

BONUS SESSION: THE CHALLENGE OF CRISIS

This session explores how we can respond to an ongoing crisis by meeting practical need while always being ready to demonstrate and proclaim gospel hope, even in the face of the most difficult, chaotic and confusing of life events.

SESSION IN A SENTENCE

Evangelism shouldn't be put on hold when a crisis hits. Rather we must continue to be ambassadors of peace into the world, keeping the hope of the gospel central in word and deed by taking account of and meeting the practical needs that arise and continuing to proclaim the good news in every circumstance.

BACKGROUND TO SESSION

In the middle of the third century the Roman empire was ravaged with the plague of Cyprian. As thousands died daily, people began to act cruelly, without compassion even towards their own family. Fear is a potent force. As a survival drive takes hold, fear can cause people to act in terrible ways that they never would under 'normal' circumstances.

During this troubling time, one group of people were beginning to stand out as being different to the rest of the panic-stricken population - the Christians. This relatively new sect of religious believers met the horror of the plague with a different spirit to those around them. They acted in love and hope, rather than fear and despair. Christians cared for the sick and even took responsibility for burying the dead, all while assuring those affected by this confusing and terrifying disease of the eternal hope found through faith in Jesus Christ. While the plague of Cyprian almost destroyed the mighty Roman

empire, the response of faithful Christians meant that these otherwise horrific events significantly *helped* the spread of Christianity across Europe.

When the black death hit the continent in the fourteenth century, its effects were even more deadly. Catherine of Siena followed in the footsteps of those early Christians. She offered practical compassion and the hope of the gospel as the world around her fell apart with seemingly little hope. Catherine's own sufferings were laid aside for the benefit of others, achieved by the empowerment and new perspective of complete submission to the will of God, of which she would write:

'Your eyes will not see anything which seems impossible, or the sufferings which may follow, but only the light of faith, and in that light everything is possible; and remember God never lays greater burdens on us than we can bear.'

When Martin Luther was faced with the deadly bubonic plague in his little town of Wittenberg, his response was not to run away as many clergy did, but to come into *closer* proximity with those in need. For Luther, it was not simply a case of 'what would Jesus do?' but, what would we do if it was Jesus in need?

'Everyone would want to be bold and fearless; nobody would flee but everyone would come running. And yet they don't hear what Christ himself says, "As you did to one of the least, you did it to me". When he speaks of the greatest commandment he says, "The other commandment is like unto it, you shall love your neighbour as yourself." There you hear that the command to love your neighbour is equal to the greatest commandment to love God, and that what you do or fail to do for your neighbour means doing the same to God. If you wish to serve Christ and to wait on him, very well, you have your sick neighbour close at hand. Go to him and serve him, and you will surely find Christ in him.'

Pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer left his homeland of Germany in June 1939 on the urging of friends to escape the dangers of the Nazi party, only to return a month later, realising quickly that he had made a mistake in walking away from his nation in its time of need.

• 'I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.'

Bonhoeffer knew that his Christian witness and integrity would be compromised after the crisis if he did not stand firm *in* the crisis. It was a decision that would cost him his life and yet the legacy of that life lives on today. Bonhoeffer holds up to historical scrutiny as a man who lived out complete trust in the hope that he preached, to count the cost of following Jesus at all times, especially when crisis arrives.

We can see Christians throughout history following the lead of their saviour, who when the greatest crisis in all of history hit – the rebellion of humanity against our perfect God – ran headfirst into the chaos of sin and death to overcome and bring the hope of peace to all who trust in his truth (John 16:33). And Jesus runs with us into the crises of today as we go in his power to offer the everlasting peace of his gospel in word and deed (Matthew 28:18-20).

SESSION GUIDE

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CATCH UP (10–20 MINS)

Take the time to catch up with one another, sharing stories, encouragements, feedback on opportunities and anything else that would be good for the group to hear about.

PRAYER

Pray to commit the time to the Lord and over any situations, positive or challenging, arising from the catch-up time. We will have time for praying into specific crisis later in the session, but feel free to include prayer for that now too if relevant.

TEACHING (40–50 MINS)

Work through the following teaching material in your own way, either by reading it word for word, or by reworking it into your own presentation.

• 'On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.'

• ACTS 8:1-4

Crisis can impact us at any time. Be it natural disaster, disease, financial collapse, personal tragedy, the list of potential challenges goes on. When crisis hits, people often start to panic, fear takes hold and hope can fade quickly. If we believe that the gospel is the source of true hope and peace, then in times of crisis the question for us is how to respond in a way that actually leverages the circumstance for gospel opportunity?

For some the idea of leveraging a crisis might seem distasteful or inappropriate. We're aware of corporations and powerbroker's who at times exploit crisis and tragedy for profit or personal gain, a practice that is usually condemned. But as the church we must remember what gain it is that we are seeking – not personal, but kingdom. The glory of God is our objective.

