

EPILOGUE

Pastoral Principles Pertaining to Pestilence and Providence

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Resurrection Sunday worship in 2020 was greatly impacted by the global pandemic—stay at home orders, empty churches, online worship, and a renewed realization of human mortality. These realities have highlighted the precious and pertinent words of Jesus. In the Upper Room he promised, “Because I live, you also will live” (John 14:19 esv). Facing the cross, our Lord comforted his own: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives, do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (John 14:27). The risen Lord declared, “And behold I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20). These biblical truths harmonize with the great opening question of the Heidelberg Catechism:

Question 1. *What is thy only comfort in life and in death?*

That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ, who with his precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and redeemed me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me, that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must work together for my salvation. Wherefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me heartily willing and ready henceforth to live unto him.¹

¹ “The Heidelberg Catechism. A.D. 1563,” in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*, rev. David S. Schaff (1931; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1983): 3:307–8.

Moreover, the Heidelberg Catechism teaches that God's providence encompasses both "health and sickness."² This confidence in the Lord's sovereign use of human suffering is sustained by Jesus's statement in John 9:3 concerning the man who was born blind: "Jesus answered, 'It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.'" Indeed, according to the apostle Paul, God's sovereignty governs all things, for God "works all things according to the counsel of his own will" (Eph 1:11).

Yet when it comes to the Lord's purposes in times of pestilence and plague, we might wonder if the Lord is truly at work. But the Scriptures do not step back from asserting that *wounding and healing are prerogatives of God*. Deuteronomy 32:39 states, "See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand." Job 5:18 declares, "For he wounds, but he binds up; he shatters, but his hands heal" (Job 5:18). Indeed, the Lord has *four judgments* that produce dread among humankind: war, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence:

"Son of man, when a land sins against me by acting faithlessly, and I stretch out my hand against it and break its supply of bread and send famine upon it, and cut off from it man and beast

"For thus says the Lord God: How much more when I send upon Jerusalem *my four disastrous acts of judgment, sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence*, to cut off from it man and beast!" (Ezek 14:13, 21; cf. Deut 32:15–44; Rev. 6:7–11)

I. Wisdom from the Past in the Face of Plague and Pestilence

How then should believers in a sovereign Lord act in such a time of apparent divine judgment upon humankind? A salient historical example is Martin Luther's response to the plague. His advice to Christian leaders in the pandemic of the black plague of his day is instructive for our experience with COVID-19. Here is Luther's counsel in "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague":

Others sin on the right hand. They are much too rash and reckless, tempting God and disregarding everything which might counteract death and the plague. They

² "Question 27. *What dost thou understand by the Providence of God?* Answer. The almighty and every where present power of God, whereby, as it were by his hand, he still upholds heaven and earth, with all creatures, and so governs them that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, all things, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand" (Ibid., 3:316).

disdain the use of medicines; they do not avoid places and persons infected by the plague, but lightheartedly make sport of it and wish to prove how independent they are.

They say that it is God's punishment; if He wants to protect them He can do so without medicines or our carefulness. This is not trusting God but tempting Him. God has created medicines and provided us with intelligence to guard and take good care of the body so that we can live in good health.

If one makes no use of intelligence or medicine when he could do so without detriment to his neighbor, such a person injures his body and must beware lest he become a suicide in God's eyes. By the same reasoning a person might forego eating and drinking, clothing and shelter, and boldly proclaim his faith that if God wanted to preserve him from starvation and cold, he could do so without food and clothing.

Actually that would be suicide. It is even more shameful for a person to pay no heed to his own body and to fail to protect it against the plague the best he is able, and then to infect and poison others who might have remained alive if he had taken care of his body as he should have.

He is thus responsible before God for his neighbor's death and is a murderer many times over. Indeed, such people behave as though a house were burning in the city and nobody were trying to put the fire out. Instead they give leeway to the flames so that the whole city is consumed, saying that if God so willed, he could save the city without water to quench the fire.

