

How to thrive in a shattered world

# HOPE

## FOR TROUBLED TIMES

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# CHAPTER 1

## PANDEMICS, PESTILENCES, AND PROPHECY

Our world has experienced a crisis of pandemic proportions. A fast-moving virus has ravaged country after country at lightning speed. The coronavirus has changed life as we knew it. COVID-19 is a strain of the virus family that we haven't seen before. Presently researchers are in a race against time to develop scientifically tested and approved vaccines for this rapidly spreading virus. During the height of the virus international borders were closed. Schools suspended classes. Businesses mandated their workers to work from home. Restaurants closed. Movie theaters, amusement parks, and other entertainment venues shut their doors. Sporting events and large conventions were canceled. People were told to avoid gatherings of more than 10 individuals. "Social distancing" became a common theme in the news media. Federal and state agencies placed entire cities on lockdown. In some countries the medical system became overwhelmed. The international stock market plunged. Unemployment rates skyrocketed.

Reports of the coronavirus dominated the news for months. International and local media outlets gave it round-the-clock coverage. The front pages of newspapers featured it daily. We had daily briefings and updates from public health officials. The entire world seemed to be consumed with this tiny, easily transmittable virus. At times we were left with more questions than answers. Many of those questions revolved around religious themes. Deep within our hearts we were seeking answers.

### Answering the Tough Questions

Where is God in all this? Is COVID-19 a judgment of God, or is it just some random, out-of-control virus? What does the Bible say about pestilences or pandemics? Is this a sign of the end of the world?

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Is there hope on the horizon—hope for our personal lives, our families, our children, and our world? Let me assure you, God is not the author of sickness. He is not the originator of suffering or disease. In the first chapter of the Bible, at the end of Creation week, God looked out over the world and declared that “it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). God created a perfect world without one taint of disease. There were no viruses, germs, or bacteria. There was no suffering or death. Sickness was not part of His original plan. His plan was for earth to be populated with people who were happy, healthy, and holy.

Sin is an intruder that entered our world through an angelic being called Lucifer. This being of dazzling brightness, created perfect by God, rebelled against the principles of God’s government in heaven millenniums ago. This fallen angel is behind all the suffering in our world. God created each of His creatures with the freedom of choice. To take away the freedom of choice is to remove the capacity to love. Without love, life has little meaning. Without love, genuine happiness is not possible. Lucifer chose the way of selfishness rather than the way of love.

This same fallen angel deceived Adam and Eve, just as he deceived one third of the angels in heaven. The Bible calls the devil “a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44, NIV). The Bible’s last book, Revelation, describes him as the one who “deceives the whole world” (Revelation 12:9). Satan’s first lie was that God did not mean what He said. Eve could partake of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and would not “surely die,” as God had declared (Genesis 3:4). She could violate God’s commands without any serious consequences. The evil one deceived her into thinking that by eating of the tree she would enter a higher sphere of existence. Satan claimed that God was arbitrary, an authoritarian tyrant who did not have the best interest of His creatures in view.

### **Opening a Door God Wanted Forever Shut**

When Adam and Eve sinned, they opened a door of sickness, suffering, and disease that God wanted forever shut. Sin is essentially separation from God (see Isaiah 59:1, 2). Separated from God, we are separated from the ultimate source of life. Separated from God, we are

