

## God in a Pandemic

A five-part attempt at a difficult conversation

*by Pastor Greg Ayt*

### Part 1

I'm about to do something dumb. Very real, very honest, very dumb. It's something that has been on my mind a lot lately, and something that God has been working into my heart. I do not claim to be infallible, and I am certainly a work in progress. But I want to start a conversation with you about a real topic. It's a conversation that will unfold over five parts.

I want to make an honest attempt to answer the question: Why is the Coronavirus? Or more fully, how could a good and powerful God reign over a universe with the coronavirus? In part 1, I want to share the importance of thinking about this question. In part 2, I want to share the various options we have for answers, as well as some of the disheartening answers I've come across lately. In part 3, I want to go to Scripture to try out an answer to this. In part 4, we'll try to piece it all together into a coherent whole. Finally, in part 5, I'll talk about where we go from there.

But to start, let me offer a few disclaimers...

First, I am not an expert. I'm your brother in Christ, who has devoted some time to studying this topic. I realize this is an attempt at this conversation and not the end-all-be-all. I'm just one beggar telling other beggars where to find bread.

Second, I am shooting for brevity in this, so I will certainly leave room for more. There's so much to talk about here! We couldn't possibly cover all of it. But we will attempt a 30,000 foot view of the response to this question.

Third, in light of all that, I welcome your disagreements, your comments, and your questions. So don't hesitate to contact me with your questions.

Finally, I'm coming from a distinctly Reformed or Presbyterian point of view on this. Scripture is the authority, God will be big, humans will be small, and we'll rejoice together in God's grace.

So first, let me share briefly about the importance of thinking hard about this question. We are going through an incredibly difficult time of suffering in the world. There is the primary suffering of those diagnosed with COVID-19; we just hit 3 million people diagnosed this week. Of that number, over 200,000 people have died. But we also see the secondary suffering of billions more in quarantine or suffering economic turmoil or mental unhealth. If you can't turn to your faith for an answer to this question, then you will turn elsewhere. We are naturally looking for something to grab a hold of in this storm. If we don't think critically if our faith offers that, then we will get tossed to and fro by the waves. We need some sort of rock to stand on here. So don't neglect this question. If you don't like my attempt, will you at least devote the time to study it for yourself?

This is the age-old question of "theodicy." How could a good and powerful God rule over a world with evil? There are three pillars of truth in that question: God is good, God is powerful, and evil exists. Theodicy attempts to piece them together somehow. And you've probably encountered this question in your life. In my experience, so many people have left Christianity because it had great answers in times of comfort, but terrible answers in times of trial. It's not that we have no answer, it's that our answers come up as lacking, especially when trial hits. Whether it's global tragedy, local tragedy, or personal tragedy, we must have an operating system in our faith, built on truth to respond to this.

How are we going to study this? The Bible! If that is really where we believe we'll find truth, then we must hang out in the Bible for this answer. Sometimes we let our feelings, or others drive our response to this. Those sources are not sufficient to answer such a big question.

One author that recently wrote about this pandemic, John Piper, says this: "It matters little what I think about the coronavirus—or about anything else, for that matter. But it matters

forever what God thinks. He is not silent about what he thinks. Scarcely a page in the Bible is irrelevant for this crisis. My voice is grass. God's voice is granite."

So let us devote ourselves to studying this question from the bedrock of Scripture. With that, let me leave you with the words of this hymn that remind us of this foundation we have in God's Word:

How firm a foundation, ye Saints of the Lord,  
Is laid for your faith in his excellent word!  
What more can he say than to you he hath said,  
Who unto the Savior, who unto the Savior,  
Who unto the Savior for refuge have fled?

## Part 2

I'm wearing some soft fleece slippers in this part. Why? Because this is when I start stepping on some toes, so I wanted to do it gently. So there's your warning. Guard your toes!

We're asking the question: Where is God in a pandemic? How could a good and powerful God rule over a world with the coronavirus causing so much suffering? Yesterday we simply said that this is a very important question to consider, and that it's best to consider it from the Bible, the truth of God.

Today, we'll see that we have a few options in responding to this question. This is the age-old question of "theodicy." How can a good and powerful God rule over a world with evil? There are three facts to that sentence: God is good, God is powerful, evil exists. The different responses I've seen to this question of evil (read "Coronavirus") try to remove or just deemphasize one of those three facts.

