

KINGDOM  **conversations**

WHEN THE UNIVERSE CRACKS

**LIVING AS GOD'S PEOPLE
IN TIMES OF CRISIS**

ANGIE WARD, GENERAL EDITOR

When the Universe Cracks gives readers a faith-based framework for understanding the complexities our world and the church faced after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic. It's a timely and important book because it is honest, convicting, practical, and hopeful. When we are hit by life's disasters, it can be tempting to view our suffering as something to avoid or defeat. Instead, the book's authors encourage us to view disasters with Kingdom vision. Through the framework of the gospel, we can most fully process our pain, lament (alone and with others), serve those in need, and heal from trauma. As someone who studies disasters and has also lived through Hurricane Katrina and my own cancer diagnosis, I highly recommend this book.

JAMIE ATEN, PHD, founder and codirector of the Humanitarian Disaster Institute at Wheaton College

We are sorting out our lives amid unprecedented disruption, loss, and crisis—a true crack-in-the-universe moment. With much wisdom, global experience, passion for the goodness of God, and a love for Christ's Kingdom, the fine leaders in this compendium guide us through this perilous landscape. Use this book as a guide to the Kingdom conversations we must have to be moved forward into God's future.

DAVID FITCH, B. R. Lindner Chair of Evangelical Theology at Northern Seminary

To live in a fallen world is to live in a world full of crises. Although we live with that truth, it is still difficult to live into that reality. To help lean into the pain and discomfort of living in a cracked universe, Angie Ward assembled a diverse team to speak to the issue of living—not just surviving—as God’s people in times of crisis. My hope is that God will use this project to help people understand, process, and faithfully proceed from whatever crisis they face now or may face in the future.

ED STETZER, executive director of Wheaton College Billy Graham Center

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When the Universe Cracks: Living as God's People in Times of Crisis

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INTRODUCTION

AS I WRITE THIS from my home in Denver, Colorado, I can see a fine powder gently descending on my yard, dusting my grill and my patio furniture. I hold my mug of tea, take in the scene, and consider how I will adjust my plans and move my activities indoors for the next few days.

Sounds cozy, doesn't it? Except this powder isn't snow; it's ashes from the forest fires that are raging in the mountains just to the west of the city, ravaging our beautiful state. Smoke hovers in the air. My eyes itch. My throat is dry. It's hard to take a full breath.

What a fitting image as I write the introduction for a book about crisis. Between a pandemic, protests, politics, and natural disasters, it seems the whole world is on fire. I recently saw a meme titled "If 2020 Was a Scented Candle" that featured a photo of a porta potty in flames.

I realize that by the time you read this, the fires of 2020 may have died down. The world may have a widely available vaccine for COVID-19. Americans may have witnessed a peaceful transition of power in the Oval Office. Cities may

have rebuilt the facades that were torn off by storms both social and meteorological. Firefighters may have contained the literal blazes that consumed millions of acres of land. But a quick review of history assures us that these crises will simply be replaced by new ones.

Into this ongoing unrest and uncertainty, I humbly offer you this book, the first in NavPress's new Kingdom Conversations series. As our world becomes increasingly turbulent, it is more important than ever to return to our root identity, orientation, and calling as followers of Christ. The Kingdom Conversations series dares to consider that any issue, no matter how complex, may be brought into conversation with what we know of God and of history and of one another, and in so doing, we can find new insight into how the people of God can persevere and bless through the great complexities of our time.

The contributors for this book were chosen with great care. We wanted a variety of voices—of ethnicity, gender, and vocation—but a shared heart: of love for God, for neighbor, and for God's people, the church. We looked for expert and experienced leaders whose writing would be fueled by missional passion yet warmed by wisdom. And we sought an integration of views, from global perspective to local practice.

I am absolutely delighted with the result.

Christine Jeske starts us off by defining crisis and explaining the nature and impact of crisis on individuals and societies. From there, D. A. Horton provides an overview of the COVID-19 pandemic, zooming his lens from the panoramic

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to the personal. Next, Efrem Smith pulls no punches as he reminds us that COVID-19 pales in comparison to the centuries-old crisis of racism, to which the church's silence has often been deadly.

