

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

N.T. Wright

August 26, 2020

Session Two:

Chapter 2 – Reading the Old Testament? (p. 7 - 14)

Psalm 44

Psalm 88

Job 38 - 42

Questions to Grapple With...

- 1. How do the Psalms help redefine the “good brings good” and “bad brings bad” undertones that had spread throughout the early Old Testament? Is this ideology still prevalent today?**
- 2. How does the book of Job and its “unresolved ending” provide hope for our time in the midst of an unresolved pandemic?**
- 3. What two stories does N.T. Wright identify are working throughout the Old Testament writings? How does one shine light into the New Testament? How does the other possibly explain some of the “unanswered” existence in the world?**

Diving into the Text...

What is the World Saying?

N.T. Wright begins the chapter by addressing what today’s “prophets” are saying about the secrets of the COVID-19 virus. Drawing from the words of Amos that God would reveal his secrets through his prophets, he shares there are many of those that are ready to share. These range in character – cause-and-effect pragmatists, detached moralizers, or separate, but specific concerns. Each speaking loudly. Wright shared, however, that there are lessons to be learned. The poor and uninsured are being devastated by the disease, and fearing they are passing it on. There are larger geographical political issues at stake as well. Actions and inactions have consequences.

Looking at Hebrew Scripture

In the Old Testament, the greatest disaster was the Babylonian exile. The prophets interpreted this event in terms of punishment for Israel’s sin, going back

to the covenant between God and Israel – both blessing and curses – dating to the time of Deuteronomy. Prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, to name a few, stated it clearly: Israel had violated their end of the covenant, and God was punishing them – through the Babylonians – for this sin. The poetic book of Lamentations is a moving account of looking down upon Jerusalem, a desolate city with no people, at what had been lost and people in mourning. In this poem, the prophet weeps, he mourns. Memories of what “had been”, the people’s ancient traditions of faith, makes matters worse. Lamenting is important.

Later on, while in exile, the prayers of the people turned to forgiveness and asking for restoration. In Isaiah and in Daniel, they turned their attention to God for restoration and hope. This is what it looked like on a larger scale. On a smaller scale, N.T. Wright uses the example from 1 Kings 17 when a widow loses her only son when she believes her “sin” is because she provided housing to the prophet Elijah. Elijah raises her son, ending that misinformed thought.

Wright points out that this “rumored” thought persists that “ill fortune and ill behavior are always linked in a straightforward causal chain.” (p. 9) Psalm 1 and 37 seem to reflect this. If you are good, good things will happen. If you are bad, bad things will happen. Isn’t that how things are supposed to be? Wright shared trying explaining that to someone dying of COVID-19 in a refugee camp. That it is all because of sin.

A More Rounded Picture from the Old Testament

Wright shares that fortunately the Old Testament shows a more rounded approach to this worldview. Psalm 73 gives us a glimpse of this opposite view. God’s temple becomes the place of healing when things do not seem to be going the way that they should. Psalm 44 provides another example that goes against the “good-brings-good, bad-brings-bad” viewpoint. God has looked after us in the past, but now things have turned against us...

Let’s read **Psalm 44**...

1. *How can our memory of God’s faithfulness in the past, help us in this time of the pandemic?*

2. *How does our feelings of loneliness and isolation mirror the feelings seen in Psalm 44?*

Wright will come back to Psalm 44 when addressing Romans 8 in Chapter 4. Another Psalm that addresses a problem but fails to give a clear conclusion is Psalm 89. He shares that there is a “refreshing honesty” to that. (p. 11)

Psalm 88 serves as another piece of poetry that reaches to the depth of our soul with emotion. Pain, agony, despair – all wrapped up in piece of literature. Wright shared that he and his wife, while on a pilgrimage in the Holy Land, were encouraged to read this Psalm while in the depths of the dungeon of the High Priest, probably where Jesus spent his last night before being crucified.

Let’s read **Psalm 88**...

1. *What emotions did this Psalm swell up inside of you? Did any of these emotions reflect those you have felt during this time of the pandemic?*
2. *Do these emotions “frighten” you? How can we embrace these emotions and turn them over to God?*

The Book of Job

N.T. Wright shared that while the Psalms give us a brief glimpse at the emotions and addressing the “good and bad” paradox, the looming text in the Old Testament that needs to be read and understood is the Book of Job. “Whenever anyone tells you that coronavirus means that God is calling people – perhaps you! to repent, tell them to read Job. The whole point is that *that is not the point*. (p. 12)

Job’s friends tell him the reason he is going through this is his sin. Great friends! If he will correct this secret behavior, God will stop punishing him. This is the “good for good, bad for bad” mentality. Job knows it, and states that if this is the case, God is being unjust. As a reader, we know the full story, but know that the “friends” are more wrong than Job. Job is a difficult book to read! There is a lot more going on in heaven and earth that we can see! Even the ending to Job is not satisfactory, completely. Things are restored for Job, partially. God is more powerful than Job, of course. As Wright states, it is very Stoic in nature.

Job 38 – 42...

Wright shares that maybe the unresolved nature of Job is exactly part of the point. Job longed for someone to stand in the middle between him and God. He longed for ultimate justice, because things did not seem fair. Jesus ultimately did this. “All of these things are spoken of in the New Testament in connection with the same God, Israel’s God has done and will do through Jesus. Jesus stands between God and humans. He has shown the way through death to renewed life. He has put all things right, and will work that out in the end.” (p. 13)

Job, however, reminds us that the Old Testament works on two different levels. One, there is the story of God and Israel – the covenantal story. This is the narrative of how the Creator God chose his people to rescue humanity and restore creation. This story tells how these people, carriers of the “proto-virus” of idolatry and injustice (sin) that infected all humanity, had to go into the darkness of exile, so they might emerge into new life on the other side. Many first century Jews (during the time of Jesus) knew the rest of the story of the time where they turned to God for forgiveness and restoration, and eventually came after a longer period of time. Jesus and his followers picked up on this story to explain what was happening today.

Wright shared that a second story runs deeper alongside the first that has the good creation and the dark power that from the beginning has tried to destroy God’s creation. Wright shares that he does not understand this darker power and that maybe we are not meant to. However, in the world, when we are caught up in injustices, plagues, accused of wrongs that we are innocent, suffering strange “viruses”, with no apparent cures – “at those points we are to lament, we are to complain, we are to state the case, and leave it with God. God himself declares at the end that Job has told the truth (42:8). He has clung on to the fact that God is just, even though his own misery seems to deny it.” (p. 14)

Next week, we will see how Jesus lived that out too.

Follow Up Questions...

Do you ever catch yourself thinking, “Good things should happen to good people”? Or on the other hand, “bad things should happen to bad people”?

Based on what we have read, is this cause and effect thinking biblical?

The Old Testament book of Job is a book to wrestle with – Job’s interactions with his “friends”, Job’s emotions during his trials, Job’s relationship with God, and our picture of God from this book. What do you think of Wight’s perspective that part of the point of the book is the “unresolved” nature of the ending? How can this help in the midst of a pandemic in which there is so much unresolved?

Next Week...

Session 3

Wednesday, September 2

6:30 PM

Readings: Chapter 3 – Jesus and the Gospels

Matthew 6:9-13

Mark 12:1-12

John 11