

Though He Slay Me, Yet Will I Trust Him (Job 13:15)
A Theological Response to the Coronavirus Pandemic: Part 2 of 3
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In the previous discussion, we evaluated the most common responses among believers to the coronavirus pandemic. There we attempted to strike a healthy balance between lethargic “cruise-control” and manic “pedal-to-the-metal” lifestyles. We also attempted to embrace the four most common responses (judgment, unity, witness, and apocalypse) in terms of humility. At *all* times – not just in hardships, and especially in normalcy – we must engage in humble self-evaluation, submissive and other-centered self-limitation, respectful gospel proclamation, and God honoring apocalyptic unveiling.

It is with reference to this final principle – the apocalyptic “last days” – that we upheld the belief that God reveals, in Scripture, various unchanging purposes behind all that he does. It is in recognizing these purposes that we begin to assemble the fragments of a transcendent worldview, a way of perceiving the events of history and a way of “being” in the world that identifies us as aliens and strangers. We begin to think and behave in certain ways because we are foreigners; we do not belong to this world. Thus, our task in this discussion is a worldview task as much as it is a theological one. Our goal will be to identify a few of God’s unchanging purposes, develop some practical implications, and subversively undercut prevailing worldview commitments in order to bring them – by the transforming work of the Holy Spirit – into conformity with God’s Word.

The Unchanging Purposes of God

1. *The Glory of God*: the first unchanging purpose of God in everything that happens is the manifestation of his divine glory. The prophet Habakkuk envisions a future time in which the “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (2:14, ESV). The issue is not glory, but knowledge. The glory of the Lord is manifestly present, but mankind is ignorant of it. Fallen human beings are not instinctively aware of God’s glory. This signals an important point: natural sight is insufficient for gaining knowledge of ultimate reality. Seeing the glory of God requires the divine gifts of spiritual vision and insight, gifts that were given to the prophet Isaiah. In chapter 6 of his prophecy, Isaiah hears the angelic chorus singing, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isaiah 6:3, NIV). The glory of God is eminently real; it may be perceived by those empowered to see it. Gradually, and successfully, the Lord reveals his glory by giving spiritual sight to his people.

But what about the manifestation of glory as the underlying purpose of all that happens? The answer here relates to God’s sovereignty. As the Lord exerts unrivalled control over the events of human history, he reveals his glory in unparalleled authority. The answer also relates to God’s holiness. As the Lord displays total devotion (holiness) to himself in faithful covenant keeping, his glory is unveiled. Thus, when God exerts his sovereign and providential rule, his glory is manifest among the nations. Additionally, as

God remains faithful to his covenant promises (in holiness), his glory is made known among the peoples of the earth.

The pattern emerges within the historical life-cycle of Old Testament Israel and is nowhere more powerfully evident than in Isaiah 43. *Take a moment to read the entire chapter and then return to the discussion.* God's providential care over Israel is in clear view. God had created (formed) Israel in the call of Abraham (see Genesis 12ff; note, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob/Israel).¹ He had redeemed his people from Egypt – they had passed through the waters (43:2). He would redeem them from Assyria – they would pass through the rivers (43:2; see also Isaiah 8:7-8 for Assyria as a “River”). He would further redeem them from Babylon – they would walk through the fire and not be burned (43:2; see also Daniel 3:16ff for the fiery furnace account).

Why did God create his people? Why would God deliver them? Isaiah 43:7 says that it is for his glory (see also 43:21). Why did God foretell these events? Isaiah 42:8-9 says that it is for his glory; the LORD had revealed his plans beforehand – and would then bring them to pass – so that his glory might be seen in his sovereignty.

Additionally, we note a progression of apocalyptic unveiling in 43:10-13. Israel is the servant of Yahweh; the text indicates a “Master-slave” relationship, the implication of which is total subjugation to providential sovereignty. Israel is also the witness of Yahweh so that she might proclaim his glory; indeed, Yahweh had chosen her for this purpose. However, antecedent to her witness is worldview formulation (God chose her so that she might “know” and “believe” and “understand”). That which she believes and understands, she proclaims: namely, that God is totally unique (43:10), the only savior (43:11-12), the eternal God (43:13), and the sovereign ruler (43:13b). The Lord maintains absolute covenant faithfulness, commissions Israel to bear witness to it, and receives glory as a result. His glory is revealed in his holy devotion to himself, his purposes and covenant faithfulness.

When we recognize God's sovereign control, his glory is revealed. When we praise God for his holiness, his glory is manifest. Likewise, when Scripture speaks of God's sovereignty and holiness, it speaks implicitly about his glory. So if God exerts sovereignty over all earthly affairs and remains holy in his self-dedication, then his purpose is revealed: God brings glory to himself in everything that happens.