Moving from the sociocultural to the historical, Marshall Shelley provides a review of the church's experience over millennia of crisis. (Hint: Crisis is nothing new.) Sean Gladding reflects on what we can learn from the example of our spiritual ancestors as described in the Scriptures. And Lee Eclov turns our attention to how Jesus prepared his people—including us—to face times of crisis.

Jo Anne Lyon then leads us toward a spirituality of crisis response, explaining how lament helps us love our neighbor. Kyuboem Lee continues the turn toward home by calling churches to radically reimagine and reshape themselves in light of postpandemic possibilities. Catherine McNiell invites us to get to work: to put on our boots, roll up our sleeves, walk out the door, and love our neighbors. And finally, Matt Mikalatos gently reminds us that what we're feeling is normal—crisis means hard times with no easy answers—and that God is here.

As you read this book, I hope and pray that your perspective will be enlarged, your faith strengthened, your spirit challenged, and your love expanded for both the God of the ages and your neighbor next door.

Angie Ward

GENERAL EDITOR

1

WHAT IS A CRISIS?

Christine Jeske

It was a crack in the universe to come home and see the destruction of Katrina. And it was in that moment that I said I was never leaving home again. You see that kind of destruction and your life will change, whether you want it or not.

COLETTE PICHON BATTLE

WHEN HURRICANE KATRINA HIT THE GULF COAST in 2005, Colette Pichon Battle was working as a lawyer in Washington, D. C. She rushed back to her home state of Louisiana. There she found that her Creole community was, as she put it later in a radio interview, “pretty much physically wiped out.”¹ That crisis opened a “crack in the universe,” sending her on a path to a new career. In the years that followed, she founded the Gulf Coast Center for Law and Policy where she advocates for equitable disaster recovery, climate justice, and economic development, especially among Native and Black communities.

WHEN THE UNIVERSE CRACKS

A crisis is a crack-in-the-universe moment. As Pichon Battle said, it's a time when "life will change, whether you want it to or not."² In the book *People in Crisis*, psychologist Lee Ann Hoff and her colleagues describe what crisis is and isn't:

Stress is not crisis; stress is tension, strain, or pressure. Predicament is not crisis either; predicament is a condition or situation that is unpleasant, dangerous, or embarrassing. Emergency is not crisis; emergency is an unforeseen combination of circumstances that calls for immediate action, often with life-or-death implications. Finally, crisis is not emotional or mental illness. *Crisis* may be defined as a serious occasion or turning point presenting both danger and opportunity.³

They go on to explain that in a crisis, we face circumstances that we cannot cope with using our "usual problem-solving devices." In a crisis, not only do we face factors beyond our control but we turn to our usual means of regaining control and discover it's not enough.

When we see crises as situations offering both danger and opportunity, we can understand both what makes a crisis so painfully difficult and how God works through crises. In this chapter, we'll look at three elements of a crisis: upheaval, revelation, and opportunity. We'll see that as terrifying as it is to reach the limits of our own control, upheaval is not all there is to crisis. Because a crisis brings us face-to-face with

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our own inadequacies—not just as individuals but as whole communities—a crisis is also the door to opportunity. As Christians, our calling is not just to survive a crisis, it's to ask God how to fully turn to him amid the dangers, the revelation, and the opportunities of a crisis.

Crisis Brings Upheaval

A crisis disrupts aspects of life we usually take entirely for granted. The effects of a crisis run deep. Like an earthquake, a crisis rattles both the visible portions of a building and the deep recesses beneath the surface. That unseen shaking can crack building foundations, burst water and gas lines, and trigger volcanic or tsunami events beneath land or sea. Likewise a crisis affects not only our everyday, visible, and conscious decisions but also the subterranean aspects of our being: our norms of social interaction, our sense of identity, the narratives we use to make sense of life, and our foundational spiritual beliefs.

