

Where is God in the Midst of a Pandemic?

David. M. Hoffeditz, Ph.D.

It is not just a virus that quickly spreads in a pandemic, a doubt also runs rampant. Once inside the host, the viral enzymes of doubt can quickly superimpose their “genetic instructions”. Similarly, in the case of doubt, these “instructions” serve to question God’s involvement, or lack thereof, in our lives. Let us be honest, events such as losing a loved one due to the virus, missing the last half of your senior year in high school, postponing a wedding, or forfeiting a job, can lead us to question our theology. Where is God in all of this? If He is so loving and powerful, why does He not act?

In the midst of losing a beloved sibling, two sisters also wrestled with similar thoughts. They both declared to the Lord that if He had come, their brother would not have died. Adding insult to injury, Jesus missed the funeral service and even declared that He was glad their brother, Lazarus, had died (John 11:14-15)! At best His response was insensitive, at worst, sadistic. Is this really the Jesus we know and love? Living in this pandemic we could easily join in chorus with Martha and Mary in asking, “Where are You, Lord? Why do You not hear our prayer and answer? Don’t You care?”.

And yet, a careful study of John 11 reveals several truths which help in answering these questions born out of deep concern and doubt. Consider:

Truth #1: We need to remember that our Lord loves us. Even before Jesus made the journey to Bethany, John provided a very important parenthetical statement in verse five. “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.” The author knew the reader needed to be reminded of this truth prior to Jesus uttering His words in verse 15. This love Jesus had for Lazarus and his sisters is also highlighted in verse 36.

Our souls need to rehearse the first line of the ol’ children’s song, “Jesus loves me”. Those words, which remind us that we know He loves us because the Bible tells us so, are so profound. In the midst of life’s difficulties, we must cling to this fundamental truth. As the apostle Paul reminded the church in Rome there is nothing that will separate us from the love

of Christ: no trouble, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword . . . or even a pandemic (Rom 8:35). Life's circumstances can quickly eclipse this amazing truth. We need to reflect on what God has done for us. *In love*, the Lord called us before the foundation of the world. *In love*, Jesus came and died on a cross for our sins. *In love*, the Spirit indwells and guides us. *In love*, Christ intercedes for us and prepares a home for us. *In love*, our sovereign Lord will see us glorified.

Truth #2: We need to remember that our Lord enters our broken world. The effects of sin upon humanity are clearly seen in John 11. Death had stripped these sisters of their brother's presence and had replaced Lazarus with a vacuum of indescribable agony and overwhelming grief. Jesus did not minimize the pain and sorrow of these two women from Bethany. Rather, He entered their world of hurt. Interestingly, this is the only reference to Jesus crying in Scripture (v. 33). In addition to His weeping, John mentioned twice that Jesus was "intensely moved" (vv. 33, 38). These tears and intense emotions were not for Lazarus, because Jesus would raise His friend from the dead. Rather, Jesus' tears and intense emotions displayed the Lord's grief over the effects of sin and death in the sin-tainted world. Jesus knows the pain we encounter living on planet Earth (see Hebrews 4:15). Ultimately, Jesus identifies with the effects of sin as He hangs on a cross for us.

Truth #3: We need to remember that our Lord is working all things for His glory. We must remember that the seemingly shocking and callous statement in John 11:15 stems from someone who knows the outcome. In His supernatural knowledge, Jesus knows that this tragic passing of Lazarus is for God's glory and for the refining of the belief of His followers. John Piper states, "People are not prepared or able to rejoice in suffering unless they experience a massive biblical revolution of how they think and feel about the meaning of life. Human nature and American culture make it impossible to rejoice in suffering. This is a miracle in the human soul wrought by God through His Word." While Martha declared her belief in Jesus (v. 27), her profession did not take into consideration the full force of this One who had come—the One who is able to give life now and for all eternity! The raising of Lazarus provided an incredible object lesson. It provided Martha and Mary, as well as all those present, the

opportunity to witness first-hand God's power and glory and an opportunity to strengthen their faith (see v. 40).

The Good Shepherd never promised to remove the dark valleys, He *did* promise to walk through the valleys with us. The Good Shepherd encourages us to come to Him for wisdom, understanding, and direction. James 1 clearly teaches that the circumstances of life can create doubt in how to navigate through these difficult waters. It can be difficult to know exactly what the Lord might be teaching us and/or how He would have us to respond. As Christ's followers, we have the privilege of turning to Him for divine wisdom. On the other hand, James 1 teaches that doubt that results in questioning the Lord's character and work in the midst of the circumstances is ungodly. At the end of the day, the Lord does not owe us an explanation of why He has allowed this pandemic (see Job 38). We are called, however, to trust in His sovereign plan.

The apostle Paul teaches that though events in life themselves are not always good, the result is always good. Why? Because the one who loves God is becoming more like Christ (see Romans 8: 28-30). This recognition of God's gracious hand even in the midst of life's darkest hours is also seen by the prophet Habakkuk. He writes, "When the fig tree does not bud, and there are no grapes on the vines; when the olive trees do not produce, and the fields yield no crops; when the sheep disappear from the pen, and there are no cattle in the stalls, I will rejoice because of the LORD; I will be happy because of the God who delivers me!" (Hab 3:17-18). While it may seem that God has abandoned us, He has not (see Prov 3:5-6). In *All Things for Good*, Puritan writer Thomas Watson pens these encouraging and instructive words: "Our graces are imperfect, our comforts ebb and flow, but God's foundation stands sure. They who are built upon this rock of God's eternal purpose, need not fear falling away; neither the power of man, nor the violence of temptation, shall ever be able to overturn them" (p. 127). In the midst of life's dark valleys, may we not forget Jesus' response to Martha, "Didn't I tell you that if you believe, you would see the glory of God?" (11:40).

Truth #4: We need to remember that our Lord is victorious. What a sight it must have been to see Lazarus come out of that tomb tightly bound in burial cloths?! However, it must be noted that Jesus was not similarly bound when He came out of the tomb in John 20:6-7. And unlike

Lazarus, Jesus would never have need of grave cloths again. Jesus declares to Martha: “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25). It is not simply that Jesus *gives* resurrection and life, but that He *is* the resurrection and life.

If there was nothing beyond the grave, then 1 Corinthians 15:19 is correct. *We should be* pitied. However, John 11 reminds us that we have hope in Christ. This world is not our home. Even death itself is subject to Christ. Our Savior has granted us life and an inheritance that is imperishable. Satan would love to use our present situation to have us lose sight of our eternal home and doubt the very character of God. And yet, we must not forget that our Lord is victorious and that He will return. May we join in Paul’s song of gratitude: “‘Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death is your sting?’ . . . Give thanks to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 15:54-57). The Lord has not abandoned us. In fact, He reminds us not to let our hearts be distressed in the midst of this pandemic or any other calamity for that matter. He is intentionally preparing for us a dwelling place in His Father’s house (John 14:1-2). The guarantee of this promise is based upon the One who declared, “I am the resurrection and the life.” Amen! Come Lord Jesus!