

What is God doing through coronavirus?

July 26, 2020 \* Langford Community Church \* Graham Gladstone

The question that we're going to look at today is one that I'm sure many of us have thought about in the last few months – *what is God doing through COVID-19? How does this fit into His plans for the world?*

That's a great question and admittedly one that I struggle a bit to answer. God's ways and purposes are just so far beyond my ability to comprehend that I'm not sure I can give you a perfectly accurate answer.

But, I CAN try to think about coronavirus in light what God's told us about Himself in the Bible and so I'm going to do that today – to think biblically about what God is doing through this pandemic.

Now, right off the bat, I think that there are two extremes that you can go to on this subject, but I'm not sure that either of them is right. At one end of the spectrum you have the idea that God was surprised by coronavirus – that this just came up out of nowhere and left Him scrambling to catch up, just like the rest of us. That's one extreme, the other extreme is to say that this is in fact punishment from God, sent by Him to pay us back for some heinous worldwide sin world that He just couldn't tolerate any longer.

Those are extremes and extremes I think we'd be wise to avoid. I mean, on one hand, God is never surprised. He knew what He was doing when He allowed coronavirus to attack; He knows when researchers will find a vaccine because He's leading them to it. He knows what He's doing from the beginning to the end and so it's just wrong to say that God had nothing to do with COVID-19. The NLT of Ephesians 1:11 puts it like this – '... he makes everything work out according to his plan. (Eph 1:10 NLT).' God allowed coronavirus to happen.

So that begs the question - why? If God was not surprised by coronavirus but in fact allowed it, why did He allow it? Is Coronavirus in fact some great punishment for sin? I've seen that idea online in a few places and it's certainly an idea that many Christians in the past have jumped to explain plagues and pandemics. It's possible, but I think that an English pastor, John Stevens, is right when he says:

"It is possible that the virus is a specific judgement from the Lord but, in the absence of any revelation to this effect, it seems unlikely. The impact of the virus is global, and it is hard to point to any specific sin that has prompted God to act in this way at this time. There are plenty of reasons why God might justifiably punish but none to suggest that this is a particular moment of his judgement."

<https://fiec.org.uk/resources/what-is-god-teaching-us-through-coronavirus>

So if coronavirus is not a surprise to God and it's not a punishment from God, what is it? How does it fit into God's plans for the world? There are so many ways to answer that question, but I'm going to focus on three. God is using COVID-19 to change the way that we think about Him, about ourselves and about the world. God is teaching us to rely on Him, to rethink our priorities, and to reorient ourselves to service. In a sense, you could say this about any trial, any illness, but I think that given the worldwide spread of COVID and the drastic measures we've taken to combat it, God is really pushing us here, as Christians and as people in the world, to rely on Him, to re-evaluate our priorities, and to reorient ourselves to service.

God is teaching us through COVID-19 to rely on Him.

April and May were scary times, weren't they? We had real concerns that we'd run out of hospital space, that funeral homes would be overwhelmed. I was quite concerned for Julie going in to care for people with COVID-19. I know that you had friends and family who were infected and some of you lost loved ones on account of it. The possibility of death through COVID was very real and real in a way that we're just not used to in our everyday hustle and bustle of life.

I think that God was using this moment to remind us of our own mortality and of our need for Him, grabbing our attention and saying 'listen, you need to rethink who you're ultimately trusting in here.' If you remember back to 2 Corinthians 1:8-9, Paul explained how he went through great pressure and terrible hardships that made him fear for his life and yet in verse nine he says – "this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead" (2Co 1:9 NIV). Paul didn't despise the hardship because he knew that it was teaching him to rely on the all-powerful God, rather than the only limited Paul. Trials taught him to rely on God and that's a lesson we need to learn too.

John Piper wrote a handy little book called Coronavirus and Christ – it's like \$4 on Kindle – and in it he writes -

"What God is doing in the coronavirus is showing us—graphically, painfully—that nothing in this world gives the security and satisfaction that we find in the infinite greatness and worth of Jesus. This global pandemic takes away our freedom of movement, our business activity, and our face-to-face relations. It takes away our security and our comfort. And, in the end, it may take away our lives. The reason God exposes us to such losses is to rouse us to rely on Christ" (Piper, Coronavirus and Christ, 82).

