

WHERE IS GOD WHEN PANDEMICS STRIKE?

A biblical and practical response

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Denison Forum Dallas, Texas
March 4, 2020

Pandemics have [killed more than three hundred million people](#) across human history. From the Antonine plague (AD 165) to the current HIV/AIDS pandemic, such outbreaks have been part of life on this planet.

Now a new disease is sweeping the globe. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the virus is known as [severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2](#) (SARS-CoV-2). It produces a disease called coronavirus or COVID-19.

At this writing, [the WHO has not yet classified coronavirus as a global pandemic](#), but it will likely do so once sustained person-to-person spread takes hold outside of China. The disease has clearly become a worldwide emergency and is [commonly referred to as a pandemic](#).

This white paper will survey some of the most urgent questions people are asking about this global threat. Then we will turn to biblical hope we can claim and share with our frightened world.

What pandemics exist in the world today?

The WHO describes a “[pandemic](#)” as “[the worldwide spread of a new disease.](#)” By this description, we are witnessing several pandemics today.

The [WHO estimates that there were 228 million cases of malaria worldwide in 2018](#), with 405,000 deaths. [Almost half the world’s population](#)—about 3.2 billion people—are at risk. The disease kills a child every two minutes.

According to [Dr. Christian W. McMillen’s excellent introduction to pandemics](#), cholera is in its seventh pandemic. It has lasted longer than any previous pandemic and shows no sign of easing. Researchers estimate that there are [between 1.3 million and 4 million cases a year](#), with up to 143,000 deaths worldwide.

Tuberculosis (TB) might be the oldest human disease, but this pandemic is still with us as well. Due to multidrug-resistant TB, extensively drug-resistant TB, poor infection control, and drug shortages, tuberculosis now kills more people than at any other time in history.

And [the AIDS pandemic has infected approximately 37.9 million people](#) around the world, with 1.7 million new infections in 2018. According to the WHO, since the beginning of the epidemic, [75 million people have been infected with the HIV virus](#); about 32 million have died of it.

Dr. McMillen notes that as commerce becomes more global, we can expect pandemics to rise. International trade networks and human migration via steamships and rail lines helped distribute plague in the early twentieth century. The pandemic influenza spread of 1918 was made possible by newly built transportation and trade networks and the heightened mobility brought on by World War I.

As our world becomes even more globally connected, we can expect to see more threats rise.

What is the history of pandemics?

The Antonine Plague (AD 165) is thought to have been smallpox or measles, though the true cause is still unknown. What is known is that this pandemic was brought back to Rome by soldiers returning from Mesopotamia around AD 163. They spread a disease that eventually killed over five million people.

The Plague of Justinian (AD 541–42) was an outbreak of bubonic plague that killed up to twenty-five million people. By one estimate, 50 percent of the European population perished. The disease might have contributed to the downfall of the Byzantine Empire.

The Black Death (1346–53) was another outbreak of bubonic plague that killed between seventy-five and two hundred million people. It devastated Europe, Africa, and Asia.

The world has suffered seven cholera pandemics, from the first in 1817 to the current pandemic that began in Indonesia in 1961. As we noted, there are as many as four million cases a year.

The flu pandemic of 1889–90 spread across the globe and cost one million lives. But the influenza that swept the globe in two waves in 1918 and a third in 1919 was the worst pandemic after the Black Death. Half a billion people—a third of the world’s population—were infected.

It killed an estimated twenty to fifty million people, though some believe the death toll to have been around one hundred million. (A lack of medical record-keeping makes exact numbers impossible to calculate.)

It was known as [the Spanish flu](#), not because it originated in Spain but because that country was especially devastated by the disease and was not subject to wartime news blackouts affecting other European countries. More US soldiers died from the 1918 flu than were killed in battle during World War I. Even President Woodrow Wilson contracted it in early 1919 while negotiating the treaty that ended World War I.

The Asian Flu pandemic of 1956–58 took two million lives, more than sixty-nine thousand in the US alone. The 1968 flu pandemic caused one million deaths, half of them in Hong Kong. And the HIV/AIDS pandemic continues today.

