

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

N.T. Wright

September 9, 2020

Session Four:

Chapter 4 – Reading the New Testament (p. 30 - 51)

Acts 11:19-30

Revelation 7:9-17

Romans 8

Questions to Grapple With...

- 1. How can the model that Wright identifies in the Antioch church in Acts 11 help serve as a blueprint for the Christian church moving forward in times of crisis? What questions should we be asking?**
- 2. N.T. Wright addresses the book of Revelation in Chapter 4. Does his approach to Revelation coincide with your approach to this New Testament book? Or does it conflict? How does his words help you considering the COVID-19 pandemic?**
- 3. Romans 8 serves as an eye-opening chapter for Christians during a “groaning” time during the pandemic. How does it help that 2000 years ago Paul wrote about these times and that he identified key points that can assist us now? What are these key takeaways from this chapter?**

Diving into the Text...

Shifting to the New Testament

N.T. Wright begins his focus on the rest of the New Testament by pointing out the event that most New Testament writings, and most Jewish writings, refer back to: the Passover – the time when God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt. Jesus made it central in his teaching and mission. One of the interesting things that Wright points out, however, is that Israel never mentioned during their time of enslavement in Egypt that it was because of “their sin” or “their fault”. In Jesus’ time, however, the plight of the Jewish people (from the Babylonian exile to the time of Roman rule), the Jewish people needed a new escape or exodus (from the prophet’s point of view) from exile because of their sin, and this rescue would be forgiveness. However, Passover was never about forgiveness. Famines come, and they do not look back and say, “What did we do to cause this?”

Instead, they say, “What can we do to meet our needs?” Maybe this serves as a pattern for the church today in the midst of COVID-19.

Acts 11 gives us a glimpse of the early church and how it functioned in the first century. However, towards the end of the chapter we see an event take place that can get lost in the verses if we are not careful. Based on historical dating, this famine is believed to have taken place between during the reign of Claudius between 41 and 54 A.D. More than one famine took place during this time, so we are not sure which one scripture is addressing.

Let’s read Acts 11:19 – 30.

- How did the Antioch church respond to the news of this impending famine? How did they NOT respond?
- How can this shed light on our response to times of crisis? How can this shed light on the church’s response in times of crisis? How can this serve as a model for our response to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Three ways they did not respond – “This is the end!”, “We must have sinned, let’s repent!”, and “This gives us a great opportunity to tell the world they have sinned and they must repent!”. They do not play the blame game either. They ask three simple questions: Who is at special risk when this happens? What can we do to help? Who shall we send? (POWERFUL QUESTIONS!) These “practical” questions are “kingdom of God” questions. As Wright points out, when Jesus came ushering in the Kingdom on earth, it was about restoring creation as God intended it. “God always wanted to work in the world through loyal human beings.” (p. 32) The church at Antioch was figuring out what God was doing, and what God was wanting to do THROUGH THEM. That is what called working through the Holy Spirit. They were a busy, prosperous church, while the Jerusalem church was the opposite. Then they had to figure out who to send. (Wright also points out the importance of the connection of the early church back then to churches in other communities, something we take for granted today. We discussed this in our Philippians study just a few months ago.)

The early Church believed early on, and we should carry this on today, that gifted with the Holy Spirit, we are the body of Christ in the world. We are called to do what needs to be done in the world. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5 – 7) is not just a list of stated “ethics”, but a mission. God’s kingdom was being

launched into the world, and he is working through his called people. Those called people are you and me! Wright makes the point that often times people say, “Why doesn’t God just send thunderbolts and put things right? The answer is that God does send thunderbolts – human ones.” (p. 34) Humans are more effective than any natural disaster. They see real need, and they act. They weep with friends and enemies. Some get hurt or killed. Humans are the answer to the most important questions – What and Who! (not Why!) What needs to be done? Who can I help? Who shall we send? “God works in all things with and through those who love him.” (p. 35)

Paul’s Address to the Athenians

In Acts 17, Paul arrives in Athens, a hub of philosophy in the Roman empire. After speaking in the synagogues and in the marketplace, Paul had been summoned to speak at the Court of the Areopagus to explain his teachings about “Jesus and Anastasis (Greek for “resurrection”) – they thought he meant a new god and goddess, being a pluralistic society. Paul was basically being summoned to be charged with a capital crime. Paul, on the other hand, had a different plan. We might assume he was challenging the Athenians to repent for their sins, that their past failures and doom, had been brought on by their sinful ways! Instead, Paul encourages the people of Athens to repent through the one called Jesus, through one great and final sign, that Jesus was. No other events mattered. Only Jesus himself.

Wright states that one early Christian book that seems to point in a different direction, or is often interpreted to do so, is the book of Revelation. Wright shares that Revelation is simply drawing out the “significance of the primary revelation, which is of Jesus himself”. (p. 37) The title of the book, “Revelation of Jesus the Messiah”, unveils the task and intent of the book, to reveal or unveil the identity of who the Lion and the Lamb is, Jesus the Christ, and the task he has been entrusted with on this earth, to build the kingdom of God. The ultimate victory has already been won on the cross. The only way this might be extended forwards in time is the suffering and witness of Jesus’ followers.

Let’s read Revelation 7:9-17. (I apologize for the wrong scripture passage in the original Reading Plan!).

- Sometimes it is easy to get lost in the “literal” of Revelation. In general, the individuals described here are the ones who have suffered or died for the name of Jesus? Have you ever suffered for the name of Jesus?
- Wright shares that Revelation is often used as the “counterpoint” to his argument that Jesus is the ultimate or final sign that God has sent for us, and that His kingdom is already being built on earth. What do you think? Do your thoughts on Revelation coincide or contradict this?

