

Frequently Asked Questions

MAY 2020

PART 1: THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

Rolan Monje, B.D., D.Min.

 @rolanmonjebooks

THE BIBLE & COVID-19

These disconcerting times have generated lots of questions. Gladly, many are turning to the Bible for help. I compiled these Bible FAQs with my own best attempts to provide direction and clarity.

This series will have four parts. Each one is encouraged to open his/her Bible and wrestle with the issues and come to personal conclusions. We trust that the Lord will see us through the trials and confusion so that we can come out of them stronger.

Q. Is the coronavirus outbreak God's judgment on the world?

A. No. To be clear, God is judging the world *all the time* (Psalms 7:17; 58:11). His Holy Spirit convicts and exposes wrongdoing all the time (John 16:8). To imply that God is judging the world only now and mainly through this outbreak would be disregarding his perfect character.

Secondly, the Bible talks about a final judgment that is focused on the *individual* person (Hebrews 9:27; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 1 John 4:17).

For that time, the earth and the heavens are reserved (2 Peter 3:7). God will judge people according to how they have lived (Revelation 20:12; 22:12).

Continued:

Q. Is the coronavirus a biblical “plague”?

A. Not exactly. Many are familiar with the plagues of Egypt (Exodus 7-12). Other plagues were sent by God to similarly demonstrate his power outside of Israel (1 Samuel 5:11-6:4). Yet although Covid-19 looks like a plague, it has not come upon us for the same reasons as the examples in the Bible, which was for God to reveal his power to non-Israelites (Exodus 8:10; 9:14) and to forewarn his own people before the Exile (Leviticus 26:21).

Having said that, I would have to say that Covid-19 and similar catastrophic events can potentially cause people to think “spiritually,” exploring questions they would otherwise avoid. In that regard, one could say it has similar *effects* to biblical plagues.

Q. The Bible tells us that God will protect us. Aren't all Christians assured protection from the coronavirus? Should we follow quarantine procedures?

A. Yes, but only in a general sense. Microbes (bacteria and viruses) exist as part of biological systems. They are part of the natural world. Even zoonotic pathogens (those that transmit diseases from animals to humans) are not entirely new.

The Bible has no absolute promises of health and safety (John 16:33). Yet, that doesn't mean God doesn't love us. It just means we have to mature in our understanding and appreciation of how mortal life is in an imperfect world (Psalm 90). Remember Satan quoted Psalm 91:11-12—a promise of protection—when tempting Jesus, to which our Lord replied, “Do not put the Lord God to the test” (Matthew 4:5-7). Jesus knew that divine protection isn't absolute and that we each have to make wise practical choices.

Yes. God can use governments and authority figures for good reason (Romans 13:1-5). Quarantine procedures (including social distancing) make sense and things such as personal hygiene can help also. The motivation is love—love always protects! (1 Corinthians 13:7).

Quarantine procedures work. That includes social distancing. The motivation is love—love always protects!



Frequently Asked Questions

MAY 2020

PART 2: ESCHATOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

Rolan Monje, B.D., D.Min.

 @rolanmonjebooks

THE BIBLE & COVID-19

In Part 1, we tackled questions of theology. Let us now move on to questions relating to eschatology.

§

ESCHATOLOGY | Definition: the study of end times and final destinies.

Q. Is the coronavirus a biblical “sign” for the end times (Matthew 24:1-8)?

A. Many these days are quoting Matthew 24 and similar passages to proclaim that “the end is near.” However, Matthew 24 does not directly speak about events in the 21st century. The same can be said of Mark 13 and Luke 21.

In these so-called “mini-apocalypse” passages, Jesus talks about the destruction of the Jewish Temple, which was fulfilled in the first century! (70 A.D. to be exact.) He ties it in with the prophecies of Daniel 9 and 11.

Read these pertinent chapters (Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21) for yourself and google “First Jewish War” to see the connection.

Personal note: If people personally consider Covid-19 as a “wake-up call” or “a sign from heaven,” then we should somehow welcome that. We’ve all seen that God works amidst suffering. Tough times can cause people to rethink their lives and repent (Romans 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9).