When God is glorified in our lives and actions, the world moves closer to the full reality of peace that we were created for and will one day know perfectly (Revelation 21:1-7). Rather than being opportunistic for our own gain, we seek opportunity for the gain of God's kingdom, the very kingdom in which the poor and those in mourning will be blessed and comforted. Word and deed evangelism is actually the *most appropriate* response to any crisis. It is the announcement and demonstration that there is hope in the present crisis you face and hope of rescue from the ultimate crisis of humanity – our rebellion against the perfect and loving creator God.

When the great persecution that Luke describes in Acts 8 broke out in Jerusalem, the early church found itself scattered and in crisis. Rather than wallowing in self-pity or retreating into hiding, Luke tells us that they proclaimed the gospel wherever they went. For all the talk in the book of Acts about the evangelistic activity of the apostles and other leaders like Stephen and Philip, it is this remarkable little detail that perhaps reveals best the response of the church as a whole to crisis in life. Paul's charge to Timothy rings in our ears here too, that both in season and out of season the church must prioritise the proclamation of the gospel as a demonstration of our trust in its essential truth, so that the world can know its hope for themselves (2 Timothy 4:1-2).

There have been numerous times throughout history where the Christian response to crisis has directly affected how the world perceives faith in Jesus Christ. Through plague, famine, persecution, war and economic crisis, history paints a clear picture. Where Christians have been seen to act selflessly and in line with the eternal hope of heaven and present power of the spirit, Christianity has spread rapidly and the church has grown.

To provide genuine gospel hope in times of crisis we need to be intentional in our character and our activity. Here are five practical things that we can do that build on the five characteristics of the evangelist that we are always working on in Advance. These will help us be loving and effective as we meet the challenge of evangelising during crisis:

1. PRAYERFULLY COMMIT (PRAYERFUL EVANGELISTS)

To be a prayerful evangelist is to know that God is trustworthy (Psalm 100:5), hears our prayers (1 Peter 3:12), is not indifferent to our suffering (2 Corinthians 1:3-4) and empowers us to do good works in this world for his glory (Ephesians 2:10). Our evangelism is always to be done in his power through prayerful lives.

And so we **speak to God**. We acknowledge his identity, worshipping him for who he is, thanking him in all things and growing in confidence that he is good at all times. We confess our failure and fear, receiving his forgiveness and his grace to move beyond our frailty. We ask him to bring

peace to the chaos of the crisis, to minister to those in need and to use us for his glory.

We **listen to God**, taking the time to rely on his wisdom, leading and inspiration as we approach any challenging and complex circumstances in this world and bring his gospel to bear upon them.

We **move with God** prayerfully into the world as his ambassadors, with prayer as the foundation of our activity as we go and as an offering of activity to those we engage with.

Question: What crises are you currently aware of? How can we best pray FOR the situation, and WITH those affected? We will pray for these situations in the prayer time later in the session.

2. PROVIDE HELP (COMMITTED EVANGELISTS)

Even those who don't believe in God can recognize the offer of prayer as an act of love and kindness. But it is likely to ring hollow if divorced from an offer to meet any practical need they have. During and after crisis people often need practical help. While our evangelism relies on a verbal communication of the gospel, our broader witness relies on living transformed lives and expressing the love and compassion of Christ to those around us. This likely needs to be intensely practical, undertaken as if we were meeting the need of Jesus himself (Matthew 25:40). Do people need groceries or supplies from the pharmacy? Do they need their house cleaning, garden kept or meals prepared? Would they appreciate some company and conversation, or perhaps they need a ride somewhere?

We should be careful in assuming that we always know what people's practical need may be. As we listen to God in prayer for instruction and guidance, so we must also listen to those in crisis for clarity on how we can best support them practically.

Wonderfully, the very act of listening to people before we steam in with gospel truth can often be transformational for how future dialogue about the gospel itself goes. As we commit to listening and commit to meeting the needs that arise, opportunities to explain the Jesus story

will often follow or be more naturally made with further commitment on our part.

We will discuss how we can get practical through specific situations in the application section of this session.

3. PROCLAIM HOPE (BIBLE TEACHING EVANGELISTS)

In all of our practical service to those in need we will be looking for opportunities to give explanation to the gospel story and its reality. Meeting practical need is an important part of bringing healing and help to a crisis situation, but the powerful truth of the gospel offers healing and hope on the deepest level of human need which is not ultimately physical but spiritual (Matthew 10:28; Matthew 16:26).

There are likely to be questions and possibly objections to what we share in light of the crisis the community or individual is experiencing. Therefore, it's important that we are thoughtful, humble and compassionate in how we approach our proclamation and present the truth of the Bible. This doesn't mean watering down the gospel, but it does mean being well prepared to meaningfully engage with the real-world concerns and questions those we dialogue with have. We do this in the confidence that they'll rightly hear and understand the gospel as genuine hope. Many hearts and ears will open during crisis. We must be ready to bring clarity in a time of confusion, to help people realise that even while the sinking sands of crisis seemingly surround, there is a firm foundation upon which we can build our lives that will see us through whatever storms may come (Matthew 7:24-27).

