

A Time to Thrive



Gary Wilkerson November 16, 2020

God's Plans for You Have Not Changed

This season has been one of pandemic, protests, riots, political upheaval and economic uncertainty. The immediate fear may have subsided, but many now live with a troubling uncertainty. Some struggle with isolation, others with health, others with loss of work and keeping their families afloat. Amid all of this, they still don't know what next week will bring or what their long-term future will be.

One thing we know is that this troubling season won't be short-lived. Its effects will continue for some time. What does this tell us as people of faith?

The prophet Daniel saw the nation of Israel in a similar situation. Daniel was probably near the end of his life when he received a fearful vision from the Lord. "And the word was true, and it was a great conflict" (*Daniel 10:1, ESV*). The vision revealed things so catastrophic it propelled Daniel into a three-week fast. "I ate no delicacies, no meat or wine entered my mouth, nor did I anoint myself at all, for the full three weeks" (*10:3*).

We know Daniel was a fearless man of faith. Earlier in life, he had boldly faced death in the lions' den after refusing to bow to the idolatrous king. Now, years later, beholding this frightening vision, he trembled.

Many of us who follow Jesus think we're not allowed to feel emotions like fear. Personally, when I see difficult times coming like the season we're in, I can't stop my concern. The Lord understands this and reassures us with his Holy Spirit.

God's holy presence in us transcends any fear brought on by a trial like the coronavirus.

Three weeks after Daniel received his terrible revelation, God gave him a holy visitation. This divine appearance overwhelmed the prophet's fearful mourning. "I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold, a man clothed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Uphaz around his waist. His body was like beryl, his face like the appearance of lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude" (*10:5-6*).

The brilliant visitation overpowered Daniel. "(I) saw this great vision, and no strength was left in me. My radiant appearance was fearfully changed, and I retained no strength" (*10:8*).

So, what were the first words spoken to Daniel? "He said to me, 'O Daniel, man greatly loved'" (*10:11*). The first thing God does when we're in a crisis is to reassure us of his love. He wants us to know that he's watching over us, looking out for us, that his powerful hand covers us at all times.

The second thing this glorified man told Daniel was, "Understand the words that I speak to you" (*10:11*). In times of crisis, we need discernment to hear what God is saying, especially if our emotions tell us to retreat and hide away. We have to understand what's going on around us if we're to move wisely in faith without being fearful.

The man said to Daniel, “Stand upright, for now I have been sent to you” (10:11). God was telling the elderly prophet, “I still have plans for you, a mission for this moment, a word for you to speak in a very serious time.”

The man then showed Daniel the eternal reality of the moment. “And when he had spoken this word to me, I stood up trembling. Then he said to me, ‘Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and humbled yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words’” (10:11-12).

What a profound lesson for us. Daniel had been praying for three weeks, and this man revealed to him, “You were heard in heaven on the first day you prayed.” As Daniel mourned over the hard times coming, God was already moving things in heaven and earth. Changes were afoot because of Daniel’s faithful prayers.

God’s Word remains the same in times of worldwide crisis as in times of peace.

The Bible has not changed because of COVID-19 or political or economic problems. Nor has Jesus changed. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). Christ is still on the throne, seated at the Father’s right hand, omnipotent over all that is happening. This assures us that the Lord’s plans for us have never changed. “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11).

When viruses, violence and sobering troubles hit, Jesus didn’t run to check his news feed. He knew exactly what was going on. In fact, he foresaw everything we’re facing. He didn’t say, “Well, I had specific plans for you, but this virus has changed everything. I’ll move on to Plan B.” No. God knew all along what his plans were for you during this time. They’re plans not for disaster but for your good, your benefit, even in hard times.

None of us knows exactly what the plans God has for us are; we rarely ever do. He says, “I know the plans I have for you” (29:11, *my emphasis*). If we can trust that he knows us better than we know ourselves, that he numbers the very hairs on our head, surely we can trust him when he says, “The plans I have for your good, your welfare, are meant for you not merely to survive but to *thrive*. I have come that you may have life more abundant.” His eternal promises do not change in a pandemic.

I don’t fear anything that is happening in the world today. Yet I have had to determine, “Even if I have to face suffering, it will be with joy in my heart, courage in my soul, fight in my mind and all the authority that Jesus has given me to my last breath. Satan will not win. No matter what happens to me, I belong to Christ.”

Based on these passages, I’ve given myself three reminders that I believe can help any Christian through this time.

First, *don’t just survive; thrive*. You may still be anxious about leaving home. This season, however, doesn’t have to be one of hibernation aimed at survival alone. It is an opportunity to thrive.

As I mentioned, Daniel was older when God gave him his mission. He was faithful to pray, and that simple act put changes into motion. In fact, the visitation that Daniel received made clear to him that his praying shook both heaven and earth.

Friend, you can thrive through intercession. Pray for your spouse, your family, your friends, your neighbors, your fellow Christians. Continue praying for frontline workers to stay safe and for leaders to act wisely. Pray for peace to rule your city and for people’s fears, frustrations and anger to melt away, changing into neighborly care and love. The Holy Spirit can accomplish this.

Another way to thrive is to renew your study of God’s Word. Spending even a minimum of time in the Bible can shift your daily thoughts from fear to faith.

Second, *don’t just endure difficult experiences; enhance them*. Let God’s power work in the midst of your problems. God’s purpose for us is always to see an increase, whether in times of trial or blessing.

When the children of Israel were poised on the edge of Canaan, a Promised Land filled with blessings beyond compare, God didn't tell them, "Okay, now is your time to settle in, shut down and entertain yourself." No, he said, "When you arrive there, I want you to increase, build and grow." Our passion for Jesus can increase during this time, both in devotion to him and in care for our neighbors, especially the vulnerable and needy.

Third, *don't just wait out changes; pray in changes*. We are called to be agents of change. Buddhism encourages passivity, to accept things as they are. Christians are called to see things transformed by Christ, to "pray in" change and to act in faith to see change. We can pray for miracles of healing in our sick loved ones, for our land to be healed of poverty and injustice and for our own hearts to turn continually to Jesus.

At this moment in history, many multitudes of fearful, yearning hearts turn to Christ.

When the events of September 11, 2001 took place, my father, David Wilkerson, was visiting my family at our Colorado home. He wanted to get back to New York City as fast as possible, but all flights were grounded, so I drove him there.

When we arrived, we discovered that the city's churches were packed with people seeking assurance, purpose and answers. It appeared to be a true spiritual awakening, but it ended up being short-lived, a trend lasting only a few weeks.

Today's problems, multiplying and intensifying, have already had an impact and will for months to come. In fact, they may leave a permanent imprint on the way we live. I pray this season sends us into a new way of living in Jesus, that people will be drawn to him by how Christians choose to live—thriving instead of just surviving, enhancing instead of just enduring, praying in blessings instead of waiting things out.

May these times of great difficulty, no matter how long they last or how intense they become, be your "twenty-one days" of passionate prayer like Daniel's to see heaven and earth moved by God's hand. Jesus is still on the throne, and his plans for you are meant to come to pass at such a time as this!

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