

## Sermon: [Asking the Wrong Question](#)

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What are we, as people of faith, to make of this global pandemic of COVID-19? Perhaps more importantly, what is *God's* role in all of this? Has, for example, this virus been *sent* by God as a means of divine judgement on the world? Now, you might instantly consider such thinking is sheer foolishness, but the question is asked in all seriousness. There are Christians who gain great comfort in believing that *whatever* happens in life, God is “in control” of everything. If that is indeed the case, then both small *and* big things – such as pandemics - are under divine control. It then logically follows that God must have a *purpose* for inflicting such an illness on the whole planet - hence the notion of divine *judgement*.<sup>1</sup> There *are* other ways to think about God's activity in the world, and I am only going to briefly touch upon this topic today, but while we live in the chaos and panic of this growing crisis, I think it's helpful just to pause for a moment and to identify our *own* attitudes *towards God* in such times of dire need.

In the Old Testament, the Jews believed that everything that happened was an act of God; God was therefore the source of both good *and* evil.<sup>2</sup> And let's face it, the plagues in Egypt at the time of Moses were interpreted as occurring directly under God's control. This pandemic is like a modern plague, and so it's not a ludicrous idea for Bible-believing-Christians to wonder if our present crisis has also been directly instigated by God. In the New Testament, however, some of our calamities were seen as a direct result of Satan's activity, rather than being from the hand of God; evidently attitudes were changing – not everything was attributed to God.<sup>3</sup> We also read of a popular Jewish idea that personal sickness and tragedy was some kind of punishment for *sin*. You still hear that same attitude today; when something bad happens to a person, they wonder if God is punishing them - or their loved-one - for something that they have done.<sup>4</sup>

At the heart of a Christian response to suffering is a consideration of the nature or character of God. The assumption that God is ultimately “in control” of everything arises from a prior belief in his omnipotence; God is deemed to be literally all-powerful yet how God exercises that power must be coherent or consistent with his character.<sup>5</sup> However, in the examples I mentioned earlier, we're left with a disciplinarian God who punishes sin on an individual and national scale, in keeping with that early

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<sup>1</sup> This generally follows from the Old Testament covenantal “blessings and curses” in Deut 28 and Lev 26.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: Isa 30:19–20; 45:5–7; 46:9–11; Lam 3:37–38; Job 1:21; 2:10; 42:11.

<sup>3</sup> See the Parable of the Weeds in Matt 13:24–30, 36–3. (This is explicitly in the context of kingdom of God activities.)

<sup>4</sup> Such questions and attitudes can be articulated in three big questions: What is the nature or character of God? What is the nature of God's creation? And, what is God's activity in the world? These are addressed in Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants*, (Cascade, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Personally, I believe that God's omnipotence is *not* absolute, but qualified; I am not alone in this view. For me, God's power cannot override human freewill, for that is an essential element of what it means to be made in the image of God. For God to do so, it would be inconsistent with his character/nature. (For “image of God” see Gen 1:26–27, where we also read God also *devolved* to humankind certain aspects of his power to be used responsibly as his agents.) Without freewill, we cannot *freely* choose to love or have faith, which among other things means we can't *freely respond* to God's love - something God highly desires. (Note the notion of freewill does not mean *all* our choices are freely chosen, but that some certainly are!)

Old Testament mindset. The famous story of Job, however, challenges that perspective, in that Job experiences suffering even though he had done nothing wrong; indeed, God *agrees* that Job did nothing wrong!<sup>6</sup> Consequently, we need to adapt our thinking accordingly and abandon the traditional notion that personal and national tragedies are a direct punishment for sin. As Christians, we believe that the character of God is most fully revealed in Jesus Christ, and therefore looking at how he approaches people with disability or facing major tragedies should tell us something about *God's* heart. The first thing we notice is that Jesus heals people! And that in itself should tell us that God desires to right the wrongs in the world, to bring good out of evil, and so let's abandon such a negative portrayal of God's character.

The lectionary reading today is the story of Jesus healing the man who was born blind in John 9.<sup>7</sup> Like the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well that we considered last week,<sup>8</sup> it is a narrative that gradually reveals the *identity* of Jesus from healer to prophet to "Son of Man" - which is a Messianic title.<sup>9</sup> The story also has the healed man proclaiming, "This one thing I *do* know, I *was* blind but *now* I see!"<sup>10</sup> and these words have been immortalised in the lyrics of the hymn, *Amazing Grace*. It's a wonderful story and I encourage you read it again for yourself. Today I simply want to focus on the opening question the disciples ask Jesus along with his reply. John writes: "Now as Jesus was passing by, he saw a man who had been blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who committed the sin that caused him to be born blind, this man or his parents?' Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but he was born blind so that the acts of God may be revealed through what happens to him.'"<sup>11</sup> The disciples' question presumes that the man's blindness *was* the cause of *someone's* sin, the question was *whose*! You might wonder how it could *possibly* be the sin of the man who was *born* blind. However, following the ancient story of the patriarchal twins, Jacob and Esau, whose later hatred of each other was linked to them fighting in Rebecca's womb,<sup>12</sup> some rabbis said that it was possible to sin even before you were born!<sup>13</sup> If that wasn't the case here, then what terrible things had the parents done!?<sup>14</sup> We can see that the disciples, like some Jews of their day, believed in a God who *punishes*. In Jesus' response, he implicitly *dismisses* that view. They are asking the *wrong* question. In this specific instance, this was an opportunity for God's mighty acts to be revealed in this tragic situation - for the blind to receive their sight, for darkness to be turned into light. The man's blindness was *not*, then, in

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<sup>6</sup> See Job 1:1,8. (Note that two of the calamities that killed his children were *natural* disasters.)

