

## **How to survive and thrive in lockdown – Mark Oden, Naples**

What a fascinating social experiment. 60 million people in lockdown for an indefinite number of days or weeks; maybe even months. Here in Italy, it's day 11 in the Big Brother house. Even without the cameras, it can still feel intense and surreal. I imagine that this will affect us all differently. For some it will be a chance to take stock; for others it will be a time dominated by anxiety; for others still, there may be tension as they share limited space with others.

In Italy, people are finding a number of ways to survive. Many have turned to baking and comfort-eating to distract them from the uncertainty of these times, while others, like the friends of my teenage daughters, are lining up the next Netflix series. For many, surviving lockdown looks like WhatsApp chats full of pictures of dinnertime creations and humorous internet memes.

But wouldn't it be good not only to survive this time but to redeem it and see it as a gift from a generous heavenly Father to His children? Maybe we didn't ask for this. Maybe lockdown is your worst nightmare. Here are some thoughts from a couple of church leaders in Italy; Stefano Mariotti (Acts 29 Pastor of Chiesa Evangelica La Piazza, Budrio, Bologna) and Mark Oden (Pastor of Chiesa Evangelica Neapolis, Naples). Both are learning as they go and making lots of mistakes, but are seeking to survive - and thrive - in this unique moment.

### **1. Delight in God's grace and be gracious**

We are saved by grace (Ephesians 2:8) and by grace, we grow in godliness (Ephesians 2:10). This is amazing news for fallen, fragile creatures. As you fall during lockdown, keep coming back to these gospel truths. As you lose your patience with your children, spouse, elderly relative, or housemates and as your precious idols are exposed through this crisis, flee each day to the cross. Enjoy the forgiveness and mercy that only Jesus can give.

Be quick to say sorry and quick to forgive. People will be scared and irrational. They will say and do things they don't necessary mean: bless them with grace. Be "kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you," (Ephesians 4:32). "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins," (1 Peter 4:8).

**In practice:** take a moment to think through the last 24 hours - who do you need to say sorry to? Go and do it now. Don't bear a grudge and be quick to forgive.

### **2. Take one day at a time**

"Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own," (Matt 6:34) Focus on the present. Don't get caught up in negative thought cycles and "what ifs." Don't get ahead of yourself. Give thanks for the many blessings that you have received today.

**In practice:** Keep a note of thanksgiving and share with others in church. We have been doing that as a church family here in the form of videos: it's been a huge encouragement.

### **3. Speak to yourself**

"Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God," (Psalm 43:5). As the great British preacher Martin Lloyd Jones wrote, "Have you realised that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself?". Take those thoughts captive! This can be particularly difficult in the midst of a sleepless night, when our fears and concerns take on pandemic proportions.

**In practice:** get up, read God's word and repeat it to yourself until the voice of your Good Shepherd drowns out fear.

#### **4. Stop what you are doing and read the Bible**

'Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth,' (Psalm 46:10). I don't know about you, but I'm not very good at being still. I'm even worse at stopping. As the Lord forces us potentially to do both during lockdown, why not rejoice at this opportunity to get to know Him better? In the clamour of 24 hour news alerts and constant social media, read His precious Word.

**In practice:** Set aside time to read and meditate on the Bible. Start now. Build it into your daily routine.

#### **5. Keep calm and... PRAY**

What a wonderful opportunity these days are to pour our hearts out to our heavenly Father in earnest prayer. Usually, there are so many distractions. Now there aren't! Let's use every moment, as individuals, as couples and as families to intercede for the sick and dying, for the medical services, for the government, for our Christian brothers and sisters and for those who don't yet share the sure and certain hope that is ours in the gospel.

**In practice:** Plan the next 7 days of prayer: when will you pray, with whom and for whom?

#### **6. Stay in touch**

Whether we are together under one roof on a Sunday or separated in our homes, we remain one body, one family, a holy temple. Keep in touch with each other using the myriad of social media platforms, interactive virtual meetings, and livestreams available to us today. One pastor remarked this week that for the first time since the invention of the internet, it really feels as if we are redeeming this tool for the glory of God. Ring each other and let each other know that you are praying and thinking of each other. Be mindful of those who are feeling lonely and isolated.

**In practice:** write a list of people that you want to be in contact with over the next week. Think through ways to include or help those with less access to technology.

#### **7. Regulate news intake**

Lockdown can easily be characterised by an obsession with the latest coronavirus stats. How many cases, which countries and towns, how many deaths, where are we on the bell curve? Be careful how much time you spend monitoring the news: it can very quickly dominate your waking hours in an unhealthy way.

**In practice:** Stay informed and up to date - and do so with others - but beware of obsessive tendencies. Regulate screen time in general. As you watch the news, why not turn each point into a prayer point?

#### **8. Delineate work / family / rest time**

"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens," (Ecclesiastes 3:1). In lockdown, every day seems to merge into one. It is easy to lose track of time and for weekdays and weekends to feel the same. Build structure as much as you can into your days and weeks.

Many of us will be working from home; many children will have virtual school classes. Build sustainable routines around these moments. Work times, family or social times, rest times. Then try to stick to them. Work out ways to delineate these moments. Have a designated workspace and leave your phone there. Think about how to make the weekend feel like a weekend. What are your usual rest patterns and how could they translate to life in lockdown?

The first week is the hardest week for establishing new routines but in our experience, it has become easier. Remember you can always adapt and change the daily routine as you go.

**In practice:** get a pen and paper and draw up the first draft of a daily routine. Put it into practice and test and adjust as you go.

## **9. Establish personal space**

Irrespective of whether you are an extrovert or an introvert, we all need some time and space to ourselves. This can be very difficult in small living spaces with young families. How can you create a space or a moment for each of you to recharge on your own? Be creative with space: one of our daughters has found that she studies well in our larder cupboard (we have noticed that our supply of biscuits has taken a hit during lockdown!).

**In practice:** look around your home and garden: how can you allocate space? Look at your daily routine: is there some down time for each of you?

## **10. Exercise**

“For physical training is of some value...” (1 Tim 4:8). Exercise strengthens the body, helps the mind to stay healthy and boosts energy levels. As far as it complies with the restrictions of the lockdown, exercise regularly. Why not exercise in your garden or flat with a session of circuits? Try to eat your 5-a-day.

**In practice:** dig out your old gym kit and go for it!

## **Conclusion**

To thrive in lockdown is to set up a spiritually, mentally and physically sustainable life. The further into this we go, the more distant and intangible the end feels.

I fear, whilst not wanting to be alarmist, that we won't all be returning to life as usual. Perhaps the real battles will begin post-lockdown. In that case, we need to find a way to thrive in this time so that we can face whatever comes our way, trusting that we can do nothing without the Lord's sustaining hand. “My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.” (Psalm 63:8).