

Coronavirus and Lent

Is the coronavirus God's judgment on human sin?

I don't think so, but it's not a stupid question. When I first heard people asking it a couple of weeks ago, I rolled my eyes and dismissed it as the kind of reductive, narrow-minded theology that insists on taking things way too literally.

Thinking about where the question comes from and how to answer it, however, has been not only a kind of Lenten meditation for me but also a way to form a response to the pandemic.

Many people have observed the appropriateness of enduring the coronavirus pandemic during the season of Lent, largely because the virus has driven us into a state of deprivation and self-denial. There's a superficial similarity there: even if you've never observed Lent,

that two of the most common Christian metaphors for sin so closely resemble the present situation; second, a basic human need for narrative causality.

1. Metaphors

It is certainly striking that the virus has driven us into not one but two crises—the physical crisis of the COVID-19 disease and the economic crisis triggered by large scale shutdowns and social isolation—and that sickness and debt are probably the two most common Christian metaphors for sin. (Sin is one of those human phenomena that it is almost impossible to think about without metaphor.)



"Rise and go. Your faith has made you well." (Luke 17:19)

The penitential Psalms almost always speak of **sin as a disease** or injury:

Psalm 6:

Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing;
O Lord, heal me, for my bones are troubled.
My soul also is sorely troubled.
But thou, O Lord—how long?

Psalm 32:

When I declared not my sin, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.

Psalm 38:

~~There is no soundness in my flesh~~

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Psalm 51 uses language that should resonate deeply with obsessive hand washers:

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!

* * *

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Fill me with joy and gladness;
let the bones which thou hast broken rejoice.

It is little wonder that the incarnate Jesus so persistently made his spiritual work concrete by literally healing people.



You have been weighed in the balance, and found wanting. (Daniel 5:27)

The metaphor of **sin as debt** seems to have become prominent somewhat later, but it is now probably more pervasive than the disease metaphor as a way to understand salvation:

Sing, oh sing of my redeemer
With his blood he purchased me.
On the cross, he sealed my pardon,
Paid the debt, and made me free.

John Donne compares himself to “stolen stuff” owned by God but swiped by the Devil;
George Herbert describes redemption as a business arrangement with a landowner.

Although the Bible itself seems to resort to economic metaphors for sin less than we do (interesting, that), Jesus himself does describe sin as a debt in the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew

There are, of course, other pervasive metaphors for sin: slavery, a stain, a wandering from the fold or the true path (probably the most common metaphor of all). But disease and debt are certainly two of those that are well-established in scripture and widely imitated by penitential poets and preachers and teachers ever since.

If we are used to thinking of sin in terms of disease and debt, it might be natural to look at graphs of rising infection rates and a plummeting stock market and think immediately of sin.

One thing to remember about metaphors is that they are always imperfect and incomplete. When Homer compares Achilles to a falcon swooping down on a hare, he does not mean that Achilles has feathers—much less that every falcon you see is actually Achilles! Sin might be very much like a disease in some respects, but that doesn't mean that every disease is sin.

In fact, the difference between the two elements of a metaphor is what actually makes the metaphor useful. Metaphors need a little bit of elbow room. What would be the point of comparing a watermelon to a watermelon? But when you say that *life* is like a watermelon, all kinds of possible meanings open up. The fact that is somewhat different from disease and debt is what makes those comparisons useful and instructive.

The very fact that the Bible uses different metaphors for sin—both debt and disease, among others—should caution us against identifying sin too closely with either one of them. The metaphor of debt tells us some things about sin: it is relational (one party owes another); it is quantifiable to both parties; it is a problem that has an implied solution (repayment: debt is rarely intended to be terminal). The metaphor of disease tells us slightly different things about sin, throwing stronger emphasis on the weakness, shame, and suffering of the sinner.

2. Narrative

In addition to the readily available metaphors of debt and disease, we humans have another basic literary reason to ask whether the coronavirus is an example of divine judgment. We think in terms of narratives, stories, plots.

We resist randomness. We attempt to impose order on events, and one of the most fundamental forms of order is the relationship of cause and effect. When Aristotle wrote that a good tragedy required a beginning, a middle, and an end, all linked by probability or necessity, he was not making up some arbitrary rules for a relatively new literary genre; he was describing human nature, basic human needs.

We ask *why* things happen, especially when those things are tragic, and we expect an answer so insistently that we might well make up an explanation if one doesn't clearly present itself. In that case, we'll probably make up a story, because stories are one way to take apparently random, jagged fragments of reality and turn them into pieces of a unified puzzle.

work. Either story—even the scary one—is a form of closure, a way to explain the cause of that ominous shape.

When a mysterious virus that we've never heard of before suddenly sweeps the globe and upends our lives, we like to know that it's a part of a story. We're eager to know the ending, of course ("How long?" in the words of the psalmist), but short of that knowledge, we'll settle for a cause. *Why?*

Even Thomas Hardy, that grim atheist, wrote a poem saying that his suffering would be less if he could somehow know that it had a divine cause. If he could know that some angry god was punishing him, at least he'd have a place in an intelligible revenge narrative.

And if we turn not to Thomas Hardy but to the Bible, we find many stories in which God sends plagues and other physical afflictions as punishment for sin. The easiest thing to do is to map those stories onto our personal situation—which is especially easy to do given the two metaphors for sin described above. That kind of mapping seems like a way to place COVID-19 as a piece in a unified puzzle, an element in an coherent narrative. And the piece certainly seems to fit.



