

Encourage

Inspiration for IPHC Leaders

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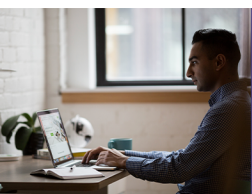


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We Need God's Discernment in This Election Season

Our responsibility as Christians is to be salt and light.
Let's do this as even as we go to the polls.



BY DOUG
BEACHAM

DOUG BEACHAM is the presiding bishop of the IPHC. He has served in various roles in the church including Georgia Conference Superintendent, executive director of Church Education Ministries, and executive director of World Missions Ministries. You can follow Bishop Beacham on [Facebook](#) or Twitter [@DougBeacham](#).

The 1968 American presidential election was the first time I was eligible to vote. I quickly learned two lessons from that year: 1) Politics makes strange bedfellows of competing and divergent groups and views; 2) Politics can be divisive and cause breaches between families, friends, the workplace, sports and, yes, the body of Christ.

Fifty-two years later the lessons from 1968 are continually reinforced. If anything, the proliferation of news outlets and social media has added to the Machiavellian fray. In light of that, I want to share some thoughts and principles I have learned over these years as we approach our national election on Tuesday, November 3, 2020.

1. Our unity as Christians is in the Head of the church, Jesus the Messiah. The New Testament affirms the Lordship of Jesus over all creation, all powers and principalities, all generations and all people in our various organizational forms (government, ethnicity, etc.). Our unity in the IPHC is not based on any political party or candidate, but solely in Jesus Christ. Our individual differences, though strongly felt, are not greater than our unity under Jesus Christ.

2. As Christians in the USA (as in any other nation), we have a responsibility to be salt and light. Jesus spoke about this in Matthew 5:13 and 16. Our responsibility as salt and light is manifested in several ways:

- We must educate ourselves regarding what the Bible teaches us about political concerns. For the IPHC, this means understanding a cluster of issues we believe the Bible addresses. These include the priority of life from conception to the grave; the divine design for marriage and human sexuality; rejection of ideas and actions that

demean and oppress others (such as racism); care for the poor; treatment of the stranger; religious liberties; violence and abuse; honesty and fairness in economic matters. The IPHC positions for many of these are available at <https://iphc.org/position-papers/>.

- We must discern the spiritual battles of right versus wrong, spirituality versus carnality, and God's righteousness versus unrighteous human power. These battles are fought daily in our fallen world. This discernment must be done "by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left" (2 Corinthians 6:7). We know that "the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds" (see 2 Corinthians 10:4).

- We must recognize that the IPHC is diverse within the United States, and even more so globally. Individually, we will decide for whom to vote based on numerous reasons. While the voting booth is private, we must respect those who publicly state choices different from ours.

- We must discern the difference between fundamental agreement on core issues and differing views related to specific policies. This requires listening to one another before we speak or write. We may discover we have more in common than when we first thought.

- We must register to vote, and actually vote. You can go to this website to determine what you should do in your state concerning registration requirements, mail-in ballots, absentee ballots and in person voting: <https://howto.vote/>

- We must study and discern the platforms of the political parties. The Democratic Party platform is at <http://bit.ly/2020DemPlatform>. The Republican Party platform is at <http://bit.ly/2020RepubPlatform>.

- We must carefully discern the positions of political candidates on the national, Congressional, state and local levels. In an era of information and misinformation overload, it is imperative that we confirm the accuracy of social media reports.

3. I am asking each IPHC congregation in the United States to promote voter registration and get-out-the-vote efforts.

As citizens of the Kingdom of God, we have an obligation to our nation and communities to be gracefully and wisely engaged.

4. Most importantly, we must pray.

Prayer brings us before the Lord of all creation. In His presence, and among His children, in His Word, we discern His lordship and love for His creation. In our prayers we pray for peace, honesty and clarity in the elections and post-elections period.