Option 1) I've heard some say that God is good, and evil exists, but that He didn't create the Coronavirus, or He didn't plan the Coronavirus, just allowed it. This takes away a bit of God's sovereignty. "Let's look elsewhere for the prime cause of this." I heard one very

prominent Christian leader say a couple weeks ago that perhaps the Coronavirus is “nature’s response” to the environmental destruction of humans. So then nature becomes this sovereign deity that God is allowing to take hundreds of thousands of human lives. Or perhaps it’s Satan’s work in the world that God is giving him the authority to do. Even though it might be convenient to not “blame this on God” by shifting the blame elsewhere, I don’t know that it’s comforting to have a God that’s not completely sovereign, or only sovereign on the mountaintops but doesn’t mess with the valleys. I don’t know that it’s comforting to the family members who have lost loved ones to say that nature or Satan had the final say in their life.

As a side note, why do we like to think Satan’s at fault for the trials in life but God’s responsible for the times of blessing? I feel like trials like this pandemic have turned more people to God, have caused more prayer, more study. And then the times of comfort are when we see less focus on God, less prayer, less time in the Bible. So if Satan is responsible for trials in order to oppose God and God is responsible for blessing in order to draw people to Him, then they are both really bad at their jobs! Side note finished.

I hurt when I hear people say that God did not plan/ordain/will this pandemic just so it doesn’t mess with their feeling of a good and loving God. Think about it. If we try to uphold God’s goodness at the expense of His sovereignty, then His goodness is of no use to us anymore; God’s sovereignty is the vehicle by which He delivers His goodness to us. Take away His sovereignty, and His goodness no longer matters. In Scripture, we see a God that’s sovereign over every detail, good or bad, and we must uphold that truth. Psalm 135:6: “Whatever the LORD pleases, He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all the deeps.” Or Daniel 4:35: “God does according to His will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stop His hand or say to him, ‘What have you done?’” But we’ll talk more about that in the following parts.

Option 2) I’ve heard others say that God is sovereign, and that evil exists, but perhaps God isn’t so good. Maybe God is just a monster for putting the Coronavirus in this world. Perhaps God is just lashing out in a fit of rage at humanity. Or perhaps God limits His own goodness so that people can have a free will. He says, “I’ll be good as long as people

choose good. If they mess up the world, well then, the lack of goodness is on them.” But this option doesn’t seem to jive with the God we find in Scripture. God defines goodness. To judge Him as evil is to even lose the standard by which you judge. We don’t get to define what good is, but so often we accuse God of evil because He’s not delivering goodness to us as we would define it. As well, we serve an unchanging God who is not subject to passions and emotions. God is good, and God rules over this world with evil in it. When asked how to reconcile those two things, Charles Spurgeon asked, “Why do you feel the need to reconcile friends?” More on that coming.

Option 3) I’ve heard a lot of Christians even try to say that God is good, God is sovereign, but that the Coronavirus isn’t actually evil; it’s actually good and God is using it to shape us and transform us and test us. But I don’t know if that answer holds up to those suffering through COVID19 or those who have lost unbelieving family members to it. This attempts to deny the evil and suffering caused by a pandemic. It’s clever to say that trials are like a furnace that refines metal. But metal doesn’t have feelings. So it’s important to acknowledge the unwantedness of the Coronavirus and the suffering that people are going through if we are going to have real answers that provide real hope.

Option 4) Finally, there was a Time Magazine article by a Christian theologian that provided a fourth option: there is no answer. The author actually said, “to wait without hope.” I think the author is wary of speculative and knee-jerk responses to suffering (as we all are). But the longing for answers is not just a product of rationalism or the Enlightenment. Looking for answers to suffering has been around for a long time, and to avoid speculation and knee-jerk responses, we can rely on the attempts of the past and the answers found in Scripture. This author wants us to lament, and I believe rightly so. But the author defines lament as asking “why” and not getting an answer. Scripture is also full of instances where lament can and should occur even when we have an answer. Dare we say that when Jesus quoted the lament of Psalm 22 (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”), that He didn’t know why? This author suggests He may not have known when he claims that “God also laments” without changing the definition from the above. He criticizes Christians that “think of God as above all that, knowing everything, in charge of everything.” Isn’t that the God we see in the Bible? If that’s the view of God that is criticized, then that would make

the OT and the NT Wrong. I'll wear that criticism as a badge all day, because my hope in times of trial is built on an omniscient and sovereign God. No wonder he recommends waiting without hope. We need a better response than "Stop asking."

So I think we could really use a Biblical response to this question that upholds all three truths, affirms the attributes of God, allows us to grieve, but still provides hope. We'll look through Scripture in our next part to see this response come together.

