



THE DIOCESE OF CHRIST OUR HOPE REFLECTS...

# IS COVID-19 A JUDGMENT FROM GOD?

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Last month a well-known Baptist megachurch in Dallas prominently [featured](#) this question on its marquee: “Is the coronavirus a judgment from God?”

It’s a question that often gets asked in the face of calamity. A few weeks ago, just as the extent of the coronavirus was becoming more clear, a friend sent me a [journal article](#) about natural disasters and God’s judgment. The article recounts the worldwide flooding in 2007, affecting 180 million people and leading to 8,000 deaths. One of the countries hardest hit was Britain, and following the floods, the Church of England’s Bishop of Carlisle was quoted in the *Sunday Telegraph* saying that the disasters were God’s judgment on Britain’s moral decadence.

As one might imagine, public reactions against the Bishop and notions of “divine retribution” were swift and fierce. But the article argues that the Bishop was essentially right – that calamities like natural disasters or military defeats have long been interpreted by the church as God’s judgment, and that it is simply a lack of courage in the face of scientific materialism and theological liberalism that would keep us from making such pronouncements of judgment today.

I think this is incorrect. I think there are, in fact, many good reasons – both theological and pastoral – why religious leaders should *not* link divine retribution to various calamities, including COVID-19.

First, examples of such pronouncements from history largely occurred within Christendom, where it was assumed that God’s people were coterminous with the state. Medieval bishops did not distinguish between judgment on God’s people and judgment on society at large. But perhaps more worryingly, contemporary pronouncements like the Bishop of Carlisle’s display a kind of missional tone-deafness. To announce to grieving and bewildered people in post-Christian societies, where plausibility structures for God are functionally non-existent, that – “Surprise! This unexpected tragedy you’re experiencing is God’s judgment” – is, at the very least, pastoral malpractice.

Second, suggesting that particular events represent God’s judgment ignores all kinds of complicated questions. If the death of over 200,000 people worldwide to COVID-19 is a specific judgement of God, what precisely is that judgment for? Our mistreatment of the environment? Our moral laxity? (How would we know? Who would decide?) And what about other ongoing tragedies with which we live – is the death toll of 7 million people around the world *every year* resulting from ambient air pollution also God’s judgement? Or the 9.5 million who die annually from cancer, or the 1.3 million who die each year from traffic fatalities? And why is it, as with COVID-19, that people living in poverty often seem to pay the highest price?

Thus, I think we need better ways of thinking about God's judgment. Interpreting tragedies that, largely because of their unexpected nature, manage to rise far enough above our awareness threshold to get placed in a special category labeled "God's Judgment" is binary and simplistic. It doesn't do justice to the complexities of a world in which death and evil remain woven into our existence, and troubles and trials remain central to life until the Age to Come.

One of the best treatments of this topic, in my opinion, is by David Bentley Hart (a theologian I don't always agree with!) in his small but potent book, *The Doors of the Sea*. It was published in the aftermath of the 2004 Asian tsunami that killed over 225,000 people, and emphasizes the important distinction between what a fundamentally good God *wills* and what he *permits*:

God has fashioned creatures in his image so that they might be joined in a perfect union with him in the rational freedom of love. For that very reason, what God permits, rather than violate the autonomy of the created world, may be *in itself* contrary to what he wills. But there is no contradiction in saying that, in his omniscience, omnipotence, and transcendence of time, God can both allow created freedom its scope and yet so constitute the world that nothing can prevent him from bringing about the beatitude of his Kingdom.

Indeed we must say this: as God did not will the fall, and yet always wills all things toward himself, the entire history of sin and death is in an ultimate sense a pure contingency, one that is not as such desired by God, but that is nevertheless constrained by providence to serve his transcendent purpose. God does not will evil in the sinner...He does not desire the convulsive reign of death in nature. But neither will he suffer defeat in these things.

Until that final glory, however, the world remains divided between two kingdoms, where light and darkness, life and death, grow up together and await the harvest...As for comfort, when we seek it, I can imagine none greater than the happy knowledge that when I see the death of a child, I do not see the face of God but the face of his enemy.<sup>1</sup>

What Hart correctly argues for is a theology which enables us to affirm the fundamental goodness of God, and evil as a privation of the good. We need a pastoral theology that allows us to condemn evil in all its forms, be that disease or natural disasters, and yet allows us at the same time to express confidence that God in his sovereignty can *use* that evil (which he permits but does not will) for his own purposes, including his intent to transform us into people of love and holiness.

Such theology means we should not be surprised by troubles and trials, be they sudden or predictable. We can condemn them as evil, as "not the way things are supposed to be" – even as we receive such trials as fundamental means by which God shapes and sanctifies us. St. Maximos the Confessor says that God constantly transforms a person through both positive and negative means. On the one hand, God draws us to himself by attraction to his goodness and beauty; on the other hand, he allows afflictions or privations of happiness to urge us to seek him, and to heal our sinful passions such as anger or pride. Both of these positive and negative means, Maximos says, are an ongoing part of God's work in our lives.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Eerdmans 2005), pp 82-83, 103.

<sup>2</sup> See St. Maximos the Confessor, *On Difficulties in Sacred Scripture: The Responses to Thalassios* (Catholic University of America Press, 2018), Letter 54, pp. 333ff.

Therefore, COVID-19 is something which, in solidarity with humanity across the globe, we condemn as evil – as something to be mourned and opposed. At the same time, we are invited to receive its afflictions – from the frustrations of quarantine to the pains of human loss – just as we do with all trials and troubles, whether big or small: as instruments of transformation.

*This reflection is part of a series engaging the difficult theological and spiritual questions surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. Each reflection is followed by three responses and some concluding thoughts from Bishop Steve. Be sure to follow us on social media @adchristourhope for subsequent posts. The entire series can be found at [www.adhope.org/hope-pestilence](http://www.adhope.org/hope-pestilence) under 'Resources'.*