

Outrageous Fortune

Study Guide

Designed for Groups of Six or More
Six Sessions with Questions and Information for Guided Discussions

2021

Introduction to Outrageous Fortune

What follows is a collection of meditations, written during five months of the Covid---19 pandemic. I have not ordered them by theme, rather I have simply let them stand in the sequence in which they were written to my congregation. The dates and scriptures are all present on the pages of my musings. I desire the reader to judge for themselves where my direction, and my interests, were taken me along this path of spiritual healing and hardship. But only in the hope that all of us are on a similar path throughout this tragedy. I began writing on March 17th and ended on July 17th of 2020.

At the beginning of this pandemic, I decided to take up my pen to acknowledge my own experience of this invisible enemy into my life. I wrote at least three meditations a week, hoping to expel the heartache and demons that processed me during this time. I also desired to write about the grace that empowered me to continue my love for congregation and God. By doing so my interest was to provide hope to those that read them. My hope is still the same. I wish for the reader to take their fears, pain, love and grace into these meditations, to judge whether they have importance for your spiritual journey. I wish for nothing else.

I do want to mention to the reader before entering the diversity of these fifty meditations, that I have allowed my readings of philosophers, sociologists, theologians and spiritual teachers during this pandemic, to intrude upon the conversation which I have had with my congregation. They are passed unto all readers as a way of providing context for my thoughts, but hopefully the thoughts of all that are still in the fateful misfortunes of this pandemic.

My main source of inspiration has been the Psalms and the New Testament. But I have taken great pleasure in using the works of Shakespeare, Eugene Peterson, Henri J. M. Nouwen, Kierkegaard, Zygmunt Baumann, Czeslaw Milosz, T.S. Elliot, Robert Frost, Sophocles and many others. One of the joys, during this pandemic, has been the time to read new and revisited works which provide a useful stimulus for my thoughts about this time.

These meditations have been a delight to write, providing a cleansing of my mind and a deepening of my understanding of the fragileness of life. This **Outrageous Fortune** we are living in is trying to define us, but I have noticed that we are trying to fight back against the tide of this erosion. Our spiritual character drives us to resist defeat. Instead, it seeks to keep alive the attributes of mercy, grace and love. We are fighting to “Be our brother’s keeper.”

Albert Camus, in 1947, completed his celebrated work, “The Plague.” It was written during the end of World War II, in which the fascists agenda fell upon Europe like a plague. Camus used the story as a metaphor for this horrendous catastrophe, but also as a metaphor for understanding the world we all live in. In the story, the plague acts as the symbol for what we all live through---everyday life. The plague reveals and intensifies the experience of hopelessness for the people in Oran, where he set to

terrifying reality of the plague. But the truth is the plague is always with us, even though we fight against it every day. That is the trouble, the danger and fear we all experience in life, all the time, needs attention, it cannot be ignored.

Dr. Rieux, the main character of the novel, who fights against the plague, sees the fighting of the plague as necessary. According to Dr. Rieux, "Fighting a plague is--- common decency." His point is well taken. Life demands a responsibility to resist, fight and engage those things that try to defeat us and others. It is a matter of caring. Compassion is the only way to defeat the effects of the plague. It is not enough to shake your fist in anger at this horrible force, you must also reach your hand to all those shaken by the plague. It is equally a means of shaking your fist at that which is inevitable.

I offer this little introduction to say that even when this virus seems to be under control, it does not mean that the offerings in this book have no value. In fact, you might say they have more. The themes expressed in this book must be cultivated, so when trouble comes into our life, we are prepared. But prepared for what? According to our spiritual masters, I believe they would say, "We must be prepared to live through the trouble of life? The only way to do that is to imagine Jesus' walking through them, before you begin your spiritual adventure walking into the wounds and pains of life.

You will discover six themes flowing through these meditations, in which I have attached various chapters to each theme. These six themes are:

Fear and Anger
Compassion and Comfort
Community
Isolation
Hope and Faith
Responsibility

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Preparation for Study

- 1, Participants and Leader should read all the meditations before they begin the class
2. A leader should be chosen to guide the group discussion. If the leader is a clergy person, they should use every opportunity to advertise the class. If leader is not a clergy person, try to get the information about the class to the newsletter editor and to anyone that provides announcements in the service. Don't make things, too, complicated or elaborate. Use your normal channels of advertising.

The leader should not be concerned to provide answers to questions, in fact should simply facilitate the group into a discussion in which the leader becomes a part of.

3. Find a room or a patio that could be used during Covid. But there is always the opportunity to use zoom. The number of people should be sparse, during this season of Covid. Masks should always be in use when meeting together, until CDC Guidelines lift the restriction. But as always, be cautious and responsible.
4. It is important that each participant use these meditations as devotions for each day. This will ensure your ability to dig into each of these categories, chasing each theme to find out its importance in your life.

