had shared her son as a meal with a neighbor woman who would now not reciprocate. This is a reality unimaginable to us, even in a world where reports of lonely death emerge every day from the frontlines of the world’s hospitals.

The outcast lepers knew that had two options: Enter the city and die, or venture out and seek assistance from their enemies. We read:

They said to each other, “Why stay here until we die? If we say, ‘We’ll go into the city’—the famine is there, and we will die. And if we stay here, we will die. So let’s go over to the camp of the Arameans and surrender. If they spare us, we live; if they kill us, then we die.” (2 Kings 7:3-4)

What a dilemma! What an honest

encing now. Can’t God see this? But when we read and remember what others before us have endured—and without supermarket delivery or penicillin or ventilators, however limited they may be—we begin to understand that God does see where we are, just as he has seen all that has gone before us. Death may be staring us right in the face, inches from seizing our last breath, but we are not without hope. Life in the flesh is not be guaranteed, but life in Christ can be ours to cling to. So, like the lepers, we are right to act. We pray, we plead, and we go as needed. Perhaps we do not survive this life in its near term. But perhaps, like those lepers and the whole of Samaria’s ancient population, we will see the rescuing hand of the Lord.

The cry of desperation

Dare we return to the bathroom floor one more time? For all the anguish of illness we suffer there, one existential question may penetrate the woeful groans: “What did I do to deserve this?” It’s a common thought when inexplicable suffering settles on us. We seemed only to be going about our ordinary business and

We seemed only to be going about our ordinary business and then *this*. Why now? Why me? These are the questions that lead to cries of desperation. We have no answers of our own; surely God must have some for us.

I do not know how well Vice Admiral Stockdale knew Jesus, if at all, but he faced his circumstances in Hanoi similarly to how Christ faced his call in life. While Jesus knew the end, he saw the present for what it was: a legion of detractors had his death on their agenda. They would lead him to the cross, where he would bear

recognition of their reality! The possibility of death awaited down both forks in their road. But they had to take steps. Sitting at the city gate was getting them nowhere.

It is easy to think, when we are faced with desperate times, that we are alone in our experience. No one has encountered what we are experi-

then *this*. Why now? Why me? These are the questions that lead to cries of desperation. We have no answers of our own; surely God must have some for us.

The young prophet Jeremiah was called to speak the words of the Lord in a time of national severity. God was preparing to exile his people

for their idolatrous sins. This was not to be an uncertain duration, like Joseph's, but it would last a full lifetime for many of those sent away. As a prophet, Jeremiah could not reject that veracity of God's words, but he still had desperate questions, for himself and for the people.

Have you rejected Judah completely?

Do you despise Zion?

Why have you afflicted us so that we cannot be healed?

We hoped for peace

but no good has come, for a time of healing

but there is only terror.

(Jeremiah 14:19)

the Lord to uphold his own honor, appealed to God's enduring covenant with Israel, rejected the idols of other nations, and declared God as their only hope. But God did not relent. Not in this hour. "Even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before me," the Lord told Jeremiah, "my heart would not go out to this people." God's mind was fixed. No wonder Jeremiah became known as the weeping prophet. His eyes would have to endure the full measure of God's judgment.

We may need to endure the same. Day by day, during the stretch of the coronavirus, personal stories of human loss are filling the feeds of every social media platform. Loved ones

of atheism have wormed their way into their minds.

God could whitewash all these consequences, just as he could have called down the angels from heaven to lift Jesus from the cross. He did not. His plan was built another way. Those who are desperate, not those who are haughty, turn to him. Those who humble themselves before him, he will lift up. And this is where we turn in our final look at an Old Testament account of how God works.

The God who is to be trusted

And so the exile came. The armies of Nebuchadnezzar swept across from Babylon and took all they wanted from Jerusalem and its surrounding

The hardest part of any horrible situation is accepting that it may not work out as we most desire. It is common in the midst of pandemics and recessions and other grave hours to hear the refrain, "We will get through this." If we are honest, the best we can offer to this line of hope is, "Some will, yes."