No, my dear friends, that is no good. Use medicine; take potions which can help you; fumigate the house, yard, and street; shun persons and places wherever your neighbor does not need your presence or has recovered, and act like a man who wants to help put out the burning city.

What else is the epidemic but a fire which instead of consuming wood and straw devours life and body? You ought to think this way:

Very well, by God's decree the enemy has sent us poison and deadly offal. Therefore I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine, and take it.

I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others, and so cause their death as a result of my negligence.

If God should wish to take me, He will surely find me and I have done what He has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others.

If my neighbor needs me, however, I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely, as stated above. See, this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God.

Moreover, he who has contracted the disease and recovered should keep away from others and not admit them into his presence unless it be necessary.

Though one should aid him in his time of need, as previously pointed out, he in turn should, after his recovery, so act toward others that no one becomes unnecessarily endangered on his account and so cause another's death. "Whoever loves danger," says the wise man, "will perish by it."³

³ Martin Luther, "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague," *Luther's Works*, vol. 43, *Devotional Writings II*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999), 131–32.

The biblical and medical wisdom displayed by the Reformer a half-millennium ago is recognized by contemporary physicians who are on the cutting edge of fighting the corona virus.⁴ Such practical insights remind us that God's wisdom has been imparted throughout the centuries, encouraging believers to be students of church history in the spirit of Hebrews 13:7–8, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."

II. *Pestilence Is Due to the Fall*

As we consider the Scriptures amidst this moment of global suffering, several truths emerge that should shape our thinking and ministry. Proverbs 18:14 says, "A man's spirit will endure sickness, but a crushed spirit who can bear?" Accordingly, we need to get our theology right, as theology impacts our minds and our spirits as we face physical infirmities. So, let us review some basic principles of biblical theology.

First, we must remember that the Creator gave his creatures a perfect creation. He declared it to be very good: "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day" (Gen 1:31). But paradise was not permanent and was lost by Adam's disobedience.

Thus, second, we are in a fallen world that is under God's curse (Gen 3). Suffering, pain, and death are the lot of all the children of Adam. Accordingly, disease, pestilence, and plague are described in the Old Testament, revealing that they afflict the covenant people of God (e.g., Lev 13; Num 25:1–9; 1 Sam 5–6; 2 Sam 24:10–17; 1 Cor 10:6–13). Yet God's people are instructed to handle them with faith and wisdom. Leviticus, for example, is a medically astute book emphasizing principles of both physical and ceremonial hygiene long before microbiology was even a consideration. A clever post by Paul Sloan on March 23, 2020, quips: "You, six weeks ago: those Levitical laws on impurity and contagions are so barbaric! Have a heart! You today: now if a person tests positive for Corona, he shall remain unclean all the days of his infection. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling is outside the camp."⁵

⁴ See Westminster Seminary's *Crisis, Christ and Confidence*, episode 1, where vaccinologist Dr. Greg Poland of the Mayo Clinic is interviewed. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=utFtyw3yx4>.

⁵ <https://ifunny.co/picture/i-paul-sloan-e-paulthomasloan-you-six-weeks-ago-those-rTUlwuoX7>.

Third, biblically, we are instructed to see our sin against the Lord as the real disease of mankind (Rom 3; 6:23). A classic Puritan expression of this is Ralph Venning's *The Sinfulness of Sin* written after London's Black Plague, in which he declared,

In short, sin is the dare of God's justice, the rape of his mercy, the jeer of his patience, the slight of his power, the contempt of his love, as one writer prettily expresses this ugly thing. We may go on and say, it is the upbraiding of his providence (Psalm 50), the scoff of his promise (2 Peter 3.3–4), the reproach of his wisdom (Isaiah 29.16). ...

Now since sin is a separation between God and man, an interruption of this communion and conformity, it must needs be prejudicial and hurtful to him. ... Man's suffering follows at the heel of sin, indeed, as he suffers by sinning, so in sinning; suffering and sinning involve each other. No sooner did sin enter into the world, but death, which is a privation of good, entered by it, with it, and in it, for sin is the sting of death. ...

