

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

N.T. Wright

September 16, 2020

**Session Five:**

**Chapter 5 – Where Do We Go from Here? (p. 52 - 76)**

**John 20**

**Nehemiah 12:43**

**Psalm 72:1-4, 12-14**

**Questions to Grapple With...**

- 1. N.T. Wright talks about God’s intended “partnership” with humanity from Genesis to Jesus’ death and resurrection? What does this partnership look like and how does that relate to our struggle in the pandemic now?**
- 2. How does John 20 model our actions during the time of the pandemic? How can Jesus’ response to Mary Magdalene, the disciples, and Thomas speak to us now?**
- 3. What responsibility does Wright contend that the Church has to both the poor and suffering, while also to the leaders of the World?**

**Diving into the Text...**

**Starting with Lament**

N.T. Wright challenges Christians that lament must be the initial response to the pandemic. He states that a third of the Psalms echo this emotion that things are not as they should be, and all the emotions that are tied up into lamenting. They are echoed in Jesus’s words, in the New Testament too, and they should be our words. As stated earlier in the text, the Lord’s Prayer should be our daily prayer – and we should listen and believe the words that we pray. Not because in the midst of the pandemic the “voices” call for “the end” or call “to repent”. The pandemic should not be the waking call to tell our neighbors about Jesus! We are called to do that every day, because everyone we needs Jesus – the one who brought new life, building a new kingdom on earth, who redefined sovereignty for us. He was the ultimate and final sign for us.

However, when in a time of crisis like the pandemic, we need to know that it is okay to lament. It is okay not to have the answers. It is okay to groan with the Spirit. As Paul says, “Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who

weep.” The world is weeping, and the Church’s place is to join with them and weep too. This is a part of love. To refuse to do so is to close oneself off to this emotion. Culture says this is okay, even right. Wright shares that culture is afraid that even if we name it, we fear that we will give in or “collapse forever.” (p. 53) Be strong! Or are we supposed to be strong like Jesus who wept for Lazarus, who was raised from the dead by the Spirit. That is the strong we should be striving to be not. Not “culture strong”. Strong like the person who waits on the Lord, patiently for the words to say when words are hard to grasp. Often times we want to escape these times, because that would be “easier”. To pull ourselves away or aside, to escape from these emotions, or to seek out quick fix solutions. That is what these earlier responses have been. Ways to avoid the call to lament, to share in the time of groaning with Spirit. Yet, that is what we are called to do.

### **Talking about God**

Through Jesus and the Spirit, Christians get to see what it means that “God is in control”. We talked earlier about how Jesus redefined sovereignty. His ultimate revelation coming through his death on the cross in which Jesus redefined God’s kingdom. For Israel to be redeemed, ultimately, He would have to rescue the world from death and all that causes it. In doing this, Jesus was aware of God’s intention for humanity from the very beginning – “to reflect God’s purposes in the world”. (p. 55) Even when humanity sinned, God’s intention for humanity did not change. He still intended his partners, humans, to work in redemption and new creation. From Adam and Eve to Jesus, this was the work of God’s kingdom being established on earth. The very character of the kingdom has been established from the beginning and continues until today. Unfortunately, humans have tried to justify “human actions” by saying, “Well, God is sovereign: he can do what he likes: therefore whatever happens must be what God wanted, so we must be able to say why.” (p. 56) Remember, however, God from the beginning has a partnership with humanity!

Many human actions bring grief to God. While providence is shaped like Christ, it is not controlling everything – every little detail. In the story of Noah, the actions of humanity grieved God! Jesus echoes this same grief before he is arrested, tried, and crucified. In Jeremiah, God was even “shocked” by the actions of humanity in the practicing of human sacrifice. When describing the death of Jesus, something that God had intended for the salvation of humanity,

scripture says “that the people who arrested, tried, and killed him were wicked to do so.” (p. 57) For humanity, this seems to be a paradox. However, this just shows that evil is an intruder into God’s creation.

N.T. Wright argues that the existence of this grief, shock, and especially evil in the world creates a dangerous image of who some believe God is. Rational approaches to dealing with “evil” in the world by politicians have also led to “rational” explanations about God. In terms of the pandemic, “They would offer the dark, disturbing picture of a god who deliberately allowed a dangerous virus to escaped from a Chinese laboratory or market in order that, by killing millions of innocent people, God could issue a general call to repentance to those who were left, and create a stage on which some people (the doctors or nurses) could develop and display heroism. If that’s your ‘god’, many of our contemporaries would rightly think, don’t expect us to want anything to do with him.” (p. 58)

Again, God has a partner in running the world – humanity. In doing so, He has accepted the risk of being shocked and grieved and disappointed. When it does, he holds people responsible. Think about Pontius Pilate. Jesus recognized his authority over him “on earth”, but states those who handed him over will be held accountable. Accountability is important. Wright shares that accountability in the way the pandemic has been handled on earth is important as well. This helps us – as a Church – move forward and live in the present.

### **Living in the Present**

John chapter 20 defines how the Church’s mission began – it began with tears (20:1-18), with locked doors (20:19-23), and with doubt (20:24-29).

Let’s read John 20:1-29.

- What commission did Jesus give Mary Magdalene in 20:17?
- What mission did Jesus give the disciples in 20:21?
- What does the statement mean that Jesus made to Thomas in 20:29, especially for those in the midst of the pandemic?

All three of these – tears, locked doors, doubt – seem to describe the same things right now. Fear is a dominating feeling right now. All these lead to questions, and should be questions the Church should be good at answering. Jesus met these questions with their presence. Can the Church do the same?