But let me leave you with this: the reason some of these options above don't work is because we are asking God to suspend one of His attributes so that He can exercise another. For example, we're asking Him to limit His own sovereignty so that He can be fully good without being blamed. Or we're asking Him to limit His goodness so that He can be sovereign and still respond with wrath. Let's be clear, we do not want a God like this. In Exodus 3, God declares His name to be "I am who I am," or "I will be who I will be." God is always all of who He is. And that's a comfort to us. We never have to worry about God suspending His mercy so that He can bring up our past sins, or suspend His patience so that He can teach us a lesson, or suspend His justice so that He can let evildoers walk free. We need a faithful God, a God who can never deny Himself like it says in 2 Timothy 2.

Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father  
There is no shadow of turning with Thee  
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not  
As Thou has been Thou forever wilt be  
Great is Thy faithfulness, great is Thy faithfulness  
Morning by morning new mercies I see  
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided  
Great is Thy faithfulness Lord unto me

### Part 3

Why is the Coronavirus happening in a world ruled by a good and powerful God? How could a good and powerful God rule over a world with evil in it? Our response must leave us with a God who is goodness itself, a God who is all powerful, and that evil exists. We

need a Biblical response to this question that upholds all three truths, affirms the attributes of God at all times, allows us to grieve, but still provides hope. So that's what we're doing in this part in way too short of a time!

First, let me just put it out there, the level of involvement I believe God has in this pandemic. I wouldn't just say God allowed this to happen or that God is watching it happen and will swoop in at the right time to stop it. I would say that God has His very fingers in the Coronavirus. He has planned it, ordained it, willed it to happen with his powerful sovereignty. I can put it no better than the Westminster Confession: "God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established. Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions, yet hath he not decreed anything because he foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions." God is sovereign over every detail, every molecule, every square inch. Isaiah 45:7, "I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the LORD, who does all these things." And then one chapter later in Isaiah 46:9-10: "For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose'... I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it."

Second, if God has sovereignly decreed the Coronavirus, do we know anything about why? For that, let's go to the beginning. The origin of the Coronavirus. No, don't worry, I'm not trying to figure out how this pandemic started. I mean, was there a time in history where the possibility of a deadly, globally communicated disease entered the world? We know that in the Garden of Eden, death had not yet entered the world, so it couldn't have happened there. But after Adam and Eve were cursed and kicked out of the garden, it became possible. After Adam's original sin, God, being just and righteous and faithful to His promise, punished them in Genesis 3. To the woman: "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing." To the man: "Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life... till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you

are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Romans 8:20 affirms this: “For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it.”

So could we say that the Coronavirus is God’s judgement on the world? Yes. If God was not judging the world for sin, then the Coronavirus would not have happened. Do I want to go down the path of speculating which sins God is judging with the Coronavirus?

Absolutely not, but there are plenty to choose from: arrogance, anger, hatred, unkindness, impurity, lying, and selfishness; and that’s just me! So while I would not try to say “It’s because of this sin or that sin that this person died from COVID19,” I would say, “It’s because of the curse that God has placed creation under that this person has died from COVID19.” After all, there would be no death if there was no sin. So this is part of God’s judgement for sin. But what about those who make God out to be a rage monster or a grumpy ole kook lashing out at the world? First, we know that God does not suffer passions or emotions, He cannot be acted upon to bring out some sort of rage. He’s not reacting to our sin with an omnipotent temper tantrum. God is who He is, and that includes His righteousness and justice. And this is the God we want, because this is the God we can rest in when someone wrongs us and we remember Romans 12:19: “‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord.” God will punish every evil deed, either by His wrath on them, or by His wrath on a substitute, namely Christ. Ecclesiastes 12:14 says, “For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.”

So that makes us wonder... If a Christian’s sins were paid for completely by Christ, why are we still subject to the Coronavirus? Is God punishing His own children? Romans 8:1 says, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” 1

Thessalonians 5:9 adds, “God has not destined us for wrath.” The suffering for us is not punitive, it’s purifying. The sting of death is gone like it says in 1 Corinthians 15. And Hebrews 12 describes suffering not as wrath reserved for us, but as discipline to remind us of our sin and to renew our efforts to expel it from our lives.

