

What Is God Doing in This Trouble?

Peter Ditzel

There's no escaping the fact that we've entered troubled and troubling times. How should we respond to this year's salvo of calamities and bad news? Christians rightly turn to God and ask whether He's causing the trials we've had this year. If He has, Why? Why is God bringing calamity upon us? What is God doing in this trouble? I don't claim to be a prophet, but I believe that the Bible gives us some possible answers to these questions.

The Trouble Is from God

Most of us would agree that the year 2020 has turned out to be a doozy. As if a worldwide pandemic that has so far taken over 844,000 lives isn't enough, various locations have seen record droughts and wildfires, floods, locust plagues, escalation of racial tension after George Floyd's death, social unrest, an impeachment trial in the US, the withdrawal of the UK from the EU, political factionalism, violent demonstrations and riots, drops in financial markets, economic recession, an unemployment crisis, and a calamitous explosion in Beirut. And that list is just partial. A small number of these things might have seemed ordinary. But all of these piled together, especially with COVID-19, appear to be pushing our civilization toward the brink.

I'm not alone in thinking this. Some have promoted the idea that COVID-19 is acting as the straw that could break the camel's back; the camel being the already economically and morally hollow United States, maybe other nations, maybe Western Civilization, or maybe even the world's economic system. I agree to the possibility of any of these things and, just perhaps, even more. I think it would be foolish to not see that the COVID-19 pandemic is a game-changer. The only question is to what degree. And where is God in all this?

Outside reading: "*We are witnessing the fall of a great power*"

(<https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6827090/we-are-witnessing-the-fall-of-a-great-power/?fbclid=IwAR0MbF-wFnoNyLd89OLnZwCcesKO0TGIW3DQFsOnG9DLaaPQaFi3SELA4t4>)

"*The Unraveling of America*" (<https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/political-commentary/covid-19-end-of-american-era-wade-davis-1038206/?fbclid=IwAR33UlnAw3OIMbSoNX7hsfCjaIWwHO7v1J6PAfi92vy7Vj-aHhyj3vqkreY>)

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All things are by God's decree (Isaiah 14:26-27; Isaiah 46:9-10; Daniel 4:35; Ephesians 1:11; Romans 11:36), including the evil (Isaiah 45:7). God brought the Flood upon the earth, the rain of fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah, the plagues on Egypt, and many calamities on disobedient Israel and other nations. We should have no doubt whatsoever that God has brought the troubles we now have, including the COVID-19 pandemic, upon the nations. But why? We may not be able to see the future and know just where God is heading with this, but we can see what He's done in the past and look for the same patterns today.

The Trouble of Increasing Madness

In 2016, I wrote about how we can see in the Bible and in history that the first step God often uses to bring down people, nations, and civilizations is that He destroys their minds. He brings a sort of madness upon them. I pointed out evidence that God might have been beginning to do that at that time. I think it should be apparent that if we had the beginnings of madness in 2016, we are much further into it in 2020.

Reference: *"He...first destroys their mind"*

(<https://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/madness/>)

This year, we've seen a rise in ultranationalism, growing racism, spreading anarchism and Marxism, street violence, citizens rebelling against sound guidelines designed to protect the public health, high-ranking officials promoting wild and even hazardous remedies, heads of state sounding like word-faith preachers by positively confessing that the pandemic will just disappear, and a significant portion of the population now believing one or more of the many conspiracy theories—with some churches now teaching a syncretic combination of the Bible and conspiracy theories. If this isn't society going mad, what is?

Conspiracy theories, by the way, are a sign of faithlessness. Even those who profess to be Christian don't seem to understand that God has ordained all things. Instead of saying, "This is from God" and asking, "Why has He brought this upon us?" and, "How should I behave in a Christ-centered way in response to it?" they blame the Chinese or Bill Gates or whoever for COVID-19 (from a Christian point of view, does it make a difference what secondary cause God used?) and publicly show disrespect for the authorities God has ordained and even openly disobey them. In doing so, they create their own conspiracy

theories—such as, the government is really just trying to stop Christian worship. Even if that slander were true, shouldn't they rather suffer for well doing (1 Peter 3:17-18; 4:12-16)?