Man no sooner begins to live, but he begins to die; and after a few days, which are but as a span, and pass away more swiftly than a weaver's shuttle, sin lays all in the dust, princes as well as beggars. Sin has reduced man's age to a very little pittance, from almost a thousand to a very uncertainty, not only to seventy, but to seven, for among men no man's life is valued at more. Man's time is short and uncertain: he that is born today is not sure to live a day. ...

Think of it, poor sinner, think of it in time before it is too late; for if you die in your sins, though you should weep out your eyes in Hell it will do you no good.⁶

Fourth, pestilence, plague, and all human suffering are temporary for God's people. There is the sure ultimate hope for the ending of human suffering in the eschaton. The climactic healing of the fallen and cursed universe is guaranteed by the redeeming work of Christ. According to Paul,

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. (Rom 8:20–22)

The climax of God's inaugurated healing of the brokenness of human life by Christ's redeeming work is revealed in Revelation 20–22. The Lord has promised that there will be a new heaven and the new earth without tears, pain or death. Christians therefore live in hope (Rom 5:1–11; 8:13–39).

⁶ Ralph Venning, "Sin, the Plague or Plagues, or The Just Vindication of the Law of God, and No Less Just Accusation and Condemnation of the Sin of Man (1669)," *The Gospel Truth* (2002), https://www.gospeltruth.net/sos/sos_sinfulnessofsin.htm.

III. *Disease and Judgment?*

All suffering and disease flow from the fall. But is all suffering judgment? The story of Job shows that this is not the case, as does the blind man healed by Jesus in John 9. Yet suffering and covenant-breaking and sin are linked in Scripture. Thus, faithful Israel's *blessings included protection from illness*. Exodus 23:25 says, "You shall serve the LORD your God, and he will bless your bread and your water, and I will take sickness away from among you." Deuteronomy 7:15 promises, "And the LORD will take away from you all sickness, and none of the evil diseases of Egypt, which you knew, will he inflict on you, but he will lay them on all who hate you."

But *divine judgment on rebellious Israel included sufferings by sicknesses*. Deuteronomy 28:58–61 declares,

If you are not careful to do all the words of this law that are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and awesome name, the LORD your God, *then the LORD will bring on you and your offspring extraordinary afflictions, afflictions severe and lasting, and sicknesses grievous and lasting*. And he will bring upon you again all the diseases of Egypt, of which you were afraid, and they shall cling to you. Every sickness also and every affliction that is not recorded in the book of this law, the LORD will bring upon you, until you are destroyed. (Cf. Deut 29:22–29)

Consistent with this, the *prayer for the blessings of forgiveness* by Solomon in 1 Kings 8:30, 37–39 *included healing from diseases*:

And listen to the plea of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, *forgive*. ...

If there is famine in the land, if there is *pestilence* or blight or mildew or locust or caterpillar, if their enemy besieges them in the land at their gates, whatever *plague*, whatever *sickness* there is, whatever prayer, whatever plea is made by any man or by all your people Israel, each knowing the affliction of his own heart and stretching out his hands toward this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place and forgive and act and render to each whose heart you know, according to all his ways (for you, you only, know the hearts of all the children of mankind).

All suffering flows from the fall and so in this sense is an expression of God's holy judgment. Yet, God is not necessarily judging a person who suffers. His purposes may be to show forth his glory and to advance the spiritual life of his child by what some have termed his "severe mercy."⁷

⁷ Cf. *A Severe Mercy* (1977), written by Sheldon Vanauken concerning his wife, their friendship with C. S. Lewis, their conversion to Christianity, and subsequent tragedy.

IV. God's Mercy amid Suffering

Preeminently, *Jesus affirmed by his restorative miracles the blessing and importance of seeking physical healing.* According to Matthew 4:23 and 9:35, Jesus healed all their diseases. In Matthew 10:1, Jesus gave the ability to heal all diseases to his disciples. The redeeming work of Christ for both body and soul reveals that caring for the sick and seeking their healing reflects God's love for fallen sinners.

