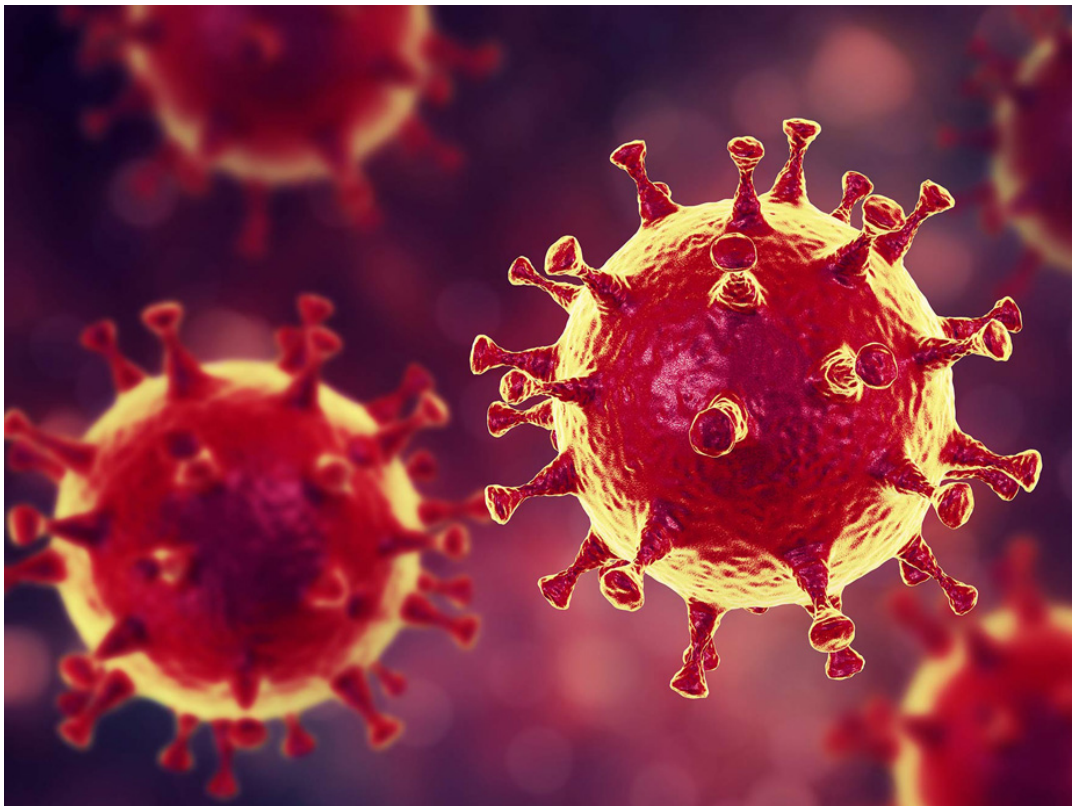
Is the Coronavirus Pandemic a Judgment from God? Things I Know.

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A friend of mine tweeted a poll with this question: "Is it right to call the pandemic divine judgment?" I didn't participate in the poll, but it's a question I've been thinking a bit about. I know this blog is about faith and culture, but right now, people of faith *and* culture-creators are fixated on this virus that is making its way across the globe leaving death and overtaxed health systems in its wake. Seems appropriate to discuss it here.

So, short answer first: I. Don't. Know. But here are some things I do know.

1. Coronavirus is not part of God's original intention for his creation. God created the world *very* good (Genesis 1:31). It's hard to know whether this very good original creation included violence of any sort (sabertooth tigers had those pre-Fall teeth for a reason). That's another debate. But its safe to say that human death was not part of the original plan. Human death came into the world with the rebellion of our first parents (Genesis 3). COVID-19 is a bringer of death, part of the cosmic ruin that happened when the human race fell. Our fate and the fate of creation are mysteriously intertwined, and creation waits, groaning, for us to be set free. With our freedom from death comes the creation's freedom from its "bondage to decay" (see Romans 8:19-22). Coronavirus is part of that prison-sentence of decay imposed on creation due to our sin.

2. Coronavirus is not outside of God's control. The fact that sickness and death are not God's original intention does not mean that COVID-19 is out of God's control. Jesus said that God knows about the details: sparrows falling, the exact number of hairs on your head. And so he urged us not to fear, for we are worth more than sparrows (Matthew 10:29-31). That means God not only knows, but is active in overseeing the details; he doesn't just know, but he acts, he is in control *over* the details. So as the pandemic ravages populations, it must be that it does so with at least God's permission. That's a sobering thought! (For the best treatment of God's sovereignty with respect to evil and suffering, see D. A. Carson's *How Long O Lord;* you can find an excerpt here:

http://www.bradleyggreen.com/attachments/article/234/Carson%20on%20Compatibilism.pdf [1] and a summary here: https://www.alisonmorgan.co.uk/Books/Carson%2006%20Suffering.pdf [2]

3. God has used evils to bring judgment on his people and the nations before. The Bible is filled with judgment narratives of how God used war, plague, drought and famine to humble both his people and surrounding nations who did not fear him. You can certainly see why some would see this as a judgment of God: he's in control of it, it's doing damage. Put 2 and 2 together... (I'm not going to go there exactly, but I get it).

4. Biblical judgments on whole societies did not discriminate between the good people and the bad. When an invading army came to punish Israel, the righteous perished alongside the evil and oppressive. When God unleashed something huge, all could get caught up in the tsunami of his wrath.