Throughout our lives, we are guided by sets of norms and rituals that we follow without having to ask deep, probing questions. Social life is held together and given order by these expected behaviors and the meanings we attach to them. For example, in the culture I grew up in, I learned without thinking that a handshake is a way to communicate welcome of a new acquaintance. I learned that going out for coffee with someone is a way to develop casual, honest conversation and friendship. I learned expectations about where to sit when I arrive at work, how a classroom will be organized, and what to do on the way in and out of church.

In everyday life, our cultural norms are like the pavement, painted lines, and road signs that make up our transportation routes. As we drive, we don't have to decide who drives on which side of the road or who stops at an intersection—the painted lines, stop signs, and stoplights tell us who does what, and if we follow those rules, we expect to be safe and get along. Sure, we face decisions in everyday life, but usually those decisions are like choosing which way to turn at an intersection. We don't typically have to decide whether to drive through a corn field or a river.

When these norms, habits, and rituals are taken away, we feel the tension in ways we do not even know how to name or express. A crisis is like trying to drive through a city where pavement and road signs are washed away, stoplights no longer function, and no one knows for certain how to get from point A to point B. In some crises, like Hurricane Katrina, this is quite literally the situation people face—physical infrastructure is destroyed. But in any crisis, we face a similar situation in a metaphorical sense. The roads of our social norms and rituals wash away, and the dilemmas we face are not just a matter of mapping an alternate route on a GPS app. As COVID-19 spread across the world, suddenly rituals like shaking hands, going out for coffee, and sitting together in meetings and classrooms disappeared overnight. We had to relearn—as a community—what it means to move through life.

Not only do our shared habits and rituals help us get stuff done but they also give meaning to our lives and help

WHAT IS A CRISIS?

us understand who we are. We take for granted that others around us roughly agree on these behaviors. Knowing that our behaviors are predictable and accepted cements both our relationship to others and our sense of who we are. If you ask me who I am, I might tell you that I am married and care for my two kids. I work as a college professor and participate in church activities. I go out for coffee and gather for book clubs with certain friends on a regular basis. These things are not just what I do; they tell me and others who I am. The combination of all those shared expectations, norms, and behaviors makes up our culture. Most of these rules were created without people ever stopping to plan out what the rules would be. They come about so gradually that we are not conscious of them having a beginning, an end, or any alternative. We all benefit from having these rules—most of the time, anyway. In a moment, we'll come back to the problem of what happens when those unspoken rules don't benefit people, but suffice it to say, those rules make us who we are as individuals and as a society.

A crisis, at its core, is a moment when the old rules don't work, shaking our understanding of what to do and who we are. One of the earliest sociologists, Émile Durkheim, called this state of "normlessness" *anomie*.⁴ In his lifetime during the late nineteenth century, Durkheim watched a massive social shift as industrialization transformed European and American ways of life. Within a generation, normal life went from shared agriculturally based work in small communities to industrial employment and consumption choices beyond

what previous generations had imagined. It wasn't a crisis that hit overnight like a stock-market crash, but it brought about a slowly unfolding crisis as old ways of life disappeared.

Durkheim noticed that while much attention was focused on economic changes, much deeper changes were also happening. Industrialization didn't just change people's jobs: It brought about the loss of a whole system of morality. Government exercised less control over everyday life, occupational guilds dissolved, and religion played a lesser role in public life. As the old systems of regulating morality crumbled, Durkheim described what he called a "liberation of desires" causing a "state of crisis and anomie."⁵ To track these changes, Durkheim looked at the statistical rise in suicides and divorces that corresponded to industrialization. He realized that mental and emotional health were not just results of our individual circumstances—they could rise and fall in tides with the shifts of our entire society. In the short run, at least, Durkheim found that anomie would be painful. Much of his research focused on this question: Will society be able to survive these changes?