<sup>7</sup> John 9:1-41. (And the unit continues in John 10:1-21.) Note expectation that the blind would see again in Isa 29:18, 35:5.

<sup>8</sup> See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Jesus-Giver-of-Living-Water.pdf> .

<sup>9</sup> See John 9:7b,16,17b,22,35. John reveals many titles for Jesus his opening chapter and fleshed out their meaning in the rest of his gospel. See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Who-is-Jesus-Come-and-See.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> John 9:25. Another theme here is *physical* and *spiritual* blindness, and how Jesus restores *both* kinds to full sight.

<sup>11</sup> John 9:1-3 NET; see also v4-5 and John 5:17: "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working."

<sup>12</sup> Gen 25:21-26. (Of course, John 9 doesn't tell us if the man who was born blind was also a twin!)

<sup>13</sup> See also John 9:34 for the pharisees' perspective. (Of course, I *don't* believe in their viewpoint!)

<sup>14</sup> See Exod 20:5; 34:7; Num 14:18. Critically, this view is *overturned* in Ezek 18:1-4, 20, 30-32, (during the Babylonian exile). However, since the writings of the Prophets don't have the same status/authority to some Jews as those attributed to Moses (the Pentateuch), it seems that Ezekiel's oracle was not embraced by all.

Jesus' or John's mind an opportunity for reflecting on the causes and effects of natural or moral evil,<sup>15</sup> but as an occasion to reveal God at work bringing good out of evil (through Jesus). Now we need to be careful and not make too much of the precise wording here because this is only referenced in passing and John is making a much larger point in the overall story.<sup>16</sup> We come to a story wanting an answer to a particular problem, namely, the larger problem of suffering, and Jesus does not specifically address our issues in the systematic way we might like to hear. But Christ's subsequent *actions* further reveal that God works to alleviate sufferings, *not* cause them. Hold on to this important truth in this present crisis. God no more curses the world with pandemics than he is the cause of other natural disasters, like earthquakes, hurricanes, and the like. It makes no more sense to blame individuals for such tragedies as it does to blame God! Natural disasters are morally neutral; they happen – period. And they can be indiscriminate – “falling on the just and the unjust alike.”<sup>17</sup>

So, if “Whose fault is this?” is the *wrong* question to ask, what is the *right* question? I suggest we go back to the basic two commandments: “To ‘love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ And to ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’”<sup>18</sup> In these times of crisis, the *right* questions are, first: “Will we continue to passionately *love* and *trust* God with our whole being, *regardless* of what happens?” This is so much easier if we see God as loving us, supporting us, even suffering with us, rather than the false image of a God who punishes us! Will we therefore trust in God's *good* character in this crisis? Second, “Will we in this time of trial continue to *love* our neighbours as ourselves?” Will we participate in gracious acts that reveal God's loving nature to those around us? If we do that, we are partnering with God to bring good out of evil in incremental ways. In addition to acting, we can *pray* because through prayer we partner with God's Spirit in ways we cannot predict or fully understand. That's why we continue to pray for the inspiration of researchers, and for wisdom for the decisions doctors and nurses make, as well as for their protection from infection,<sup>19</sup> for all healing comes from God.

Let me conclude by reading the lectionary psalm for today, Psalm 23. This is traditionally attributed to David, who himself experienced many hardships. This much-loved poem is his confident expression of faith in a trustworthy God regardless as to what the future may hold; may we echo his thoughts:

The LORD is my shepherd; I have all that I need. He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams. He renews my strength. He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to his name. Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me. You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies. You

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<sup>15</sup> Incidentally, one of John's themes is that sin is *not* a *moral* category of behaviour, but a *theological* category about one's response to the revelation of God in Christ Jesus. See for example John 8:21,24; 9:39–41; 16:8-10.

<sup>16</sup> For example: Jesus being “the Light of the World” (John 8:12, 9:5). See Luke 13:1-9 for another example. Again, Jesus refutes their logic but utilises it to make a warning to others. There is *no* indication that God planned the death of those involved.

<sup>17</sup> Matt 5:45 speaks of God's *goodness* being indiscriminate and therefore love your enemies!

<sup>18</sup> Matt 22:36-40; Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18.

<sup>19</sup> Of course, this does not mean they should not be diligent and take appropriate precautions!

honor me by anointing my head with oil. My cup overflows with blessings. Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the LORD forever.<sup>20</sup>

I will simply close with the Lord's Prayer, let us pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name.

Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

*Give us this day our daily bread.*

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation, but *deliver us from evil.*

For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you, and give you peace. Amen.

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<sup>20</sup> Ps 23 (NLT).