

## The Power that is the CoronaVirus

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### Some biblical reflections...

“When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (Psalm 11:3). I well-remember this ancient question – posed by the young anointed king, David – from my childhood growing up in the heart of Africa when the then-colonial structures of society – for all their then and now-known, evils – seemed to be collapsing. We were told to “flee like a bird to [our] mountain” (v.1), the safety of a more well-ordered society. David’s three-millennia-year-old question remains current for any age, not simply but surely also for today.

COVID-19 has been designated by the World Health Organization as a pandemic, “the worldwide spread of a new disease...a word that, if misused, can cause unreasonable fear, or unjustified acceptance that the fight is over, leading to unnecessary suffering and death” (Director General of WHO). The virus is causing fear and anxiety, social, cultural and medical isolation, economic upheaval in global production and trade as well as financial markets, all in the middle of international as well as national political disquiet and disagreement. It has power!

RiverWind works with indigenous cultures in the Amazon. There is a universe populated by unseen powers, spirits implored for curses on enemies or placated by offerings. Our multi-cultural team speaks the gospel into these cultures and practices; we need to be biblically and theologically prepared to understand and address what the Scripture calls principalities and powers – using language such as *thrones, powers, rulers, authorities, dominions* – “the basic principles (*stoicheia*, or *elements*) of this world” (Colossians 2:8, 20). Given our tendency to disbelieve or downplay the spiritual dimension in favor of the physical world we are too easily dismissive. The apostle Paul, however, described these powers as both “things in heaven and things on earth” (1:16), alike created by God through Christ.

There is growing awareness and agreement among evangelical New Testament scholars that Jesus announced and the apostle Paul proclaimed *the* good news, both the in-breaking of God’s kingdom and defeat of the power of death through the cross, as well as confronting the sovereign power of Caesar, the death-dealing military and economic empire that was Rome during the first century. Another Psalm, this one ascribed to Asaph, principal worship leader under King David (see 1 Chronicles 16:5, 7), describes *El* – the Supreme Creator God known to Israel as YHWH (LORD in our English Bibles) – as presiding in an assembly (or courtroom) of divine beings, or gods (*Elohim*, plural). *El* pronounces judgment among the gods because they did not justly rule the nations assigned to them. Instead these spiritual rulers defended the unjust, they were partial to the wicked rather than defending the weak and fatherless, or maintaining the rights of the poor and oppressed (Psalm 82). As a consequence these gods would themselves die like mortals (82:7). The invisible principalities and powers in the heavenlies rule over the visible thrones and authorities on earth. Such is the worldview of the Bible.

David’s answer to the collapse of national and global foundations was that he had taken “refuge in the LORD” (Psalm 11:1), that “The LORD *is* in his holy temple; the LORD *is* on his heavenly throne.” Then and now. Or as Paul, writing from a Roman prison, described it, “God has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves...” (Col. 1:13); that “in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form and you [those in Colossae two thousand years ago, as well as 21st Century believers] have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority” (2:10). Christ “disarmed the

powers and authorities...triumphing over them by the cross" (2:15). This is warfare language; Christ, resurrected and ascended on high, was (and remains) victorious! Death has been defeated. Fear is vanquished. *Hope* is the Christian's watchword!

### **Some practical reflections for followers of Christ...**

Death has been defeated; its power – ultimately the power of present-future fear - has been broken. However, death has not been destroyed; we are dust and our physical bodies will return to dust when we die. But we are *not* nothing-but-dust. Genesis tells us that when God "formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, the man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7). The word *breath* translated from the original text into Greek is *pneuma*. In English *pneuma* can be translated (as noted) as *breath*; but also as *wind* or *spirit*. After his resurrection, when Jesus appeared in the midst of his disciples hiding in fear behind locked doors, John tells us that he breathed on them, saying "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22). Our word for the Holy *Spirit* is, unsurprisingly, *pneuma*. Jesus is the author of the new creation; we have life-beyond-death. Again, as Paul reminds us, we "died with Christ to the basic principles of this world" (Colossians 2:20), moreover we "have been raised with Christ...[our] life is now hidden with Christ in God (3:3), and when "Christ who is our life, appears, then [we] also will appear with him in glory" (3:4), that is, with resurrection bodies, not subject to decay into dust. If we believe this, then we have no reason to fear.

However, as we are seeing with the coronavirus, fear is pandemic. We must not make light of it, as those who live in secure dwelling places. We live fear-free, but so many around us are fear-plagued. Our calling is to be the light of the gospel to those dwelling in the darkness of fear. We are called to be a people of prayer: prayer against the dark powers; prayer for those who are suffering exposure, illness and isolation, for those who lose family members; prayer for those in economic distress; prayer for those held in the grip of political powers enslaved by lies; above all prayer for those who are without hope in this world.

We are called to be a practical people. As David asked, "When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?" (Psalm 11:3). The question reminds us who we are, "the righteous", and encourages us to think carefully what we can "*do*". We are to do what Asaph, the worship leader of God's people, recommended: "Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed; rescue the weak and needy; deliver them..." (Psalm 82:3-4).

We are called to be a self-sacrificing community. To return to Paul again, writing to the church in Colossae: "I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those in [neighboring] Laodicea" (Colossians 2:1). I think of the doctors and nurses and other other health-practitioners I know who – when the viruses explode – run not away but towards the people affected, to care for them. This is what God did in the person of His Son. I find it spiritually-interesting that the response to the coronavirus seems to have been to empty the store-shelves of food, soap and cleaning items; to isolate from one another in self-and-medically advised quarantines; to close the doors of places of worship. I don't question the intent; it is just so counter-intuitive to the being-in-community that marks the church as the people of God. Surely the coronavirus is a spiritual power, as much as it is malware infecting the body.