2. *The Victory of Christ*: the second unchanging purpose of God is to manifest the victory of Christ, through the process of bringing everything into subjection under him (1st Corinthians 15:25-28; Hebrews 2:6-9). We must be careful with the Hebrews passage. The author quotes Psalm 8:4-6, which speaks about the special place of humanity within

¹ Also note here that “Jacob” and “Israel” are in parallel lines of Isaiah 43:1a. As a general rule, when we observe this feature of Isaiah, we should know that it is a reference to covenant Israel (or, the faithful remnant of Israel). Thus, there is a kind of double meaning behind words like “redeem, ransom, created, and formed.” On the one hand, God had formed, created, ransomed, and redeemed all ethnic Israel (physically, as in their redemption from Egypt). On the other hand, only the righteous remnant would be formed, created, ransomed and redeemed (spiritually, as in their redemption from sin and death).

God's creation. In Psalm 8:4, the first phrase – “What is man that you are mindful of him...” – points to humanity in general while the second phrase – “... the son of man, that you care for him?” – refers to a specific individual within the human race. Simply put, then, mankind (in general) was created to have providential control/dominion over the earth as vice-regents, under the supreme authority of God as his ruling representatives (see Genesis 1:26-30). Because of sin, this providential dominion was lost. In time, and according to God's plan of cosmic renewal, there would come one specific “son of man” to restore creational order and perfection. He would subdue and rule over the earth.

So Hebrews 2:8, speaking of humanity in general, says two things: (1) God gave total dominion to mankind so that they might rule over the earth (2:8a); and (2) that one of the effects of Adam's sin was the forfeiture of representative rule (2:8b). We do not see everything in subjection to humanity. But we see Jesus (2:9)! The great “Son of Man” is enthroned and his kingly reign has begun. He has conquered sin and death. He has overcome the enemy and is now crowned with glory and honor. The kingdom of God is established and the victory of Christ is final. He has been resurrected to an indestructible life. As a result, Jesus Christ is the first man of the new creation. He is the representative – as Adam had been in the first creation – of all those created according to his pattern (Romans 5:12-21). Adam was representative of all *physical* creation; Jesus is representative of all *spiritual* creation (who experience new birth; John 3:3). However, with all biblical eschatology, we must be careful to recognize the “already” and “not yet” or “not fully” dimensions of God's kingdom. The *spiritual* effects of Christ's victory have *already* been established: for example, spiritual death (eternal separation from God) is defeated as sin is eradicated, cleansed from the hearts of God's people. The *physical* effects of Christ's victory have *not yet been fully* realized: for example, physical death still occurs even though spiritual life is unending.²

The Hebrews passage teaches that Jesus is fully in control now. Due to the spiritual nature of his victory and reign, the spiritual elements of the new creation are accomplished. However, the physical realities of the new creation have not yet fully come to pass. One such physical reality is that new humanity (the saints, in general) will regain providential dominion over the new earth. Because this is “not yet,” there are worldly events – like viral pandemics – that are outside the control of humanity (in general) even though they are presently subjected to Jesus' sovereign rule. Thus, Hebrews 2:8 maintains, “At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him” (ESV). This interpretation rings true if “him” refers to humanity in general.

² On this point, see Jesus' statement, “I am the resurrection and the life” in the context of John 11:25-26. Jesus says, “I am the resurrection” and explains what it means: “He who believes in me will live (spiritually), even though he dies (physically).” He also says, “I am the life” and explains what it means: “Whoever lives and believes in me (physical AND spiritual life) will never die (spiritually).” Therefore, “I am the resurrection” means that Jesus will raise physical bodies at the singular last day, the judgment (see John 5:24-25; 6:39-40, 44, 54); bodies will be raised and reunited with the soul/spirit that continued to live even after physical death. As well, “I am the life” means that Jesus has already given unending, spiritual life to God's people. They are alive. They believe in Christ. Their new (spiritual) life will never end.

