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Introduction

Perhaps the hardest part of the Christian life is dealing with the unholy and unwanted trio of visitors: fear, suffering and death.

Death, the Bible tells us, is the last enemy and we must all face it. Suffering usually comes before death and is a visitor we all dread. After all, who wants to suffer? Fear is normally the first of the trio to make our acquaintance, affecting our minds rather than our bodies.

Normally, of course, we don't like to think about these things. Suddenly, though, in the time of coronavirus, these unwelcome visitors cannot be avoided.

The French mathematician and writer Blaise Pascal was reported to have said, 'Being unable to cure death, wretchedness and ignorance, men have decided, in order to be happy, not to think about such things.'

But suddenly 'such things' are inescapable.

I have known this for longer than most. I have lived with cancer for seven years. Five years ago I was told the cancer was incurable and that my death was imminent. Since then I have been living with the sword of Damocles over my head. Now, however, that sword seems to be over everyone's head. While I was in chemotherapy it used to be just me who was nervous about coughs and sneezes. Now it's everyone. 'Welcome to my world!' I like to say, tongue firmly in cheek.

The truth is that despite their existence, Christians living in the developed western world have broadly been shielded from fear, suffering and death. This may explain why our faith is often so weak and feeble.

When I was a child, my father used to take our family Bible smuggling behind the Iron Curtain. When we visited those churches, I noticed that despite being terribly persecuted, the Christians we met had a vibrancy to their faith. Perhaps God is using the current crisis to teach us spoiled western Christians to live like Christians in the majority of the world who trust Him daily.

I'm reminded of the words that Corrie Ten Boom wrote in her book *The Hiding Place* when she recalled her time in a Nazi concentration camp, 'I only realised that Christ was all I needed when Christ was all I had.'

While I have been through chemotherapy, radiotherapy and other operations for cancer and blindness, I am not an expert on fear, suffering and death. I am not even – like my father – a clergyman. I am just a Christian, married with three adult children, living in the southeast of England, where I attend my local church.

I make this point only to say that these devotions are not about me but about three things that I have found we can use to defeat fear, suffering and death.

The first is that when we have a problem we must go to the Bible. The Bible is God's medicine cabinet where we can find treatment for our diseases. That is why each of the following devotions meditate on a Bible passage and considers how it can help us. I've chosen them because each passage has helped me powerfully over the last seven years and, in the same way, I pray that God will use His Word to speak to you. If you aren't familiar with the Bible, then there is some more information in the appendix about the Bible passages referred to in the devotions that I hope will be useful.

The second thing I have found is that when I read the Bible, God's promises come to life. These everlasting promises are like a rock upon which we can stand secure in the stormiest seas: 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you' (Heb. 13:5); 'Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age' (Mt. 28:20); 'Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me' (Ps. 23:4).

God does not promise us health and wealth. That's the devil's lie. The writer in the letter to the Hebrews assures us of that when he writes that 'people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment' (Heb. 9:27). There is no by-pass around the valley of the shadow of death. We all must go through it. In fact, we are called to take up our cross daily and follow Him. This can be unbearably hard, but there is something amazingly powerful in God's Word that enables us to endure to the end.

We may find partial theological answers to fear, suffering and death – and there is a place for that – but God's ultimate answer is Himself. A person who walked the dusty streets of Palestine and who was like us: facing fear, suffering and death. He can sympathise with our weakness and hardships because, amazingly enough, He experienced far worse. Christ never asks us to go through anything that He hasn't experienced Himself.

Yet, at the same time, He is *not* like us. He is God Almighty. He went to the cross because of His love for us. He holds the keys to death and hell. He can save us from fear, suffering and death. I am a living testimony that His presence can be experienced through His Word and my prayer is that you, too, will know His closeness as you look at His Word.

Thirdly, and finally, I have found that fear, suffering and death can be redemptive because in Christ we have hope. My cancer has been a powerful driver in motivating me to share my faith. I have written a book for non-Christians about the only real hope we have in the face

of death. What do we have to offer in response to the coronavirus?
Hope in Christ.

I have found that people are intrigued by the hope that I have. It is nothing particular to me; every Christian has the same hope. Jesus stands in front of us in our fear, suffering and grief and says, 'I am the resurrection and the life' (Jn. 11:25).



The Intruder

GENESIS 3

The Bible tells us that death and his two sidekicks, fear and suffering, are intruders. We are like a couple living in a beautiful house who, one night, hear the noise of breaking glass and suddenly realise that someone has broken in. We cannot get the intruder out and, sooner or later, he's going to kill us.

Sometimes the intruder breaks in because we live in a bad neighbourhood – the world is full of violent criminals like disease and natural disaster – but also, if we are honest, the intruder comes because of the moral evil within each of us. One sin leads to another and its destination is clear, 'the wages of sin is death' (Rom. 6:23).

You may have watched the popular TV show *Breaking Bad*, in which a respectable teacher becomes a drug dealer and unleashes a trail of suffering and death on everyone he comes into contact with. It's popular because it reveals something that we all know to be true.

