

# LIFE AFTER THE PANDEMIC:

**What May Happen and How to Prepare Biblically**

***DR. JIM DENISON***

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COVID-19 is the greatest medical threat of my lifetime.

Not since the [1918 flu pandemic](#) have we seen an outbreak of this global scope and scale.

Although research shows promise, there still are no vaccines or proven medical treatments available beyond managing symptoms. The pandemic has disrupted every dimension of our lives, from closing schools and businesses to threatening us with hospitalization and even death isolated from our loved ones.

But despite the severity of this tragedy, we know that it will not last forever.

Vaccines and medical treatments will become available. "Leveling the curve" will give our overworked healthcare systems the resources they need. And our economy will begin to recover.

As a result, we are starting to ask:

- What will life be like when the pandemic recedes?
- Will we return to "normal"?
- What will "normal" look like?
- What is the pathway forward?

And what does God's word say to us in days of uncertainty unlike any in living memory?

## Our medical future

In addition to my work with Denison Ministries, I serve as Resident Scholar for Ethics with Baylor Scott & White Health, the largest non-profit hospital system in Texas. In this context, I have been closely following the medical dimensions of the coronavirus pandemic and their impact on our system from an ethical perspective.

SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19) is [predicted to take one of four paths](#) in the future:

1. A singular event that largely disappears and no longer poses a significant threat. However, while this is what happened with the SARS outbreak of 2002–2003, SARS-CoV-2 appears to be much more contagious and difficult to control.
2. A seasonal outbreak which slows in the summer and recurs in the winter. This is our experience with seasonal influenza. It is too soon to know if SARS-CoV-2 will follow this pattern.
3. A second wave after social distancing restrictions are relaxed, causing a resurgence of infections and disease. Many are concerned about this threat in China and South Korea today.
4. A persistent threat until effective treatments and a vaccine are developed.

### What we know and need to know

To gain a better view of the future, scientists need to learn more about the virus and the way it spreads and infects.

They know that it is spread primarily by symptomatic people, but they have also determined that it can be spread by those who have minor symptoms or none at all. Studies show that between 6 and 13 percent of cases can be attributed to presymptomatic or asymptomatic transmission. This factor makes it much more difficult to isolate those who are infectious but asymptomatic.

The virus is known to be roughly twice as contagious as seasonal influenza. It can be spread through contaminated surfaces; this is more common in health care facilities and cruise ships, which have more frequently touched surfaces.

Its mortality rate will probably be determined to be near or just below 1 percent, but it is over 20 percent for those above the age of eighty. Its mortality is higher for those with chronic lung disease, serious heart disease, immunocompromised status (including HIV), chronic kidney disease, liver disease, diabetes mellitus (type 1 or 2), and severe obesity. Those living in congregate settings (e.g., nursing homes and prisons) are at higher risk as well.

Scientists are still debating the degree to which patients who recover from COVID-19 retain an acquired immunity to it. For instance, [South Korea recently reported that 163 people initially cleared of coronavirus had tested positive again](#), but officials say the most likely explanation is that the tests are picking up remnants of the virus. Faulty tests may also play a role.

At present, non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) such as stay-at-home restrictions and handwashing are our most effective way to stop the spread of the disease.

## **Trials and tests**

Trials are ongoing to develop treatments that would lessen the severity of COVID-19 symptoms. Such treatments are vital to reopening the economy, as they could lessen the fear of severe symptoms or death upon infection.

Trials are also underway to develop prophylactic treatments to prevent or lessen infections for those known to have contacted COVID-19 patients. Such treatments (akin to Tamiflu for influenza) would be extremely helpful in lessening the spread and severity of the disease.

Point-of-care tests are starting to be used, providing results within two to twenty minutes. Their widespread use will be vital to identifying those who are infected.

[Antibody tests](#) could help us know which individuals have developed at least some immunity to the disease, but many of the tests currently available can provide inaccurate results. Once the process is refined, these individuals could be employed on the frontlines of healthcare provision and other essential functions.