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separated from the source of health. We live in a broken world—a world in rebellion against God. The reason Christ came was to satisfy the claims of the broken law, to restore us back to God’s image, and to reveal what God is like. The Bible says in Luke 19:10 that “the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (NIV). Because “the wages of sin is death,” and “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God,” Christ came to redeem this lost world (Romans 6:23, 3:23, KJV). In His life and death, Jesus revealed how much the Father cares for us. Every miracle in the New Testament that Jesus performed speaks to us of a God who cares when we suffer. Every time He opened blind eyes, unstopped deaf ears, healed withered arms, and raised dead bodies to life, He demonstrated how much He genuinely loves us. By His death on the cross, He demolished Satan’s lie forever and revealed that He would rather take the guilt, shame, and condemnation of sin upon Himself than have one of us lost (see 2 Corinthians 5:21, Galatians 3:13). But Jesus came also to be an example, to model the abundant life. Jesus demonstrated that God is not the one behind sickness; He’s not the one behind suffering; He is not the one behind disease. He is the God of the abundant life! In the great controversy between good and evil, a rebel angel has rebelled against God and is battling against God for the control of this planet. Sickness, suffering, heartache, and disease are the result of this controversy. Satan uses sickness, suffering, and disease to discredit God. He deceives millions into thinking God does not have our best interest in view. In this world of suffering, God has revealed His love and care. He says, “*Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world*” (Matthew 28:20, KJV).

### **What About Pestilences in the Bible?**

The Bible uses the word “pestilence,” or a variation of that word, 81 different times in the New King James Version. A pestilence is a sudden or fatal epidemic that generally impacts an entire community. The word “pestilence” is used at least three different ways in Scripture. Sometimes in the Bible the word “pestilence” is used to describe a disease that occurs because we are in a world of sin. Take, for example, the story of Job. Did Job’s sin cause the pestilences that afflicted his body from head to toe? Was he responsible for the impact

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of the destruction upon his livestock, his family, his home, and his community? Certainly not! Satan was the mastermind behind all his suffering and disease. Speaking of Job's experience, the scripture states, "So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord, and struck Job with painful boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head" (Job 2:7). Why did God ever allow Satan to afflict Job with such a horrible plague or pestilence? We live in a world separated from God's original plan of complete health and wholeness. It is a world of pathogens, viruses, and germs. A world in which pestilences and plagues devastate entire communities and impact whole countries. God does not always intervene to prevent Satan's attacks, but through it all He is with us. He is there to strengthen, encourage, and support us. It is often through life's toughest times that we seek God most earnestly and long for heaven more deeply.

There's a second way that the word "pestilence" is used in the Bible. At times pestilences are the judgments of God upon the wicked. At times the Old Testament prophets describe pestilences as God's means of leading His rebellious people to repentance. The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel use the word 25 times in harmony with God's judgments. You may say that's rather strange, but think about Egypt. Were the plagues of ancient Egypt simply natural disasters, or were they God's judgments to deliver His people? In love God sent warning after warning to the Egyptians. He graciously sent repeated messages to them to avoid the disaster that was coming, but they willfully refused His loving invitations, and the judgments of God fell upon the land. Love speaks gently, but it also speaks in thunderous tones at times to get our attention. God's ultimate purpose in all our life experiences is to lead us closer to Him.

There is a third use of the word "pestilence." At times God simply withdraws His protective power. There are times God withdraws His presence and allows the natural result of sin to take place. Do you remember the story of Israel being bitten by snakes in the wilderness? Many died of the venom. God simply withdrew His presence to allow the consequence of their sinful choices to be played out so they would turn in repentance to His will. When we see pestilences raging in our land, it may be God's clarion call for us to become more serious about

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our commitment to Christ, experience a deeper repentance, and surrender our lives fully to Him.

John the revelator gives us further insight on the restraining power of God. Speaking of the calamities that will come in the last days, he declares, “After these things I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, on the sea, and on any tree. Then I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God. And he cried with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea, saying, “Do not harm the earth, the sea, or the trees till we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads” (Revelation 7:1-3). In the prophetic language of the Bible, wind represents destruction. Think of the destructive force of a tornado or a hurricane. Revelation pictures the angels of God holding back the destruction that will come upon the earth just before Jesus returns. The famines, earthquakes, fires, floods, and pestilences we see all around us are a foretaste of what is coming. The angels are restraining the full force of destruction while the Holy Spirit powerfully appeals to people everywhere to make a full commitment to Jesus.