The Groaning of Creation

Wright contends the passage that reveals the depth of Paul’s theology and how we should approach the COVID-19 pandemic is Romans 8.

Let’s read Romans 8.

Full of faith, hope, and love. Ending with a shout of praise. Condemning sin through the death of Jesus. The Spirit as a gift to His people. This chapter has everything a Christian believer should want. But Wright points out that in the middle, there is a section that we often want to skip over because it is a little confusing.

Paul describes that all followers of Jesus, being led by the Spirit, are being led to an “inheritance” (references back to the Promised Land), even though this journey is not easy. (vs. 16 & 17) Suffering is inevitable, but pales in comparison to the glory it leads to. Wright emphasizes that the “inheritance” is not heaven! The inheritance is a renewed creation! (See Genesis 15, Psalm 2, Psalm 72, Isaiah 11).

What is humanity’s role over this new creation? While scripture is not clear on the state of our transformed beings, Romans 5 and Revelation 5 emphasize redeemed humanity’s rule over God’s new creation. We often bring our own expectations in to how God wants his “new creation” to be run – him “lording” over his subjects or like a “well oiled” machine. In either case, if something unusual happens (enter the “pandemic”) then he must have intended it, or he is trying to communicate something to us (enter the “prophetic” voices now!). Wright states that God can and do whatever He wants to do. However, as

humanity, we should not use this as an escape policy for our responsibility from the challenge of this chapter.

Romans 8:19-21 shares that God always wanted to rule earth through humanity – he has been waiting patiently for those created “in his image” to be ready. Jesus showed us what it looks like, and we are called to follow Him. How do we put it into practice? “...the followers of Jesus are called to be people of prayer at the place where the world is in pain.” (p.42) Paul says it works in three stages – the groaning of the world, the groaning of the Church, the groaning of the Spirit – within the Church, within the world. Paul lays this out in Romans 8:22-27.

How has the Church responded and how should we respond? Wright says unfortunately the Church has often responded during the pain of the pandemic from the sideline – It’s because you are all sinners! The End is near! I know the answer, ask me! That is not what Paul is counseling from Romans 8. We, as Christians, are caught up in this same groaning as well. We need to realize it too. We need to realize the painful gap between the people we are now (painful and frail) and the redeemed that we will be. We share in the groaning of creation now. Admit it. This opens us and the Church up to how we should respond.

Above all, the Church should be PRAYING. But as Romans 8 says, we do not always know what to pray. (Romans 8:26) We do not have to be ashamed about it. Not being in control is natural, and in that moment, we are caught up in the divine, relying on the Holy Spirit. Sometimes “not knowing” is the exact right place to be. We cannot explain the “pandemic”, just like we cannot begin to explain the depths of our God, but that is when we place our reliance in Him. Our “groaning”, without words, resonates with the Spirit “groaning” for His creation. This mirrors the same image as Jesus weeping at the tomb of Lazarus. It shatters our understanding of “God being in control”, yet we can relate and understand it. “But the God we see in Jesus is the God who wept at the tomb of his friend. The God we see in Jesus is the God-the-Spirit who groans without words.” (p. 44) This is the same God who washed his disciples’ feet. It shattered expectations. God does not run the world the “ordinary” way, it is extraordinary (tying into my sermon series...!)

When we find ourselves groaning with the world and creation, Christians should remind ourselves that this is the same state the Spirit is in at the agony of

creation. Like how Jesus was in agony of Israel and the cross. Sometimes words are not the answer. Sometimes tears are the answer, even for God.

But what about Romans 8:28? Can't I just skip over those other verses to get to this one? Wright has done some research on recent scriptural exegesis on this passage, specifically this verse in relation to the prior verses in Romans 8. Wright argues that recent scholars contend that maybe "all things" is not the subject of this verse, but that maybe "God", like the previous verses, is intended to be the subject. The second area he points out is that instead of the result being a "benefit for" those who love God, the focus rather is God working together for the good of others. Wright shares his preference for this translation, "God works all things together for good to those who love him."

The verb used by Paul in this passage is used multiple times in his letters referring to Paul working with others in the church. Paul referencing God and this verb would indicate His working with his human workers, Christians, on earth. Overall, this verse would indicate God, working through the Spirit, with humanity for the good of the world. Wright later describes that, "The very moment of the wordless lament described in verse 26 is the moment when God the Father and God the Spirit are working together with believers caught up by the Spirit within that strange but vital interchange." (p. 50)

Humans are called to hard work yet knowing that the Spirit is working through us. Paul is stating that work sometimes reflects a lament that is too hard to deep to express in words. The final piece of this verse, "called according to his purpose," describes the healing, teaching, relief for the poor, and comforting ministry of the Church. This grows out of the groaning and the lament, as modeled by the church in Antioch. The Church is called to be active participants in the world. "Such God-lovers are therefore shaped according to the pattern of the Son: the cruciform pattern in which God's justice and mercy, his faithfulness to the covenant and to creation, are displayed before the world in tears and toils, lament and labour. That is our vocation in the present time." (p. 51)

Follow Up Questions...

N.T. Wright shares the church at Antioch as an example of how to approach a time of crisis (for example, the COVID-19 pandemic) for the modern Church.

What lessons can we learn from those three questions – What needs to be done? Who can I help? Who can we send?

Romans 8 becomes the focal passage for our understanding of how understand

God during the COVID-19 pandemic and how we as the Church can respond during the pandemic? Have you experienced the “groaning” of creation during the pandemic? What do you think about the Spirit “groaning”? Have you felt a “loss of words” when it came time to pray?

Next Week...

Session 5

Wednesday, September 16

6:30 PM

Readings: Chapter 5 – Where Do We Go From Here? (p. 52 - 76)

John 20

Nehemiah 12:43

Psalms 72:1-4, 12-14