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EDITORIAL

In times of crisis we are brought to pay special attention to Scripture. This edition of the Bulletin includes two papers from the 2013 Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference on the Doctrine of Scripture. We plan to publish papers from the 2015 and 2017 conferences in upcoming editions. These are supplied by the Rutherford Centre of Reformed Theology, whose director Andrew McGowan has kindly co-operated with us along with the contributors so that their papers can be published here.

Covid-19 has spread suffering and death throughout the world this year. What observations might we make as evangelical Christians at the present time? We see reality being revealed, and hope more contagious than the virus.

First, *the hellish character of the virus*. C. S. Lewis comments, 'In Scripture Satan is specially associated with disease in Job, in Luke 13:16, 1 Corinthians 5:5 and (probably) in 1 Timothy 1:20.'¹

The virus has unleashed a catalogue of ill effects – sickness, death, isolation, unemployment, debt and distress. Members of families have been unable to visit one another, even in the last moments of life; people unable to physically console one another at funerals, schools closed and churches unable to meet physically together. Domestic violence and abuse is reported to have increased considerably. Concerns regarding mental health have been further exacerbated. Even if a cure is found soon, the effects of the virus will be felt for many years to come.

Second, *we have a greater adversary, the devil*. Large-scale disasters are often described today as being of 'biblical proportion'. The Bible is a familiar source of stories about disaster: the flood, the plagues, the siege, famine, disease and death. Yet it does not identify the afflictions of 'flesh and blood' as our chief enemy:

Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (Eph. 6:11-12).

Third, *a threat with the same power as the coronavirus is already underlying*. While faced with the virus's aggressive threat to life, we can take notice of the Scripture that says, 'death spread to all men because all

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis Signature Classics Edition (London: Collins, 2012), p. 87 fn. 1.

sinned' (Rom. 5:12). We must take action against the virus, but we must not overlook what the Bible is saying to us – that which issues in death is already within, namely the sin that is within us. As Jesus said, it is not what goes into a person that makes him unclean, but what comes out of a person that makes him unclean.

Fourth, *our Lord is greater than our adversary outside of us and within us*. We can identify three truths of God that are especially relevant.

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

God is an ever-present help in times of trouble. He is greater than the evil of the coronavirus and the adversary whose malice exceeds it. Jesus declared, 'I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.' On the cross he destroyed the works of the devil. In Scripture outbreaks of evil are regularly followed by outbreaks of revival. The fall was followed by the promise, slavery followed by freedom, the exile followed by repatriation, the cross followed by resurrection, martyrdom followed by the growth of the church. Many churches speak of new-found interest from their communities. Seldom has the media had such a healthy focus upon Easter as it did this year. In March Google Play and App Store recorded 2 million more downloads of its most popular English Version of the Bible than in the same month last year while Eden online bookstore reported a 55% increase in sales of physical Bibles in April.²

God is also greater than the enemy of sin that lies within. 'The wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom. 6:23). Thus for Christians, while the power that leads to death is within – sin which leads to death – Christ overcomes it by his Spirit within. 'The law of the Spirit of life has set you free from the law of sin and death' (Rom. 8:2).

GOD'S IMMUTABILITY

J. I. Packer understands how many Christians feel a 'spatial distance' reading the Bible, between us and the original characters. At the same time, in crisis, scripture leaps off the page:

The crucial point is surely this. The sense of remoteness is an illusion that springs from seeking the link between our situation and that of the various

² Sebastian Shehadi and Miriam Partington, 'How coronavirus is leading a religious revival', *The New Statesman*, 27 April 2020, <<https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/religion/2020/04/how-coronavirus-leading-religious-revival>>, accessed 20 May 2020.

Bible characters in the wrong place. It is true that in terms of space, time, and culture, they, and the historical epoch to which they belong to, are a very long way away from us. But the link between them and us is not found at that level.

The link is God himself. For the God with whom they had to do is the same God with whom we have to do. We could sharpen the point by saying, exactly the same God; for God does not change in the least particular. Thus it appears that the truth on which we must dwell in order to dispel this feeling that there is an unbridgeable gulf between the position of men and women in Bible times and our own, is the truth of God's *immutability*.³

The same God who was sovereign over the flood, the plagues, the exile, and every moment of biblical history is sovereign today. He is the same God, yesterday, today and forever. Consequently, Jesus his Son, the immutable yet incarnate Word, is our hope today. 'He is the same, yesterday, today and forever' (Heb. 13:8). Therefore the victory he won in biblical times, 'to destroy the works of the devil' (1 John 3:8) is the victory found in him today. And his redemption for our sins is as effectual today as it was on the day he accomplished it.

GOD'S PROMISE

Society is asking 'what will be the new norm?' It's a question we also have for our churches. We anticipate church services restarting in buildings: Who will be there? What will we return to? What will be the same, what different? Will we be the same? Will it be what we hope?

The Bible teaches us times of refreshment follow repentance; and warns of future tests. That is always true of the church this side of glory, and may be so following the current crisis. The hardening of Pharaoh's heart didn't peak at the last plague, but afterwards, when Israel fled and approached the Red Sea. There he tried to destroy them.

Before coronavirus the temperature was rising against the professing church in the west for its stance on moral issues such as marriage, sexual morality and gender identity. Contrary views were persistently advocated by some influential media outlets. The coronavirus has, for a time, completely rewritten the agenda and switched the focus. The church has been allowed to speak. It may be the eye of the storm. After Daniel's friends were allowed to speak Nebuchadnezzar turned the furnace temperature up seven times. When Jesus spoke, no charge would stick against him, so false witnesses were found instead and he was nailed to a tree. Israel

³ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2013), pp. 84-85. Italics original.

walked free, so did Daniel's friends, and so did Jesus. 'Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all' (Ps. 34:19).

Whatever is ahead for the church, whether hardship, or a period of relative ease, God's promises are of special significance so long as we do not harden our hearts when we hear his word: 'Behold I am with you always, to the end of the age'; 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' This is the great hope for the Christian which God also offers in the gospel to the world. Confronted by mortality, our hope is in the sovereign, immutable God of promise.

John Ferguson and Mike Parker

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Papers by Fergus Macdonald and Timothy Ward were presented at the 15th Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference on the Doctrine of Scripture, 2nd-5th September 2015.

David Smith's paper was presented at the Neopolis conference in Glasgow on 12th October 2019.

Daniel Wiley's paper was presented at the 2019 Northeastern Regional Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society on 6th April 2019 at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Massachusetts, USA.