Fear

(Chapters, 1, 4, 14, 36)

1. In the first chapter entitled, "Live Your Fear", both Henri J.M. Nouwen and Psalm 13:1-4, direct our attention on how to dive into our fears, instead of, backing up, away from the fear that is front us. Nouwen points, beware not to think your wounds, but live your wounds through. What do you think he means, and what does it take to do this? What do we gain? (pg.1)
2. What is the difference between giving into fear and letting fear go? What do we get for doing this? How do we live into fear? (pg.2)
3. In the Pilgrim Psalm 121, there is a habit mentioned that we all engage. When we see a mountain range our eyes turn to it. There is no doubt that our eyes control much what we see, and come to know. Besides the fear of going over the mountain, what else do they see and imagine? (pg. 4-5)
4. Fears are attached, not only to death experiences, but also to guilt being attached to us, our whole life. The Psalmist who is struggling to overcome fear and anger, has now found his peace. He proclaims that he is free as a bird, He has found the secret. (pg. 14)
 1. What provides the feeling of being free as a bird?
 2. How does this feeling, reduce the power of fear?
5. Part of our fears is that we are afraid of the future. It is not uncommon for the notices of doom to radiate through our televisions. Then they take us on a circus ride, called "Fear." For us to live our fears we must try and stay as close as possible, to the one who provides us strength. Other than Jesus, who is your partner of strength? (pg.36)
6. Love has the capacity to take the sting out of fear, bringing under the banner of the love of God. Love is not a desperate act, it is an act of devotion, towards the person you would do anything for. Love has a way of melting the fear, because an object of devotion becomes more important. What is meant by "love casting away sin?" (pg. 36)

Comfort and Compassion
(1,2,22,34,38,46,58,79,89,99)

1. How do we carry, each other's burden, without falling into the trap of exceeding our capacity to be useful for those in pain? (pg. 22)
2. In the story of the "Wounded Healer", what is the hope of the healer? Why is it important that he bind his own wounds? (pg.22-23)
3. Compassion begins by knowing what we need. Only when we have some understanding of our need, can we embrace others. What is it that you need, in order to help others? (pg. 22)
4. In the second paragraph on page thirty-four, I write, "In the end, peace is not the absence of pain and frustration. In fact, it is frustration and pain that drive us to seek a way to find the meaning of peace." Do you think this leads us in the right direction? Or is this wrong-headed? (pg.34)
5. Many interpret Ecclesiastes as a cynical look at life and the world. I have a different perspective on the writer's purpose. I see this book addressing the reality of the suffering in the world, and addressing the problem, while offering sympathy. To offer the reader a look at the reality of the world, is a way of trying to embrace the reader who lives in the ephemeral world. In other words, don't get caught up with worldly things, they lead to "nothingness." Do you see the writer trying to bring sympathy to the reader, or do you see his message only as cynical? (pg.38)
6. Frederick Buechner, retells the story of teaching King Lear, to high school students that don't seem to have any interest. For the discussion, Buechner quotes the following line from Lear on top of the Hearth in a storm, "Poor naked wretches that bide the pelting of this pitiless storm." Most of the class was bored, except for one young girl, a cheerleader. She saw in Lear a softening of the heart. She recognized that he was becoming more compassionate, as he continued to suffer. Do you agree with the statement, "In this moment, this young girl and Lear becoming compatriots of compassion? (pg. 46)

Community

(16,26,48)

1. Community life is enjoying the many kinds of experiences in life. One thing that brings community together is to “really laugh.” Laughing brings people together, without to injury of inflicting pain on others through criticism. Laughing opens us the need to embrace one another. With laughter it makes it easier to jump into a world of stress and chaos. How does laughter affect you and your relationships with others? (pg.16)
2. Jesus demonstrated the art of community by telling parables and by making fun about the foolishness of life. I enjoy the parable of the “Rich Fool” because it makes me life. Think about it. A man makes all kinds of many, then he basically buries it for himself. But soon as he feels secure, he dies. The games we play. I believe that Jesus must have had a good laugh on that one. His story creates community. The disciples laughing and talking about the silliness of some people, must have created a sense of community. Laugh until you change. Laugh at yourself, laugh at others and laugh at God. This expression brings us together. Do you think laughter creates community? What makes you laugh? (pg. 16)
3. Community is a word we feel. We don’t somehow dissect it, by sociological methodology, instead we “feel” its power, more than use it. To be a community is to initiate love and to be responsible to that which you love. As a member of the church community is to be responsible to each other and to God. How important is this during our time of Covid-19? How important is community at any time? What are your favorite things to do to create community? (pg. 26)
4. Part of the isolation we experience, is that we have taken up new habits. I have taken to watching birds in my yard and cats climbing fences. The trick is to take those experiences and habits and turn them into tools for building community. Isolation is not antithetical to community. It is merely the classroom for further exploration. After this exploration, we take it out to our friends and to others, and share the solitude that we have experienced. You might even take a walk with God, and find a community with God. As God passes through the flowers, disturbs the trees, and leaves the footprints of an endearing heart on the grass where God walked, press your lips to sing praises. How does solitude help to create community, and further your spiritual life? (pg. 49)