Testing is critical to the future, for at least three reasons:

1. We need to identify those who have not been infected, so they can be protected.
2. We need to find those who have been infected and recovered so (on the assumption that they have acquired some level of immunity) they can return to work with less fear of future infection.
3. We need to find those who are currently infected so they can be isolated and treated as effectively as possible.

The ultimate medical answer is to develop prophylactic treatments to lessen the severity of the disease for those exposed to it, treatments to lessen the symptoms of those infected, and, ultimately, a vaccine to protect the population from future infections.

## **Reopening the economy**

President Trump said this week [the country will dramatically expand testing](#) in May, and the White House issued [new guidelines](#) for reopening the battered economy.

“We are releasing additional guidance on testing to inform the states as they develop their plans for phased and very safe reopening,” he said. “Our blueprint describes how states should unlock their full capacity and expand the number of testing platforms established, monitoring systems to detect local outbreaks, and conduct contact tracing.”

Much also will depend on the availability of new medical therapies for COVID-19 and a vaccine to prevent the disease. Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's leading infectious disease expert, said [a vaccine for the disease could be widely available by January](#). He also has said that [he expects a "real degree of normality" by the November elections](#) as a result of present strategies and future resources.

According to a recent [American Enterprise Institute report](#), [four benchmarks must be met before a state or area can be reopened](#).

1. Hospitals in the state are able to safely treat all patients requiring hospitalization without resorting to crisis standards of care.
2. A state is able to test everyone who has symptoms.
3. The state is able to conduct monitoring of confirmed cases and contacts.
4. There is a sustained reduction in cases for at least fourteen days.

The National Coronavirus Recovery Commission has announced [a five-phase plan to return the American economy and public health "back to normal."](#)

1. Return to a more normal level of business activity at the regional level based on scientific data.
2. Slow the spread of the virus while expanding testing, reporting, and contact tracing (identifying those who have been in contact with COVID-19 patients).
3. Continue to build the science.
4. Establish US leadership in leading the free world in economic recovery.
5. Reduce future risks of pandemics.

## **Our financial future**

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) warns that [the financial consequences of the pandemic will be the worst economic fallout since the Great Depression](#). It expects the global economy to shrink 3 percent this year, far worse than its 0.1 percent dip in the Great Recession year of 2009. However, it expects a rebound in 2021 with 5.8 percent growth.

Writing for *Foreign Policy*, Columbia University historian Adam Tooze claims that ["the normal economy is never coming back."](#) He reports that "Western economies face a far deeper and more savage economic shock than they have ever previously experienced."

This is because the COVID-19 lockdown "directly affects services—retail, real estate, education, entertainment, restaurants—where 80 percent of Americans work today. Thus the result is immediate and catastrophic." He believes that many of the stores that shut down in early March will not reopen, costing millions of Americans their jobs.

Responses by federal authorities in the US have prevented an immediate global financial meltdown, but the longer we sustain the lockdown, "the deeper the scarring to the economy and the slower the recovery." After the lockdown, according to Tooze, there may be some rebound in expenditure, but he questions whether it will be sustained.

Nobel laureate Robert J. Shiller is more optimistic, [viewing the present stock market as "a reasonable long-term investment, attractive at a time when interest rates are low."](#) His advice: "I'd try not to worry too much about the stock market. Most likely, it will do moderately well in the coming years, even if there is a risk that you will need to be very patient."

[Global supply chains will likely be remapped as a result of disruptions in China](#) when the pandemic began there. One finance professor says "China will be a loser in that respect," but "it will be a good thing for the world economy."

## Our cultural future

COVID-19 has forced the closure of schools nationwide, in some cases for the rest of the school year. Many families do not have broadband internet access or computers or tablets, making homeschooling difficult. Assuming that social distancing restrictions are loosened by the summer, [some school districts could decide to make up lost time by requiring classes during the summer break](#).