In much of the Western world today, people learn to think of themselves primarily as unique individuals, making choices that dictate the consequences of their own lives. In a crisis, though, people realize that they are not in control. Social circumstances affect us, whether we like it or not. I remember listening to a friend who lives in Philadelphia describe a scene that played out in her neighborhood in the summer of 2020. So many of the city's sanitation workers were calling in

sick or quarantining from coronavirus that trash pickup fell days behind. Garbage on streets overflowed from trash bins, stinking and humming with flies and maggots. Rain filled garbage bins, making them impossibly heavy, and as few as 25 percent of sanitation workers were left on duty. On one hot summer day, a sanitation worker, in my friend's words, "a big burly dude," sat down on the side of the street by a pile of rancid rubbish and began to weep. Neighbors came out to talk with him, and eventually a manager came to relieve him for the day as he still shook with sobs. Crisis is when the basic systems we rely on—from trash pickup to sending kids to school—have collapsed, and no individual is immune from the emotional weight of carrying on.

Much of what scares us about crises is the upheaval. When norms, habits, and our very sense of identity are disturbed, we experience emotional, physical, and economic burdens. As much as some of us like variety in our lives, nobody wants the kind of brokenness that comes with crisis. But another part of what scares us is the next aspect of crisis: the revealing. As old systems are thrown into upheaval, the foundational ideas that produced these systems are laid bare. In the case of Philadelphia's trash pickup crisis, people witnessed the crumbling of a system they had taken for granted,⁶ and it unearthed deeper questions: *How can a community work together to solve problems we can't fix as individuals? What should government do? What does a job have to do with a person's ultimate purpose? What's the fairest way to distribute scarce resources?*

Ultimately a crisis reveals new facets of some of our

deepest age-old questions: *Am I my brother's keeper?* (Genesis 4:9) and *What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?* (Mark 8:36).

Crisis Is Revealing

In March of 2020, as my email inbox was overflowing with notifications about canceled events and in-person gatherings moving online, I plugged in my earbuds and went for a run. Scrolling through the many podcasts that were now focused solely on COVID-19, I chose one from the *The Bible Project*, appropriately titled, “Apocalypse Please,” with the descriptive line, “Is this the apocalypse?” I was intrigued. These early days of facing the pandemic surely felt like what people tend to call apocalypse—the coming of the end of the world. But as hosts Tim Mackie and Jon Collins explained, “apocalypse . . . does not mean end of the world.” The English word *apocalypse* is transliterated from a Greek word meaning “revelation.” The word is used across the Bible, not just about God revealing the new heavens and earth but for various times when God suddenly gives the ability to see reality in ways that people previously could not see it.⁷

Crisis brings about upheaval, but in that upheaval, we also receive apocalypses. In their podcast, Mackie and Collins highlighted a few revelations happening in America during the early days of the pandemic. Families and couples who now had to spend every moment together discovered harmful patterns in the ways they had been relating to each other. People out of work recognized how they had idolized career success.

Patterns emerging in infection and death rates revealed racial and ethnic disparities in health care and resource access that had existed for generations.

During the coronavirus crisis, God revealed to people realities about both individual lives and culture. Often those cultural patterns were painful to see because of the very fact that people now faced the reality that social factors mattered—humans are not and never have been totally free individuals. Other times they were painful because they revealed how we as individuals had been complicit in accepting cultural norms and systems that harmed ourselves and others.

One revelation America faced at a cultural level was that even the best science has limits. As predictions of when we would bounce back from the pandemic stretched further and further into the future, Americans realized that there could be no guarantee that scientists could cure our bodies, either now or ever. In hospitals, health-care workers faced the reality that even if they could access enough ventilators and other technologies, many people would die from COVID-19. The coronavirus revealed the lie beneath the common Western expectation that life would keep getting better.