Other facts about pandemics (from McMillen):

1. Vaccination was invented in response to smallpox.
2. Government structures and medical authority were both enhanced as responses to pandemics.
3. Africans were less susceptible to malaria, which led, in part, to their importation as slaves to the New World in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.
4. Insecticide-treated bed nets have worked well with malaria (the WHO claims they have been responsible for cutting malaria rates in half in Africa since 2000). However, they have also been repurposed on a massive scale as fishing nets in Nigeria, Mozambique, and elsewhere. People are choosing food over prevention. This increase in fishing is also having an adverse effect on fish stocks.
5. Irrigation canals in India became stagnant pools in which mosquitoes bred, spreading malaria.
6. Migrant laborers have sometimes brought malaria back to their homelands, where it had previously been unknown.

Why does God allow pandemics?

Four biblical claims are relevant to our discussion.

One: God made all that is.

Genesis clearly states that the Lord “created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). According to Colossians 1, “by [Jesus] all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him” (v. 16).

Two: The world is broken.

When humans chose to sin, physical suffering resulted (Genesis 3:16–19). In addition, “cursed is the ground” because of sin (v. 17). As a result, “the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now” (Romans 8:22).

One day there will be “a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away” (Revelation 21:1). In the meantime, we live as fallen people on a fallen planet. Coronavirus did not exist in the Garden of Eden and exists today not because of God but because of the Fall.

Three: God sometimes uses disease and disaster as judgments against sin.

The Book of Exodus describes plagues against Egypt in response to Pharaoh’s hardened heart and the enslavement of the Jewish people. Miriam was temporarily afflicted with leprosy as punishment for her opposition to Moses (Numbers 12:1–15).

Moses warned the Jewish people that if they rejected God’s word and will, “the LORD will strike you with wasting disease and with fever, inflammation and fiery heat” (Deuteronomy 28:22). The diseases suffered by Asa (2 Chronicles 16:12) and Uzziah (2 Chronicles 26:16–21) were clearly the result of divine judgment. Acts 12 tells us that “an angel of the Lord struck [Herod] down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last” (Acts 12:23).

However, by no means is all physical suffering in Scripture the result of sin. We think of Job’s innocent sufferings (cf. Job 2:7), Hezekiah’s sickness (2 Kings 20:1), and the fact that Daniel “was overcome and lay sick for some days” after receiving a vision from God (Daniel 8:27).

Lazarus’ death was clearly not the result of sin (John 11). Nor was the illness and death of Dorcas (Acts 9:37). Epaphroditus, a Christian who was so faithful that Paul called him “my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier,” nonetheless became so sick that he nearly died (Philippians 2:25–27). Trophimus, one of Paul’s fellow missionaries, was left ill at Miletus (2 Timothy 4:20).

How can we know if coronavirus is the direct judgment of God?

It seems to me that whenever God judges a person or people directly in Scripture, he warns them first. We think of Moses warning Pharaoh about the plagues to come and the prophets warning the nation before the Northern and Southern Kingdoms fell. Jesus wept over Jerusalem and warned the city of its coming demise (Luke 19:41–44).

I am not aware of any warnings from God specifically directed at the Wuhan province of China, where this coronavirus epidemic started. Or at any other nation where the virus is active.

It is also the case in Scripture that God’s punishments are directed at sinners for their sin. While the innocent often suffer from these consequences (as with the Egyptians who suffered from the plagues resulting from their leader’s prideful rebellion), such punishments are God’s response to specific sins. I am not aware of any sins that led directly to the coronavirus epidemic or helped produce it.

And we should note the fact that Satan is responsible for much pain and suffering in the world.

He comes “to steal and kill and destroy” (John 10:10). The suffering he inflicted on Job and on the Gadarene demoniac (Mark 5:5) are indicative of his hatred against humans and desire to harm us.

I am not claiming that Satan is behind the coronavirus epidemic. But I am claiming that he takes delight in the suffering it is producing and wants to use it to lead people away from God’s word and love.

Four: God intervenes in his broken world according to his providential purposes.

The Creator did not abandon his creation when humanity caused its fall. Rather, he gave the first man and woman covering for their shame (Genesis 3:21). He gave us laws to guide our behavior as fallen people and prophets to explain and enforce the law.

Ultimately, he gave us his own Son. Jesus left his throne in glory to step into the suffering of our fallen world and to die for our sins to purchase our salvation. His incarnation is proof that when we could not come to God, he came to us.

From Adam and Eve to today, our Father continues to care for us, to answer our prayers, and to meet our needs. Jesus worked more than thirty miracles in nature and in physical healing. He teaches us to “ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7).

