

Reflections on COVID-19 From Psalm 80

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Everyone has been caught off guard. The numbers are staggering. As of this present writing, there are nearly 20 million infections of COVID-19 worldwide, of which some 730,000 have been fatal.¹ This unprecedented crisis has caused the best scientists and medical experts to face it with a view to finding cures and preventatives. Optimists tell us to wait a while until a breakthrough can occur. Realists worry that there is no end in sight. There is precedent for some hope in the fight against SARS and other types of viruses we have seen. And if we go back far enough, we can remember surviving the 1918 pandemic flu and many others. A babble of voices, some reliable, others not, is coming at us over the media, telling us what we can do. Governments have issued directives, suggestions, and warnings.

In a challenging situation in which Christians ought to have a good deal to say, not many voices have united to herald a single message. Should we just ignore the babble and wait? The love of our neighbor, being our brother's keeper, forbids it. Renowned theologians like N. T. Wright have written (for *Time* magazine) telling us to avoid pat answers and resolve simply to be sorrowful, to lament.² He pleads with us to stay away from hasty reactions that tell us the pandemic is a judgment. This, he says, comes from a “knee-jerk” rationalism that wants easy responses to something more mysterious.

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¹ Editor's Note: These reflections were written on August 9, 2020. The numbers in the text reflect the situation at the time.

² N. T. Wright, “Christianity Offers No Answers About the Corona Virus: It's Supposed To,” *Time*, March 29, 2020, <https://time.com/5808495/coronavirus-christianity/>.

My own view is that lament is wholly appropriate. The appeal to judgment is not rationalist but is, at least in part, biblical—“in part” because while there is no doubt that judgment is involved, so are other elements in the inscrutable providence of God revealed to us. Like many, I have taken refuge in the Psalms. However, it is not always easy to derive a simple message from the Psalms. They must be read expectantly yet with a certain amount of vulnerability.

Let us look briefly at Psalm 80. I find it rich yet also somewhat hard to summarize. Making an outline seems, if not futile, quite difficult. Various elements are woven together with no doubt a final message of confidence in God. But it is a frank appeal for mercy to a God who has chastised his people for a long time. Let us admit that there is certainly judgment here.

O LORD God of hosts,
 how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?
 You have fed them with the bread of tears
 and given them tears to drink in full measure.
 You make us an object of contention for our neighbors,
 and our enemies laugh among themselves. (Ps 80:4–6 ESV)

Secularized Westerners are hesitant to declare that there is such a God. Liberal theologians have long preached that, as H. Richard Niebuhr puts it, “a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”³ Evangelical Christians won't go that route, yet they are loath to talk about judgment, hell, and condemnation. But neither the Psalms nor most of the rest of Scripture makes much sense if there is not judgment. Indeed, the gospel message is premised on atonement from the wrath of God (Rom 1:18–3:31; 1 John 1:5–2:6).

Judgment, well, fine. Things become a bit more treacherous when we try to identify the cause of God's judgment. We do not possess the clairvoyance of the prophets. Yet it is not out of the question to make a few connections. Planet earth becomes complacent in a number of ways. One of them is to be satisfied with economic security. Another is the (often unspoken) assumption that whatever our challenges, science and learning can get us out of them. Yet another is that we do not need God to have meaning, or even to be good. So my humble surmise is that occasionally the Lord uses a powerful megaphone.

³ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (Chicago: Willett, Clark, 1937), 193.

But we certainly cannot stop there. Our Psalm adds a number of themes to the theme of judgment. Strangely to us, perhaps, it reminds God of his great deeds.

You brought a vine out of Egypt;
 you drove out the nations and planted it.
 You cleared the ground for it;
 it took deep root and filled the land.
 The mountains were covered with its shade,
 the mighty cedars with its branches.
 It sent out its branches to the sea
 and its shoots to the River. (Vv. 8–11)

The psalmist follows this up with an urgent question:

Why then have you broken down its walls,
 so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?
 The boar from the forest ravages it,
 and all that move in the field feed on it. (Vv. 12–13)

It is quite legitimate to ask God, *Why?* The question, when asked in faith, is not only legitimate but the only honest approach to God. Throughout the Psalms, and beyond, the saints of God ask, *Why?* and *How long?* (Pss 13; 43; 73; 88; etc.). Our Lord himself asked the question during his agony on the cross (Matt 27:46). I cannot underscore this enough: being a believer does not mean having all the answers. It does mean asking God to intervene. Now, he may do so, or he may do so but not on our terms. Our psalm asks God for restoration but does not dictate the terms. This is one of the great lessons of the spiritual life. Job was righteous but did not receive straightforward answers to his yearnings. According to divine wisdom, there are matters we need to know about and others we do not. This is a big subject. But the Reformation doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture is solidly based on biblical evidence.

Applied to the present COVID-19 pandemic, this would mean we cannot know all of what God is doing. That is a difficult posture for Western folks, particularly Americans. Many of our leaders foolishly make claims that are soon shown to be unsupported. The balance is delicate because we do not want simply to throw up our hands and become resigned to our fate.

Finally, though we may struggle to find a clear outline for our psalm, it is resolutely a prayer of confidence:

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock.
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth.
Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh,
stir up your might
and come to save us!
Restore us, O God;
let your face shine, that we may be saved! (Vv. 1–3)

The beginning and the end of the matter is that God is God. And he loves his people. And he has saved the world through his Son, Jesus Christ, the ultimate “man on his right hand.”

But let your hand be on the man of your right hand,
the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself!
Then we shall not turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call upon your name!
Restore us, O LORD God of hosts!
Let your face shine, that we may be saved! (Vv. 17–19)

So, worship God, admit you cannot discern all his ways, yet declare that he is good. Pray hard, rehearsing each circumstance, each question, each challenge. And, finally, do all you can to bring relief to your fellow suffering neighbors.