God is preparing His people for the final crisis that is soon to break upon this world. Jesus appeals to us to make a total, absolute commitment to Him, to be anchored in His Word, and to be filled with His love so that all the demons in hell with their devilish schemes cannot move us. We will not be shaken, because He cannot be shaken, and our eyes are fixed upon Him.

### **Rising Natural Disasters**

Jesus describes natural disasters, including pestilences, that devastate the earth in the context of the signs of His second coming. Let me hasten to add that we need to avoid two extremes. One extreme is the fanaticism that shouts, “The coronavirus is here, so Jesus must be coming next week [or next month or next year].” There are some people who are consumed with fanciful, sensational time-setting theories not found in the Bible. The other extreme is to dismiss this virus as some natural phenomenon that will soon pass, that has absolutely nothing at

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all to do with last-day signs. But that's certainly not what Jesus said. In Matthew 24 Jesus discusses end-time signs and declares, "For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows" (Matthew 24:7, 8). Jesus lists wars, rumors of war, the rise of nations against nations, kingdoms fighting against kingdoms as part of an end-time scenario. He adds natural disasters such as earthquakes, famines, and pestilences among the more than 20 signs He foretells in Matthew 24. The Gospel of Luke also speaks about these end-time signs. Luke was a medical doctor and is very precise in reporting Jesus' description of final events. In Luke 21 Jesus plainly states, "And there will be great earthquakes in various places, and famines and pestilences; and there will be fearful sights and great signs from heaven" (Luke 21:11). Jesus predicted that there would be dramatic signs in the natural world that would be a sign of His return.

It might seem strange to talk about famines today in a world in which so many people are obese, but it is a fact that millions starve to death every year. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that nearly 870 million people are suffering from chronic undernourishment. That represents one of eight people living on the planet, or about 13 percent of the world's population. Every day more than 20,000 people die from the effects of malnutrition. That is almost 7.5 million people every year.

Jesus said there would be famines, earthquakes, and pestilences. The number of earthquakes measuring 3.0 or more on the Richter scale has been significant. Meanwhile, tsunamis, mudslides, avalanches, tornadoes, and volcanic eruptions have been breaking all previous records for their violence and disastrous effects. More than \$24 billion of weather damage is caused each year. It is as if all nature is speaking, saying, "Lord, it's time for You to come and deliver us."

The 2004 Sumatra-Andaman earthquake and the Indonesian tsunami that followed had waves almost 100 feet high and took more than 225,000 lives, with thousands more injured. In the earthquake that struck the Sichuan province of China on May 12, 2008, almost



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70,000 people died and another 18,000 were listed as missing. On January 12, 2010, Haiti was struck by a major quake. According to Haitian government figures, at least 220,000 people died and more than 3 million were seriously affected. On March 11, 2011, a 9.0 earthquake caused a tsunami that struck Japan and killed almost 20,000 people. Earthquakes have been prevalent in the past 50 years. Jesus also predicted the rise of pestilences.

Pestilences are epidemics that impact entire countries. Pestilences can also be categorized as strange diseases that destroy our crops; pollutants that impact the environment; or noxious substances that contaminate our air and water.

Why do we spray our crops with deadly chemicals called pesticides? Because if we didn't, the pestilences, or the pests, would destroy them! You can hardly find anything in the supermarket that's not covered with pesticides. Agriculture around the world uses 5.6 billion pounds of toxic pollutants per year. These pesticides run off into our land and into waterways and oceans. This insatiable desire to make money by rapidly producing crops and quickly ripening them by artificial fertilizers to get them on the market sooner is having devastating consequences on the environment and our health.

A group of scientists got together and issued what they called a "Warning to Humanity." They wrote: "No more than one or a few decades remain." Now, this is not some preacher standing in a pulpit; it is a group of scientists. They said: "No more than one or a few decades remain before the chance to avert the threats we now confront will be lost and the prospects of humanity immeasurably diminished." They are talking about global warming, the greenhouse effect. They are talking about vehicles and industry emitting toxic carbon pollutants into the atmosphere, the melting of the polar caps and the rise of the oceans. This is not somebody crying wolf! The danger we face is real.