In the 1992 U.S. presidential election I learned something important about prayer. I pastored the Franklin Springs Pentecostal Holiness Church, and there were strong opinions in the congregation about the candidates and the election. As we approached the November elections, three viable

presidential candidates emerged: George H.W. Bush, William J. Clinton and H. Ross Perot. I asked three mature members of the congregation to lead in a prayer for one of these candidates.

One of the people I asked to pray said to me, "I do not support the candidate you have asked me to pray

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Encourage

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for, and at first it was hard for me to pray for him. However, the more I prayed, the more the Lord opened my heart to pray for him, that God would guide and bless him, regardless of my personal views and choices." He had tears in his eyes as he told me that being in the presence of God changed his perspective to view things from a heavenly perspective and not simply from personal views.

Finally, we must commit ourselves to pray for whoever is elected to offices in various levels of civil government. I hope we do that now in our church pastoral prayers and in our devotional life. We should call aloud the name of the president, the governor, the mayor and others in our communities, and we should do it each Sunday. We do this in obedience to God's Word (see 1 Timothy 2:1-3 and Romans 13:1-7).

And let us remember "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:10, 11, NKJV). □



How Should a Pastor Respond to the **COVID-19** Crisis?

I gleaned practical wisdom from studying the 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic.



BY TIM LAMB

TIM LAMB serves as the Conference Superintendent of LifePoint Ministries, formerly known as the Georgia Conference of the IPHC. He formerly served as a Senior/Lead Pastor, and he has more than 34 years of experience in church planting, church revitalization and pastoral ministry. Bishop Lamb is in his 40th year of ministry. He serves on various boards and committees for the IPHC, including the Council of Bishops, Emmanuel College Board of Trustees, IPHC Finance Committee and the Falcon Children's Home and Family Services Board. Tim and his wife, Carissa, live in Milledgeville, Georgia. You can follow him on Facebook and Twitter @TimLPMinistries.

In the past six months the spread of Covid-19 has changed the landscape of our nation, particularly for places of worship. In March, pastors made the decision to move from in-person church services to online services. This has created remarkable avenues for ministry. I believe we have unlimited opportunities to leave impressionable footprints on history for years to come.

A similar situation happened in 1918 during the the Spanish flu epidemic. In 1918 guidelines were set in place that included prohibiting public gatherings for churches. Most pastors accepted the guidelines and found others ways to connect with their congregations.

During today's pandemic, states have varied guidelines for churches, and these guidelines change often. As leaders we should be diligent to stay up to date with required guidelines, and then we should communicate those to our leadership teams. Good communication from leaders eliminates confusion among church members.

A contentious debate erupted recently when California ruled that religious groups must discontinue "singing and chanting activities." A subsequent version of these guidelines, dated July 6, specified that "indoor singing" must be discontinued. Pastors suddenly became very creative by offering outdoor services even while respecting government authorities.

At the writing of this article, we are still in the middle of this pandemic. Many of my friends have tested positive with Covid-19. I've had one very close friend die from this plague, and several others who have been hospitalized because of it.

How we as pastors respond to this virus has become a hot-button issue. Some Christians don't think their churches should stop meetings. Others don't want to open church for many more months. Some Christians are against masks, while

others demand that everyone wear masks in church! In making decisions about public worship during this crisis, here are a few principles that I have led by:

- There is no “one-size-fit all” situation. Every situation is different. Be flexible.
- Seek godly counsel from those who you serve with. Surround yourself with positive people who can speak into your situation.
- Beware of armchair quarterbacks. Some people love to tell you what you should do, but they are never willing to join the team. Even Moses had naysayers among his followers.
- Prayerfully evaluate your situation and make the best possible decision you can—serving God, your congregation and your community.

I’ve talked with a few denominational leaders about the guidelines in their areas, including my good friend Dale Adams, who is Conference Superintendent of River of Life Ministries. Bishop Adams told me that churches in his region have done well in following the state’s guidelines, and have found new ways to make a difference in their communities.