If the referent of “him” is the Son of Man, we have a slightly altered interpretation. The difference between the “already” and the “not yet” in this interpretation hinges on human sight. The reason we do not yet *see* everything under divine control is that our vision of heaven is blurred and incomplete. Again, as with the eminent glory of God to which humanity presently remains ignorant, heavenly realities are true despite our flawed perception. We will come to *see* (*recognize*) the all-encompassing sovereignty of Christ as human history unfolds to confirm various events really were under his feet. As our ability to perceive heavenly realities develops, we will recognize the ultimate victory of Christ and its implications more and more clearly. As our worldview matures, we will acknowledge the reign of Christ even over events that seem to be out of control. May Elisha’s prayer fall afresh on us: “Oh Lord, open [our] eyes so [we] may see!” (2 Kings 6:17ff)

3. *The Peace of Christ*: another of God’s unchanging purposes is to promote the transcendent peace of Christ. As our worldview matures, we will not only *acknowledge* the reign of Christ in every event, but we will also find *comfort* in it. First, we observe the connection between the victory and resulting peace of Christ. In the upper room discourse of John’s Gospel, Jesus discloses his nearing departure. Peace is in short supply. But comfort will come in the form of the divine Spirit. As Jesus departs the world and is enthroned in heaven, peace is poured out as a result of the Spirit’s descent. The victory and reign of Christ directly correspond to the peace of his disciples, both ancient and modern (see John 14:27). Jesus is absolutely sovereign. Jesus is graciously benevolent. We find tremendous peace in the victory of Christ. And the quality of peace is discernable: while the world offers transient peace, Christ provides transcendent peace. One is shakable; it is dependent upon external factors. The other is solid ground; it is independent of external factors because of its spiritual (therefore, internal) nature.

At both the inception (John 14:27) and the benediction (John 16:33) of Jesus’ discourse we find its main point: the issue of peace. As we have seen, Jesus speaks of his return to the Father (16:28); it will involve a coronation ceremony during which his reign will be established. But he must first destroy the dark powers of evil, of sin, and of death, by which the enemy enslaves unregenerate humanity to fear (Hebrews 2:14-15). First comes his victorious death, then his victorious exaltation and enthronement. What follows for the people of God is sheer joy. Surely they will have hardships in the world, but their Lord has overcome the world (at the cross). Therefore, they do not lose heart. One more worthy note on John 16:33 bears mentioning: namely, that peace is experienced through union with Christ. Since we have been united to Christ, we experience the peace of Christ.

So we have observed the connection between the victory and resulting peace of Christ in the Gospel of John. Now we encounter the same blessing of peace through spiritual union with Christ in Philippians 4:6-7. Both passages use similar language: “in me” (John 16:33) and “in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7). In fact, Pauline theology may be less about justification and more about union with Christ. In terms of the present

discussion, we observe several features in the Philippians passage. First, the peace of God is effected in the human heart by union with Christ. We have alluded to this point already. Second, this divine peace guards our hearts and minds. Once more, the “already, not yet” distinction clarifies a possible misunderstanding. If peace guards our hearts and minds, why do we feel troubled? Why do we face fears and fight anxiety? In the “already” period of the believer’s life, belief and behavior are sometime incongruous. However, he has been given a deposit or down-payment. The Holy Spirit guarantees that God’s good work in us will be brought to completion. In other words, we ought to expect normal reactions of fear and worry to be gradually and increasingly displaced by peace and assurance. The displacement is not instantaneous. But it is ultimately assured according to God’s unfailing promises. The “not yet” period of the believer’s life will be defined by perfect peace and unending joy. Just like a mustard seed or new investment account, faith starts small and grows unto maturity.

Thus, in the present day, our hearts and minds (together, the locus of worldview formulation) are guarded by transcendent peace. Fears may surface, but they will not suffocate. Anxiety flares up, but does not consume. Two concepts work together here: peace and transcendence. Because the *peace* of God *transcends* our physical perception, we are not enslaved to sensory data. We need not worry about what we see with our physical eyes. We do not need to panic about what we hear with our physical ears. Why not? Because ultimate reality lies beyond what sensory data suggests. Ultimate reality – transcendent reality – is not apprehended by sight, smell, taste, and touch. It is apprehended by the Spirit of God.

In another of Paul’s earlier letters, he indicates that believers “have the mind of Christ” (1st Corinthians 2:16, NIV). Along with the gift of the Spirit, and because we now live the very life of Christ in our bodies (Galatians 2:20), we have been given the mind of Jesus. What does this mean? Does Jesus link up with my mental hard drive and Bluetooth files labeled “divine” or “sanctified” into my subconscious? Probably not. However, because we are living the very life of Christ, we have been given Jesus’ own mindset. We progressively think more and more like he thought. We progressively behave more and more as he behaved. In other words, our worldview morphs from its current worldly and sensory mode to a transcendent one.