To summarize: pandemics are a consequence of the Fall, not the design or intention of God. But he intervenes in our fallen world according to his perfect will, which means that we must pray for his healing and join him in ministering to those in need.

How should Christians respond?

My son Ryan and I recently wrote *Making Sense of Suffering*, which will be released later this month. In its pages, we survey several biblical theodicies. A *theodicy* is an explanation for evil and suffering (from the Greek words for God and justice). In this section, we will apply these approaches to the question of pandemics and coronavirus with seven practical steps we can take today.

One: Do not blame those who suffer for their suffering.

The free-will theodicy notes that much suffering in the world results from misused freedom. However, as we noted above, not all suffering is the fault of sin. I am not aware of evidence that the coronavirus epidemic was caused by specific sins or is God’s judgment on specific sinners.

When we blame the innocent for their pain, we make their pain worse. Remember the disciples’ question when they saw a man born blind: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2). Jesus explained that the man’s blindness was not the fault of sin (vv. 3), then he took steps to heal him (vv. 6–7).

We should follow his example.

Two: Seek ways to grow spiritually through suffering.

The soul-building theodicy notes that pain is often a catalyst for spiritual growth. Joseph learned humility through his enslavement and imprisonment. Peter learned to depend more fully on God as a result of his betrayal of Jesus. Paul learned through his “thorn in the flesh” to “boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

If you contract the virus or know someone who does, turn to God for his help and strength. Learn to depend on the Great Physician as well as on human physicians. Ask your Father to show you ways you can grow and lessons you can learn through this disease.

Charles Spurgeon testified, “I am certain that I never did grow in grace one-half so much anywhere as I have upon the bed of pain.”

Three: Look for the presence of Christ in pain.

The present-help theodicy points to God’s presence in our suffering. Our Lord promises us: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior” (Isaiah 43:2–3).

Jesus knows what it is to suffer hunger (Matthew 4:2), thirst (John 19:28), weariness (John 4:6), sorrow (Isaiah 53:3), and pain (Isaiah 53:5). He knows what it is like to be abandoned by friends (Matthew 26:56) and to feel abandoned by God (Matthew 27:46).

As a result, we know that he knows our pain today. If you or someone you know is suffering from coronavirus or another malady, you can take such suffering to your Savior. You can know that he hears you and loves you. And you can trust him for his best.

Four: Claim the hope of Christ.

The future-hope theodicy focuses on ways God will use present suffering for future good. It claims Paul’s testimony, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18).

We know that the worst that can happen to us in this life leads to the best that can happen to us—our transition to our new life in heaven (cf. John 14:3). The moment we close our eyes on earth, we open them in paradise. When we take our last breath here, we take our first breath there. That’s because, as Jesus promised, “Everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (John 11:26).

God uses present suffering for future good in ways we can imagine and in ways we cannot. As noted above, smallpox led to the invention of vaccines. Many of the public health measures being enacted today in response to coronavirus were [first developed during the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918](#). Many other medical advances have been made in response to specific diseases or challenges.

What we do not understand today, we will understand one day: “Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Five: Trust that God redeems all he allows.

We know that our Lord is perfect and can never make a mistake (Matthew 5:48). We know that he is sovereign, so that all that happens occurs by his permission or agency (cf. Matthew 10:29). And we know that he is love (1 John 4:8) and always wants our best.

As a result, if God allows or causes anything he does not use for greater good, he made a mistake in allowing or causing it. Thus, we can be assured that he redeems all he allows.

I am not claiming that we will see this redemption fully in this life, or that we will understand it on this side of heaven. However, I do not have to understand God's redemption to trust in it. I don't understand how my laptop processes my keystrokes into this manuscript or how the internet transmits it to you. I do not understand all the ways God is redeeming and will redeem coronavirus for his glory and our good.

But I believe that he is and will. This is one way that "for those who love God all things work together for good" (Romans 8:28).

Six: Look for ways to share the compassion of Christ.

Rather than speculating theologically about reasons for the coronavirus epidemic, the more practical response is to help those who are suffering from it. Christians are the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27), the physical manifestation of his continued earthly ministry.

Jesus wants us to "rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15). He calls us to share his healing grace with those who hurt (Matthew 10:8). He invites us to pray for those in pain and then to be part of the answer to their suffering (James 5:14).