Continued:

Q. Does Covid-19 tell us that we are in the times of the apocalypse (Daniel and Revelation)?

A. Many scenes brought about by this pandemic do feel gloomy and apocalyptic, but we should not be quick to connect these with Daniel or Revelation.

a. Apostle John wrote in Revelation 1:3 that the “time is near.” To put this into focus, we need to look at the historical context of the book. John was writing at the end of the 1st century about God’s impending judgment upon the Roman Empire which was persecuting Christians. The fall of Rome eventually happened in history, and so to a large degree, most of the book of the Revelation has already been fulfilled. For more on this, see Gordon Ferguson’s book, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*.

b. When Daniel prophesied about the “distant future” (Daniel 8:26 ESV “many days from now”), his words were fulfilled about 400 years later. Like Revelation, Daniel prepares readers for tough times ahead. There is no reason for us to consider that any of the prophecies of Daniel, Ezekiel, or Revelation point to specific events in the 21st century. For more on this, see John Oakes’s book, *Daniel: Prophet to the Nations*.

Q. Is the Covid-19 outbreak indicative that Jesus will return soon (Matthew 24:8, 27)?

A. As earlier mentioned, Matthew 24 finds fulfillment in the first century A.D. In such prophetic writings, the “coming” of divine authority carries mainly figurative aspects. It is not about Christ’s second coming.

Consider logically: If the Coronavirus is meant to be a sign of Jesus’s imminent return, why can’t the same be said about the bubonic plague (a.k.a. “The Black Death”) in the 14th century when over 50 million people died? Why didn’t Jesus come back in that century? Or what about the 1918 influenza pandemic? Or World War 1? Or World War 2? People have tried since the 1800’s to connect current events to biblical predictions. So-called “prophets” boldly predict the end of the world, only to prove themselves false (Deuteronomy 18:20-22). They forsake crucial interpretative principles.

The main point is this: nobody knows when the end will come or when Jesus will return. That’s why Jesus and the Apostles have no shortage of words telling us to keep ready (Matthew 25:1-13; Luke 12:40; 1 Thessalonians 5:6; 1 Peter 4:7).

Coming in Part 3: Reflective Questions

We have all seen that God works amidst suffering. Tough times can cause people to rethink their lives and repent.



Frequently Asked Questions

MAY 2020

PART 3: REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

Rolan Monje, B.D., D.Min.

 @rolanmonjebooks

THE BIBLE & COVID-19

In Parts 1 and 2, we tackled questions relating to theology and eschatology. Here we dive into matters more personal and reflective.

Q. How would you describe a Christian response to Covid-19?

A. Simply put, Christians should strive to react and act as Jesus would (1 John 2:6; cf. John 13:15). The apostles clearly taught this to the early church (1 Peter 2:21; Philippians 2:5).

Given that Christ is the paragon toward which we all strive, here's what I tell others as what would constitute a Christian response:

1. Feel compassion for those who are hurting (Matthew 14:14; 2 Corinthians 1:3-7).
2. Pray for government agencies and helping organizations (1 Timothy 2:1-2).
3. Replace fear with love (1 John 4:18).
4. Keep our confidence and reliance in God (John 16:33; 1 John 4:4, 16).
5. Cooperate with directions from those with authority (Matthew 22:21; Romans 13:1-7).
6. Be positive, proactive, and protect yourselves and others (Philippians 1:27; 1 Corinthians 13:7).
7. Be a light and have spiritual conversations (Matthew 5:14-16; Colossians 4:5-6).
8. Keep preaching the word (Acts 8:4; cf. 2 Timothy 4:2-4).

Q. How is Christian living changed with the so-called “new normal”?

A. Christian life is all about relationships: relationship with God and with people. When asked which Torah commandment is most important, Jesus underscored “love,” specifically for God and neighbor (Matthew 22:36-39). These fundamentals have not changed. Any personal adjustment in the “new normal” will mainly pertain to *how* we love God and others.

Perhaps the greatest practical challenges relate to fellowship. We have yet to figure out how to meet while observing social distancing. Likely we will have to continue virtual meetings, and eventually move toward in-person small groups in the interim. The scenario will change considerably only when an effective vaccine is found, or enough persons have gained (herd) immunity, or a combination of both.

Q. How should Christians pray during this time?

A. The book of Psalms records many good examples of prayers during troubled times. Psalms of lament teach us to voice our heart-cries, psalms of confidence point us heavenward for strength. (See my articles on prayer in addtoyourlearning.com.)