Here we may consider God's nature during human suffering. Orthodox Christianity affirms, as taught in Westminster Shorter Catechism Question 4, that God is "infinite, eternal and unchangeable." This means that there is no limit to God's presence. Wherever there are those resisting, treating, or suffering with the coronavirus, God is there. Psalm 139:7 puts it this way: "Where shall I go from your Spirit?" Moreover, there is no limit to God in time, for time exists within God's eternal nature. So, while we dread to see a new day's statistics for those who have contracted the disease, those hospitalized, or those who have died, our omniscient and eternal God knows what the final statistics will be. He alone can declare the end from the beginning (Isa 46:10). There is no place in the Scriptures where it says, "When God saw what had happened, he panicked." Because he is unchangeable, we can be sure that his holiness against sin, his love for his people through Christ, and the life-sustaining and comforting promises of his Word are ever sure. Indeed, as observed above, how good it is to know that because he lives we will live as well! We can rest in that he is with us to the end of the age. In his peace, our hearts can rest untroubled and unafraid. He promises forgiveness for repenting and believing sinners (1 John 1:9) and assures judgment for the arrogant who resist him and his Word (John 3:36).

V. Pandemics and Divine Iconoclasm

While God's goodness is seen in his mercy, his holy judgment is seen in the humbling of the false deities of human worldviews that stand against the God who is there. Exodus 12:12 says, "For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and *on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments*: I am the LORD." Similarly, in pandemics, he is not silent but is declaring that he alone is the Lord and that there is none other. Thus, pandemics are *iconoclastic* by nature and call us through *revival and repentance to be the righteous remnant saved by the Lord's grace.* God's purpose in times of suffering humbles

humanity's false gods whether they be pride, boasting, power, treasure, health, success, and self-sufficiency. Isaiah 10:10–22 states,

“As my hand has reached to the kingdoms of *the idols*, whose carved images were greater than those of Jerusalem and Samaria, shall I not do to Jerusalem and her *idols* as I have done to Samaria and her images?”

... He will punish the speech of *the arrogant heart* of the king of Assyria and the boastful look in his eyes. For he says:

“... I remove the boundaries of peoples, and plunder their treasures; like a bull I bring down those who sit on thrones. My hand has found like a nest the wealth of the peoples”

Therefore the Lord GOD of hosts will send *wasting sickness* among his stout warriors, and under his glory a burning will be kindled, like the burning of fire. The light of Israel will become a fire, and his Holy One a flame, and it will burn and devour

In that day *the remnant of Israel* and the survivors of the house of Jacob will no more lean on him who struck them, but will lean on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, in truth. A *remnant* will return, the *remnant* of Jacob, to the mighty God. ... Destruction is decreed, overflowing with righteousness.

Indeed, human suffering underscores the *danger of forgetting God* by taking his many blessings for granted. Deuteronomy 8:11–20 affirms,

Take care lest you *forget the LORD your God* by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrifying wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water, who brought you water out of the flinty rock, who fed you in the wilderness with manna that your fathers did not know, that he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end. *Beware lest you say in your heart, “My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.”* You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers, as it is this day. And if you forget the LORD your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. Like the nations that the LORD makes to perish before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the LORD your God.

Compare this with President Abraham Lincoln's call for a Day of Prayer, Fasting, and Humiliation during the Civil War, March 30, 1863:

It is the duty of nations as well as of men, to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions, in humble sorrow, yet

with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon; and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations only are blessed whose God is the Lord.

And, insomuch as we know that, by His divine law, nations like individuals are subjected to punishments and chastisements in this world, may we not justly fear that the awful calamity of civil war, which now desolates the land, may be but a punishment, inflicted upon us, for our presumptuous sins, to the needful end of our national reformation as a whole People? We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us!

It behooves us then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.

Now, therefore, in compliance with the request, and fully concurring in the views of the Senate, I do, by this my proclamation, designate and set apart Thursday, the 30th. day of April, 1863, as a day of national humiliation, fasting and prayer. And I do hereby request all the People to abstain, on that day, from their ordinary secular pursuits, and to unite, at their several places of public worship and their respective homes, in keeping the day holy to the Lord, and devoted to the humble discharge of the religious duties proper to that solemn occasion.