In *The Rise of Christianity*, noted sociologist Rodney Stark points to the plague of AD 165 and the epidemic of AD 251 as remarkable opportunities for the gospel. These epidemics "swamped the explanatory and comforting capacities of paganism and of Hellenic philosophies." By contrast, "Christianity offered a much more satisfactory account of why these terrible times had fallen upon humanity, and it projected a hopeful, even enthusiastic, portrait of the future."

These Christians were already committed to social service and community solidarity, which enabled them to survive epidemics in substantially higher numbers. Such survival seemed miraculous to the pagans. In addition, these believers were unafraid of death and thus ministered to the sick and welcomed them into their community.

Stark quotes from Dionysius' Easter Letter (around AD 260):

Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains.

By contrast,

The heathen behaved in the very opposite way. At the first onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treating unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease.

[Theologian Ed Stetzer offers another example](#) from the yellow fever epidemic in the fall of 1793 in Philadelphia. He writes that “thousands of citizens fled, hospitals became overwhelmed, and dead bodies rotted in homes.”

But the black church under the leadership of Richard Allen entered into this suffering. Notwithstanding the persecution and prejudice they had faced, they served the sick when others isolated themselves. Stetzer notes:

Despite the overt racism he faced, Allen modeled an empathetic approach to loving his neighbors. Allen and his fellow volunteers were heartbroken over the suffering of the sick. They resonated with those patients who had been cast out. . . . Allen never lost sight of the truth: Those around him were lost and needed Jesus. His empathy informed his witness.

When we are present in the pain of others, our hope offers them hope and our love shows them the love of our Lord.

Seven: Share the gospel of grace wherever you can.

It has been my experience that adults who do not trust in Christ as their Lord are much more open to faith during times of suffering. When they realize that they cannot depend on themselves, they are more willing to turn to God.

It is vital at such times that Christians be present to share God’s love and grace. It is not opportunistic or manipulative to offer salvation to those who suffer—such ministry shares the greatest hope and healing that humans can experience.

As “ambassadors for Christ,” our calling and message is simple: “We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5:20).

What are some consequences for Christian leaders?

Just as the coronavirus epidemic presents unique challenges for our nation and world, it presents significant challenges for churches and ministries. Here are some possible consequences for which leaders should be preparing:

- How will you hold worship services if your people are unable or unwilling to attend large gatherings?
- How will you enable their continued financial support of the ministry? How will you respond to potential downturns in giving?
- How will you compensate for leaders who fall ill to the virus?

- What congregational care should you be building for members who need your help?
- How can you be coordinating with other churches, ministries, and agencies in preparation?
- How can you respond to the virus in a way that advances God's kingdom and your presence in your community and beyond?
- How can you help your people prepare spiritually for the uncertainties and challenges to come?

If you are preaching on Jesus' ministry as the Great Physician, these recent sermons may be helpful:

- "[God's Peace in Our Pain](#)," my message on January 12 from Matthew 8:1–17
- "[Jesus Is Still the Great Physician](#)," my message on January 26 from John 5:1–9
- "[Touching the Garment of God](#)," my message on February 23 from Mark 5:24–34

Also, my latest book is now available: *Making Sense of Suffering: 7 Biblical Ways to Help Hurting People*. You can [download a free digital copy here](#). You may also [request a print copy here](#) (and please feel free to select the \$15 minimum, which covers our printing and distribution costs).

Conclusion

Coronavirus presents a unique challenge to our world. Not since the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 have we faced a threat that affects us medically and financially on such a global scale.

Disasters such as Hurricane Katrina directly affect only the area they attack. Previous epidemics such as Ebola have been confined to specific regions. The Great Recession affected us financially but not medically.

But coronavirus, so far, transcends our ability to respond medically. Our financial means are not sufficient for this crisis. And it transcends borders and nationalities, potentially affecting everyone on our planet.

Here's the good news: this unique challenge constitutes a unique opportunity for the gospel.

If God's people will embrace the privilege of praying and caring for the sick while facing this epidemic with calm courage and faith in our Father, we will model the kind of relevant, empowering faith and community our culture desperately seeks. Our love will invite others to trust the love of our Lord.

And our Father will redeem this present-day crisis for his eternal purposes and our eternal good.

May it be so, to the glory of God.