Not only have I researched what happened during the 1918 pandemic, but I’ve learned what it looked like in the post-pandemic period. What lasting footprints did they leave for the next generation to follow?

I believe this difficult season will pass, and we will get beyond this pandemic just like our spiritual ancestors did. But what lasting footprints will we leave behind that other generations can follow? Here are three significant footprints that the 1918 church left for us to follow:

CREATIVITY

The church of 1918 found new ways to do ministry, including using the local newspaper to publish sermons. In the 1920’s, after the pandemic, ministers moved to the electronic age and began to use radio to communicate their messages.

Yesterday it was the radio, but today it is online ministry through social media and other platforms. My good friend Randell Drake, Conference

Superintendent of Horizon Ministries, shared with me that he has seen a significant increase in online ministry among his ministers during the pandemic. For many churches, this pandemic has pushed us to try online ministry for the first time.

The apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians 12:9: “My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness” (NLT). I’ll admit that leading a network during this time has presented many challenges, and I’ve found myself feeling very weak. I wish I had all the answers.

But God has and will continue to be faithful in my life and in yours. God knows how to work best in our weakness, and it is my prayer that He will give us the strength to carry the gospel forward into unknown territory. He will give you the creativity!

PRAYER MEETINGS

“Cottage prayer meetings” is a term we don’t hear much anymore, but it was a familiar concept in 1920. In my research on the pandemic of 1918, I learned that churches saw an increase in small group gathering in homes for prayer and worship.

This was not a new idea, but it took on a different meaning as the church faced challenging circumstances. Prayer meetings in homes did not stop after the pandemic, and the footprint of these prayer meetings still exists today. In fact, prayer meetings accelerated during the post-pandemic era. As a result many new churches were planted in the United States.

It is my prayer that the church will leave footprints of prayer from this 2020 pandemic—footprints that will

be followed for generations to come and will birth new churches in the 21st century.

COMPASSION

The last significant footprint that I will mention from the 1918 pandemic is that churches led the way in humility and genuine care for others. The Christian community often gave sacrificially as they took care of the sick. Some churches closed their buildings for public worship, but opened their buildings as hospital spaces. This is something I believe we are already seeing take place in our 2020 pandemic.

I’ve heard many sacrificial stories of churches ministering to the sick or helping others financially as people

struggle with job loss. Churches have sponsored food giveaways to needy families. Many Christians have also given to help believers overseas, since people in developing countries are suffering worse than we are. And church members have continued to support their churches financially, even when they are not meeting on Sundays.

Bob Teague once wrote, “We all leave footprints as we journey through life. Make sure yours are worth following.” I encourage you to look behind you to see what kind of footprints you are leaving for others to follow.

A lot of people are hurting today. Yet we are “a

place of hope and a people of promise.” It is my prayer that, during this crisis, we will leave lasting footprints that expand God’s kingdom and lead others to Christ. □

“It is my prayer that, during this crisis, we will leave lasting footprints that expand God’s kingdom and lead others to Christ.”

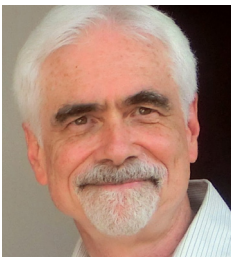


During the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic, Americans wore masks and churches were closed.



We Need Generosity to Reach the World for Jesus

Taking the gospel to the world requires a partnership between those who go and those who send.



BY RUSSELL
BOARD

RUSSELL BOARD and his wife, Sandra, have served with IPHC World Missions for more than 35 years. Russell currently serves as Regional Director of World Missions for Continental Asia, overseeing IPHC work in 11 countries. He is the author of *Grow*, *40 Days with Jesus*, and *40 Days in the Psalms*. Russell and Sandra live in Saitama, Japan.

Jesus issued His marching orders before He ascended into heaven. He said: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

This familiar passage is known as “The Great Commission.” But here is the key question: Who is responsible to carry out this critical mandate?