All this being done, in sincerity and truth, let us then rest humbly in the hope authorized by the Divine teachings, that the united cry of the Nation will be heard on high, and answered with blessings, no less than the pardon of our national sins, and the restoration of our now divided and suffering Country, to its former happy condition of unity and peace.

... By the President: Abraham Lincoln.⁸

If it was true a century and a half ago during the American Civil War that America had grown in prosperity like no other nation but had forgotten God, how much truer it is today as America and the world face COVID-19!

VI. *The Christian's Personal Witness during Suffering*

Margaret Clarkson, a woman who lived with daily suffering, gleaned valuable insights for the believer facing suffering. She explains,

Suffering may well be a part of God's will for our lives. Peter wrote of this in his letters to the young churches in Asia. He warned them of the suffering that was to be theirs and urged them not to be bewildered by it as if some strange thing had

⁸ Abraham Lincoln, "Proclamation Appointing a National Fast Day (March 30, 1863)," *Abraham Lincoln Online*, 2020, <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/fast.htm>.

happened to them; rather, he urged them to rejoice because they were sharing Christ's sufferings and would also share His glory (1 Pet. 4:12–13), and he went on to add words that have blessed countless sufferers ever since: "Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator" (1 Pet. 4:19 KJV).

Our part in suffering in the will of God is twofold: first, we are to commit the keeping of our souls to God, believing that he is in control of our lives and trusting Him to do for us all that He has promised. We must resist Satan's lies. We must not be deceived into thinking that God "gave" us this suffering as a sadistic "gift" because He wants us to suffer, that He is no longer in control in our affairs, or that we have lost our way and strayed outside His will. We must accept the fact that he has permitted this evil to come to us, and we must commit its outcome, along with our souls, into His keeping.

Second, we are to do this "in well doing": we are to concentrate on continuing to do the things that are well pleasing to God. This means that we will witness a good confession in our suffering. We will not fall apart when calamity strikes. It is not easy to maintain a good witness in the face of sudden upset and pain, but it is a part of our Christian responsibility. The spiritual confusion and devastation we so often experience when suffering invades our lives not only causes us needless pain but is a poor testimony to others. It betrays a lack of spiritual maturity and shows that we do not in fact possess the faith we profess.

Suffering borne with courage and confidence in God is a powerful witness to His grace. Fear, anxiety, self-pity, and inner havoc suggest to others that God is not all He claims to be, that He is not sufficient for our needs. Many an observer has been turned either towards God or away from Him by watching a Christian's response to suffering.⁹

The examples of past saints challenge us to show forth the glory of our God when we suffer. The Puritans learned much about suffering from illness as well as persecution for the sake of conscience. A classic example is Thomas Case, who writes,

We are great strangers to the cross, and when we suffer, we either despise the chastisement of the Lord or we faint when we are rebuked by him. If the affliction is in measure, we are apt to despise it and considerate it not worth taking notice of. But if the rod fetches blood, presently it is intolerable, and we begin to faint, crying out in our passion: "Was ever sorrow like my sorrow?" But God's rod and God's love may stand together! Providence has so ordered that whosoever will follow the Lord fully like Caleb (Num. 14:24) will be exposed to the world's hatred, but the glorious spirit will rest upon them (1 Pet. 4:14).¹⁰

⁹ Margaret Clarkson, *Destined for Glory: The Meaning of Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 91–93.

¹⁰ Thomas Case, *On Affliction* (1652), republished by as Thomas Case, *When Christians Suffer* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009).

Among the lessons that bearing the cross of suffering brings, Case offers the following:

1. God teaches us by affliction to have compassion for those who suffer.
2. Through sufferings God teaches us to value our outward mercies and comforts more, and yet to dote upon them less.