Okay, so is God sovereign and righteous, has he planned and purposed this pandemic in order to judge sin? Yes. But is He still good? For that we can briefly look at the life of Joseph. After everything Joseph went through at the hands of his wicked brothers, he ends

up as second in command of Egypt, and he says to his brothers: “Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.” Notice here that God does not simply *use* it for good. God is intentionally bringing about good even in the lowest moments of our lives. Are those moments still painful and real? Absolutely. But God has a greater plan in place, one that we might not be able to see. And it’s not just for us individually. Because think about this... this verse is overused and sometimes misused to explain trials as though God will always restore us physically or materially when we experience loss. But watch what happens in the story of Scripture after this. Because Joseph was in power and because of a famine, he moves his entire family to Egypt. Fast forward 400 years... Israel is enslaved and oppressed by Pharaoh. So was it still good that God did this? Probably not according to Israel’s definition during those 400 years. But yes, because it was to accomplish God’s purposes, His plan of redemption, God pointing forward to Christ. And that’s what we’ll talk about in the next part.

But for now, let me leave it at this. We have seen that God is indeed powerful and sovereign. Evil and suffering do exist, and that is what God is punishing. And God is good, but according to His purposes and standards. And there are secret things that belong to the Lord. We can only go with what’s revealed. So we can see a revelation in Scripture of this overarching response. But when it comes down to specifics, there is certainly a bit of mystery left for us.

So in a way, we are pulling from all four options that we talked about in part 2, but only in moderation and in a way that affirms the attributes of God at all times. We still need to wrap this up in to a coherent whole with one more point from Scripture, but that’s what we’ll leave for the next part. Let me leave you with the words of one of my favorite hymns by William Cowper, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way”:

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
But trust Him for His grace;  
Behind a frowning providence  
He hides a smiling face  
His purposes will ripen fast,

Unfolding every hour;  
The bud may have a bitter taste,  
But sweet will be the flower

#### **Part 4**

We've now pieced together a Biblical response that attempted to take the whole of Scripture into account as we looked at key verses. We ended up with a bit of each of the responses from part 2. God is completely sovereign; He willed this pandemic to occur. God is good AND He is just; the curse we feel in the Coronavirus is part of the curse God put on the world as punishment for sin. Evil truly exists, but that pain and suffering is part of God's overarching, divine plan for His glory.

Today, I just want to add one final, Biblical piece to all of this. And this is everything. Adam and Eve certainly went through suffering; can you imagine going from paradise to corrupt creation? Joseph indeed went through a lot of suffering. Job went through immense suffering. Throughout the Old Testament we see instances of God's wrath as the prophets proclaim, "This is God doing this!" And so it's easy to assume that God no longer exists in a New Testament world. But the instance I want to point to this morning is the single greatest moment of God's wrath, the worst evil committed in human history, the greatest moment of pain and suffering ever... and it happens in the New Testament.

I'm talking about the crucifixion of Christ, when humanity murdered the only innocent one, Son of God. Why do bad things happen to good people? It only happened this once! Romans 3:10 says otherwise that no one is good. No greater act of evil has ever occurred. This is the moment where God's wrath for sin is poured out on Christ as He took our place. This is the moment of incredible suffering and pain on Jesus Christ on the cross.

Yes, this pandemic is causing suffering and pain and wickedness. I'm reminded even this week of the psychological toll of this global response. Make no mistake, 230,000 people dead in just a couple months is horrible. But let's remember this: the cross was worse. And so if you take issue with me saying the good and sovereign God ordained this pandemic, perhaps we need to only look at the cross.

Look at what Peter says in Acts 2:22-23: “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—<sup>23</sup> this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.” And again in Acts 3:18: “But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled.” And then again in Acts 4:27-28: “for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.”

The cross of Christ was foreordained, definitely planned, predestined by God to take place. This was His will from the beginning of time. And if we can see clearly from Scripture that this was within the sovereignty of God, then nothing could be excluded from it. When God appointed the time for Christ to die, there was no backup plan in case the humans didn't carry it out like He was expecting. God didn't give over sovereignty to Satan for a time and hope Satan had Jesus crucified. God didn't simply foreknow that humans would do this and then responded by putting it in His plan to somehow make the best of it. This is the sovereignty of God in the cross of Christ.

But the cross is the perfect place to look for even more answers. The fulfillment of all of this is here in the cross. Do we have a powerful God? Yes, look at the cross. Do we have a good God, one who would send His Son to die for us so that we might have new life? Yes, look at the cross. Does evil exist? Yes, look at the cross! There wouldn't be a cross if evil didn't exist and if punishment wasn't necessary. This is where it all comes together, this question of theodicy. Look at the cross.

So where does that leave us with this question? How could a good and powerful God rule over a world with evil? The existence of evil in a world ruled by a good and powerful God is to glorify Christ. It is His plan for the fullness of time.

