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What Lessons Do Americans See for Humanity in the Pandemic?

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How we did this

When an event has as much impact as the coronavirus outbreak – disrupting billions of lives and leading to more than 1 million deaths around the world – it’s natural for people to ponder big questions. Is this just a random occurrence, or is there something more at play? Is it all part of God’s plan? Or, at a more worldly level, can this experience teach us any truths about humanity?

We sought to explore these questions in a recent Pew Research Center survey, conducted in mid-July on the Center's *American Trends Panel*. First, we asked people: Do you believe there is a lesson or a set of lessons for humankind to learn from the coronavirus outbreak? And if so, do you think these lessons were sent by God, or not?

A large majority of U.S. adults (86%) say there is some kind of lesson or set of lessons for humankind to learn from the pandemic, and about a third of Americans (35%) say the lessons were sent by God. The remainder say the lessons were *not* sent by God (37%), they do not believe in God (13%), or there is no lesson to be learned (13%).

Then, we asked half the respondents who said yes to the first question to describe, in their own words, what lessons they think humankind should learn. This prompted more than 3,700 people to write their answers, which ranged from a few words to several sentences.

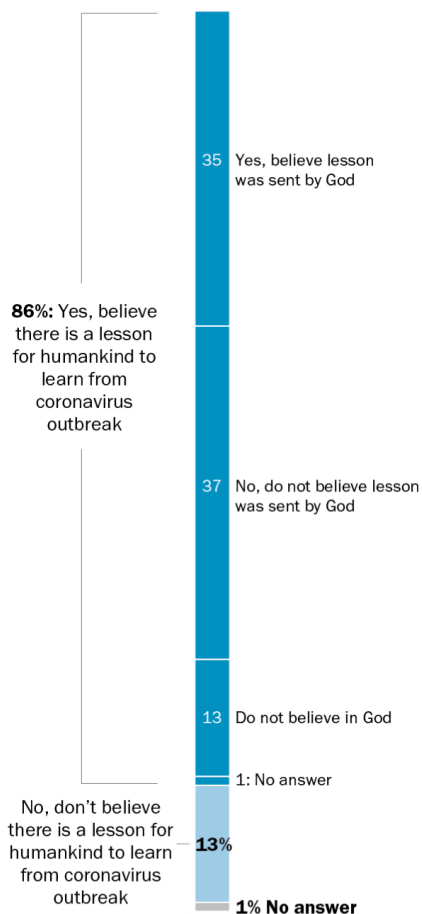
The rest of this essay looks at a sampling of responses – including many examples presented exactly as respondents wrote them. Some responses have been lightly edited for spelling and clarity. Due in part to the great variety of responses we received, we did not attempt to quantify what percentage of Americans believe there is a certain type of lesson to be learned.

There are, however, a few common themes. These include practical lessons, such as wearing a mask; personal lessons, like remembering the importance of spending time with family and loved ones; and societal lessons, such as the need for universal health care. Still other takeaways are political in nature, including criticisms of both political parties and concerns about the politicization of the pandemic.

Americans who say God is using the pandemic to send a lesson to humanity often highlight religious lessons. Those who do *not* think the lessons of the pandemic were sent by God mention a variety of topics – though rarely religious ones.

Vast majority of U.S. adults think pandemic provides lesson for humanity

% of U.S. adults who say ...



Note: Figures may not add to 100% or to subtotals indicated due to rounding.
 Source: Survey conducted July 13-19, 2020, among U.S. adults.
 "What Lessons Do Americans See for Humanity in the Pandemic?"

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A worshipper kneels in prayer during an outdoor Mass in California. (Mario Tama via Getty Images)

Lessons about God and religion: ‘The rapture is at hand’

Among those who say there is a lesson about religion within the pandemic, some respondents point to the role God has in humans’ lives. For instance, a 53-year-old woman writes that “whether you believe it or not, God is in control and we must have God at the center of our lives. He is our savior.”

Other respondents say the pandemic is a sign the end of the world is near. In the words of a 55-year-old woman, “it is biblical prophecy playing out. This pandemic as well as other world events are a wakeup call and confirmation that the rapture is at hand as prophesied in the Book of Revelation.”

A 58-year-old man feels God wants people to reflect on their lives: “God is telling us that we need to change our ways or he will send a virus that will make us be alone so that we have time to think about how we live our lives. We all need to live as one we are all children of God. God did not create mankind to live as we do. And he is not going to let this virus end until he knows that we have learned our lesson.”

Additional lessons about God and religion

“We should humble ourselves before God. We should look to Him as God and repent of our arrogance, ignorance, and contempt of our Holy God. We should cry out to Him for our salvation.”

– 54-year-old woman

“We need to pray more and pray harder.”

– 19-year-old man

“We need to learn that every person’s life is a precious gift from God. We must learn to love one another period. If your belief in our Father in Heaven does not convict you to love all races, we are not following really serving Him ... He loves all of us, and we are required to love Him and one another!!”

