

**“God and the Pandemic:”  
A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and Its Aftermath**

N.T. Wright

August 19, 2020

**Session One:**

**Preface (xi – xii) and Chapter 1 – Where Do We Start? (p. 1 – 6)**

**Questions to Grapple With...**

- 1. What type of emotions have you wrestled with during the period of the pandemic – from the beginning up until now? How have these emotions changed throughout this experience? What have you done to help deal with these emotions?**
- 2. Do you have individual in your life (family or close friends) that fall into the categories of being Stoics, Epicureans, or Platonists by nature? If so, how has this affected their approach to the COVID-19 pandemic?**
- 3. N.T. Wright challenges us in this opening chapter to ask the question “What” instead of “Why”? Have you caught yourself in the pandemic asking yourself “Why” a lot? Have you asked yourself “What can I be doing?” How does your emotions dictate which question you are willing to ask?**

**Diving into the Text...**

**Preface:**

N.T. Wright is an English New Testament scholar, who currently serves as the senior research fellow at Oxford University. As a thorough writer and teacher, Wright was asked early on during the COVID-19 pandemic by *TIME Magazine* to write a short article to address the pandemic, reactions to it, and his approach, specifically the focus on the emotions welling up from it, from a biblical perspective. His goal, as he clearly states, is not to offer a “solution” or a quick “answer” as so many – pastors and theologians included – have done. Before we can do this (or should do this), we should restrain ourselves to wrestle with the emotion, to lament...This may require us to retreat – from ourselves and our initial reactions – and from others who want to tell us what to think! Spending time to reflect and lament may provide us a fresh perspective, something new, rather than the repeated old!

Question to ask ourselves: As the pandemic has drawn on (we are going on approximately 5 months in our area where things have been dramatically shifted), have you found the opportunity to “retreat” from the emotional overwhelm and cacophony of the world to reflect and lament the emotions that you are feeling?

**(THIS IS OUR ULTIMATE STUDY GOAL!)**

### **Chapter One: Where Do We Start?**

Initial reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic mirrored reactions to viruses in the past. Predictions, but surely they were overblown. Wright shared Pastor Martin Niemoller’s famous quote about 1930’s Germany (that once hung in the pastor’s office at FBC Elon!) as a response to COVID – surely it will not come for me... This seemed to have been Britain and America’s thoughts as this mysterious virus first emerged. It is over there! China. Iran. Italy. Reasonable excuses why it happened to “them”. But then London. (Then Washington state.) Then New York. No one is safe. We are all vulnerable.

Here comes the questions. So does anyone know what is going on? Why is this happening? Is someone trying to tell us something? What are we supposed to do about it? (p. 2)

In ancient (and some modern) times, major disasters are associated with angry gods. Someone has it “out for you”. Not the right sacrifice, prayer, or action taken, so the gods are taking it out on you. Philosophers, however, did not think that made logical sense. They provided three alternatives...

(1) Stoics – Everything is programmed, you cannot change it. Learn to fit in.

(2) Epicureans – Everything is random; you cannot do anything about it. Make yourself comfortable.

(3) Platonists – Present life is just a shadow of reality. Bad things happen, but we are destined for a better world. (p. 2)

Modern approaches to life mirror these three as well. Most of the Western world is Epicurean in nature. Some take a Stoic approach to life. Some, including Christians, are more Platonists. “Death isn’t the worst that can happen. We are heading somewhere else anyway. All right, let us be sensible, but please do not shut down the churches. Or the golf clubs.” (p. 3)

## **“What” Question Should we be asking...**

All the while, the suffering gets worse for the “least of these”. Instead of asking “Why”, we should be asking “What?” “What can we do?” Wright shared that a plea went out in the U.K. for volunteers to help with extra urgent non-special tasks. 500,000 people signed up almost at once, so many they had to find more tasks for them to do. What? These individuals are modeling the early Christians who would stay in the cities when plagues would come to nurse the sick and dying. The rich would literally “head for the hills”, while the Christians remained to help the sick. This helped spread the message of Christ. Jesus put his life on the line, so do we. (p. 3)

Now most social attitudes towards helping the sick and poor are reflection of that initial Christian attitude and innovation. Medicine, education, and necessities cost money – but Jewish doctrine and later Christian doctrine believed all deserved these necessities. Before, society did not have the responsibility to provide it. God had a special concern for the poor and outcast. While the religious part has been dropped off, the same foundational principles have been enveloped into social services and outreach to those in need.

## **A Christian Response?**

With the rapid spread of COVID, many Christians have reached out for quick responses to the pandemic, similar to the ancient responses. We play the blame game (because that is the easiest). To point fingers does not help deal with the emotions that are swelling inside of us. (Even if we blame someone else, those same emotions are just being fueled by anger, disappointment, and regret.)

“Christian” conspiracy theorists are also prevalent. Someone knows what has gone wrong and what God is trying to say to us. Some are saying this is the sign of the End. Wright shares this approach is Platonic in nature, and is not “new” in any sense. More recently fictionalized accounts of the end times have captured reader’s imaginations and, unfortunately, replaced biblical understanding with colorful thought. Now, COVID-19 is a sign of this happening...

Other Christian response to the pandemic sees this as an opportunity. Since you are thinking about death, we can have a massive turning to God. Perhaps our friends will finally listen to us about Jesus, and they will come to heaven with us. Others jump on the Old Testament prophet bandwagon and run the other way. God did it because he is angry with us, especially those who are

living all those sinful lifestyles. “They” need to change their ways because we are all being punished for it.

### **Our Approach**

N.T. Wright says to understand our emotions, we must walk through scripture, beginning with the Old Testament. From there, we will go to the Gospels, the rest of the New Testament, and then a direction from where to go from there.

### **Follow Up Questions...**

Have you caught yourself during this period of the pandemic coming back to the question, “Why?”

The COVID-19 pandemic has allowed everyone with a voice, platform, and social media “followers” to provide their answer to the reason for the pandemic.

N.T. Wright shares his personal thoughts on this in Chapter 1.

What are some of the dangers of pastors/theologians/Christian speakers “speaking for God” or “interpreting the signs” during the pandemic?

Is their danger for us engaging these thoughts in watching these thoughts on social media or reading these thoughts through other means?

### **Next Week...**

#### **Session 2**

**Wednesday, August 26**

**6:30 PM**

**Readings: Chapter 2 – Reading the Old Testament**

**Psalms 44**

**Psalms 88**

**Job 38 - 42**