For now, I'll leave you with the words of this hymn, “When I Survey”:

See from His head, His hands, His feet,  
Sorrow and love flow mingled down!  
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,  
Or thorns compose so rich a crown

## Part 5

This is the final part to this conversation. In the end, it's my hope that I've made you think about this at least, and perhaps started a conversation. Maybe you disagree with me, that's fine. As long as you're thinking hard about it, going to Scripture.

So first, let's wrap up by reviewing my attempt at answering this question: How can a good and powerful God rule over a world with evil? Where is God in a pandemic? What we've seen in Scripture is that God did not simply step back and allow the Coronavirus. He didn't give over the reins to someone else. He didn't limit His goodness to us based on what we choose. And this isn't just goodness disguised as evil. God is completely sovereign with His very hands in everything that's occurring. He is completely good, sometimes in ways that are higher than ours. And real suffering and evil exists. How can we see all of these things at once? Look at the cross.

Finally, where does leave us? How can this answer fuel us toward holy living? It's great to talk about it in the theoretical, but where does it show up in the practical? I have a few things for you, as I'm sure you have a few things you've come up with yourselves.

First, because of humanity's sin, this world is under a curse. Creation is groaning because of God who subjected it to His wrath. The Coronavirus is part of God's judgment on the world. One author I read asks this interesting question, "How come God cursed us physically for a wrongdoing of the will, of the soul?" Because it's hard for us to be constantly aware of our spiritually failings and weaknesses. We will hardly lose sleep over the grievousness of our sin. But if a pandemic occurs, if sickness occurs, if disease and aging occurs, then He has our attention. So let us use this time to repent. Whether you are a Christian or not, let us remember the disease of our sin and repent and call out for mercy. If you're a child of God, this is not punishment for you, there is no wrath left for you,

it's all been taken by Christ. But it is a purifying moment for you. Become more aware of your sin, see the forgiveness offered by Christ, and repent.

Second, in this same line, physical suffering drives us in many ways towards spiritual restoration. Don't waste times of suffering. See how God is teaching us and molding us. No, it is not pleasant, and it's not just good disguised as evil. But what the world meant for evil, God meant for good. Don't rush through suffering just to get back to comfort. See how God means it for good in your life by increasing your trust, extending your patience, exercising compassion, building your dependence on Him, or so many other things. Because Christ suffered more than all of us, and we are called to be like Christ, very often suffering is a shortcut to becoming like Christ.

Third, even though we know what God is up to in the world in a big overarching sense, we still are left wondering how the little pieces of suffering fit into that. We have been given a glimpse at the divine perspective, but we still live from the human perspective. It's like we're driving on dark road at night, and our headlights illuminate what's in front of us, the things that we know God has revealed to us and called us to do. But we can take comfort in the fact that God sees the whole route like Google maps. So in this, we have a tension between lament and grieving, and peace and comfort. We can be honest about the trials and griefs. But we can also find peace in the presence and working of God. Lament, but not without hope.

Fourth, think about this, as people cry out for help and answers in the midst of suffering, we all must be ready pastorally to be there for them. As you all know from experience, a wrong word in a time of distress can compound the suffering. But if we are going to give real help, we can look to what we've learned seen in this study for how to care for others going through suffering. I think a lot of us do this naturally without realizing it, but it's also something we can work on. Pray for wisdom to know which direction you need to lean on with a friend in trial. Do you need to remind them that God is powerful, sovereign, in control? Do you need to remind them that God is good, compassionate, present? Do you need to commiserate with them that evil is real, and the pain is deep? Or do you need to sit in silence, in the mystery, and lament to find hope?

I hope I've given you a chance to consider a Christ-centered theodicy. God is in control, and He is good, and evil exists. But someday we will see how God is weaving all of this together for the glory of Christ in this world. Let us take heart during a time of global suffering that we know the end of the story: Christ is glorified as King over all. And let us take strength from the fact that by God's grace we can work towards that in our lives now, whether in comfort or in trial.

Let me leave you one final time with the words of a modern hymn called "All Glory Be to Christ" by Kings Kaleidoscope. It's to the tune of Auld Lang Syne. And I highly recommend you listen to this on repeat today.

Should nothing of our efforts stand  
No legacy survive  
Unless the Lord does raise the house  
In vain its builders strive  
To you who boast tomorrow's gain  
Tell me what is your life  
A mist that vanishes at dawn  
All glory be to Christ  
All glory be to Christ our king  
All glory be to Christ  
His rule and reign we'll ever sing  
All glory be to Christ

Thank you for joining me in this conversation. I'm so thankful we could look into Scripture together and consider this difficult topic. I pray that God sustains you in this time, and may His grace overflow to you and yours.