I think God is using this moment to teach us to rely on Him and to find that He is indeed faithful. When we're fighting an invisible enemy, when the shelves are empty, when the TP is gone, even at the graveside, God is there with strength for today and hope for tomorrow. He is using COVID-19 to remind us to rely on Him.

God is also using COVID-19 to cause us to re-evaluate our priorities.

I mean, there's nothing like a four month shut down to cause us to rethink what's important to us. We often get so caught up in the everyday details and detours of life that we hardly have a moment to stop and say 'is this really something that I want to do and give my time to? Am I really spending my effort and my interest on things that are important to me?' God though is giving us that moment right now.

My mom posted something on Facebook early on that said something like – 'In the rush to return to normal, let's stop and make sure the new normal lines up with what's valuable.' And I think that God is giving us an opportunity to do that through this pandemic.

It makes me think of one of the first video messages I did back in March – it was John 15:2 (remember – the vine and the branches) – I said: I wonder if God is cutting back the excess baggage on our lives so that we will be able to really focus on what matters. I wonder if we'll look back at this time and say – "wow, God knew what He was doing. He trimmed off the deadwood in our lives and we are even more fruitful because of it."

I think that God has been pruning us, rearranging our priorities, and if we allow Him to, reorienting our priorities to His.

And frankly, I think that God has been doing this not just in our lives but in our society too. It took a four month shut down to do it, but I think we understand now who the truly 'essential' workers are – not the people who command all the attention and the nine figure salaries – but the grocers and farmers and people who provide the necessities of life.

And I wonder if God has ordained this time to prompt a society wide conversation about race and equality. With so many other issues on hold, it seems that this one has come to the top and I wonder if God has used the coronavirus to make us think seriously about how we treat people of other races. I think that it has certainly led a lot of people to examine their own subconscious prejudices and that's good. And maybe it took being stuck inside for four months to get us there.

Whatever the case, God has been using this time to rearrange our priorities and to realign our priorities with His, both on a personal and societal level.

And speaking of that, I think that God is using COVID-19 to reorient us towards service.

We sometimes forget as people and as a church that we exist for the benefit of others. We are called to serve others the way that Christ serves us. In the midst of everyday life, when there's so much else going on, it's easy for service to get pushed to the back burner. But when there's nothing else going on, and when the need is so obviously and painfully clear, it reminds us that we have a call on our lives to serve others.

And I'll tell you, I'm really proud of how everyone stepped up to help prepare food for the Blessing Centre. I remember Mary saying she had to turn people away she had so much help. As a Board, we decided not to do a meal in July lest we burn people out on helping, but what do you think, give a nod if you think we could take on another meal?

And I know that many of you went shopping for others, dropped off groceries and gifts for people in need; I know that you have used this unique time to help other people and I think that that's exactly what God intended it for. Even wearing a mask is a question of service – it's not preventing you from getting sick but protecting others from getting sick, so even if it's uncomfortable, wearing a mask is a very tangible way to serve others and look out for their interests. As the world 'picks back up again,' we just need to be intentional about ensuring that we continue to serve others the way we have during COVID-19.

God has used COVID-19 to change the way that we think about Him, about ourselves and about the world. God has been teaching us to rely on Him, to rethink our priorities, and to reorient ourselves to service.

I think that there are many other things that God has been doing and I'm sure that God's plans here go well beyond my capacity to understand. But it's a good start I think and hopefully this will help you to think further about COVID-19 in light of what we know about God in the Bible.

Now, there is one more thing that I think we should mention and it's this – I suspect that God is drawing people nearer to Him. In the uncertainty of this time, I think that God is drawing people to Himself.

N. T. Wright also wrote a book about COVID and in it he says (somewhat facetiously) – “Now that everybody is thinking about death rather than wondering which cupcake to buy, perhaps there will be a massive turning to God” (*God and the Pandemic*, 5).

And I think it’s important for us to pray that whatever doors God has opened, whatever seeds God has planted, whatever willingness people have shown to think about God in the midst of this pandemic, I think that it’s important for us to pray that God would bring new life and new hope into all of those lives. So let’s do that as we conclude.

#### BENEDICTION

Phil. 4:7 - (May) the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, ... guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.