Here are some themed series of psalms to meditate on or pray through:

- Throwback Psalms to Recall God’s Deeds: Pss 78, 105-106, 135-136
- Protection Psalms to Seek God’s Refuge: Pss 2, 5, 16, 18, 57, 71, 73, 91, 142, 144.
- Celebrative Psalms to Count Blessings: Pss 92, 115, 125, 129, 144, 150

In addition to the psalmists, the example of Daniel comes to mind (Daniel 6:10). This man of God steadfastly continued with his prayer habits despite the royal court’s prohibition. During crises in fact, God’s people are expected to pray more, not less. Troubles bring us to tears and also to our knees.

Q. How should Christians deal with fear?

A. Fear is a normal human reaction to presenting abnormal occurrences, ones that threaten or bring distress. However, fear shouldn’t overwhelm or define Christians. It’s not surprising that the Bible abounds with messages saying, “Do not fear!” (e.g., Isaiah 35:4; 40:9; Daniel 10:19). The Apostle John suggests that fear can be displaced with love (1 John 4:18, cf. Romans 8:15).

Finally, there is a healthy kind of fear in Scripture. We are called to *fear God* only—a fear characterized by reverence and awe (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14; Luke 12:5). This kind of godly fear also guards our actions (Proverbs 1:7; 23:17).

Q. Is it right to simply pray for a “miracle” such that the coronavirus will just go away?

A. Pray, yes, but also be ready for anything. God works in any way he chooses—by natural and supernatural means. In John 4:48, Jesus is somewhat frustrated that people needed a “miraculous sign” *before* having faith.

Remember that God expects faithful obedience from his people in whatever circumstance (Philippians 1:27; 2:12). Just as in the widespread famine described in Acts 11:27-30 (when I’m sure disciples prayed for relief), the church did what they could to proactively meet needs.

Coming in Part 4: Pastoral Questions

“Pray” the psalms: Psalms of lament teach us to voice our heart-cries, psalms of confidence point us heavenward for strength.



Frequently Asked Questions

MAY 2020

PART 4A: PASTORAL QUESTIONS—LOSS

Rolan Monje, B.D., D.Min.

 @rolanmonjebooks

THE BIBLE & COVID-19

In Parts 1 and 2, we addressed questions relating to theology and eschatology. We paused for reflection in Part 3. Here in Part 4, we tackle issues related to ministering to others (4A - on loss; 4B - on cremation).

Q. *How can Christians deal with sudden unemployment or loss of income?*

A. Millions worldwide have been set back financially by Covid-19. When someone loses income or revenue, it is a case of *loss*, much like grieving. Therefore, that person will go through the waves and phases of grief. He/she would be expected to go through a period of mourning, and there is nothing abnormal or shameful about it. To mourn is part of the nature of loss.

Given that substantial period of loss, some of the greatest felt needs are likely:

1. Immediate financial assistance
2. Emotional support
3. Spiritual direction
4. Business/employment advice
5. Transition help (e.g. possible career changes, academic or re-tooling opportunities)

Some who have been gravely affected emotionally may need professional help. In such cases, the church should have references ready.

No matter what turn a crisis takes, it is strong relationships that will help people through tough times (2 Corinthians 1:3-5).

Q. What can the church do to help those who are suffering?

A. There are several things Christians can do for those afflicted by crises. First, be available. Do not underestimate the power of being a tranquil and composed presence for others. People will naturally borrow your calm and composure. Consider yourself a model of how to manage emotions while honestly bearing witness to the situation.

Second, be there to listen. Being an emotionally-present listener is precious, especially to those who have scant emotional support. To offer a listening ear is to offer an inestimable gift.

Third, offer assistance. Part of being present is calmly asking people how we might help them. Whether it's setting up a food pantry, delivering goods, sending money, aligning with potential employment, or giving business advice, no help is too big or too small. Show compassion. Historically, Christianity is known to have repeatedly infused hope into a hurting world.

Fourth, pray. It's vital for us to get our strength from God and not to rely on ourselves. Prayers have power to reshape any situation. Further, when we pray with others, we embody divine love and community.

Lastly, stay healthy. Follow safety guidelines. This goes without saying but is worth repeating: We will be more effective and productive when we are healthy ourselves.

Q. Many are hurting financially. How can we help people using biblical passages?

A. Woes hit hard as many people face the inability to meet financial obligations. In addition to disrupted employment or revenue owing to the pandemic, many still have to bear the burdens brought on by medical treatments, bad investments, hurtful habits, birth of a child, helping relatives, and so on.