As human beings, we make sense of events by fitting them into narratives. We assume that certain events follow one after another, and causes and effects are predictable along certain lines. In the West, one of those narratives often used to make sense of events has been called the *redemptive-self narrative*.⁸ As Christians, we tend to think of believing in redemption

as all good, but in this narrative, it's not Jesus who leads the redemption—it's ourselves. Since the Enlightenment, systems of education and science in the West have been geared toward breaking down problems, testing hypotheses, and working hard to find answers. That way of solving problems has indeed cured innumerable diseases and brought modern technologies that enhance people's quality of life. But the dominant culture also teaches people to credit human ingenuity for overcoming any problem and to expect that over time, society will keep making itself stronger, richer, smarter, and better.

This narrative differs significantly from the biblical flow of history. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, groups of people rise and fall in power through cycles involving human sin and God's overarching command of history. Crises often reveal people's dependency on the redemptive-self narrative. In a crisis, not only does the present look bleak, but we have to be honest about the fact that the future might not get any better. In these moments of revealing, we can see the world through a different narrative: *What if history and progress are in God's hands, not humans?*

During the moments of financial crisis, another narrative that is often revealed is that for many people, especially those in the middle class, work holds the central place in our identity. To be out of work or seemingly failing at work—whether in a situation like a coronavirus quarantine or long term—touches deep nerves not only because of economic insecurity but because a dominant Western way of thinking equates work with human value. Among middle-class

people, introductions often begin with people telling what they do for work. The narratives that saturate Western society teach people that when able-bodied adults are not working, there must be something morally wrong with them. This has never been true—at any time in history, plenty of people are out of work for no fault of their own or for noble purposes. And yet for many Americans, it takes a crisis to reveal this.

Crises also often reveal our fears and the ways we assign blame. In cultural anthropology classes I taught in the spring of 2020, we began studying patterns of social-media posts to notice patterns of responses to COVID-19. Several students began tracking how people talked about masks. They noticed that masks became first a revealer of xenophobia, and then a political symbol. In the early days of the pandemic, White Americans were subconsciously racializing masks, imagining them as something only Asians wore. For many Americans, masks triggered thoughts that blame for the disease could be assigned to “foreigners,” not ourselves. The pandemic unearthed long-standing prejudices of Asian Americans and Asians as perpetual foreigners, dangerous outsiders, and competitors. As one student wrote in an article she later published on the topic, “Asian Americans are framed as ‘dangerous virus carriers,’ magnifying their existing alienation.”⁹ She quoted the anthropologist Mary Douglas: “Fear of danger tends to strengthen the lines of division in a community . . . the response to a major crisis digs more deeply *the cleavages that have been there all the time.*”¹⁰

A few months later, masks had become another symbol of

cleavage, this time of political polarization. From conservative to liberal parts of the country, the patterns of who wore masks revealed not just the choices of individuals but the patterns of who we trusted, who we identified with, and how strained were relationships even within one nation.

Ultimately the revelations that happen in a crisis lay bare our spiritual state. We are forced to face uncomfortable realities. Our social systems are broken. We do not control our own lives completely, and when we do, we mess up. We are sinners, desperately dependent on the triune God. How we respond to these realities further reveals our relationship with God. Do we tighten our grasp on fears and sins? Or do we step into the light and become what God calls us into in this moment?

Crisis Offers Opportunity

When people talk about crisis, much of what usually comes up is along the lines of what Émile Durkheim saw amid anomie—suicides, divorces, and social breakdown. But Durkheim also believed that anomie was a pathway into new kinds of social order, and he was fairly optimistic that new social orders could be as good as or even better than old ones. Christians see similar patterns throughout history and Scripture: A crisis is a time for remaking our communities and ourselves, and if we invite God into that process, we need not fear.

Over half a century after Durkheim's research, an anthropologist named Victor Turner picked up on Durkheim's question of what happens when a society goes through turmoil.

Turner noticed something about crises: A social crisis isn't all that different from other kinds of transition that people go through all the time. The kind of normlessness and social upheaval that happens in a hurricane is somewhat like the kind of upheaval that an individual goes through when, say, they graduate from college or get married. In all those situations, people have to leave behind an old way of life and enter a new one. Between one way of living and another, we pass through an in-between time that Turner called *liminality*. The word originally described a threshold, the space in a doorway that is neither in nor out. Liminal times can be scary and downright dangerous because we hover between systems. We leave behind old norms and roles and haven't yet entered new ones.