One seminal doctrine emerging organically from the soil of the New Testament Gospels is called “Spirit Christology.” In my classroom, I teach the doctrine as follows: Jesus is our ultimate example of living the godly life (to be sure, he is *more* than a mere example, but certainly not less). As such, we desire to imitate his life and worldview orientation. We notice immediately his complete submission to the will of God (John 5:19). We also see his complete dependence upon the power of the Spirit (Luke 4:14). In the immediate context, note the progression: baptism and Spirit (3:22), Spirit and power (4:1; temptation overcome), Spirit and power (4:14; Jesus’ public ministry initiated). Jesus received the Spirit in baptism. He was totally dependent upon the Spirit’s power to resist temptation and repel the enemy. Likewise, Jesus was empowered by the Spirit throughout his public ministry. As our worldview

commitments and resultant behavior mature into Christ-likeness, we expect increasing submission to the will of God and increasing dependence upon the power of the Spirit. We may also expect a prevailing, guarding, governing, and transcendent peace.

4. *The Grace of Christ, the Love of God, and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit*: we must be brief and somewhat limited here. As Paul offers his final greetings to the church at Corinth (2nd Corinthians 13:14), he does so by announcing three unchanging and controlling principles. First, he extends the grace of Christ to them. In the midst of hardship, grace sustains. In the face of fear, grace prevails. In confronting sin, grace overcomes. The Apostle Paul knew this all too well; for, in his own experience with suffering, the Lord's word to him said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2nd Corinthians 12:9, NIV). But is God's grace permanent? The progressive unfolding of biblical covenants shows, at every point of human failure, God's response is to pour out grace. Also, in biblical salvation, we cannot boast about creating and sustaining what grace alone creates and sustains. In other words, if salvation is about grace from first to last; and if salvation is permanent, never to be lost, then grace is also permanent. God's grace never changes; it sustains his people's faith until faith is turned to sight.

Next, the Apostle Paul holds out the love of God to the Corinthians. A few years later, while in Corinth and writing to the church in Rome, Paul proclaims an enduring truth: nothing shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. The emphatic use of polar opposites (death or life, angels or demons, present or future) determines that nothing in all creation is powerful enough to separate God's people from his love (Romans 8:37-39). Believers are eternally and irreversibly surrounded by the arms of the loving Father. Finally, Paul proffers the fellowship of the Holy Spirit to the saints in Corinth. One feature that distinguishes the New Covenant age of redemptive history from those that preceded it is the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We may read (or even sing) the words of Psalm 51:11, "Cast me not away from thy presence, oh Lord; take not thy Holy Spirit from me." While this makes a good melody, it fails to correspond to New Covenant realities. Thus, in the backs of our minds, we should be thinking... *Lord God, thank you that you never take your Spirit away from me.*

In light of these controlling principles, we may have unbroken fellowship despite social distancing. We may experience endless love during self-isolation. We may receive lasting grace and peace in times of enforced lockdown. Therefore, "may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all," evermore. Amen.

The Implications of God's Unchanging Purposes

We know that God will be glorified in all things, including coronavirus. This is because his sovereignty and holiness will be revealed along the way. We know that Christ is victorious over sin and death and, as a result, his peace reigns in our hearts and minds. We are assured that the grace of Christ sustains us, the love of God envelopes us, and the fellowship of the Spirit

revives us. These things are true for the saints, chosen by God, reconciled to God in the death of Christ, and cleansed and sealed by the power of the Holy Spirit. However, these truths do not permeate the lives of unbelievers nor do they define or govern pagan worldviews. Because we are riverbeds – and not reservoirs – of divine blessing, we must not allow the waters of grace, love, peace, or fellowship to stagnate as if we were its intended terminus.

The Apostle Paul provides very practical advice in this regard. Returning again to 2nd Corinthians, we read,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵ For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too (1:3-5, ESV).

Reservoirs of comfort would allow divine blessing to reach them and move no further. But we are riverbeds, channels, conduits of divine blessing. Therefore, we experience comfort and, in turn, provide comfort for the afflicted. Affliction takes on various forms: physical, mental, sociological, psychological, and so forth. The point is not to define the affliction or even to explain why it exists – we may not have access to this information. Nevertheless, we may provide comfort that transcends human ability to explain or ease suffering. If you cannot explain why God brings about global pandemics, you can certainly hold out confident hope. Or, perhaps you can explain *that* God will be glorified in the coronavirus outbreak, but cannot understand *how* he will be glorified. Simply trust in the revealed Word of God and move outside yourself to provide encouragement and comfort. Therefore, the first implication of our ongoing discussion is to be missional in our lives of faith. Let there be an outworking of our theology, an others-centered missiology married to our doctrinal convictions.