So how did we end up being hired by this devilish employer? Or with this murderous intruder in our home? The Bible tells us that in

the beginning the house – that is, the world – was good. How did moral evil enter the world? Genesis 3 teaches us that humanity suffered a catastrophic fall. Evil, in the form of a serpent, tempted Adam and Eve. They fell into sin and unleashed a wave of fear, suffering and death on themselves and their descendants.

This is the consequence of the Fall. The very first emotion the newly fallen couple experience is fear (Gen. 3:10). Adam and Eve suffered in specific ways (Gen. 3:16–19) but anyone who has been through childbirth or knows the hardship of work has experienced something of their suffering. And what's the end? Death. Back to the dust from where we came.

The damage is done. If you like, Adam and Eve were patient zero in a Wuhan wet market. Once the virus broke out it could not be stopped.

But wait! There is amazing hope: for as death came by one man, so life will come by another. And, strangely enough, that hope involves the same evil trio. From the woman, a deliverer will come who will kill that old serpent, the devil. He will obliterate the snake by stamping on his head but He will also have to suffer Himself. That rescuer, of course, is Christ, and the rest of the Bible is the story of how that happens. That story leads to a hill outside Jerusalem 2000 years ago, an old rugged cross and, near its foot, a new hewn tomb.

What comfort can we take from this? That God doesn't give us what we deserve. That God, before the creation of the universe, purposed a Saviour to save us from fear, suffering and death.

Since I was diagnosed with cancer I have spent a lot of time discussing with my non-Christian friends the question, 'How can a loving God allow suffering?'

The Christian answer to this question – and the answer to the unholy trio who afflict us so badly – is not a theological proposition.

Rather, the answer which we must share is a person. He is the Son of God who will crush fear, suffering and death. A man of sorrows who was acquainted with grief. He turns these three imposters on themselves. Even death, their terrible king, is utterly defeated and, as we will see at the end of this book, will one day be destroyed, “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death” or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away’ (Rev. 21:4).



All Aboard

GENESIS 6 — 8

I spent much of 2020 in lockdown, either government-imposed or self-imposed, as I worried about coming into contact with Covid-19 with no immune system.

During that time, I felt as if I was being endlessly tossed around in a boat in a stormy sea, quarantined, cut off from others, fearful, lonely, wondering how long this would go on for and whether I would ever see ‘dry land’ again.

You don’t have to be a Bible genius to see a passage that speaks to us — Noah and his ark. This is a passage that has been ruined by twee pictures of fluffy animals marching in two by two; the poor drowned corpses never seem to make it into the Sunday school illustrations.

What does it say to us then?

The story of Noah shows us that we live in a death-threatened world, whether we know it or not. Jesus tells us that people in Noah’s day were living ordinary lives until suddenly everything changed. It’s the same for us: in a few short weeks, in early 2020, our lives were threatened by something we had never previously considered. Without warning, we are alone on a stormy sea.

Where can we take comfort?

Firstly, from the great truth that God doesn't give us what we deserve. God was incredibly patient in the days of Noah and He is equally patient with us now. Not only is He long-suffering but, at the same time, He offers us a way to escape death. For Noah, it was the ark, for us, it's the cross. Both appear very unlikely routes to safety but all you have to do is 'get on board'. You don't need a golden ticket, there is room for all who will enter and all are invited.

Secondly, we read 'God remembered Noah' (Gen. 8:1). I sometimes feel forgotten as I lurch from one illness to another. Noah felt forgotten but of course, friend, God will never forget Noah, me, you or any of His children! 3000 years ago, God's people were saying the same thing: 'The LORD has forsaken me, the LORD has forgotten me' (Is. 49:14).

To which the reply came:

'Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!' (v. 15)

No, in our suffering, pain and loneliness, we will never be forgotten. Nor are we ever on our own. Noah was not on his own; he had his family with him. We have our family — the church. Now, sometimes you may think that the church is the last thing you need in suffering, that it can be worse than useless or irritate you beyond belief. But the church is not as it seems: it is ultimately the body of Christ. As John says, 'Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us' (1 Jn 4:11-12). In our church family, we are all brothers and sisters being made like our older brother, Jesus, as we are 'conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters' (Rom. 8:29). If we want to love Christ, whom

we cannot see, we must first love our brothers and sisters, whom we can.

Ultimately, what we need in suffering, fear and death is Christ. He beckons us aboard His ship, the cross, of which He is both builder, captain and shipmate. He designed it, suffered it, offers it and is our companion and friend in entering it.

James K.A. Smith quotes Augustine, 'It is as if someone could see his home country from a long way away, but is cut off from it by the sea; he sees where to go, but does not have the means to get there.'

Smith continues 'You can't get there from here. Not even a map is enough. You might already have realized where you need to go, but the question is how to get there.' Augustine points out that God sends us an ark 'For no one can cross the sea of this world unless carried over it on the cross of Christ.' Get on board, says God, for the only way to reach home, is aboard the ark of the cross.