Question: What dialogical challenges may we need to be prepared for as we speak of Jesus in a time of crisis?

4. PRIORITISE COMMUNITY (ACCOUNTABLE EVANGELISTS)

Through Advance we get used to checking in with each other, asking pointed questions and journeying life intentionally together. In times of crisis we can be reminded how important it is that we don't become siloed into our own little sub-communities that ignore the needs of others around us. Let's hold each other to account for

prioritising the needs of others as a core part of our Christian lives. And by extension, our evangelism, never forgetting that the root of our evangelism is found in the dual command of loving God and loving our neighbour.

Accountability shouldn't just be about checking in on our success or failure in temptation, or our devotional lives. It should also give space to reflect and respond to the challenge of justice, care for those in need, our approach to the environment and other issues that directly affect the way we love our neighbour daily.

During the application and accountability time we will talk through the challenge it presents and hold each other to account for the actions we decide upon, as well as filling out the usual questionnaire.

5. PRACTICALLY ENCOURAGE (INSPIRATIONAL EVANGELISTS)

Our job as evangelists is to continually stir the church to be witnesses of the good news. During a time of crisis we should take the initiative to continually reaffirm the gospel to the church so that our brothers and sisters in Christ remember that the hope of the world is actually the gospel lived and proclaimed by God's people. Some in the church may even find it inappropriately opportunistic to proclaim the gospel in times of crisis as we've already reflected on. Our job is to realign this thinking where necessary and to encourage the church to prayerfully, practically and proclamationally bring the peace of the gospel to a chaotic world at all times.

Question: How can we stir the church to prioritise evangelism in times of crisis?

Satan loves to grip us with fear and make us ineffective, blunting the people of God in their purpose as hope carriers to the world. Martin Luther wrote his famous letter to Johann Hess about whether Christians are allowed to flee crisis (here, the plague) or are duty bound to stay and help those in need. In this letter he offered this prayer of rebuke against Satan's schemes and a powerful assurance of God's supremacy:

- 'Get away, you devil, with your terrors! Just
- because you hate it, I'll spite you by going
- the more quickly to help my sick neighbour.

• I'll pay no attention to you... If Christ shed his
• blood for me and died for me, why should I
• not expose myself to some small dangers for
• his sake and disregard this feeble plague?
• If you can terrorise, Christ can strengthen
• me. If you can kill, Christ can give life. If you
• have poison in your fangs, Christ has far
• greater medicine. Should not my dear Christ,
• with his precepts, his kindness, and all his
• encouragement, be more important in my
• spirit than you, roguish devil, with your false
• terrors in my weak flesh? God forbid! Get
• away, devil. Here is Christ and here am I, his
• servant in this work. Let Christ prevail! Amen.'

Fear and chaos hasn't won. Let's go and tell the world the name of the one who has.

DISCUSSION (EXTRA TIME IF REQUIRED/ABLE)

The main session has already included various points of discussion which replace this regular section. However, if time allows and the group would like to discuss further questions around the topic of crisis evangelism, the following questions may be useful. As ever, you can split into smaller discussion groups or work as one big group to explore the following questions and/or the discussion quote:

- Where does our responsibility start and end in meeting people's need in a crisis?
- How do you combat your own fear in times of crisis?
- Can you think of an example of how your evangelism became *more* effective during a crisis?

• 'You must live with people to know their problems, and live with God in order to solve them.'

• **P.T. FORSYTH**

PRAYER (10–15 MINS)

Lord, help us in times of crisis. Help us to be aware of the need, to be compassionate in our response and above all to trust you in the uncertainty. Forgive us when we fail to trust you and help us to overcome fear that would hold

us back from living as you would have us live in these times. Empower us to be a people of hope and peace to a world in chaos. Would we be faithful to proclaiming your gospel in all situations and intentional about how we practically meet the needs that arise in times of trouble. Thank you that you are good in all situations. May your goodness be revealed in our evangelism and witness.

Take some time to pray into the specific areas of crisis that were raised earlier in the session.

APPLICATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY (15 MINS)

Some crisis plays out on a grand scale such as a natural disaster or pandemic. Others play out in individual lives and family circumstances, and yet for those experiencing them, they are no less difficult. Take the time to think about what is happening globally, locally, and individually in the world around you and to think about how you can apply the five crisis evangelism actions from the session to these situations. Once you have identified some crises, and how you can offer the hope of the gospel in and through them, hold each other to account for what you will do in the coming weeks to action this as part of the accountability time.

Fill in accountability forms, feedback in pairs or smaller groups and pray for each other.