

the **WORD** among us[®]

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Where Is God?

Asking Hard Questions During a Time of Crisis



Thirty years ago, our three-year-old daughter, Christine, was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer in her eyes. Suddenly, a crisis was upon our family. Back then, I was president of *The Word Among Us* magazine. You would think I would have responded with more faith and trust. But I didn't.

I shut down. I took a leave from *The Word Among Us*. I simply could not tell people about God's perfect love and his perfect plan for us as I watched my daughter enduring what seemed like a hundred tests and a thousand injections.

I was completely frustrated with God. I felt that God had abandoned my family and me. I wondered, "How could this happen to this innocent little child of mine? What kind of a God would allow this?" When my wife, Felicia, and I took Christine to the hospital, we saw about one

hundred other young children with all kinds of serious medical conditions. Seeing all these children with so many ailments brought me to tears. We tried to go out of our way to console and encourage some of them and their parents, but what I saw only furthered my negative disposition toward God. I spent the longest six weeks of my life wondering if my daughter would be alive in a year.

Something Broke in Me. From a spiritual perspective, I didn't handle this crisis very well. But God didn't abandon me. A few weeks after Christine began treatments, a group of close friends asked if they could pray with me. I reluctantly agreed. As they began praying, I felt God's love flooding into me. I'll never forget that moment. As we were all praying, my brother told me he had a message that he thought came from God: "Don't you think I knew what I was doing when I asked Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac? Don't you think I know what I am doing with Christine?"

Something broke in me. I prayed, "Lord, as a parent, I want Christine to live. But if you want her, she is yours." Christine lost both of her eyes to cancer, but today she is alive and well and teaching at a local university.

We have all had to persevere through one crisis or another. It isn't easy and it isn't fun. But it is part of living in this fallen world. Sometimes, as I experienced with Christine's cancer, we can only accept a crisis as a mystery—a mystery that God will one day explain to us. Nonetheless, we can always trust that God will come to us with his grace and help as we turn to him in moments of crisis. I know that's what happened to me, and I've seen it happen time and time again in other people's lives.

"Father, Take This Cup." In the previous two articles, we looked at how Jesus prayed before taking on any major activity or making an important decision. Now let's look at how he faced crises in his own life in a similar way.

At the Last Supper, Jesus was clear about what was going to happen to him. He spoke openly about being betrayed, about his disciples scattering, and about Peter's denial. But while Jesus knew that the end was near, his apostles were clueless. Despite the fact that he told them what was about to happen, they didn't understand. In fact, they got into an argument over which of them was the greatest disciple (Luke 22:24). One of them even suggested taking swords along to defend themselves (22:38). Clearly, they had yet to grasp that Jesus was going to his death willingly and humbly.

Contrast the way the disciples approached the coming crisis with the way Jesus approached it. They were in a fog, they were fighting among themselves, and they thought about resorting to violence. Jesus, on the other hand, went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. Speaking honestly about how he was feeling, he asked his Father for a way out. "Take this cup away from me," he prayed. But then, in the next breath, he said, "Not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). He entrusted himself completely to his Father's care.

And what happened? God sent an angel to minister to Jesus. I doubt that this angel removed the distress and anxiety that Jesus was experiencing. Rather, I believe the angel gave him the grace and strength to endure the cross.

Jesus didn't put prayer aside after he left Gethsemane. It was always on his mind. That's why he could urge the women of Jerusalem to pray, just as he himself was praying (Luke 23:28). As he

was being crucified, he prayed, “Father, forgive them” (23:34). Even his very last words were a prayer: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (23:46). He didn’t just pray once and then push through the crisis on his own. He repeatedly turned to his Father for more strength, for more grace, and for more peace. And his Father continued to help him.

Faith in the Age of the Coronavirus. We live in a world that lurches from one crisis to another. Every day, millions upon millions of people are faced with spiritual, physical, financial, and family problems that threaten to overwhelm them.

As I write this article, more than one million people across the world have died due to COVID-19 and an additional thirty million have been diagnosed with the disease. We cannot even begin to measure the toll that all this suffering and loss of life will take on our loved ones, our economy, and institutions both large and small.

COVID-19 is not the first pandemic. The AIDS epidemic killed 36 million people. The flu pandemic of 1968 killed 1 million people. The Asian flu (1956–1958) killed 2 million people. And the flu pandemic of 1918 killed between 20 million and 50 million people. In fact, over the past 150 years, more than 60 million people have died as a result of some public health crisis. And let’s not forget the Black Death, which killed 50 million people in Europe alone in the mid-1300s.

Faced with this pandemic, as well as other similar tragedies in the past, we wonder why. How could this happen? We might even ask, “Where is God? Why does he seem to be hiding from us at a time when we need him most? Why won’t he come and rescue us?”

From our limited human perspective, it can seem that God really has abandoned us. But it simply is not true. God doesn’t cause evil. He would never send a crippling virus to us any more than any of us would want to infect our children with a deadly illness. True, he has allowed evil acts and horrible disasters to come to us, but he never causes them. He never wills them into existence.

God Is Always with Us. The truth is that God can bring good out of any evil. It is vital that we stand firm on this truth and put our hope in it. God loves his creation. He loves every human being. He loves his Church. And he loves you.

How do we know God is with us? Because he always sends his servants to us in times of crisis. He doesn’t send plague and war and pestilence upon us; he sends saints. Think of how he raised up Sts. Damien de Veuster and Marianne Cope to minister to the lepers at Molokai. There’s also St. Teresa of Calcutta, who cared for the poorest of the poor. St. José Brochero nursed the sick through a cholera epidemic in Argentina in 1867. During an outbreak of the plague in 1576, St. Charles Borromeo, the archbishop of Milan, went from house to house in his city ministering to the sick and dying.

Where was God in the midst of these tragedies? He was right there with his suffering people. He was present in great saints like Mother Teresa and Damien and Charles Borromeo. And he was present in every act of kindness, compassion, and prayer performed by any of his people.

Even today, God still raises up saints to bring his love and grace when catastrophes like the coronavirus strike. We may not know their names or their stories, but God knows. We may not

know how much they are sacrificing in order to minister to people, but God knows. And he blesses them immensely for it.

In the midst of all the suffering this pandemic has caused, our heavenly Father is still telling us, “I am here. I am with you.” He is telling us, “If you want to find me, look to the love your family and friends are offering you. Look to all the people who are bringing food, medicine, prayer, and compassion to the victims of this illness.” And he is telling us, “Turn to me and let me work through you for the sake of the people around you.”

May we, the Church, commit ourselves to loving as Jesus loves.