Clearly, Jesus did not expect His eleven remaining apostles to “make disciples of all nations.” As He promised His presence “to the end of the age,” we must conclude that the Great Commission remains in effect until then. Indeed, Jesus indicates that the end of the age will not come until the Great Commission is completed (Matthew 24:14).

Considering the duration of this assignment, it is safe to conclude that Jesus expects *the whole church* to get involved. This is the only way the job can be done!

Does this mean that every Christian is called to be a missionary? No. All are called to engage in the task of missions, but not all carry the gospel to other lands. Yet those who do cannot fulfill this calling on their own, as “lone rangers” for Jesus.

The Apostle Paul points out that missionaries can’t do the job alone. He wrote: “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’” (Romans 10:14-15).

Missionaries can go nowhere unless they are sent. We might think of missionaries as “mouths” to tell the good news, while senders are the “feet” who get them where they need to go.

The feet may not be seen or heard, but without them the job cannot be done. In the eyes of God, how beautiful are the feet that enable the gospel to travel around the world!

Just who are these senders? Consider the Apostle Paul, whose daring missionary journeys are described in the book of Acts. Did he just decide to strike out on his own? No way. Here is Luke's account:

"Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off" (Acts 13:1-3).

Barnabas and Saul (later known as Paul) were called by the Holy Spirit, but they were *sent* by the church in Antioch. It was a partnership. The church affirmed the call of the two men. They fasted and prayed for the mission, and no doubt helped fund the journey.

The Antioch church was not the only local congregation to partner with Paul in his mission endeavors. Paul commends the church in Philippi for their ongoing "partnership in the gospel" (Philippians 1:5). He refers to their financial support as "a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God" (Philippians 4:18).

Keep in mind that these congregations were new church plants, not established churches with steady income and large budgets. But they were filled with new Christians who were willing to sacrifice in order to get the good news to others who had never heard.

From the days of Paul until now, the partnership between missionaries and local congregations has fueled the spread of the gospel. Over more than a century, this partnership has operated successfully in the IPHC, producing mission efforts in 100 countries around the world.

World Missions Ministries

(WMM) is the administrative arm of IPHC tasked with facilitating and strengthening this partnership of goers and senders. The local church is where potential missionaries are disciplined, and often where they receive their calling from God. Service in the local church is the proving

"From the days of Paul until now, the partnership between missionaries and local congregations has fueled the spread of the gospel."

ground for character and ministry ability.

Candidates who are recommended by the local pastor and conference missions director are then evaluated by the WMM Council. If approved, they receive training, direction, placement and oversight from WMM staff. Crucially, prayer and financial support come from local congregations that choose to partner in their ministry.

For missionaries on the field, WMM continues to provide supervision of ministry activities, a secure and accountable channel for funding and a network for reporting to conferences and local congregations. WMM ever remains the conduit connecting missionaries to their senders, the local churches.

What does the calling to *send* entail? Senders have three essential duties:

- Senders *pray* regularly and fervently, both *for* the

missionaries and *with* the missionaries, making the missionaries' requests their own.

- Senders *give* regularly, generously, sacrificially and joyfully toward the support of missionaries as well as toward special projects.
- Senders *serve* missionaries, whenever and however they can. Senders sign up to receive printed and/or electronic newsletters. Senders connect with missionaries on social media, offering encouraging messages and comments. When missionaries are in the U.S., senders invite them to share their experiences. Senders also offer assistance with lodging, transportation and whatever other practical needs may arise.

Having served with WMM for over 35 years, I can testify to the effectiveness of this partnership. There is no doubt that the commitment of senders has sustained our longevity. Time after time, a card, an email message, a phone call or an unexpected financial gift has encouraged us to keep going through tough and lonely seasons.

Senders and goers are true partners in mission:

- They share in a burden for the lost, and a vision to see the nations worship God.
- They share in sacrifice, giving of their love, their time, and their resources.
- They share in the reward, a commendation from God for using their gifts to serve and honor Him.
- They share in the glory, the coming grand celebration of Christ's eternal, global Kingdom!

