

Though He Slay Me, Yet Will I Trust Him (Job 13:14)  
A Theological Response to the Coronavirus Pandemic: Part 1 of 3  
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It will be vital in the coming weeks and months to see the global crisis caused by COVID-19 through the lenses of biblical and theological truth. Many different responses have already surfaced, calling for wisdom and discernment among God's people. We will evaluate the most common responses momentarily. However, at the outset, we find encouragement in the words of C. S. Lewis who, preaching a sermon called "Learning in War Time" (October 22, 1939), said:

The war creates no absolutely new situation: it simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it. Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice... creatures who are every moment advancing either to heaven or to hell. Human culture has always had to exist under the shadow of something infinitely more important than itself... under the shadow of these eternal issues.

These words ring true almost a century later. Human nature dictates two main responses to life's changing circumstances. First, during periods of relative calm, we put our lives in cruise-control. We ignore eternal realities. We submit ourselves to virtually no critical self-evaluation. The vehicle trundles down the road while we sleepily play on our phones. But second, under the conditions of war or viral pandemic, we are jolted back to attention. We take the wheel again. We struggle to control our circumstances; we strive after self-preservation. We find ourselves – and our minds – speeding dangerously out of control. We panic; our sleep is interrupted. Now we have become too busy, or too distracted, for honest self-assessment. Somewhere between lethargy and anxiety we seek a well-struck balance. In our evaluation of the following responses to coronavirus, we will strive to find it.

1. **The Judgment of God:** some within the church have rightly recognized coronavirus as an act of God. Consequently, they have identified various idols that are implicitly worshipped by the larger society, idols that potentially exert influence over believers, idols that have been systematically dismantled in the wake of a global pandemic. The interpretation, some believe, is that God is judging the world. Perhaps we have placed confidence and trust in our health care systems; thus, as these systems are overwhelmed, idols crumble. Perhaps we revere athletes, maybe we bow before athletics. This false worship might involve watching sports or actively participating in them. In their absence, we feel an emptiness on Sunday afternoons. We might apply the same level of misguided devotion to food, friendships, or personal comforts. Maybe we have fashioned an idol in the shape of freedom, whether personal or political. As limitations in these areas come to define our daily existence, a call for honest self-evaluation may be heard. Have I lost my first love? Has my heart fallen prey to idolatrous influences?

This first response calls for *personal* reflection because it is impossible to ascertain the condition of other people's hearts, to determine with absolute certainty their specific set of sins – the vices that so easily ensnare. Each person must do the hard work of spiritual self-assessment. And each of us must undertake this work with the unswerving conviction that there is no condemnation for those found in Christ (Romans

8:1). God is not vindictively punishing his covenant people; he is no heavenly slave master. But neither is he a spiritual Santa Claus, with a dreary benevolence that blesses his people despite their straying affections. With gentle severity, the Lord will draw us away from the world and toward himself. If we have held too tightly to the world, pain will accompany the process of prying us loose.

Beyond this, we know one thing for sure: if we are members of God's family, hardship is for purification and not for destruction. This point becomes abundantly clear in any examination of Isaiah's prophecy. We do not have sufficient space to parse this out, but Isaiah's "remnant theology" identifies God's primary purpose in judgment. It is for the destruction of the wicked and for the purification of the righteous. Consider Isaiah 10:33—11:3, in which God oversees the destruction of Assyria – pictured in symbolic terms of divine deforestation – and meanwhile superintends the preservation of the righteous – pictured in terms of the "shoot" that shows the vitality of Jesse's stump and the "Branch" that bears fruit.<sup>1</sup>

2. **The Unity of the Church:** others within the church have called for a greater degree of unity among the Body of Christ. This group suggests that God brought about the coronavirus to promote greater solidarity in the global church. The question being asked is very appropriate: when someone prays for unity, does God give a mystical sense of harmony or does He provide an opportunity to be unified? However we answer this question, we must not overlook the obvious point: namely, that God empowers all unity that the church experiences. We cannot realize oneness without the Spirit's presence or power. This power both serves and demands practical application; it enables an outworking of unity, a visible and tangible demonstration bringing glory to God.

