



A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON COVID-19

By Dr Ruth Valerio and Gideon Heugh

We face an unprecedented global crisis and, as followers of Jesus, key questions emerge: why is this happening? How should we respond? Where is God in this situation?

In times like these, when life as we know it has been turned upside down, it's crucial that we have a good Bible-based theology. Theology is our understanding of the nature of God. This in turn influences the way we see and respond to the world.

Most churches around the world have stopped meeting in person – for obvious, sensible and necessary reasons. Some, however, have not, citing their belief that God will protect them from the virus. This is bad theology, and it might cost lives.

God does protect, and he does heal. Yet we are his hands and feet, and it's vital that we play our role, listening to and acting upon the advice of experts. I trust God with my health – but I also try and make sure that I exercise and eat well. If I break my leg, I'll pray for healing – but I'll also go to the doctor. So we must trust God, but take action too.

BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS

Tearfund's theory of poverty is rooted in our understanding of relationships. God created a world that he declared to be very good: a world in which people and the wider natural order exist harmoniously in the presence of God. Relationship with God, with others, with ourselves and with the rest of creation is central to God's loving purposes. When those relationships go wrong, the Bible then tells the story of how God works to restore them and put them back to rights – a plan that ultimately finds its fulfilment in Jesus Christ.

Poverty is the result of those broken relationships: it is the consequence of the social and structural legacies of broken relationships with God, a lack of understanding of what it means for us to be made in the image of God, unjust relationships between people, and exploitative relationships with the environment. This is the reality and the consequence of sin as it affects us individually, but also structurally and systematically. The Bible is clear that God, people and the wider natural world are deeply interconnected and so if one aspect of that is broken then everything will be impacted.

As hard as it is to hear, the outbreak of Covid-19 is not a 'natural disaster'. Rather it is a disaster of our own making. Viruses jump species and get into humans, and environmental destruction makes this more likely to happen, and with greater frequency, as people are brought into closer contact with virus-carrying animals. Deforestation, mining, the bushmeat trade, animal trafficking and unsustainable agricultural practices are all likely factors at play.¹ The desperation of poverty and the greed of wealth underpin a global system that is fundamentally at odds with God's original intention of shalom between all things.

To recognise this is not to say that 'God caused this' or 'God willed it' or that this is God's judgement. Rather it is to recognise that the brokenness of creation, and systemic and personal sin, are contributing factors in the rise and spread of things that harm us all. God has created a world where all things are interconnected, and there are natural consequences when those connections are broken.

SICKNESS AND SIN

In some cultures, sickness is seen as directly linked to that individual's sin (that could be from sin committed during a past life for those who believe in reincarnation and karma). But the Bible does not allow such a simple 'cause and effect' line to be drawn between sin and sickness. For example, in the story of Job it is clear that Job's suffering is not a result of Job's sin but of the existence and work of Satan. In Luke 13:1–5, Jesus is told about Pilate's massacre of some Galileans who were in the process of offering sacrifices: he responds by pointing out that those who were killed were not greater sinners than those who were not killed. And he makes the same point about the 18 people who were killed when the tower in Siloam collapsed. In doing so he makes it clear that the existence of calamities doesn't mean that those who fall victim to them are worse people than anybody else. Such events should not become an opportunity to judge others. What Jesus does is attack the judgmentalism of those who are observers of disaster and point out that all human beings face a disastrous divine judgement if they fail to repent.

In John 9:1–5 we see Jesus meeting a man who was blind from birth. The disciples ask about the sins that have caused this blindness – was it his sin or that of his parents? But Jesus is clear that his blindness is not to do with sin. Rather it provides an opportunity, 'that the works of God might be displayed in him' (v 3). In Mark 2 Jesus heals the paralysed man who has been let down through the roof, and he does so by saying, 'your sins are forgiven'. Given what we have just seen Jesus saying above, we must be wary of seeing this as Jesus linking the man's paralysis with his individual sin. Jesus

does not say that explicitly, and it may simply be that Jesus knew the bigger need the man had was for forgiveness of sins rather than physical healing (it needs to be noted that nowhere else does Jesus heal by saying 'your sins are forgiven').

That is not to say that there are no links between spiritual and physical healing. As we have seen above, the Bible does present links between sin and suffering in the world: our physical suffering is part of that whole chain of sin from Genesis 3 onwards. And there are lifestyle choices we can make that either promote or neglect our health and well-being. But, if and when people fall ill, there is no biblical warrant for linking sickness with a person's sin and we must never use that as a basis for stigmatisation and rejection. The Pharisees did that – Jesus did not. His message was one of acceptance, inclusion and compassion for all.

SIGNS OF THE END TIMES?

Widespread conflict in the Middle East. A plague of locusts spreading across Africa. Flooding around the world. Surely these are signs of the end times?