As we focus our attention in 2020 on our core value, "We Prayerfully Value Generosity," I pray you will examine how you can better fulfill the Great Commission by praying, giving and serving so that we can reach the whole world. □

When God Doesn't **ANSWER** Like You **EXPECTED**



I've learned an important truth.
When we pray, we leave the final results with the Lord.



BY
**BARBARA
JAMES**

BARBARA JAMES served for many years as director of WIN, the IPHC's World Intercession Network. A graduate of Emmanuel College, she is an author, conference speaker and prayer mobilizer. She and her husband, Bane, lead the JoySprings Foundation, a ministry that hosts retreats for pastors and leaders. Barbara is an IPHC minister, and she is ordained in LifePoint Ministries. She and Bane live in Franklin Springs, Georgia.

1979 was a difficult year for our community. Fires erupted in unusual places—at a home, a church and the college nearby. People were praying about all of this earnestly. A professor found that one of the fires had been started in a wastebasket. Finally a local policeman was able to connect the dots, and the arsonist was captured and prosecuted.

Besides the fires, the electricity in several local poultry houses was disrupted during a storm and thousands of baby chicks died. This created some significant financial concerns. In addition, several people in our community were diagnosed with cancer, and some died.

To make matters worse, my father and my husband's mother both suffered severe heart attacks, but both survived. In November, Bane's mother was brought from the hospital to our home to recover.

During that week I received an unusual phone call. It concerned an acquaintance named Carolyn Maxwell. She was 41. Her recent cancer diagnosis was alarming. Christians from the local church she attended, and other local friends, were praying for her.

It was my heart's desire for God to extend miracle help to Carolyn, and to her husband and teen-age son. Since her condition was complex, I questioned how to pray. In fact, at one point I said to myself, "Lord, it's obvious I don't know how to pray for cancer patients. I feel totally inadequate, so I'll simply leave this to others."

During one of our interdenominational Thursday morning prayer times, Carolyn sent a message through a friend. It said: "I am too weak to pray; I am counting on your prayers for me."

I went home totally shaken. For many weeks following that incident, I prayed faithfully as the Lord directed me. I called forth the healing light and life He was choosing to send.

Then one autumn afternoon the doorbell rang. When I opened the front door, I was surprised to see Chris, Carolyn's son. I invited him to come inside and he began to share his heart. At some point we both knelt to pray together for his mother. While praying for God's healing, the Holy Spirit spoke to my heart: "He is going to need a family!"

Immediately I thought, "This can't be true, Lord! Many weeks ago I was not going to pray for this need because I felt so inadequate, but You gave me the mandate and I have faithfully obeyed. Surely there will be an amazing extension of mercy and Chris will not be faced with this heart-rending need for a family!"

The cool days of November arrived, and I was caring for Bane's mother following her brush with death. It was during this time that a minister's wife called to inform me that Chris's mother was in an Atlanta hospital. My friend said she and her husband were going to Atlanta to visit Carolyn in the hospital and that they felt I should go with them.

I told this friend that I needed to stay at home. I felt somewhat relieved because, as I told my friend, I personally felt that I did not have anything to say to Carolyn. But several more phone calls followed.

Finally I prayed: "I don't know if You are asking me to go to Atlanta, Lord; but if this is Your desire, You know I can only leave Mama James if You provide someone trustworthy to stay with her."

Only minutes passed before the phone rang again. This time it was Bane's older sister. When I shared about my friend's request, she immediately insisted that I should go to the hospital in Atlanta. She offered to come to my house and care for her mother.

During the drive I was lifting my heart in prayer. I wanted to hear from

God. I wanted to know what I was supposed to pray for Carolyn. What was God's purpose for me in all of this?

Once we arrived at the hospital, a nurse told us we would have to wait. After 25 minutes in the waiting room, the Lord whispered: "You will be in Carolyn's room in five minutes." Exactly five minutes later we were allowed to see her!