The Trouble of Political Unrest

Also, in 2016, I suggested the possibility that both people running for the office of president of the United States at that time were sociopaths. I also said, "whoever wins the presidency, and whoever loses the race, the real losers look to be America and the rest of the world.... Maybe God is giving the United States and other nations their just wages."

"Whoever Is President, Jesus Is King"
(<https://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/jesus-is-king/>)

Now, the United States is looking to another presidential race. Frankly, I again don't find the choices encouraging. But God knows what He is doing with the United States and who will accomplish His will. Yet, the President himself has cast doubt over whether he will accept the outcome of the election if he loses, and others in both parties seem poised to take to the streets if they don't get their way.

God Is Using Trouble to Stir His People Out of Complacency

I think we'd all admit that there's nothing like serious adversity to stir us out of our day-to-day, humdrum routines. And the COVID-19 pandemic has been a whopping humdinger in this regard: Work from home, can't work from home, maybe unemployed, can't go to school, have to wear a mask just to go to the store, mustn't get closer than six feet from anyone, thoroughly wash hands countless times a day, social life gone, savings disappearing or maybe already in debt, friends and relatives sick and some dying—yep, it got us off the customary treadmill.

Hopefully, on the other hand, it's gotten us closer to God, enlivened our prayer life, activated our Bible study, and made us more concerned for others as we try to keep them safe, secure, and well in body and spirit. I also hope that it's made us see how foolish it is to put our hope in worldly politics and prepared us for the possibility of even worse distress to come.

Of course, we don't like the disruption. It's like the harsh shrieking of an alarm clock. But, waking up is a good thing.

One of the details that have always impressed me about Jesus' Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13) is that, while five were wise and five were foolish, they *all* slept. It was only when they were woken up that it became apparent that half of them had oil—a picture of the Holy Spirit—and half did not.

COVID-19 and the other ordeals that have come upon us are together an alarm. This alarm has woken us up. And, it's showing who's who.

God Is Using Trouble to Show Who's Who

Again, in 2016, I explained in "Peace on Earth, or a Sword?" (<https://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/peace-sword/>), that Jesus taught that He came to throw a sword into the earth that causes division. The division is between believers and unbelievers.

Of course, unbelievers are often mixed into the fellowship of believers. These people consider themselves Christians. The rest of us may even consider them Christians. Like those pictured as seeds fallen on stony ground and those sown among thorns in the "Parable of the Sower" (<https://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/sower/>), these people can seem quite zealous until there is a trial or they get caught up in worldly affairs and they fall away. This often happens on an individual basis. But periodically, God creates a situation—usually a severe, widespread trial—that creates a division. The differences between the true and the false brethren become so severe that they move in different directions.

Examples include the various persecutions, the siege of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the Constantinian shift that legalized the apostate religion of the Catholic Church and branded all who differed as heretics, the proto-Protestantism of the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries that resulted in persecution, the Reformation, the Radical Reformation, the rise of Baptist assemblies distinct from Protestant churches, and so forth.

Of the antichrists of his time, John wrote, "They went out from us, but they didn't belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have continued with us. But they left, that they might be revealed [*phaneroō*—"made manifest," "rendered apparent"] that none of them belong to us" (1 John 2:19).

But this doesn't mean that it is always the unbelievers who physically leave. Often, it's the believers who do the walking (1 Timothy 6:3-5).

So, trials that distress the world and tear our assemblies apart shouldn't dishearten us. In 1 Peter 4:12, Peter writes, "Beloved, don't be astonished at the fiery trial which has come upon you, to test you, as though a strange thing happened to you" (1 Peter 4:12). God is refining the gold from the slag (1 Peter 1:6-7).

False brethren and false teachers have always plagued God's assembly and caused schisms. All the world's false teachings would make a tediously long list. But, there are really only two religions. The true religion tells us that God saves His people through grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. Ultimately, all the other religions—including many that try to pass for Christianity—depend on human works.

Of course, God's elect aren't easily fooled. Unfortunately, many heretics give a good appearance of orthodoxy while slipping in works-based salvation. These wolves wear very realistic sheep's clothing.