College enrollments may be affected as well. A recent survey indicated that [a fifth of students who planned to start college in the fall may not attend because of diminished family finances due to the COVID-19 pandemic](#). An enrollment decline of 10 percent would be "absolutely devastating to higher education," according to one expert. She hopes, however, that students now studying online will learn to value more highly an on-campus experience when the pandemic passes.

[Boston University appears to have been the first American college or university to announce that it may not re-open its campus until January 2021](#). It has also canceled all in-person summer classes.

In related news, [student loan repayment suspensions have been enacted for six months but may go further](#), according to a recent announcement by President Trump. And [the pandemic could shrink the earnings of 2020 college graduates for years to come](#).

[Workplaces are likely to be affected permanently](#). New seating arrangements could provide for more social distancing between employees. Building materials could discourage the spread of germs. New technology could provide access to rooms and elevators without having to touch a handle or press a button.

And remote work practices are likely to continue on some level. Some suggest that this could lead to [a renaissance of small towns and suburbs](#) as people seek lower housing costs while working online with occasional commutes to the office (perhaps in autonomous vehicles).

In larger cities, public transit is likely to become less popular (at least for a while). Sidewalks may be widened and [some streets may be reconfigured as pedestrian-only](#). And temperature checks and other health screenings will be more common at airports.

[Sporting events will be dramatically affected](#) even when social distancing regulations are loosened. Some 72 percent of Americans said they would not attend such events without a vaccine for coronavirus. It is expected that sports could begin again in isolated communities where disease monitoring is easier. Providing hand sanitizers, limiting attendance, and enforcing six-foot spacing between spectators are options until the virus is eradicated.

Hospitals may retain and grow their current emphasis on [telemedicine and hygienic practices](#). (A new study indicates that [telehealth services have been an appropriate replacement for in-person care in many cases](#).) Many hospitals that were forced to suspend elective procedures (which are a significant source of income) are struggling financially. [Small-town hospitals are especially threatened](#).

As more people are cooking and exercising at home and walking in nature, [healthier practices may persist](#). Plummeting air pollution during this period may be sustained on some level as fewer people resume commuting to work.

[Online shopping will likely retain and even grow its popularity](#) when the pandemic ends as customers prioritize convenience and personal safety. [Sweatpants have become more popular](#) as people work and stay home, a trend that could become permanent. [Streaming video and video games are likely to explode](#), perhaps at the cost of traditional institutions and entertainment such as [movie theaters](#) and [theme parks](#).

[Virtual dating could retain its popularity](#). And stay-at-home regulations could spur [a much-needed baby boom](#).

## Our spiritual future

For the first time in Christian history, [churches were recently forced to celebrate Easter primarily through online platforms](#). Some held services in their parking lots as members attended in their cars and listened through their radios.

We obviously expect to return to in-person services when possible. But some innovations required by the pandemic are likely to be enduring. Groups, especially of older adults, are more easily able to check on their members online than by requiring them to travel to the church campus. Online devotionals, Bible studies, and other seminars are proliferating.

And many churches have found ways to reach people they were not reaching before the pandemic began. For example, I know of a church in the Houston area that is known for its focus on the needs of families. When families in their area found themselves homeschooling children almost overnight, many reached out to the church for assistance. The pastor tells me that they have been able to reach thousands of people in their community they had not reached before the pandemic.

Churches with thousands in attendance on a given Sunday are reaching multiple times more through online services. People are able to access religious programming in times and ways that fit their schedules, making these resources more adaptive and practical for many.

And the health and financial crises spawned by coronavirus have caused many nonreligious people to admit their mortality and to search for spiritual help they would have rejected just a few weeks ago.

An unprecedented crisis is an unprecedented opportunity for the gospel. The persecution of the early church in Jerusalem scattered believers across Judea and Samaria, where they spread the good news of God's love (Acts 8:1). Rejection in Thessalonica led Paul and Silas to Berea, where the people "received the word with all eagerness" (Acts 17:11). Paul's arrest in Jerusalem eventually led to his preaching the gospel in Rome (Acts 28:30–31).