Taking this point further, the Scriptures acknowledge that God's people are united *in* Christ because we have been united *to* Christ. Ephesians 2:11-22 expands the foundational truth of the believer's union with Christ (Ephesians 1:3-14; 2:1-10) and develops a striking implication: we are already united one to another because we are united to Christ. In other words, we do not work to build unity. Unity is already achieved because of the cross of Christ. Our work is to live in the unity that Christ has already secured. Our work is to live in light of spiritual realities. The divine passive in Ephesians 2:22 (you are "being built") is instructive. Just as God actively unites us to Christ, so also he actively unites us one to another. Our response (and it can be nothing more than mere response) is to enact, through submission to the Spirit's influence, the unity that has already been achieved on our behalf. The testimony of togetherness is like streams of living water in a dry and weary land.

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<sup>1</sup> We note here that "fruit" or "fruitfulness" is the biblical way of identifying the presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. On this point, see Galatians 5:22-25. The Messianic Branch of Isaiah 11:1 bears fruit to indicate that he is empowered by the Holy Spirit (Isaiah 11:2-3).

3. **The *Witness of the Church***: the gospel light shines brightest in the darkest of times. Here we recognize the Messianic Mission, embodied in the ministry of Christ and bequeathed to His disciples, both ancient and modern. Thus, others within the church have responded to the coronavirus pandemic by proclaiming the gospel. Where fear prevails, peace is a precious commodity. Where structures of security tumble down, solid ground is prized real estate.

I have often heard the prayer: “Thank you, Lord, for the freedom we have to *worship*.” And this prayer is very appropriate. But I have never heard the prayer: “Thank you, Lord, for the freedom we have to *witness*.” Brothers and sisters, we have been given a gift... a golden opportunity. Only let us not understand this gift to indicate our past failures. A defeatist attitude may result in continued apathy. Instead, let us embrace the gift as God’s grace that continually affords us chances to obey, to speak boldly, and to extend his love to hurting people.

4. **The *Apocalyptic Last Days***: the great and terrible Day of the Lord has come. This response is the cousin of the first: many have said that God is enacting apocalyptic judgment upon the world. The optimists among us will relate to responses 2 & 3 (unity & witness). The pessimists will lean toward responses 1 & 4 (apocalyptic judgment). This is part of human personality. My advice here would be to embrace a balance of all four perspectives. But let us first clarify the potential pitfalls of this fourth perspective. On the surface, we read the word “apocalyptic” to mean future cataclysmic events that shake the stars and set the world on fire. This is unfortunate. Biblical apocalyptic literature unveils heavenly purposes behind earthly events. It pulls back the curtain of the world in order to show what’s happening in heaven. Think here of Jesus’ parables: they invest earthly stories with heavenly (or spiritual) significance. The parables are a mythological example of the apocalyptic genre. As myths, they do not correspond with actual historical events, but only to the story Jesus tells.

Moving from parables to the prophets, we find ourselves moving from mythology to reality. The prophets offer insight about heavenly realities that stand behind the events of human history. Think here of Elisha’s prayer in 2 Kings 6:14-17.<sup>2</sup> The Lord responds to the prayer of the prophet, Elisha, and *opens the eyes* of his servant. God reveals (discloses, unveils, shows) his plans; the servant can now see and understand ultimate reality, how the spiritual realm interacts with earthly events. If we understand the COVID-19 pandemic as an apocalyptic event, we must search the Scriptures for the patterns by which God operates within human history, particularly during calamities. The church, in her responses outlined above, has almost

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<sup>2</sup> The passage reads, the king of Syria “sent horses and chariots and a great army, and they came by night and surrounded the city. <sup>15</sup> When the servant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. And the servant said, ‘Alas, my master! What shall we do?’ <sup>16</sup> He said, ‘Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.’ <sup>17</sup> Then Elisha prayed and said, ‘O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see.’ So the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha” (ESV).

subconsciously undertaken this task. She has instinctively looked behind the curtain to access the divine realm, to see what is *really* happening above and beyond physical sensory perception.