I was so encouraged by this. I felt it was the Lord's way of assuring me that I was hearing Him correctly. He was

strengthening my confidence.

After simple greetings my minister friend began sharing some scriptures. Suddenly, anointed by the Holy Spirit, I fell to my knees beside the bed and words began to pour forth from my mouth. The declaration began with a promise from God, "Behold, the hour of victory is at hand!"

When we left Carolyn's room, my friends were overjoyed. They expected to see a miraculous recovery. However, my heart felt heavy,

and I could not summon the joy of celebration. The weightiness in my spirit made it plain that more understanding was needed concerning how God's will would unfold.

December came, and it was a difficult month. A local minister died from leukemia. Another dear lady was rushed to a local hospital where she remained for almost a year.

It was during this time that my phone rang one morning. It was Chris Maxwell. He said his mother was not doing well, and he was requesting prayer. My heart was so deeply moved. All through the morning I interceded in the Spirit. What was God's plan?

At some point, the Lord brought the words of Ezekiel 7:6 to my mind: "The end has come! The end has come!" I thought: "Lord, for weeks You told me to pray for healing light and life. I have obeyed You. Surely this is not the

end!" However, two times during that afternoon the Lord gave me a striking one-sentence prayer: "I rest my case in Jesus' Name!"

In intercession we present our case to God as a lawyer before a judge; but the Holy Spirit knows when to instruct us to "rest" our case. The following morning I learned that Carolyn had passed away. Her hour of victory was at hand! She was only 49.

As I pondered this journey the enemy began bombarding me over the next six months with questions such as, "Did you pray enough? Was your faith strong enough?" Over that period of time God pushed back the enemy.

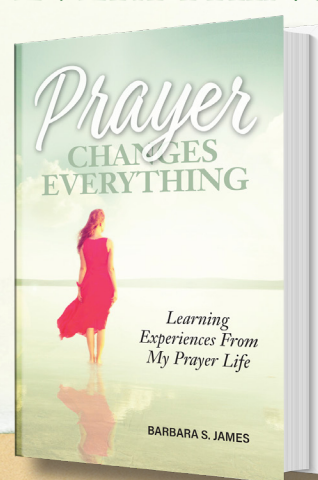
God alone knew the beginning from the end. He alone knows how to make all things work together for good. God stamped an indelible principle on my heart through this experience: "You are responsible for obedience; I, the Lord, am responsible for results!"

God never asks more of us than we are able to give. Our hesitations should always be exchanged for faithful obedience, and we must also understand that the results of our obedience belong only to God. □



"God stamped an indelible principle on my heart through this experience: 'You are responsible for obedience; I, the Lord, am responsible for results!'"

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God Is Pruning His Church—and You—in this Pandemic

Pruning is a painful process. But Jesus said if we want growth we must allow Him to cut some things away.



BY J. LEE
GRADY

J. LEE GRADY is an author, traveling minister and former editor of *Charisma* magazine. Author of several books including *10 Lies the Church Tells Women* and *Set My Heart on Fire*, Lee leads The Mordecai Project—a missionary organization that focuses on bringing the healing of Christ to women who are abused and marginalized. Lee has been ordained in the IPHC since 2000, and he and his wife, Deborah, live in LaGrange, Georgia. You can learn more about his ministry at leegrady.com.

Have you ever imagined that the year 2020 was just a really bad dream? I've had that fantasy many times since the coronavirus pandemic started six months ago. But I always wake up and realize this nightmare is real.

Life hasn't been easy. Some of us got infected with COVID-19, or we know people who were sick or even died. People with loved ones in nursing homes haven't been able to visit in months. Many of us lost jobs, or experienced a serious drop in income. Families have had to deal with closed schools and shuttered businesses.

Meanwhile the U.S. economy shrank 32.9% in the second quarter of 2020—the sharpest economic contraction in modern American history. And no one saw this coming!