Other salient lessons he offers include these:

5. God also uses affliction to reveal unknown corruptions in the hearts of his people.
13. God teaches us in a suffering condition to attend to our duty more than our deliverance.
17. Another lesson to be learned is to rightly estimate the sufferings of Jesus Christ.
18. The next lesson that God teaches by affliction is to prize and long for heaven.

May our Lord help us to reflect such faithful responses to suffering if that is his purpose for us.

VII. An Opportunity and Time for Awakening?

Could it be that God will use this situation for a gospel awakening, for which so many have prayed? This season of suffering may be a severe mercy of the Lord to restore his church and grant revival. Let us pray to that end. To help us consider how pestilence has been used by God in the past, here are comments that Charles Haddon Spurgeon made during the cholera epidemic in London. Notice that Spurgeon observes that while pestilence is powerful it can soon be forgotten after it passes.

“Who is the man that does not fear to die? I will tell you. The man that is a believer. Fear to die! Thank God, I do not. The cholera may come again next summer—I pray God it may not; but if it does, it matters not to me: I will toil and visit the sick by night and by day, until I drop; and if it takes me, sudden death is sudden glory” (18th Feb 1855).

“In times of pestilence it is possible to walk in the midst of cholera and death, singing—‘Plagues and deaths around me fly, Till he please, I cannot die.’ It is possible to stand exposed to the utmost degree of danger, and yet to feel such a holy serenity that we can laugh at fear; too great, too mighty, too powerful through God to stoop for one moment to the cowardice of trembling” (14th Oct 1855).

“You cannot say, can you, that you have all your salvation? But a Christian can. He can walk through the cholera and the pestilence, and feel that should the arrow smite him, death would be to him the entrance of life; he can lie down and grieve but little at the approach of dissolution, for he has all his salvation; his jewels are in his breast, gems which shall shine in heaven” (15th Apr 1855).

“How many of the same sort of confessions, too, have we seen in times of cholera, and fever, and pestilence! Then our churches have been crammed with hearers, who, because so many funerals have passed their doors, or so many have died in the street, could not refrain from going up to God’s house to confess their sins. And under that visitation, when one, two, and three have been lying dead in the house, or next door, how many have thought they would really turn to God! But, alas! when the pestilence had done its work, conviction ceased; and when the bell had tolled the last time for a death caused by cholera, then their hearts ceased to beat with penitence, and their tears did flow no more” (18th Jan 1857).

“If you ask me what I think to be the design, I believe it to be this—to waken up our indifferent population, to make them remember that there is a God, to render them susceptible of the influences of the gospel, to drive them to the house of prayer, to influence their minds to receive the Word, and moreover to startle Christians into energy and earnestness, that they may work while it is called to-day. Already I have been told by Christian brethren labouring in the east of London, that there is a greater willingness to listen to gospel truth, and that if there be a religious service it is more acceptable to the people now than it was; for which I thank God as an indication that affliction is answering its purpose” (Aug 12th 1866).¹¹

Will the coronavirus, like the cholera epidemic of Spurgeon’s days, bring a revival today? This is being discussed and some believe it is possible.¹²

VIII. *Claiming God’s Promises in the Pandemic*

The Scriptures declare, “as [a man] thinketh in his heart, so is he” (Prov 23:7 kjv). So, it is essential that believers today meditate on God’s great promises in the inevitable periods when anxiety and fear arise. Here are examples of some of the wonderful truths of God’s Word available for us to focus upon as believers:

Moses declared to Israel, “Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the LORD your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you” (Deut 31:6 esv).

The Lord commanded Joshua as he assumed Moses’s leadership mantle,

Be strong and courageous Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. ... This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you might be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For

¹¹ “Lessons from Spurgeon on Coronavirus,” *Christian Concern*, March 17, 2020, <https://christianconcern.com/comment/lessons-from-spurgeon-on-coronavirus/>.