We must also clarify that the “last days” began in the First Century AD. One needs only to read Peter’s sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2) for confirmation. The unified testimony of the biblical authors affirms the same point: namely, that the “end times” or the “last days” have already begun. God has invaded human history – in the climactic life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ – to initiate the Final Act of the redemptive-historical drama. Thus, we experience an “already” though “not yet” tension in life. The Kingdom of God was established by Jesus; at the same time, the Kingdom of God is extended by the Spirit through the followers of Jesus. The victory of Christ has been realized; at the same time, the implications of Christ’s victory are being applied by the Spirit to the hearts of God’s people. Living in the “last days” means that we will experience cycles of external hardship – because the Kingdom has yet to be fully consummated – alongside lasting internal peace – because the Kingdom has already been established in our hearts. We experience transcendent peace because the spiritual effects of sin have been overcome (Romans 5:1); however, we still experience suffering because the physical effects of sin have yet to be overcome completely (2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 4:17-18).

When we understand the apocalyptic genre of the Bible in this way, alongside a revised understanding of the “last days,” we see this fourth response in a new light. During these “last days,” the purposes of God are being unveiled. In these times, we come to recognize his sovereignty and mercy. In these times, we are compelled by the prophetic commission to proclaim the truth in love. The biblical story has pulled back the curtain of reality in order to show us several unchanging purposes of God. We can confidently know and teach these apocalyptic insights. But we should never expect to know God’s plan perfectly; neither should we expect a life devoid of suffering... not yet, anyway.

We want to identify the unchanging purposes of God. Before doing so, we should pause and reflect on how we might embrace a balance of the four responses highlighted above. How can we blend judgment, unity, witness, and apocalyptic unveiling? The answer, I believe, has something to do with humility. Think about the honest self-assessment we promoted in response #1; God may be pointing to an area of idolatry in our lives. It takes humility to admit our faults and submit to God’s purifying work. Without humility, this perspective turns outward: “God is judging *you!*” or “God is judging the *world!*” We embrace a self-righteous posture that leads us into self-delusion. However, in humility, we may rightly see the global pandemic as the judgment of God – first and foremost upon our own forms of idolatry.

Remember the unity of the church from response #2; God has already unified his people. It takes humility to enact oneness, to live in harmony, and to demonstrate a willingness to submit to one another. This becomes particularly true when stronger members of a community practice conscious and intentional self-limitation on account of vulnerable

members. Self-sacrifice for the sake of others follows the example of Christ. Coupled with humility, this self-limitation avoids the obvious trap of boasting. In this way, we may rightly see the global pandemic as God's desire to promote unity in the church.

Consider our witness from response #3; God has given the church a golden opportunity to speak the truth in love. Without humility, however, our gospel proclamation comes across as arrogant superiority. Believers still struggle with fear – yet they have been given strength to overcome it. Believers still wrestle with doubt – yet they have been given peace that transcends all understanding. We need not pretend. We may be honest that coronavirus brings occasional anxiety, fear, and struggle. Our humility here opens the door for God's work to be magnified; when we are weak, the Lord is strong!

Finally, recall the nature of apocalyptic unveiling from response #4; God is revealing his purposes in these "last days." Beyond the general principles we will highlight in part 2, we may not know the specific purposes of God in the current crisis. It takes humility to trust God even when we do not understand his work, his ways, his purposes, or plans. When our sight fails to penetrate the foggy shroud of eternity, we may rest in the knowledge that God is good; he is always doing what is best for us. And this is enough. But it also takes humility to explain God's purposes to those with less insight. Instead of condemning their lack of vision, we must help them see the truth and be comforted (or confronted) by Scripture (and not us).

In all these ways, we may embrace with proper balance and understanding, the four main responses to COVID-19. In triumph and tragedy, in peace and in hardship, may the grace of God guard our hearts!