3. Or not

The story that should probably give us pause is the book of Job.

The first two chapters of Job happen to invoke our two metaphors for sin, one after another. God allows Satan to attack Job's wealth in chapter 1, sending Job's (live)stock crashing.

When that doesn't corrupt Job, Satan is allowed to attack Job's health in chapter two. The

Recognizing these two metaphors for sin, and subject as we all are to the human need for narrative causality, Job’s visitors reasonably surmise that his suffering is a punishment for sin—an explanation that is roundly rebuked by God himself.

The problem, of course, is that Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar have not read the first few chapters of the book, which show us that the three friends have the story both partially right and exactly wrong: although God does want to humble Job (God’s terrible speech at the end is sufficient evidence of that), Job suffers not because he has sinned, but precisely because he is “blameless and upright” (1:1).

Job is a hard book to read, not only because of the terrible suffering itself but because it dismantles the kind of narrative scaffolding we humans build in order to make reassuring sense of that terrible suffering. It knocks over our little puzzle tables.

What Job loses is not just his wealth and his health and his family—and that would be more than enough!—but also the stable narrative in which those losses might be neatly (if painfully) understood.

In the book of Job, the easy *causality* we’d like to find around human misery is clearly wrong. God says so. And even the *effect* of that misery, the “happy ending” to the book, isn’t entirely satisfactory. Yes, God gives Job new children, but mustn’t Job still mourn the old ones? Taken as a literary whole—as a series of causes and effects—the book of Job strikes a strong blow against our instinctive uses of metaphor and narrative.

The book of Job is the biblical reason why I’d be reluctant to apply biblical metaphors and narratives of sin to our struggle with the coronavirus pandemic—however right and fitting those metaphors and narratives might seem to us.

4. Flipping the script

The book of Job does not, however, entirely demolish narrative order—it is, after all, a story of its own—it merely replaces one narrative order with another. Within the story, Job’s friends see his suffering primarily as an *effect*; God and Satan see it primarily as a *cause* (of either righteousness or rebellion, but a cause either way).

If we’re to take a literary lesson away from Job, it’s not that everything is random and life has no narrative, but rather that our scripts are flipped. We’re looking to see what caused something when we need to be thinking about its effects, how we respond. We’re writing the backstory when we need to be composing the story-forward.

The Protestant Reformation was, in a very broad sense, an attempt to flip the script on Christian repentance. Where the medieval church had taught that grace was the *effect* of

Let's be wary about mapping the story of Job onto our present situation. Let's not claim that God has boasted to Satan about our righteousness and has willingly sent this virus to prove the point.

But let's compose the story-forward. We're afflicted, for whatever reason. Whatever the virus is an effect of, though, how will it cause us to act? We probably can't know whether the virus is a response to sin, but we can decide how we respond to the virus.

5. Present tense

What are some good ways to respond? Lament. Repent. Those seem like good places to start.

N.T. Wright pointedly rejects any sort of Christian narrative explanation for the pandemic and suggests that **lamentation** is the most fundamental spiritual response to it.



How lonely sits the city that was full of people! (Lamentations 1:1)

One virtue of lamentation is that it is a way of being very *present*. A lament is almost always offered in the moment, with some glancing at the recent past, perhaps, and a question or two about how long the pain will last—but centered and grounded in the misery of the moment. If we're looking to shift from the backward search for causal sins and to a healthy way forward, it is worth pausing in the present.

We should look around, name the tragedy for what it is, and mourn with those who mourn. We need to see the suffering, say the suffering, and be present with those who suffer. That is the fullest expression of Christ.

And yes, we can and should repent. Even after Lent has passed. But I would suggest that we

There is nothing like a crisis to expose weaknesses, shortcomings, and oversights in both public systems and in private souls. Let's pay attention to what we see, not just grit our teeth and ignore it until (Lord willing) the pandemic passes us by.

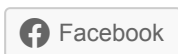
No, I do not believe that the virus has been sent in *response* to human selfishness, but it certainly has served to *reveal* our selfishness in ways we might not have otherwise seen. Quarantines and social isolation have demonstrated to many of us how dependent we are on other people—people we've never really noticed before.

The trick here is to notice these things *in ourselves*, because it's all too easy to notice them in other people. One very common response to the crisis—I'm guilty of it—is to ascribe blame. I like to tell the story in such a way that the cause for bad things always falls onto other characters. Who could have prevented or mitigated this, and how do we hold those people accountable? Who's worse, the idiots who are hoarding toilet paper, or the idiots who insist that the whole thing is being blown out of proportion? Times like this always seem to trigger the gut-level sense that *someone's doing something wrong, and it sure as hell isn't me*.

If you listen closely, you'll hear that sentiment in talk of the pandemic from both the left and from the right. (And you'll hear it from me, too: calling out a fault in other people has never made a person immune to it themselves.)

Attitudes like that are ripe for repentance—and that repentance, I think, is one of the opportunities of this crisis. Is the coronavirus an effect of our own weakness and self-righteousness? I doubt it. But if the coronavirus causes greater awareness of our own dependencies, failures, and arrogance (we're not Job, after all!), so much the better. That gives a way forward. And forward seems, to me, to be the right direction in which to tell the story.

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