¹² <https://www.reviveourhearts.com/true-woman/blog/could-coronavirus-lead-revival/>; <https://thefederalist.com/2020/03/27/amid-coronavirus-lockdowns-neighborhoods-are-coming-to-life-again/>; <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2020/march/praying-for-revival-during-coronavirus-crisis.html>; <https://www.christianpost.com/voices/coronavirus-could-ignite-revival-like-a-diesel-engine.html>.

then you will make your way prosperous and then you will have good success. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go. (Josh 1:6–9)

When David was taken captive in Gath by the Philistines, he declared, “In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?” (Ps 56:4). This is the closest biblical source for the United States national motto adopted by Congress on July 30, 1956, “In God We Trust.”

And as our Lord faced the cross in the Upper Room, he assured his disciples, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (John 14:27).

We are to take God’s promises to heart lifting them up in our prayers. We must remember that suffering calls on us to be strong today and to prepare for eternity tomorrow. Accordingly, let us meditate on biblical texts on the following themes and principles:

1. Divine omnipotence: Our Lord is always in control. Nothing escapes his plan.

Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. (1 Chr 29:11–12)

2. Humbly but confidently let us approach our Heavenly Father through our High Priest and Savior, Jesus Christ.

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. (John 15:16)

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. (Phil 4:6)

3. Remember as we pray that our God is able to do more than we can think or ask.

Ah, Lord God! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you. (Jer 32:17)

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think ...

to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph 3:20–21)

4. Let us seek to deepen our trust in God because he uses suffering and trials for his purpose and our good.

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (Jas 1:2–4)

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Rom 8:28)

5. Should we face death, let us rest in the wonderful truth that God is with us and we look forward to an eternity with our Savior.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. ...

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever. (Ps 23:4, 6)

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. (Rom 8:18)

6. Let us be authentic and thankful upon recovery. Consider the example of King Hezekiah's grateful prayer after his recovery as he reflected on what he thought was his imminent death:

A writing of Hezekiah king of Judah, after he had been sick and had recovered from his sickness: I said, In the middle of my days I must depart; I am consigned to the gates of Sheol for the rest of my years. I said, I shall not see the LORD, the LORD in the land of the living; I shall look on man no more among the inhabitants of the world. My dwelling is plucked up and removed from me like a shepherd's tent; like a weaver I have rolled up my life; he cuts me off from the loom; from day to night you bring me to an end; I calmed myself until morning; like a lion he breaks all my bones; from day to night you bring me to an end. Like a swallow or a crane I chirp; I moan like a dove. My eyes are weary with looking upward. O Lord, I am oppressed; be my pledge of safety! What shall I say? For he has spoken to me, and he himself has done it. I walk slowly all my years because of the bitterness of my soul. O Lord, by these things men live, and in all these is the life of my spirit. Oh restore me to health and make me live! Behold, it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness; but in love you have delivered my life from the pit of destruction, for you have cast all my sins behind your back. For Sheol does not thank you; death does not praise you; those who go down to the pit do not hope for your faithfulness. The living, the living, he thanks you, as I do this day; the father makes known to the children

your faithfulness. The LORD will save me, and we will play my music on stringed instruments all the days of our lives, at the house of the LORD. Now Isaiah had said, “Let them take a cake of figs and apply it to the boil, that he may recover.” Hezekiah also had said, “What is the sign that I shall go up to the house of the LORD?” (Isa 38:9–22)

Conclusion

Clarkson, quoted above, summarized the biblical doctrine of suffering under the sovereign purposes of God in the final stanzas from her hymn, “O Father, You Are Sovereign”:

O Father, you are sovereign, the Lord of human pain,
Transmuting earthly sorrows to gold of heav’nly gain,
All evil overruling, as none but Conqu’ror could,
Your love pursues its purpose—our souls’ eternal good.

O Father, you are sovereign! We see you dimly now,
But soon before your triumph earth’s every knee shall bow.
With this glad hope before us our faith springs forth anew:
Our sovereign Lord and Savior, We trust and worship you!¹³

In these uncertain days of suffering, may our Lord grant us all the humble trust of Job, who declared, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:21).

¹³ “75. O Father, You Are Sovereign,” in *Trinity Hymnal*, rev. ed. (Atlanta: Great Commission Publications, 1990). Copyright *Christianity Today* (1982); assigned to Margaret Clarkson.