As Christians, we can point people to God's readiness to meet needs as his children live according to his will (Matthew 6:31-33; Psalm 37:25). Furthermore, God may also use moments of financial challenge to cause repentance—at least to reorient a person's priorities or lifestyle. We can help them as "people of the Word."

Some helpful passages:

- Proverbs 3:9-10 – honoring God with wealth
- Proverbs 13:11; 21:20 – patiently storing up and saving
- Deuteronomy 8:18 – relying on God for income
- Luke 6:38; Matthew 10:8b – attitude of giving
- Psalm 37:4-5 – God ready to meet our heartfelt needs or desires
- 2 Corinthians 9:6-9 – reaping as one sows
- 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 – giving to the needs of God's people
- Matthew 22:15-22 – rendering to people what they deserve

Let's continue to be lights to the world in dark times!

Whether it's setting up a food pantry, delivering goods, sending money, aligning with potential employment, or giving business advice, no help is too big or too small.



Frequently Asked Questions

MAY 2020

PART 4-B: QUESTION ON CREMATION

Rolan Monje, B.D., D.Min.

 @rolanmonjebooks

THE BIBLE & COVID-19

In Parts 1 and 2, we addressed questions relating to theology and eschatology. We paused for reflection in Part 3. Here in Part 4, we tackle issues related to ministering to others (4-A - on loss; 4-B - on cremation).

Q. Some people feel uncomfortable about cremation of departed relatives. How can we help?

A. There seems to be two aspects to address here: doctrinal and pastoral. With regard to doctrine, the Bible neither endorses nor forbids cremation. Yet those from certain faith traditions might feel uneasy about this practice for fear that it may affect future bodily resurrection. (See article below by Douglas Jacoby.)

Pastorally, we can be of help in the following areas:

1. Divide the sorrow. Bereavement in these unprecedented times is compounded by having funerals held not as imagined by loved ones. We need to be willing to listen and to acknowledge people's pain and sadness.
2. Condole with sensitivity. It can be really hurtful when someone tells you to "move on" too quickly. Healing and acceptance take time; mourning comes in waves.
3. Meet other needs. Aside from emotional support, we can offer to do the following: help plan the funeral, provide food for those assisting, give financial support, and so forth. Ideally, we would want to be there physically, but in most cases, we may have to keep distancing measures.

No one is 100% prepared for life's mottled tragedies, and so we need to give ourselves and others extra compassion.

On Cremation (from douglasjacoby.com)

What does the Bible say about cremation? What is your opinion on it?

The Bible does not give any position at all on this subject, and I personally have no problem with cremation. In many cultures, corpses are routinely burned. In most, they are buried. In Zoroastrianism, they are intentionally exposed to the elements, allowing the birds to peck away the flesh until only a skeleton remains. Some people request that their ashes be scattered--over rivers, mountains, or other special places. In other words, there is no consensus on how most respectfully to dispose of the bodies of the departed.

We understand that virtually every atom in the human body is replaced about every ten years. This means that God could resurrect the average person about 7 times, using their own atoms, without using the same atom twice. So, if my last body gets cremated, God would still have six more to choose from!

Many believers, however, are uncomfortable with cremation because they believe such a practice might interfere with our resurrection at the last day. The Bible does, after all, mention a bodily resurrection: even though our new bodies are "spiritual" according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, they are bodies nonetheless. You can see why many believers are uncomfortable with cremation. Orthodox Christians oppose cremation (as do Muslims and Orthodox Jews).

My view is that, if God is able to reconstitute the bodies of the dead -- in whatever form they may be found in their new and altered state -- surely he can accomplish this whether the body is drowned (Exodus 15:4), buried in the sand (Exodus 2:12), dismembered (Judges 20:6), eaten by animals (2 Kings 9:36-37), humans (Lamentations 4:10), or consumed by fire (Joshua 7:25, 1 Samuel 31:12, 1 Kings 16:18, 2 Kings 23:20, Amos 2:1, Amos 6:10, 2 Peter 3:10-13). For nothing is impossible with God (Luke 1:37). Can you imagine how Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego might have fought against the guards at the furnace if they thought cremation would nullify their resurrection (Dan 3)? Obviously, they had no problem with it. Moreover, it is not intuitively obvious that we are honoring God more with our bodies in a moldering, decomposing state than in an incinerated one. This is also the position of the early church. (See my CD set, *What Happens After We Die?*)

In the final analysis, given the silence of the Bible, the cremation issue will need to remain an "opinion matter." – Dr. Douglas Jacoby (ICOC-Atlanta)