But societies figure out ways to carry people through liminality. As Turner studied rituals around the world, he noticed that what happened in unsettled times wasn't all bad—in fact, a lot of what happened there was beautiful, inspiring, and powerful. Liminality kicks us out of old routines, which not only gives us those apocalyptic epiphany moments but also sets us up to do something about what's revealed to us.

In ordinary life, people resist changing old systems because change can require us to face old traumas or release structures that benefitted us to the detriment of someone else. Systems and norms are hard to change—no one individual can do it alone, and even social movements that are desperately needed just aren't that easy to get going. So, too, as individuals, we cling to our old habits. And so we often go on following old

ruts long after their usefulness fades away, even when they hurt people.

But in liminality, our inertia against change is already broken. Recall that most of the time, norms and rituals help us function in society, but not always. Plenty of systems go wrong, like the health-care systems that leave millions of Americans without reliable access to affordable health care, or racial divisions across neighborhoods, schools, and churches. In times of crisis, not only are those systems revealed but often our normal modes of behavior are so unsettled that we have to rebuild new systems. In the rebuilding, we just might make things better. The shake-up of liminality is like spring cleaning for social systems.

In this way, crisis brings not just the dangerous confusion Durkheim saw in anomie; it can bring a necessary, renewing force in society. In the early months of the pandemic, my own family realized that in scrapping all our usual extracurricular commitments, we had the energy to start new healthy and fun habits like daily walks, Wednesday crossword puzzling, and Fancy Friday dress-up days. When these types of habit changes multiply on a societal scale, a lot can change.

One opportunity that often comes in crisis is that our shared problems override the usual hierarchies and barriers that divide us, and we reach out to each other as equals in previously unheard-of ways. It's the phenomenon we experience in my native state of Wisconsin when blizzards hit. Suddenly neighbors who never spoke are out clearing each other's driveways and delivering warm meals to those without

power. A crisis can be a portal to human connections and a reminder of our shared unity as human equals. Turner and his wife, Edith, both anthropologists who converted to Catholicism as adults, call this sense of equality and unity *communitas*, and they wrote that ultimately, it can offer a glimpse of the Kingdom of God.¹¹ They wrote that liminality often brings “experiences of unprecedented potency,” “sacredness,” and “collective joy.”¹² In other words, when this anthropologist couple compared all the ways humans deal with transitions and crises, they saw there Christ and his Kingdom.

Looking back at the way the world coped with COVID-19, we see many times when crisis sparked *communitas*. Celebrity John Krasinski’s show called *Some Good News* became an overnight viral hit on YouTube. Viewers watched what felt like a home video of him sitting in front of his daughter’s hand-drawn “SGN” logo, hearing stories of people across the world caring for one another amid the pandemic. Not only did the show give viewers the sense that Krasinski and the other stars who called into his show were all just “one of us” but it also reminded viewers that goodness was possible in a crisis. Viewers around the world loved watching stories of everyday acts of kindness not just because they showed us what we wanted to happen but also because in many communities, this extraordinary caring *was* happening.

The early weeks of the pandemic created space for *communitas*. People started GoFundMe efforts to support artists, restaurant workers, hair stylists, and other out-of-work

service providers. We saw messages of hope and gratitude spring up everywhere, from sidewalk chalk to murals, balcony music ensembles to free online concerts. When George Floyd's tragic death by police brutality reminded the nation once again that systemic racism still threatened the well-being and survival of people of color, historic numbers of demonstrators turned out on streets and engaged in some part of the long, hard work of undoing the racism that permeates society. In the very act of socially distancing, people were rediscovering and embracing the reality that we are all in this together and we cannot do this alone.

