

- We are in week 3 of a little mini teaching series called “Never waste a good crisis.” It was spurred by the current pandemic crisis that we are in, but it got me thinking about all crisis that we face.
 - Crisis is a common experience. We have them whenever we experience something unexpected or something that gets in the way of life. It can be as small a crisis as being behind a driver that is so slow they make us late for something or as large and evastating as a disease or death.
 - For many, the goal is simply to survive a crisis and return as quickly as possible to some state of normal. But in the effort to get past it they miss crucial opportunities.
 - Every crisis is a chance to move in a positive direction. It is not always easy. It is often time-consuming. It is rarely straight-forward. But it is possible. And it doesn’t happen by accident.
 - We have looked so far at two things that can help us not just weather a crisis but to let them transform us.
 - First, we saw that every crisis is an invitation to go deeper. An invitation to wrestle honestly with God because he desires relationship. He knows that often a crisis is necessary to get us from where we are to a better place.
 - Second, we looked at the importance of our thoughts, and that we get to decide what we let our minds dwell on in crisis. If we want to not waste a good crisis, we forcibly bring our mind to bear of things that are good, not denying the crisis itself, but not constantly dwelling in the negative.
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- In this third week, I want to about “playing the long game.”
 - I’m not sure if you have ever hear of Admiral Jim Stockdale. He actually ran for President in 1990’s and accomplished many amazing things in his lifetime.
 - He was a Vice-Admiral in the Navy and had the distinction of being the highest ranking officer as a POW in the Vietnam War.
 - He spent 8 years in the Hanoi Hilton in Vietnam. He was tortured over 20 times during that period because they wanted him to betray his country. He purposefully cut himself in the face at one point with a razor so that he would look terrible and they wouldn’t want to parade him in front of the cameras as part of their PR stunts.
 - Jim Collins interviewed him when he was writing his book “Good to Great” (which some of you may have read) and in this interview, Jim Collins asked, “How did you ever survive 8 years in a POW camp.”
 - “I never lost faith in the end of the story.” Remember that statement – it is so profound and we are going to circle back to it. “I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life which in restrospect I would not trade.”
 - That he could say this is unbelievable.
 - “You made it out, tell about the people who didn’t. Who didn't make it out?”
 - “Oh, that's easy,” he said. “The optimists.”
 - “The optimists? I don't understand,” I said, now completely confused, given what he'd said earlier.
 - “The optimists. Oh, they were the ones who said, 'We're going to be out by Christmas.' And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they'd say, 'We're going to be out by Easter.' And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart.”
 - What he described actually became known as the Stockdale paradox.
 - *“You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end – which you can never afford to lose – with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”* (Jim Stockdale)

- Never give up hope but don't deceive yourself about current reality
- If we want to not waste a good crisis, we must always keep in mind the long game.
- It's not a new term. It generally is associate with looking out into the future. With seeing past the immediate.
- Right now, almost 2 months into our current crisis, people are very eager to get back to normal. People want it to be over.
- Whenever we are in a crisis of any type, that is what we mostly feel. I just want it to be over. I need direction. I just need clarity. It's this short-term mentality that causes many of us to miss what is going on in our current crisis.
- The reason we miss what is going on is because **God is always playing the long game.**
- The writer of Hebrews knew this. The fact that God is playing the long game should have a great impact on how we deal with the crisis in our lives.
- Let me read from Hebrews 12.

Hebrews 12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses,

- Let me pause here for a moment. What is he referring to? If you read the previous chapter, Hebrews 11, the author spends the entire chapter speaking about people of faith from the history of the Israelite nation. He writes about people who generally endured crisis after crisis. Some of those people saw their faith in those crisis rewarded with amazing miracles and deliverance, but some of those people in crisis never saw them fully end.

- In light of all those stories . . .

let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

- The key idea in these verses is perseverance.
- When I think of perseverance, it is not a positive feeling word, unless you are looking backwards.
- If I can tell a story about how I or someone "persevered", it sounds noble. It sounds great.
- But if I am in the middle of a crisis, and someone tells me to persevere, to stick with it, that is the worst thing.
- It might be because it feels like it is a white-knuckle, just hold on until it's all better kind of advice. But if we take that view, then we will often succumb to the crisis in front of us.
- I was trying to think of how to process this, and I decided to do it in three pieces.
- First, the difference between short-game and long-game thinking.
- Second, how we play the long-game
- Third, how God's model for the long game gives us tremendous hope.
- **God is always playing the long game.**

I. Short game vs. long game.

- In our hyper-fast paced world, we don't do well with crisis that doesn't have an immediate end date.

The short game:

- We desire swift resolution to our crisis. We have no desire for a long term battle. We want to get answers and get them now. We want to win immediately.
- We feel pressured and stressed. When quick answers or solutions are not forthcoming, we worry about it, or we push to make those answers happen.

- We focus on instant gratification. We are going to do whatever it takes to feel better right now. We push over people, get angry or walk away.
- It leads us to take the easy path, the path of least resistance. We slide towards the actions that simply don't take as much effort.
- We will exert tremendous power and strength to achieve immediate results without considering long-term consequences because we desire relief now.
- We become increasingly critical of others, our situation, God and we get depressed when things are not working out like we desire.
- The writer of Hebrews describes it by telling their readers to *"throw off what hinders and the sin that entangles."*
- When we play the short game in a crisis situation, we retreat to behaviors, attitudes and actions that threaten what God is doing.