Jesus' signs were signs of new life, a new beginning. The early Church did the same thing. In the face of plagues, they would pitch in and aid the sufferers. Despite the work of emperors like Julian who tried to deconvert the Roman Empire after Constantine, the social work of Christians to the sick and poor helped solidify the faith roots in the Roman Empire. In the areas of hospitals, hospices, education, and medicine, Christianity was a leader. Christians have visited the prisons, tended the wounded, embraced the stranger, and fed the hungry – in good times and bad – within the cities, the country, the slums, or the farmhouse. Led by pastors and priests, but also followed by civic and family leaders, making sure everyone is taken care of – making sure the right approach is practical and faithful. However, Wright points out that in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic where more is known, “do the right thing” needs to be tapered with an equal understanding to restrain apparent “heroism” when it can lead to further pain and disaster.

Out of lament must come action! Pastors must be able to tend to the sick and dying. The church must continue to reach out to the poor and hurting. Running food banks, helping with the homeless shelters, volunteering to help with prisons, and other social ministries must still happen. The work will not only be beneficial, but they will also serve as signs to the world that the Church is still here – actively serving! While we still grieve alongside the world, healing can start taking place. New vocation starts taking hold. This sheds light on work that needs to be done – to leadership and to others. Sometimes the Church must be the voice when things are falling through the cracks. However, we cannot “just” be a voice. We must be actively working too.

Wright also addresses the issue of worship in church buildings as well. Wright first states that a church building is not an “escape” from the world, but a bridge to the world. However, he also fears that while church buildings have temporarily been closed down, losing the need and desire for “corporate worship” by a culture and generation where everything else has been pushed towards “privatization” may be a permanent result. As things have started, the benefit of pulling new individuals in through the virtual medium have been positive. Wright's hope, however, is that the “exile” from the church building will not last long.

Wright's biggest concern has been the Church's quick willingness to follow the secular lead when faced with the pandemic crisis. “The sign of new creation,

from the ministry of Jesus forward, has been the healing presence of Jesus himself, and his death and resurrection above all.” (p. 69) Public worship, wherever and however, is an important part of sending this message out. Rejoice and celebrate (safely and appropriately)!

Let's Read Nehemiah 12:43.

- After the wall of Jerusalem was finished once the exiles returned, the whole city rejoiced. How can this be a model for our rejoicing in the time of the pandemic?

Wright says the middle ground between the two needs to be found. Being safe and properly following protocols is important. Thinking one is safe because they are “Christian” or the church is “protected” is, unfortunately, what can give Christianity a false sense of protection. Locking up church buildings, on the other hand, can just as equally send the wrong message. (One often forgets that God can be worshipped anywhere!) Maybe the answer is to realize that we are currently in a time of exile. We are grieving, and how can we express this grief clearly without a “home”. Even the people in Babylon, in exile, did not get to worship and “lament” as they wanted to – together. But amid the city, they ministered to each other. As Wright put it, they “seek the welfare of the city” where they are – like the early Christians in Antioch. Meeting the needs where they are. From this, the Church can communicate what can and should be said, and hopefully leaders will listen can and will hear the message that is being spoken...and act.

### **How to Recover**

What is the “new normal” going to be? That is the question the Church, world leaders, and the world needs to be asking. Many hope that the world will change for the better. N.T. Wright shares that he hopes so, but he fears there will be a rush back to normal. Economic downfall during this time will unfortunately lead to rushed economic decisions that may and will cost lives. Wright uses the analogy of the many different “gods” battling for their turn – money, war, love, healing – all leading to a cost. Unfortunately, the weak or the low are usually the one that pays the consequences in this battle. Maybe the focus should be on Psalm 72 instead.

Let's Read Psalm 72:1-4, 12-14.

- How can the Church be the rallying cry of Psalm 72 during the pandemic? Are we willing to be that voice to our leaders?

The Church at its best has lived this out. The world's leaders, early on before they realized who a "Christian" was, knew and saw this. Do people still have this impression about the Church today? We need to "think globally but act locally". (p. 74) The Church needs to work for the good of "all" – not for those in power, but for the "least of these", helping organizations like the World Health Organization who seek to help countries across the globe no matter their economic standing. We also need to look ahead and plan, just as Joseph did for Egypt in a coming time of need. Wise leadership with Christian voices alongside them is needed, not just in difficult times, but in preparation and in aftermath. Vision and realism for the coming months are needed during the pandemic present and aftermath. New thoughts and new ideas and can lead to new ways of building "new creation" in God's kingdom.

Or we can just wait, and let the usual forces take control. During this time, the rich will get richer and the poor will continue to suffer. The Church, however, should be lamenting and praying. As Christians lament, we must use this time of prayer for hope. We pray for human leadership and initiative that will bring about healing in a "groaning" world.

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

N.T. Wright talks about God's intention from Genesis through Jesus for humanity and God to work as "partners" in bringing about redemption and new creation into His fallen world. After Jesus's death and resurrection, humanity's partnership was in building the kingdom. This "partnership" has led to times of pain, shock, and evil in the world. How does this idea of "partnership" with God resonate with you in understanding the COVID-19 pandemic?

Does Wright's approach to moving forward – lamenting, action guided by our call to help the suffering and oppressed, being a clear and moral voice for world leaders – resonate with you as a Christian?

**Next Week...**

**New Study**

**"Here Comes the Judge!"**

**A Look at the Old Testament Book of Judges**

**Begins Wednesday, September 23**

**6:30 PM**

**Facebook Live!**