I am convinced that the Holy Spirit wants to use this crisis as a catalyst for spiritual awakening in our day. For this to happen, however, we must partner with him. We must humble ourselves, pray together, seek his face with passion, and repent of our sins (2 Chronicles 7:14). We must be bold and courageous as his witnesses where we live and have influence around the world (Acts 1:8).

And we must see these days as our opportunity to share the compassion and love of our Lord with frightened and hurting souls who need him so desperately.

On my first trip to Cuba, I told one of the pastors of my grief over the persecution he and his fellow Christians were facing and assured him of my prayers that such persecution would end.

He smiled and asked me not to pray in this way. Seeing the surprise on my face, he explained that persecution was purifying their churches and strengthening their faith. Then he told me that many Christians in Cuba were praying for adversity to come against the US as a means to spiritual awakening in our land.

## Conclusion

[Bill Gates predicts a viral outbreak like COVID-19 every twenty years or so](#), given the realities of world travel. But he also believes we will be much better prepared in the future with standby diagnostics, deep antiviral libraries, vaccine platforms, and early warning systems.

While there may be more pandemics in our future, the present crisis is our present opportunity. And because of Easter, we can know that our risen Lord is more powerful than any virus and able to redeem all he allows.

As I was finishing this paper, I received a translated message from my dearest pastor friend in Cuba. He traveled with me to the Holy Land last December.

In that context, consider this reflection from my very wise brother:

The tomb is empty.

The most extraordinary thing about my trip to Israel was not walking the path Jesus walked, nor being in the places where so many miracles were performed. It was not navigating the Sea of Galilee, nor visiting the villages, nor walking the triumphal entrance, nor walking on the painful road to the cross.

What impressed me most was seeing the empty tomb.

Upon returning to Cuba, I was able to bring back hundreds of wonderful photos, videos, and experiences of memories that I lived. I brought back stones, pieces of jugs, even little pieces of salt from the Dead Sea.

But I couldn't bring back a single memory that Jesus was dead. Do you know why?

"I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said" (Matthew 28:5-6).

This is the reason why Christianity does not follow a dead man but the One who lives forever.

Come to him right now, tell him about your problems, and he will understand you and carry your burdens and make you glad.

Will you accept my brother's invitation today?

## For Further Reading

Dr. Jim Denison recently wrote *Biblical Insight to Tough Questions: Coronavirus Special Edition*, [a complimentary e-book you may download here](#).

In that work, he answers these questions:

1. How could God allow the coronavirus pandemic?
2. How does this pandemic lay bare our humanity?
3. What have we learned about the world as it responds to the pandemic?
4. Should I fear death?
5. How can I face my fears with faith?
6. How can I face the future with hope?
7. How can I partner with God to redeem this crisis?

Please feel free to share that link with others who may be encouraged by its words.

## About Denison Forum

In 2009, Dr. Jim Denison co-founded Denison Ministries in Dallas, Texas, to encourage spiritual awakening while equipping believers to engage with the issues of the day.

Today, Denison Ministries reaches a worldwide audience through news discerned differently at [DenisonForum.org](#), devotional experiences at [First15.org](#), and trusted guidance for parents at [ChristianParenting.org](#).

## About the Author

**DR. JIM DENISON** is the Chief Vision Officer and founder of the Denison Forum.



Through [The Daily Article](#), his email newsletter and podcast that reaches a global audience, Dr. Denison guides readers to discern today's news—biblically. He is the author of [multiple books](#) and has taught on the philosophy of religion and apologetics at several seminaries.

He is the Resident Scholar for Ethics with Baylor Scott & White Health, a Senior Fellow with the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative, and a Senior Fellow for Global Studies at Dallas Baptist University's Institute for Global Engagement.

Dr. Denison holds a Ph.D. and M.Div. from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, as well as a Doctor of Divinity from Dallas Baptist University.

Prior to launching Denison Ministries, he pastored churches in Texas and Georgia.

Jim and his wife, Janet, live in Dallas, Texas. They have two sons and four grandchildren.