The long game:

- We find that it can be incredibly boring and repetitive. It feels like 2 steps forward and 1 step back. 1 step forward and two steps back.
- We find that the results of the long game are slow. They are not immediate.
- We have to engage and regular work. Usually daily. Certainly weekly.
- Instead of a lot of power in one burst, the long game asks us to exert a little strength over, and over, and over again.
- We cannot always see the results of the long game so it generally takes patience.
- The writer of Hebrews calls it *"running with perseverance."* Not in a sprint fashion, but settling in to a pace that we can sustain for the long term.
- Crisis can transform if we play the long game, because **God is always playing the long game.**

II. How to take a long game perspective.

- We see the long game in many different arenas.
- A football coach will deliberately run a certain set of plays for almost an entire game in order to set up one play that will pay off huge later.
- Generals will go to battle, to do the same thing in a certain way over and over, sometimes sacrificing men and equipment, because they have a long term plan for winning the war.
- Musicians will play for years in dives and hole-in-the-wall places, putting up with no money and a lot of hardship, because they are shooting for something bigger.

And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

- The author is describing the long-game. To shift from viewing only what is happening "right now" to what might be happening over the longer term.
- What does it mean to "fix our eyes on Jesus?"
- I hold on to hope for the future without denying the facts of my crisis.
- The facts of my crisis are simply that – facts. I am sick. I lost my job. I am still single. I have to stay quarantined. I am not getting the answers I need. I am frustrated. This is hard.
- We don't deny these things, but we play the long game when in the midst of all that, we ask: What might God be uncovering in me through this crisis?
- Our desire in any crisis is to ask for God to solve the crisis. Bring healing, find a job, fix a relationship, let me get back to normal.
- We absolutely can, and should, ask God for these things. Remember, a crisis is an invitation from God to engage with him.

- BUT, to take a long game perspective is to know that God will use whatever he chooses not to remove.
- What God is doing in your crisis is in the center of what he is doing in your life so don't short-change the process.
- Don't bail out in the middle of the process – let the crisis finish his work.
- The very thing we want removed is the thing that God has chosen to use.
- Remember, **God is always playing the long game**, so we must believe that God is going to use in us for our good anything that he chooses not to take away.
- But what happens when it never seems to end? When there is no light at the end of the tunnel and it gets more difficult to accept all this?
- Andy Stanley, a southern pastor, tells a story about his friend Reggie, who had crisis after crisis. Lung disease which was going to systematically reduce his capacity until he couldn't breathe any more, then lung transplant, then cancer and rejection.
- A few days before he died, Andy walked into his room and saw a whiteboard with goals on it. Goals like:
 - I will walk with Jesus every day.
 - I will be grateful and live every day to the fullest.
 - I will bless my family.
 - I will invest in people their good and God's glory, not mine.
 - I will not give up and run out the clock.
 - I will let people love on me.
- It turns out that these were not life long goals, but goals he had made only a month or two before, KNOWING that his life was about to end.
- How could he do this? He said this: "God was there when things were bad. He was good and walking with me. God was there when things were better. He was good and walking with me. And God is there now that things look horrible. He is still good and still walking with me. Nothing has changed."
- If you want to live the long game in crisis:

III. Never lose faith in the end of the story.

- The world questions why bad things happen to good people.
- Christ-followers have never believed that bad things don't happen to good people. In fact, the cornerstone of what we believe is that the worst possible thing happened to the best possible person.

For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

- **God is always playing the long game**. God sees things from the perspective of eternity.
- God had a plan that he put into motion from the day Adam and Eve ate that fruit. His plan was so long in its scope we can't even imagine.
- He prepared for thousands of years and then, we read, "when the time was right, Jesus Christ came into the world."
- God's long game was to bring the solution to humanity's ultimate problem – sin and death.
- There is hope, but hope is not that all problems and crisis will be solved.
- Our hope is in the one who came to solve the ultimate problem, which is not sickness or pain but the ultimate problem is sin.
- Our story will have multiple ends. Your crisis will end. There will be an end to that chapter of our story and if you are playing the long game, that can be a good end, because God is working in you. In reality, there will be more crisis, more chapters, and more ends.

- The ultimate end of the story is going to be amazing. Consider:
- God played the long game and Jesus died as a part of it.
- If God didn't play the long game, we would not be here.
- If God didn't play the long game, we would never have had the opportunity to know him.
- If God didn't play the long game, we would not benefit from his presence.
- God continues to play the long game in your life, in your crisis, and in the world.
- **God is always playing the long game.**
- When we play that long game, it's amazing how it often makes things become less urgent, less important and less emotionally loaded.
- Long game worries more about the final destination than every bend in the road in front of us.
- Let's put these last three weeks together.
- We don't choose our crisis but we choose our response to the crisis.
- We don't want to waste a good crisis, so when we are in a crisis, how do we respond?
- Wrestle with God in the moment with hopefulness, keeping your mind fixed on what is good.
- I am going to encourage you to pray a prayer. Perhaps you are praying regularly – add this. If you are not praying, consider praying this prayer in your crisis. (Thanks to Andy Stanley for this prayer)
- *"Heavenly Father, use this until you choose to remove this."*
- **God is always playing the long game.**
- Let's play it with him.