– 66-year-old woman

“Use this time to know God better. Receive as a gift this time of less activity and immerse yourself in quiet contemplation for personal spiritual

growth. Develop gratitude in the midst of the current situation. Pray for the sick and unemployed.”

– 57-year-old man



Police and firefighters in California lined up outside of a hospital to thank health care workers who are working on the front lines of the coronavirus pandemic. (Justin Sullivan via Getty Images)

Lessons about society: ‘Just who are the essential workers?’

Some respondents see lessons in society’s failure to face up to problems like racism, economic inequality and climate change. According to a 24-year-old woman, “the system that is in place currently needs to be dismantled. We need change, equity and true equality for all races, gender, religions, etc. The facade of America being a country of the free and of equal opportunity is being exposed.”

Another respondent, a 63-year-old man, emphasizes the need for universal health care: “Health care should be universal to maintain the population’s health. Having so many people without lifelong care promotes comorbidities that, as we see now, affect the death rate from this pandemic.”

Much of the public discourse this spring centered on whether lockdown orders were causing unnecessary harm to the economy. Americans see lessons on both sides of this debate. “The economy should be important, but grandparents and parents shouldn’t die because people are too antsy to stay home or try and accommodate for current events,” a woman in her mid-20s writes. “People should be the first concern in health and human rights over economic value and growth.”

Other respondents register anti-lockdown sentiments, saying the pandemic’s main lesson is that government officials and public health experts have overreacted. “Don’t believe everything you are told by experts,” a 65-year-old man concludes. “Shutting down the economy for a virus which kills less than 1% of the population is insane.”

Additional lessons about society

“Capitalism has caused us to develop an unsustainable and inhumane system. We should take this opportunity to restructure our society so that people can spend more time with family and so that there are appropriate safety nets in place to protect people when disaster strikes.”

– 30-year-old man

“The lesson that humankind should learn is how horribly we are treating our Earth. When countries were quarantined our Earth started to heal in so many ways, simply because people were not out abusing it every day.”

– 26-year-old woman

“A single human life is worth more than rescuing the economy for a few. With universal health care, the millions of laid off Americans would be able to provide for their families most basic needs.”

– 29-year-old man

Another respondent says the pandemic has taught us which workers are actually essential to the economy, a viewpoint shared by many. “Just who are essential workers? It’s not the financiers and money pushers or the 1%,” writes a 65-year-old woman. “It’s the plant and factory workers, the grocery clerks, the people producing our food, the caregivers in nursing homes and daycare centers, the janitors. The disparity and inequity in this country must be addressed. Our infrastructure and health care systems need fixing.”

Some respondents reflect concern for the environment and the severity of climate change when asked about the lessons humankind should learn from the coronavirus outbreak. For instance, according to a 53-year-old man, “the virus seems to have come about by humankind’s continued encroachment on the natural world. We need to be far better stewards of our planet than we have in the past.”

Another respondent, a woman in her 40s, is more explicit: “Mother Earth will prevail. We have done so much damage with overuse of land, destruction of ecosystems, and hunting of animals. The virus is a way to get us to stop or eliminate us completely. Pollution, global warming and building have destroyed the earth.”

“That public health affects economic health, for one thing. Also, it’s exposed all the flaws in our society: science denial, safety net for the working poor, health outcome disparities between rich and poor, white and POC. Lack of childcare options. How much work schools do that isn’t education (meals, childcare, reporting of abuse, etc.)”
– 49-year-old woman

“While the working class supports, arguably runs, the economy, there is not adequate aid for them in this time of crisis. Whereas big businesses and the one percent are given aid, disproportionately large compared to their “need.” The government is not for all the people, it is for the well off and rich some. The working class keeps the economy growing, but in business and government eyes, they could not care less what happens to them so long as they are spending their money. However in these times, there is no money to spend for these working class citizens, but somehow big businesses and corporations are getting richer due to the financial aid they are receiving from the government.”
– 22-year-old woman

“What we do to the Earth has consequences – we can’t continue building cities and abusing resources and the climate for personal profit without expecting something to happen. As a species, we need to find a way to live in harmony with the planet and learn to be more content with what we have, as well as supporting our community members and ensuring that people are cared for and understood properly.”
– 27-year-old man



The last patient leaves a Massachusetts field hospital in June. (John Tlumacki/The Boston Globe via Getty Images)

Lessons about life and relationships: 'An opportunity for people to rethink their priorities'

Many respondents mention lessons about changes people should make in their personal lives and relationships with others. One 46-year-old woman says people need to “think about what is REALLY important and how your time is REALLY spent ... hopefully this is an opportunity for people to rethink their priorities.” Similarly, a man in his 40s writes, “Life moves too quickly and people don’t slow down long enough to see their lives pass by. The virus has shown us that life doesn’t need to fly by so quickly. We can enjoy the moment more.”

Spending time with loved ones is another key theme in the responses. According to a 44-year-old woman, “the importance of family and friend interactions should not be overlooked. Internet and electronic interactions cannot replace or fulfill human need for interactions face to face.”