The impact the pandemic has had on churches has been devastating. After weeks 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, staff positions have been eliminated, and pastors are wondering if having even 50 percent of their previous members is the new normal.

We've been challenged. We've been hit with overwhelming discouragement. We've been stretched to a breaking point. The reality is that some churches will not survive this crisis.

Yet those of us who love Jesus know we can't despair. The pandemic didn't take Him by surprise. He not only has promised to be with us during our worst trials, but He promises to use this crisis for our good.

When my ministry travel schedule was canceled in mid-March, and I had no idea where I would get my income, the Lord took me to John 15 and underscored these words from verse 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."

Jesus was sharing an uncomfortable truth in this passage. If we want to grow spiritually, and if we want more spiritual fruit, we must submit to the Father's plan, not ours. He has to cut things away so new growth will appear.

He might even need to prune things we cling to. 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 adversity.

British preacher Charles Spurgeon, when preaching about John 15, said: "All fruit-bearing saints must feel the knife."

Ouch! I don't like the knife! Pruning is an ugly, painful and embarrassing experience. If you've ever seen a row of pruned trees, you know what I mean. They look uncomfortably raw and naked. They've been stripped of beauty. All you see is stumps and stubs.

Grapevines that have been pruned are cut back so drastically they look dead. Are you willing to live the pruned life?

"Life prior to this pandemic was too busy and too cluttered. Jesus wants our focus to be on Him."

I'm pondering these three truths as I go through this crisis:

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, are realizing they were pouring tons of financial resources into programs or buildings that had no spiritual

impact. Pruning has revealed what is essential for us to make a powerful, book of Acts-style impact on our communities.

PRUNING BRINGS NEW LIFE AND MORE FRUIT.

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. Right now we are an ugly sight, stripped of our big audiences, our celebrity preachers and our cool worship bands. 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.

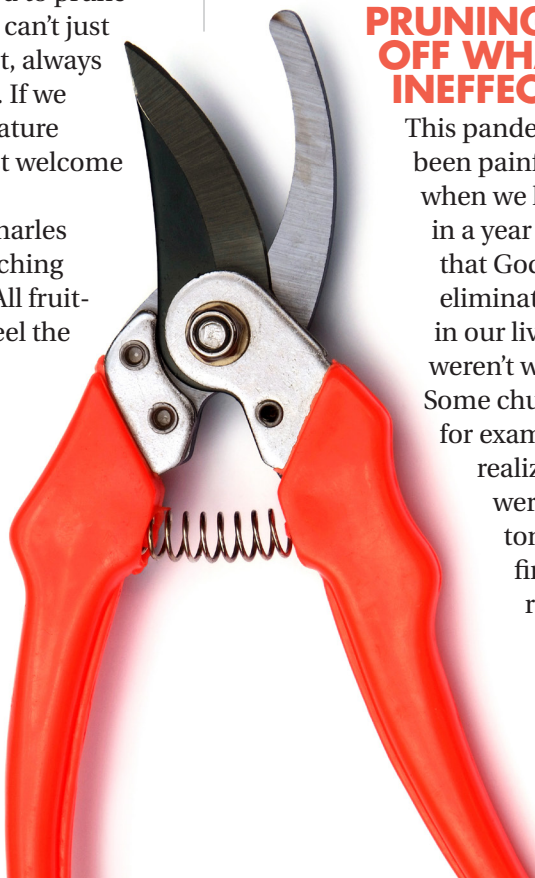
PRUNING DRAWS US CLOSER TO JESUS.

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

We cannot 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 focus to be on Him. The process of pruning cuts away everything else so we can love Him and trust Him fully.

If you are willing to embrace God's knife of pruning, pray with me:

"Lord, I choose to rejoice in the midst of this difficult season. I know You can cause all things to work together for my good. Forgive me for complaining. I welcome Your pruning process in my life. Cut away my unfruitful branches so I can bear much fruit for You. And purify Your church in 2020 so we can welcome a fresh movement of Your Holy Spirit in this new season." □





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