Opportunity is not the same, though, as prediction. Opportunity means there are options that some will take and others will not. There is no guarantee that crisis brings out the best in people—it can also bring out our worst. In many instances, the pandemic widened inequalities in wealth, education, and health-care access and worsened domestic violence and mental-health situations. In a society-wide crisis, systems will undoubtedly change, but whether for good or for evil is yet to be determined. In the chapters that follow, we will read more about how to respond to times of upheaval with a willingness to open our eyes and actively invite God's Kingdom to come in the middle of today's opportunities.

One paradox of responding to a crisis is that a crisis calls for both hard work and relinquishing control. Unless people commit to the long, slow work of rebuilding systems in ways that reflect the Kingdom of God, any euphoric sense of unity that might happen in a crisis will quickly fade as we return

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to old, selfish habits. But at the same time, a crisis reveals that we do not have complete control over our choices and outcomes. The words of James 4:13-14 (BSB) never ring so true as when we come to a crisis:

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business, and make a profit.” You do not even know what will happen tomorrow! What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

In crisis, we have the opportunity to adjust our inflated sense of agency—that is, our expectations of what we are capable of.

In research I conducted over several years in South Africa, I interviewed dozens of people about the ways they sought better lives amid some of the world’s highest unemployment rates and most entrenched racism.¹³ One common trend I noticed among people who said they were experiencing a good life even amid difficult circumstances was that they acknowledged that a good life was not entirely in their own control. Social scientists call this temporary release of control over a situation *abeyance of agency*.¹⁴ This doesn’t mean giving up and doing nothing. In fact, the people who talked about the role of God helping them through tough situations often were the most active in working for good. In admitting that the outcome was not fully in their control, they had the freedom to try without being terrified of failure. Instead of

grasping as much control over their own lives as possible, people who thrive through a crisis practice some forms of abeyance agency. They learn new ways to trust both in other people and in a higher power. In a pattern that repeats again and again throughout Scripture, as people desperately cry out to God and commit to following him, God guides them to new and good paths.

For the Joy Set Before Us

In the years after Hurricane Katrina as Colette Pichon Battle became an advocate for disaster relief and prevention, she realized she would have to learn how to persevere in that tough work without resorting to fear or hatred. She recalls looking at the ways people of her Louisiana Creole, Black, and Native ethnic heritage have persevered through generations of struggle. She realized, “We are not a people who are energized by hatred. I come from people who were energized by joy.”¹⁵

The same is true of all Christians. We are a people who are energized by joy. We tend to associate crisis with pain, not with joy. But at the center of what was perhaps the biggest crisis of all time—the crisis of God atoning for the sin of humankind—we find Christ, dying on a cross, not out of fear or hatred but “for the joy set before him” (Hebrews 12:2). What is crisis? It is upheaval, a moment of revealing, and ultimately, if we meet God there, it is opportunity to be motivated by the joy set before us.

ABOUT KINGDOM CONVERSATIONS

TO BE A CHRISTIAN is to be conscious of and responsive to three realities at once: the past, the present, and the future.

We pay attention to the *past*, understanding that God has spoken to those who have gone before us, giving practical instruction for a way of being in the world. We learn what it means to be a peculiar people with the privilege of calling God our Father.

We pay attention to the *future*, recognizing that God has invited us to participate in his coming resolution to all the world's pain and suffering.

And we pay attention to the *present* because the present is where we live, move, and have our being.

Still, we are often distracted by crises and conundrums, and we forget to look to the past to inform us, to the future to inspire us, even to the facts on the ground present to us. But when we step back to consider the vantage point of our good God, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, these circumstances take their proper shape and size in our

imaginations, and we find our footing and our way of glorifying God in our response.

Kingdom Conversations are meant to facilitate this exercise in finding our footing. We dare to consider that any issue, no matter how complex, may be brought into conversation with what we know of God and of history and of one another, and in so doing, we can find new insight into how the people of God can persevere and bless through the great complexities of our time.

They are “conversations” because they gather the perspectives of various Christian leaders to consider the question together.

They are “Kingdom” because they are each submitted in humility and hope to God, trusting that God himself will lead us into all truth.