

# God & Covid-19

## Seeking Biblical answers to five common questions

This corona crisis affects all of us in different ways. Some are feeling tired of being quarantined or are losing patience with their bored children. Others are in hospitals, struggling themselves or helping those who find it difficult to breathe. Where is God in this crisis? What is an appropriate way to talk about our experience with Covid-19? We can learn from how the Lord Jesus dealt with a family disaster as described in John 11. Lazarus had died. When Jesus arrived, Martha went out to meet Him. "Lord" she said "if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (11:21). What follows is a theological discussion that ended with a deep revelation: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die" (11:25). Then Mary arrived. She fell at Jesus' feet. She expressed her pain and frustration with the exact same words as her sister Martha (11:32). Towards Mary the response of Jesus was different. "He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled." And then, "Jesus wept" (11:35). That is what Mary needed to see: the tears of her Master. Which is more important: the theological or the pastoral approach? Clearly both are. But we need sensitivity and the Lord's guidance to know which approach is needed in each situation.

A sentence in an article I read last week made me stop and think: 'In times of crisis, we desperately need good Biblical theology'. My thoughts went back to 2010 when our son spent 6 weeks in Intensive Care after a complicated heart surgery. In those days I received many emails. One was from a desperate Christian woman I have never met. Her 10-year-old son also had a complex heart condition. God had repeatedly told her that He was going to glorify Himself by healing her son. This was confirmed by many encouraging remarks, Bible texts and prophetic messages from Christian friends and from her church. Her son had died in hospital. She now felt numb and very alone. 'In one day', she wrote, 'I have lost my son and my God. How can I believe in a God who says He loves me and then allows my son to die? How can I trust in a God who does not do what He says He will do?' I have never forgotten that email exchange. The way we understand God determines our expectations and colours the way we look at life. It can strengthen our faith or break it. It is true, in times of crisis, we desperately need good Biblical theology!

### 1. Can a plague come from God's hand?

An often-repeated line of thought is, 'a sickness or plague do not fit in with the character of God. So, these can never come from His hand'. Jesus explained to his disciples that not even a sparrow would "fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father" (Mat. 10:29). What was the lesson? That Father God is sovereign, that He is involved in every aspect of life. Our experience with Covid-19 is new for all of us, but plagues have been around for many years. What does the Bible say about God and plagues? Words like 'plague', 'pestilence' and 'contagious disease' appear many times in Scripture. Like it or not, we discover that plagues are also connected in some way to God's will.

We are familiar with the 10 plagues brought on Egypt in the time of Moses. Plagues of frogs, flies, grasshoppers and hailstones. Two of the plagues also involved sickness, on livestock

(Ex. 9:1) and also on human beings (Ex. 9:8). All these plagues came from God's hand. The Lord encouraged the Israelites to be faithful to their covenant, and warned them of the cost of disobedience: "And I will bring the sword upon you to avenge the breaking of the covenant... I will send a plague among you..." (Lev. 26:25). Scripture makes it clear that sometimes God allows plagues, and that sometimes they even come from His good, wise and righteous hand. We do well to include this Biblical fact into our 'understanding of God.'

## 2. Can a plague be a judgment of God?

In Numbers 16 we read of a large revolt against the authority of Moses and Aaron. This was a rebellion against the God appointed leadership of Israel. The Lord God showed His displeasure by sending a plague among them which killed 14,700 people (16:46-50). In 2 Samuel 24 we read about God's response to one of David's sins. He sent a prophet named Gad with a very odd offer. David was asked to choose between three punishments: some years of famine, three months of persecution or 3 days of plague. David chose the last. "So the LORD sent a plague on Israel from that morning until the end of the time designated, and seventy thousand of the people from Dan to Beersheba died" (24:15). This story is repeated in 1 Chronicles 21, where 'the plague' is referred to as "the sword of the Lord" (21:12).

Given this connection with judgement, it was common for Jews to think that *personal* sickness was connected with *personal* sin, a thought that remains alive in some quarters even today. The friends of Job were convinced Job faced such disaster because he had sinned in some way. Scripture informs us that, with God's permission, Satan was responsible for Job's sufferings.<sup>1</sup> When they met a blind man on the way, the disciples asked Jesus "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? Neither this man nor his parents sinned, said Jesus, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life" (John 9:2-3). Since the events of Genesis 3 we live in a fallen world. Sickness, plagues and natural disasters are connected to sin, but sin *generally*. When God says that a sickness or a plague is a *judgement* on a particular person (like Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5) or on a group of people (1 Cor. 11:23-32), then we know this is the case. But when God does not reveal such a purpose, be very cautious in expressing your opinion. In doing so you can cause a lot of harm. Remember that we live today in a time of grace and not of judgment, a time where God is patient with us all, "not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

## 3. Can Covid-19 be seen as a sign of the end times?

In Luke 21 the Lord Jesus gave some indications concerning the end of the age. He spoke about wars and "great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven" (21:10-11). In his second letter to Timothy, the apostle Paul describes the "last days", listing characteristics like: "People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy..." (3:1-2). We see many of these attitudes around us today. Where should we place these 'last day'? The letter to the Hebrews begins by telling us that in the past God spoke "at many times and in various ways, but in these *last days* he has spoken to us by his Son" (1:1-2). If these 'last days' represent the time between the first and the second coming of Christ, we are currently living in the end phase of these last days.

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<sup>1</sup> Creation became fractured after we rejected God. Satan tempted. Adam and Eve sinned. Because of sin God cursed His creation (Gen. 3:17-18) and subjected it to frustration: "For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope" (Rom. 8:20). But there is hope. With God there is always hope: redemption and restoration have always been part of God's plan.