If there's one thing that we can say for certain, it's that no one can know for certain. If Jesus himself did not know when the end times would be (Matthew 24:36), who are we to try and say?

It is important to keep a wider perspective throughout all of this. Christians have been trying (and failing) to predict the end of the world since the early days of the church. Although the word 'unprecedented' keeps being brought up, this is not the first crisis of this scale – indeed, there have been far, far darker times in human history. The great plague of the 14th century is estimated to have wiped out nearly two thirds of Europe's population. I'm sure they were convinced that they were in the end times too.

War, disease, natural disasters – these are, sadly, nothing new. Jesus said his return would be sudden and unexpected, and he said we were to ignore anyone who thought they knew about specific dates and times (Matthew 24:3–31). The answer is that there is no answer, and that we should ignore those who think they have one.

SO HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND?

The church should be the light of the world (Matthew 5:14). As the shadow of coronavirus falls across the land, the call of the church is to shine as brightly as it can.

We believe that suffering and sickness is not what God has intended for his creation. The mission of God is to

Footnote 1 – See [link](#)

redeem and restore the whole of creation, and the church, as the body of Christ, has a vital and distinctive role to play in fulfilling this mission. We are to follow Jesus in showing God's love, bringing healing to a broken world and responding holistically to people's needs: economic, emotional, spiritual and physical, both locally and globally. We can and must act.

As we do this we will be following in the footsteps of the church through history. In both the second and third centuries AD, terrible pandemics (probably measles or smallpox) swept through the known world. In these situations it was the Christians who stayed and took care of the sick. In the 1500s Europe experienced a plague, and the church and church leaders argued about how they should respond. Martin Luther wrote a tract on the topic, reminding his readers of Christ's words, 'I was sick and you took care of me'. His view was that the church should care for those affected (including spiritual care through trying to meet as church) and also take measures to avoid exposing others to disease. When Ebola ravaged West Africa in 2014, it was local churches that helped lead the fightback. In Sierra Leone, Christians used video and radio broadcasts to spread vital health messages. Tearfund trained pastors and gave them phones so they could call people with Ebola. The pastors spoke to them and prayed with them over the phone. Churches gave practical help to people in quarantine and church members provided food, water and toiletries.

There is thus a huge role for us to play in this situation and we are seeing the church rising to the challenge. In many communities around the world, it is Christians who are coordinating local care, creating neighbourhood WhatsApp groups, dropping off food and toiletries to those who are self-isolating, and being there to provide emotional support. In Cox's Bazar refugee camp in Bangladesh, life is becoming even more miserable as sanitation and hygiene facilities are already inadequate, and the streets are narrow and crowded. But Tearfund's church partners are distributing hygiene kits and leaflets with information in the Rohingya language to educate people about handwashing, distancing and recognising the symptoms of Covid-19.

When we face a situation such as we are facing today, we will naturally experience fear and worry, and our first response may be to turn inwards in panic and self-interest. But we know that we have Emmanuel, God with us, who

understands our suffering, accompanies us through it and asks us to bring our fears and worries to him in prayer. Archbishop Justin Welby, in the first live-streamed service after church buildings had closed in the UK, said that looking inwards we 'will only reveal the limits of our own resources and lead to deeper fear and selfishness', but that 'to console others, we must find our own consolation in God'. It is through coming to God that we 'will find the means to console the frightened, the panic-struck, the panic-buying, the fearful and all those around us in whom alarm is rising'. During this time, as we are called on to take care of others and of ourselves, we must find rhythms that help us lean into God and find our strength in him.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

If we lean deeper into God's love, choosing faith instead of fear, we may find that new opportunities emerge. We believe that God allows things to happen in the world and that he can work for good. There is the potential for communities to come together more than they have before; for families to re-discover themselves; for busy people to slow down and build rhythm into their lives; for people to reconnect with God and his world; for nations to re-tune into God's word; for churches to learn how to use digital technology to enhance ministry; for us to develop local economies and green enterprise. As we emerge from the initial extremes of Covid-19 we can ask ourselves what sort of a world we want to build going forwards. Can we repent of the world we have created, and instead look to build one without such a huge gap between rich and poor – a world that enables us to live in harmony with creation? A world where we understand that the well-being of one is bound up with the well-being of all?

As Christians, we are future-oriented people. Our lives are motivated by that vision of the future that we glimpse in Revelation 21 and 22, of a time when God will dwell fully with us, in a transformed heaven and earth. Then there will be no more suffering, sickness or death, and the wider natural world will flourish with us. Through the undoubted pain and uncertainty of these current times, we can let that future hope motivate how we live our lives today as we hold on to God our rock, pray for those affected and an end to the outbreak, and look outwards with practical love and compassion.



learn.tearfund.org

100 Church Road, Teddington TW11 8QE, United Kingdom
T UK +44 (0) 20 3906 3906 E publications@tearfund.org

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