The second implication involves our salvation. Being aware of the heavenly realm helps us in two ways: it strengthens our faith and serves our perseverance. We will very briefly examine the purpose of Hebrews 12:1-3. There are three “let us” statements that provide textual infrastructure and move from a foundation in point #1 to a climax in point #3. First, the author points back to the real-world biblical examples of Abraham, Moses, and others from chapter 11. Incidentally, in part 3 of our ongoing conversation we will spend significant time referring to chapter 11 as well. For now, the exemplars of faith motivate the contemporary readers. Their inspirational lives serve as the backdrop of the first “let us” statement: “let us throw off everything that hinders... the sin that so easily entangles.” Strong, persevering faith avoids sinful patterns. The author of Hebrews makes the same connection. We are to throw off sinful entanglements so that we may persevere. This is the second “let us” statement: “let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”³ But how do we avoid sin and thereby persevere?

³ I am keenly interested in perseverance; but I am also aware of divine determinism here. Note that we persevere in the race *marked out for us*. Jesus models the new creational life for God's people, perfectly submitted to the Father's will and perfectly dependent on the Spirit's power. Therefore, running the race has nothing to do with human autonomy, free will, or self-determination; instead, it means “keeping in step with the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16-25), or walking according to the pre-ordained path. My working theory on divine determinism is that God holds out to His people a glorious vision of eternity. Knowing the future, believers then pursue the goal in willful

We “fix our eyes on Jesus.” The third, and climactic “let us” statement provides the means of accomplishing the other two. Note the divine pattern: a vision of eternal joy supplies strength for ultimate self-sacrifice and fuels perseverance. Jesus anticipates glorious vindication, endures hardship with perseverance in light of promised glory, and finally experiences the fulfillment of that which was promised him. Now consider how the divine pattern relates to us: we receive a biblical vision of eternal joy (Revelation 21:1-7); the glorious vision promotes self-sacrifice by extolling its ultimate outcome; the same vision fuels perseverance by unveiling heavenly purposes; believers then experience – and this is the substance of our hope – the final vindication of Christ because of their union with Him. Therefore, we fix our eyes on Jesus as the source and fulfillment of faith. We consider him so that we may not “grow weary and lose heart” (12:3). His perfectly obedient life (righteousness) is the basis of faith; his exaltation means the fulfillment of faith. As we are united to Christ, we are united to his immaculate faithfulness (his faith is the source of our faith), his death to sin, his new creational life, and his glorious exaltation (his reign ensures the fulfillment of our faith).

The Transformation of Worldview

Inasmuch as we have presented biblical truth; and inasmuch as truth is transformative, then we have hopefully begun to notice worldview transformation even in the process of reading this article. We are no longer dismayed by suffering; instead, we know it achieves an eternal purpose. We are no longer married to this world; instead, we know our citizenship is in heaven. As such, we are people of the new creation (the renewed heavens and earth), not of the former creation. We are no longer enticed by worldly comforts; instead, we recognize the divine pattern: vision of glory – perseverance in suffering – realization of glory. In this world we will have trouble. Our comfort is in Christ and his decisive victory. We are no longer mindful of personal rights; instead, we lay them down in submission to God’s will. We are no longer militant about self-preservation; instead, we lay down our very lives in self-sacrifice. This discussion shapes worldview by insisting that our gaze be drawn upward, heavenward, to the transcendent spiritual realm of ultimate existence, to the glorious and exalted Christ, and to the eternal purposes of God.

One question remains: what does a transformed worldview look like in real life? How does a transcendent worldview manifest itself in the actions and attitudes, the thoughts and perspectives of those possessing it? In our final discussion (part 3), we will highlight various examples of the biblical worldview. As we might expect, it is often most clearly revealed in the midst of suffering. Therefore, we will examine the lives and circumstances of those who

submission to rugged determinism. They effectively say, “If such a glorious future awaits me, I will walk the pre-ordained path that assuredly leads me there.” God does not depend on human willingness to achieve his purposes, but nevertheless inclines (or compels) the human will toward complete self-abandonment to prevent a robotic relationship. God determines the human path (Romans 8:28-30, for believers: God relationally foreknows, unconditionally predestines, radically conforms to the image of Christ, effectually calls, graciously justifies, and presently glorifies them; as in, believers exist on earth and are seated with Christ in heaven... *at the same time* – Ephesians 2:6). For our part, we gladly and freely walk according to divine determinism; the heavenly glory is so compelling that we have no choice, nor would we want a choice if it meant the possibility of failing to attain it.

suffered in order to see how they remained faithful to God. Their hardship was not a stumbling block, but a launching pad. They did not trip over it and fall; rather, they embraced God's will and walked forward in provocative, counter-cultural demonstrations of faith.