We are seeing another form of pestilence in the new diseases that are springing up around the world. Have you wondered about new epidemics? Where are they coming from? Before science can find a solution or a vaccine for one, another appears. Just think about the pestilences that have taken millions of lives in recent years. We

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have had mad cow disease, bird flu, HIV/AIDS, Lyme disease, the Marburg virus, the West Nile virus, Ebola, coronaviruses, including SARS and now COVID-19.

### **A Sign of Christ's Return?**

Does that mean that this COVID-19 virus that has ravaged the world is a sign of Christ's coming? It does not stand alone as the sign. But when you look at the larger picture, pestilences are one of multiple signs that Jesus predicts will occur preliminary to His return. These events indicate that the time is running out and that we are living on the verge of eternity. The stage is being set for the climactic events described in the prophetic books of Daniel and Revelation to soon be fulfilled.

In the light of Christ's predictions in His prophetic Word, what can we expect in the future? Natural disasters will increase. Famines, earthquakes, and pestilences will escalate. Just as in Noah's day, when a sinful world full of immorality and violence filled the cup of its iniquity in rebellion against God and the floodwaters deluged this world, so our world is preparing for God's final judgments. God lovingly appeals to a wayward planet. There is nothing more important to God than saving as many people as possible. When God withdraws His protective power, natural disasters and death dealing disease run rampant. God does not cause these disasters, but uses them to appeal to us on the fragility of life. They drive us to our knees to seek the only source of security, which is in Christ and the promises of His Word. The Bible is a book filled with the hopeful promises of God.

### **Hope Makes a Difference**

When we lose hope, dark clouds of despair hang over our heads. The future appears gloomy, and everything about tomorrow seems uncertain. But hope leads us from what is to what can be. It paints tomorrow in an array of bright colors. It lifts our spirits from the mud below to the heavens above.

Hope is not some idle wish or vague longing for a better future. It is not baseless desire or an uncertain expectation with no real

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certainty or assurance. In the ancient Scriptures hope is a strong, confident expectation based on the unchangeable promises of God with the certainty that the thing you hope for will be accomplished. The apostle Paul, writing in the Bible book of Romans, states that the “things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope” (Romans 15:4, KJV).

The apostle Paul faced life’s fiercest trials. He was stoned, beaten, unjustly condemned, and imprisoned. But he writes to the believers in Rome who were living through trying times: “Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (verse 13). God is a God of hope. As we grasp His loving concern for us in all the circumstances of life, our hearts will be filled with joy and peace, and we will abound in hope.

The promises of God reveal hope for today, tomorrow, and forever. They speak with certainty in an uncertain world. They encourage our hearts and give us the sense that we are not alone in this world. They speak hope to our troubled minds and peace to our anxious spirits.

Although we may face challenges, and life might not go as we have planned or desired, the promises of God are sure. Our happiness is not based on the illusionary idea that nothing bad will ever happen to us. It is not based on the mythical dream that each day is brighter than the day before. Sometimes bad things happen to good people.

We live in a broken world. Sickness, suffering, poverty, and disease afflict both the righteous and the unrighteous, but here is the difference: Those who put their faith in God are filled with hope. Our hope is anchored in a God who will never let us down (see Hebrews 6:18). It is rooted in a God who is there in our trials, with us in our difficulties. It has as its foundation a Christ who once dwelt in human flesh, one who understands us and strengthens us in all our trials (see Hebrews 4:15). He identifies with us in our tears and comforts our hearts. He came to provide us with the hope of a better tomorrow.

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Today let your heart be filled with hope. One day soon Jesus will come, and the heartaches and trials, the challenges and difficulties of life, will be over, and we will live with Him forever.