Isolation

(71.81,95)

1. "When time slips away for us, or even if we feel it does, we are struck with an uncomfortable awareness of loss." In the meditation entitled, "And there will be time," connects the loss of time and our experience of its heaviness. Have you ever made this connection between loss and time? If not, how would you express your feelings about it! Define a time you experienced loss. How did it affect you? How does time work in your life? (pg. 71)
2. Robert Frost writes, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." Frost is trying to portray something deep inside us. But it is complex. He confesses he and us do not like walls. We resist them. But at the same time, we use them as a means of protection. Frost acknowledges this paradox when he writes at the end of the poem, "Good walls, make good neighbors. During this time of Covid and when you are filled with dread, what do you tend to do? (pg. 81)
3. Bonhoeffer writes, "Learn to be alone, before learning to live with others." Self-imposed isolation can sometimes be a good thing. It prepares you. But there are other times when isolation is dangerous to our spirits. When is it necessary to dive into the darkness, and when is it time to break free from the affects of isolation? (pg. 95)

Hope and Faith

(28,30,32,50, 77,97)

1. In the story of Abraham and Isaac, Abraham had a challenge before him. It was an enormous challenge, to the heart and mind. His heart is broken because he was asked by God to sacrifice his son. He was powerless. But unless he turned that powerless into a new reality. That reality is bathed in hope and faith. Abraham's weakness before this test comes with an incipient faith, that is ready to be put into action. How is faith unlocked in you, in times of bitter crisis? (pg. 28)
2. There is a mystery that surrounds the activation of faith. We only learn about the power of faith, as we develop a knowledge of powerless. J.M.Nouwen, says, "Your willingness to let go of your desire to control your life, reveals a certain trust." Is this the way faith works in you? Tell of your experience of faith. (pg. 30)
3. Believing in God's future, is believing in everyone's future. This is our hope as well. We just need to put our faith in action, for it to translate into a visible reality before us. How do you put faith in action, creating a possibility of God peaking into our world? How do faith and hope work together to complete our spiritual desire, that God will bring all things together? (pg. 32)
4. The story of the "Woman and the Hemorrhage," reveals to the reader a desperate and very disheartened woman. When she heard of Jesus, coming into town. She "hoped against hope," that Jesus might be able to heal her twelve-year illness, that has left her weak and alone. After Jesus healed her, Jesus said to her, "Your faith has made you well." Read the story and explore what faith was to this woman? (pg. 32)

Responsibility

(6,44,54,60,66,87)

1. No doubt, that when crisis comes, there are people that need to stand up and be responsible for the community. Responsibility takes a courageous move toward transparency. When Cain said to God, "Am I my brothers' keeper," the deflection of guilt and responsibility is whisked away, because Cain was a coward. Jacques Derrida, French philosopher, says against this backdrop of cowardly actions, "Religion is responsibility, or it is nothing at all." Please respond to that statement. (pg. 6)
2. Philippians is a deeply spiritual letter. It is filled with gratitude, tenderness and a thanksgiving to them for their responsibility in taking care of each other, and him. The church saw the need and transformed their desire into action, for the sake of Paul and the whole church. With no money they found a way to visit Paul in prison. So, Paul encourages them to keep focused on the goal. He wants them to keep their vision of life turned forward. Don't miss what God is doing in you and around you. How do you see responsibility growing in your life? (pg.44)
3. Maturity is God's answer to false religiosity, that cracks when suffering becomes a reality. Spiritual maturity and responsibility, like a tapestry. Woven, with the right colors, produces a vibrant and beautiful piece of art. Our life can become a piece of art if responsibility never falls out of style. Take time to discuss the connection of spiritual maturity and responsibility? (pg. 54)
4. At the end of the 1800's America was blessed to have a French Historian, Alexis de Tocqueville, wrote a book entitled, "Democracy in America." It has many jewels of insights. One insight that permeates the book is responsibility. He writes, "Each citizen is engaged in the contemplation of a very puny object, namely himself." His point is that we tend to be individualistic at heart, and forget that we are responsible for the larger community. Do you think that a strong individualism in a community, hinders responsibility? Discuss. (pg. 60)