5. For God's people, death is not the final chapter. That has been seen to by Christ. Even if some of us die--and we will--that's not the worst thing that could happen. Jesus has *absorbed* God's wrath definitively (see Romans 8:1). He is our Passover Lamb; his blood has turned away the destroying angel (1 Corinthians 5:7). Even though we may die, we are not destroyed. In fact, death can be a blessing in the midst of judgment. Isaiah, predicting doom for Israel, says (57:1-2):

> The righteous perish, and no one takes it to heart; the devout are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil. Those who walk uprightly enter into peace; they find rest as they lie in death.

Yesterday was the one year anniversary of my mother's sudden death at 81. My son said, "It's good that she died before any of this hit." I replied, "Good that she died so she wouldn't have to die?" "Well, yeah, but without the suffering and pain of a lingering death at the hands of this virus." And he's right. Perhaps those who die in Christ will be spared the chaos or hardship of the rebuilding that will follow.

6. Still, death means pain for everyone involved. Though death is not the final word, it remains a curse. Families torn apart, loved ones ripped away from us. It's not...good. Ultimately, death remains a judgment on human sin, and it stings. Until, that is, Christ comes to remove its sting permanently (1 Corinthians 15:54-57). But for now, it's a harsh reminder that we live--all of us--under God's wrath (Psalm 90:5-9).

7. I do not know what God is doing through this pandemic. Listen, I do *not* want to be the guy to say to a grieving son or daughter, "Yeah, this whole thing was God's judgment, so they got what they deserved." That didn't work out so well for Job's friends. It comes off sounding callous, even malicious. The fact is, I'm no prophet and I've received no vision, and the Bible's perspective on judgment is nuanced and complex. Far be it from me (or any of us) to oversimplify the complex interweaving of God's wrath and mercy. If you want a taste of how complex, just check out Lamentations and how it climaxes in the middle of chapter 3. Or check out the ending of the book of Habakkuk, where his prophet waits for the invading army,

> I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled. Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us. Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights.

I do not feel competent saying, "Yes, God's judgment has come at last!" or "Well, this is just one of those things that happens." What I *do* feel competent to say is what I've said above. Also, I think

there is some helpful practical spiritual advice to be had in times like these.

8. Though we don't know if this is God's judgment, why not ask ourselves questions as if it were? After all, every man, woman, and child is alike under an ultimate death sentence. We are all going to suffer God's judgment against sin (Romans 6:23). The wrath of God *is* being revealed (Romans 1:18) in one way or another. So it makes sense to ask if we are involved in anything that God would find offensive. It's always the right time to consider repentance.

> He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8).

And I take the "walking humbly" to mean "walking in continual repentance" before God.

This is essentially the same advice Jesus gives to his audience in Luke 13:1-8. They wondered about current events: did tragedies like being murdered by the government or having a tower collapse on a group of Jews mean that God was extra angry at them? Jesus' response: "You think you're better? Repent or you likewise will die." And then he tells a story about an unproductive fig tree that's on the verge of being cut down, but the gardener begs the landowner for one more year for fertilizing it. If there is still no fruit, then chop away. Translation: We're all living on borrowed time, and we'd all better be living in repentance, producing the fruit of righteousness and justice that God desires.

It's always a good time to ask about repentance, but worldwide tragedies bring these questions home with force.

So ask yourself: Is there something in my personal life that offends God? How should I change course?

Since this virus is affecting whole societies, and has exposed the various ways the social system oppresses the poor, the outsiders, the vulnerable, we should ask collectively: Do our judicial, economic, and educational systems work for justice, or do they exalt some at the expense of others? Do some get ground underfoot, while others get rich exploiting the system?

And since this virus is a natural consequence of our use and abuse of the natural world, we should ask ourselves: Have we as a people treated creation the way we ought to? Have we been wise and faithful stewards of what God has given us in trust? Have we deafened ourselves to creation's groaning? (For an interesting take on how these pandemics may becoming the norm because of our treatment of the environment, see global health expert Alanna Shaikh's TED talk, "Coronavirus is Our Future," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fqw-9yMV0sI [3]

Some wish to point the finger at anyone but themselves. Yes, others have failed us, and they should be held to account, no doubt. But let us first seek to reckon with how *we* have failed, and how *we* need to change.

9. We can find our hope and peace in Christ. No matter how bad we've screwed up--personally, socially, environmentally--Christ is a refuge for those who repent. He is willing and able to forgive, to wipe the slate clean with God, and begin the process of healing and wholeness. In other words, in the midst of sorrow that drives us to repentance, there is an indefatigable hope. Find your hope and peace in Christ.

10. We must walk in wisdom. The end-goal of repentance is wisdom, a change of course that leads to health for the whole person, society, and planet. We have already seen how some nations have drastically changed course and how that has lessened the virus' impact. It happened in China, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Singapore, and (thank God) it seems to be happening in Italy. We're hoping that the rate of spread flattens for us in the Czech Republic, where we are currently on lockdown. And we have seen a predictable increase of the spread of the virus where the policy has been unwise, defying health experts' recommendations, and downplaying the virus' significance.

COVID-19 has amplified our choices Proverbs 9 style: follow wisdom, and health follows; follow folly, and death follows.

But even beyond the basics--stay at home, wash hands for 20 seconds, don't touch face, etc.--we are learning new paths of wisdom. Be kind to each other. Share, don't hoard. Figure out how to make do with less. Design social systems to serve people, even the most vulnerable. Value the elderly people around you and reach out to help them. Live at peace with nature, use it wisely.

It is up to us to learn from this era with the seriousness *as if it were God speaking judgment and warning through these events.* I'm not going to be the guy to say, "This *is* the judgment of God," but we ought to listen and change as if it were.

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