In truth, we can rarely, maybe never, make a case before God that we do not deserve the calamity that is our present condition. Even if we have not sinned in this hour, we have sinned, and the effects of our sin and those of the world—including something as common as food poisoning—are bound to reach us sooner or later. And we know from our recollections of what those in the past have endured, including our own parents or grandparents, we cannot humbly consider ourselves more special or deserving than they that we should escape trouble. But we may still raise a desperate cry: "God, will you not yet intervene? Are you blind to all I am enduring?"

Jeremiah's plea continued. He confessed the sin of the people, asked

lost, many in lonely hospital rooms, with only a nurse or other attendant allowed to be present. No family members. No friends. These are the conditions that cause us to cry, "Why God, does it have to be this way?"

We have already answered this question. It is this way because of sin. Not just one sin, but the cloud of sin. The effects of all that humanity has done wrong since the sin of Adam mount. You know this in your business, where a few bad actors create expensive and time-consuming regulations for us all. You know this in your homes, where the lies of pornography subject true relationships to fantastic, unreachable expectations. You know this with your children, who will not cling to the faith you've found because the arguments

lands. And what they took included many of Israel's finest young citizens. One of these you will know as Daniel, whose own historic and prophetic accounts are provided for us in a short Old Testament book bearing his name.

In Babylon, David and his cohorts were challenged repeatedly with affronts to the practice of their faith in the Lord. Eat the king's rich food, rather than the diet of their homeland, which was prescribed by the laws of God for them. Stand against the violent threats of the petulant king, who ordered the death of all his wise men unless they told him and interpreted a dream he could not even remember for himself. But the greatest disturbance of all came when Nebuchadnezzar erected a tall

image and ordered everyone in the land to bow down to it. It was a blatant call to idolatry, the very sin for which Judah had been exiled. The men of God could not do it.

In our pluralistic Western societies, we may not readily understand the consequences of such a choice. They were in this case life and death. Those who would not bow down to his image, Nebuchadnezzar sentenced to destruction in a fiery furnace. Although furious with Daniel's friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego for not bowing down, the king offered them a second chance. "Bow down," he said, "and all is good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"

The men did not pretend to mishear the king. They did not try to offer a palatable alternative. They accepted the reality of the situation and made their only defense, if you can even call it that.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, "King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up." (Daniel 3:16-18)

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hours to hear the refrain, "We will get through this." If we are honest, the best we can offer to this line of hope is, "Some will, yes." Others will not. Some will die. We ourselves may be among them. Forgive me if this is too stark a word. But to ignore this possibility is to ignore the reality that came for nearly all of Jesus' closest disciples. They were not all delivered from "trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword" (Romans 8:35). These were the means of the end of their earthly lives.

But here is what is most true: Their earthly lives were not the end. For Paul went on to write to his Roman readers in that place where he would one day die himself:

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:37-39)

A final word

To offer final words beyond those of Paul is a pretense, I know. There is nothing to be said, except perhaps to remind us of our present circumstance. Whether the concerns you face today are as big as the whole world, with its gripping pandemic, or as personal as the confines of your own sickroom at home, or as communal as the concerns you have for your employees at your presently shuttered business, you may be faced with all that we have read today—with the fog of unknowing, with the

dread of calamity, with the cry of desperation. Never in your life have you prayed that these would be your lot, yet here they are. But over and above them all is the God who sees, the God who knows, the God who loves, and the God who will carry you on, be it in this life or the next. Trust in him, even if it feels like your last finger is clinging to the thinnest thread. You do not know whether you will see a miracle. But you will see God. And that is all the miracle we need.

At the end of Psalm 13, that Davidic lament, the shepherd-king offered faith-filled closing words. May they be ours today, unto whatever end God leads us.

But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing the LORD's praise,
for he has been good to me.

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