Others reference the need for humankind more broadly to come together with a common purpose. One 42-year-old man notes that the pandemic has alerted us to the fact that “we need to work together since the world is more connected today than ever. One simple little virus in China has spread worldwide. You cannot defeat it on our own. We need allies and a government that cares for the people.” And a 68-year-old woman says that humankind should focus not on what divides us, but what unites us: “We need each other to survive and should be willing to set aside individual differences for the greater good.”

Many respondents also frame the coronavirus as a simple reminder to treat others well. A 54-year-old woman says that “we should always be kind to one another regardless of race, religion, or political belief. The virus does not discriminate, and neither should we.”

Additional lessons about life and relationships

“We don’t need all the materialistic things. Value humankind and intimacy.”

– 55-year-old woman

“To appreciate and love each other. To be thankful for our blessings.”

– 71-year-old woman

“To empathize with each other, to be considerate of others, to appreciate all of those who serve and work with the public, treat them well and compensate them well.”

– 52-year-old woman

“It’s important to occasionally take step back and focus on your well-being and your relationships with those you love. Working and spending your time and money isn’t what life is about.”

– 24-year-old man

“Many of those who have died with coronavirus had underlying health issues, such as obesity and type 2 diabetes, two conditions that are preventable. The lesson is to take better care of yourself so that your

healthy body has a much better chance of surviving the virus.”

– 52-year-old woman



Rep. Steve Scalise, R-La., talks with House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., as they arrive for a news conference outside the U.S. Capitol in May. Calling it unconstitutional, Republican leaders filed a lawsuit against House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., and congressional officials in an effort to block the House of Representatives from using a proxy voting system to allow for remote voting during the coronavirus pandemic. (Drew Angerer via Getty Images)

Lessons about government and politics: ‘Political polarization is detrimental to the public good’

Respondents provide a range of anti-government responses that criticize both Democrats and Republicans.

One woman in her 30s takes aim at the political left specifically: “The lesson is that our government is out of control. We elect officials to speak/act on our behalf, it is unacceptable that individuals see this as a career path. We need term limits for all. The left is 100% out of control and the level of corruption is going to bring the United States to its knees.” But another respondent, a woman in her 60s, is clear in her disapproval of the Trump administration’s response to the pandemic: “Trump is going to kill us if we don’t vote him out of office.”

Indeed, opinions about the pandemic have [diverged along partisan lines](#) in the U.S., and some respondents see a lesson in this fact: “Politicization of public health crises should be avoided,” a 49-year-old man says. “Science should be prioritized over political agendas when dealing with public health. Political polarization is detrimental to the public good.”

Others mention more general, and less partisan, lessons about the current state of U.S. politics. According to a 38-year-old man, “We humans have the wrong leaders in place and we need to replace them with kinder more compassionate leaders who will choose the right thing over what’s politically expedient.”

Respondents’ criticism of government is not limited to the U.S. In fact, many respondents condemn China for its response to the initial outbreak. “You can’t trust the Chinese government,” a 56-year-old woman writes. “They knew about this and did not communicate it to the world, allowed travel in and out of Wuhan, and other parts of China to

Additional lessons about government and politics

“Start voting for best interest and not on partisan lines.”

– 47-year-old man

“Humankind absolutely cannot trust their government officials do the right thing. This virus is perpetrated by the left wing media and the Democrat Party to remove Trump from office.”

– 46-year-old man

“Be careful about who you vote for or support.”

– 84-year-old man

“We get the leadership we vote for.”

– 27-year-old woman

all over the globe. They are responsible for the spread of this virus.”



(Frederic J. Brown/AFP via Getty Images)

Practical lessons: 'Cleanliness is of extreme importance'

While many respondents share broad, sweeping ideas about the world, others give more narrow and practical answers. For one 76-year-old woman, the lesson is “that humankind should learn to abide by the govt. orders to stay home. As much as possible wear masks when out in the public, and social distancing. Also not to assume that the virus is nearing over when the cases are still going up, to still be cautious!!!!”

For another respondent, a man in his 60s, “cleanliness is of extreme importance. Handwashing and staying away from people when sick is crucial.”

Another theme is the idea that people need to do a better job anticipating future crises. According to a 54-year-old man, “We all need to be better prepared for any other pandemic, many people did not take it seriously. Government, medical authorities, specialists were not prepared and this is a chance to look and prepare.”

Finally, many respondents mention the importance of respecting expertise. As one man in his 30s sums up, the lesson humankind should learn is “to listen to scientists, professionals, and subject-matter experts that have spent most of their lives researching and studying topics such as climate change, health, social inequality, etc. It took a pandemic to highlight all of these issues and still there is significant part of the population that chooses to reject proven facts in favor of uneducated opinions of influencers and politicians. Doctors have no self-interest in providing medical advice to slow down the pandemic, politicians have significant self-interest in making choices that gets them reelected depending on the district or region they are in. Thus the consensus between the medical field and the disparity in the laws and ordinances to address the pandemic. We need to get back to listening to the experts and eradicate these opinions that everything is a conspiracy.”

Cover image: People gather in circles designed to encourage social distancing at a park in California. (Josh Edelson/AFP via Getty Images)