Covid-19 shows us that world-wide plagues such as described in Revelation can happen. Covid-19, just like wars, earthquakes, increasing materialism, greed, pride and immorality also remind us that the end is near. It is easy to be so engaged with life on earth that we forget that our days on earth are limited and that we may use them to store up “treasures in heaven” (Mat. 6:20). The words of Jesus still hold true: “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” (John 14:3). As we approach the end, the heart of the Christian need not fear. “The Spirit and the bride say, Come! And let him who hears say, Come!” And the Lord Jesus says “Yes, I am coming soon” (Rev. 22:17-20). Whatever may come our way, we face the future with hope and confidence. But we are warned against using events, like Covid-19, for calculating and suggesting dates: “No-one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mat. 24:36).

#### **4. Can a Christian die of Covid-19?**

Psalms 91 has always been a popular Psalm. Many families in South America have a large Bible in their living rooms, always open at this Psalm. Many believe it will bring protection to their homes. This beautiful Psalm begins with, “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.” Then follows a promise, “Surely He will save you from the fowler’s snare and from the deadly pestilence” (91:1-3). This reference to being saved from the *deadly pestilence* has made this Psalm even more popular today. Is this Psalm affirming that God will protect believers from Covid-19?

We must begin by reminding ourselves that this is a Jewish song, sung by the people of Israel. Did this Psalm mean that an Israelite would not die of a plague or pestilence? Not really. This is a good moment to recall that some of God’s promises are conditional, others not. For example, a number of times we are told that God automatically protected the Israelites from the plagues in Egypt (8:22; 9:4; 10:23). But for the last plague, the death of the first born, the Israelites were promised protection (Ex. 11:7) but only if they sacrificed a lamb and painted the door-frames of their house with its blood: “when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt” (Ex. 12:13). For this plague, God’s promise of protection was conditional. We have already seen that when the Israelites were unfaithful to their covenant promises, sometimes God would use a plague or pestilence to punish them or call them to repentance. Clearly, in Psalm 91 God was not promising the Israelites automatic and general protection.

We Christians, the people of the new covenant, also have been given fantastic promises. In his second letter the apostle Peter reminds his readers that God “has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature” (1:4). We are born again. We are reconciled with God. We have eternal life and will never be condemned (John 5:24). These promises rest on the finished work of Christ at Calvary. They are not conditional on our good behavior. But God has also given us conditional promises. For example, in Philippians 4:6-7 we find a lovely promise, that “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus”. Have you ever seen a stressed Christian? Most of us know what it is like to be stressed! Why isn’t God’s peace guarding our minds? This promise has a condition: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” And there lies our daily challenge! The death of Christ shows us, among other things, that He did not come to take away our pain. It shows us that He has joined us in our

pain. He knows how you and I feel. His resurrection is no guarantee that we cannot be infected by or die from Covid-19. It is a guarantee that we have eternal life. As a Canadian friend wrote to me last week, 'Disease can't harm us even if it kills us.' Its true! Think about it.

## **5. If God is speaking through this crisis, what is He saying?**

God speaks in different ways to different people at different times. God's normal way to speak to the Christian is through the Bible. That is why we call it 'Word of God'. As we read it and meditate on it, often God speaks to our hearts. But God can also speak through what we see in nature (Rom. 1:20), or through other people, or through a dream or some other special way (1 Cor. 14:1). Sometimes we face a difficult decision, and we would like God to speak like a GPS: 'at the next junction turn left...'. Yet we are encouraged to ask for wisdom, and use that wisdom to reach God honouring decisions (James 1:5). God can also speak through circumstances. Our God can do millions of different things at the same time! Surely God is speaking through this corona crisis, to different people in different ways. Maybe He is calling us all to take better care of this planet. To some unbelievers the Lord is perhaps reminding them how vulnerable they are, that they are less in control of their lives than what they think, that death is inevitable - intelligent people usually prepare for the inevitable. In this crisis many may feel their emptiness, and then seek and find Him.

Through this crisis God may also be speaking to many Christians and churches, pressing on them the need to improve their theology: to view Father God as revealed in Scripture, and not as they wish He was based on selective Bible texts and a host of personal stories. Such a 'self-made' God does not exist. Trusting such a 'self-made' God is bound to disappoint. Some will become aware that their health, comfort and material prosperity are not God's central priority. Christ is central and we are secondary. We are created for His glory. Perhaps through our struggles we will learn to trust Him in the midst of disaster, and develop an inner tenacity like that of Job, who in the middle of his crisis said, "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him" (Job 13:15). Perhaps God is seeking to speak to you personally. This crisis can be your call to make more time to seek the Lord's face, to dig deeper in His Word, to forgive someone or work at restoring a broken relationship. It may be God's call to you to confess a sin and to distance yourself from it (2 Chron. 7:14). For some, the Lord may be seeking to loosen their connection to their current work or career, to make them willing to consider a missionary calling or be open to something new. Like young Samuel, perhaps we would all do well to take Eli's advice to heart and regularly pray, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening" (1 Sam. 3:9).

## **Conclusion**

Our newspapers and news channels are full of Covid-19 related news. It is becoming tiresome. For some, fear is entering their hearts. If that is your experience, you may benefit from reading and meditating on Psalms 23 and 46. Jesus himself said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me" (John 14:1). It is a conscious choice, to trust in Him, in His presence with us, in His promises. Through our sufferings and also through this world crisis God is working out His numerous purposes. And when we live those difficult days, "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Heb. 4:16).

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