Some of these tricksters *talk* of justification by faith alone while also imposing obedience to Old Testament law. Others use such emotionally charged double-talk as "cheap grace" and "Lordship salvation." They try to steal away our salvation from the accomplished work of Jesus Christ who paid the complete price for us. They contradict the Word of God by sticking a price tag on grace. These supposed teachers of the Bible fail to see that God's freely liberating us from slavery to sin also automatically makes us servants of righteousness (Romans 6:18). This is the natural fruit of the Spirit within us and not some required act of our will, which would make our salvation works-based.

Some of these preachers have taught these things for decades and deceived many. Only a few discerning individuals have exposed them, and in return they were accused of being mean spirited, ungracious, and judgmental. But now, circumstances are stirring the purveyors of works and their followers into taking public actions that expose that their hearts are really in and of this world rather than in the kingdom of God. Hopefully, this will cause more of God's people to see them for who they are.

Lord willing, I'm going to write an article addressing the apostasy we're now seeing. For now, look around. Who's following the Word of God, and who's trusting in the documents of men? Who's shining the love of Christ, and who's spreading confusion with conspiracy theories? Who has Christ only as king, and who's doing obeisance at the altars of politics and money?

God Is Giving Us Opportunity in Our Troubles

We're all familiar with separating pessimists from optimists by knowing whether they see a half glass of liquid as half empty or half full. That may not pass as real psychology, but it has a good point. When we're experiencing a trial, how we react to it shows what's inside us.

When God sends us a pestilence, we can blame God, we can murmur against the authority God has placed over us as did the Israelites in the wilderness, we can resist God's ordained civil authority and claim to know better; or we can use it as an opportunity to see God's sovereignty in action, grow in patience, help our neighbor, comfort the suffering, start discussions about the Gospel, model obedience to the civil authority God has put in place for our well-being, and exemplify long suffering in adversity.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "No temptation has taken you except what is common to man. God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted above what you are able, but will with the temptation also make the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

The Israelites who left Egypt under Moses quickly became murmurers, complaining against the authority God had established through Moses, and, thus, they were really complaining against God (Exodus 16:6-8). Many Christians today whinge over the trials that God has brought according to His will, including the pandemic and the government restrictions. They make themselves the spiritual heirs of those malcontent and rebellious Israelites. That generation fell dead in the wilderness; none entered God's rest because they were faithless.

And with whom was He indignant forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose carcasses fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter into His rest, except to those who disobeyed? And we see that they were not able to enter on account of unbelief.

Hebrews 3:17-19 (*English Majority Text Version*)

Instead of being troublemakers, the true children of God look for opportunities to create peace (Matthew 5:9). Instead of trying to get their way with "Moses," they stay focused on their Rest, who is Jesus Christ.

God Is Using Trouble to Remind Us to Focus

God's Word tells us, "No soldier on duty entangles himself in the affairs of life, that he may please him who enrolled him as a soldier" (2 Timothy 2:4). Yet, many Christians obsess on becoming entangled in the affairs of this life.

The kingdom of God is independent of the political system of this world. The true faith has survived under all sorts of political regimes. Jesus asked, "when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8). He didn't ask that question because He was concerned that faith (or, as the Greek has it, "the faith") would be crushed by the government. Jesus was talking about apostasy.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, and you will see that Paul refers to what is variously translated as "falling away," "rebellion," or "defection." The Greek word is *apostasia*, "apostasy." The word literally means, "a standing off."

Some people commit apostasy when they simply walk away from the faith; they no longer make a pretense of holding to Christianity. But it can also be more subtle. I've already mentioned the heresies of some teachers. They can become so heretical that they've really stepped away from the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 1:3-4).

It's also possible to commit apostasy by transferring our loyalties from God, His Christ, and His kingdom to the system of this world. This also is apostasy. The crises we've experienced this year have driven some Christians to seek to better know their Savior, and it has driven others to idolize some politicians, to hate others, and to look to the world to solve problems that are really spiritual.

When Paul wrote these verses, he didn't have twenty-first-century politicians in mind, but notice that the description certainly fits and, thus, applies:

Now I beg you, brothers, look out for those who are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and turn away from them. For those who are such don't serve our Lord, Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by their smooth and flattering speech, they deceive the hearts of the innocent.

Romans 16:17-18

We Christians of the twenty-first century, and especially we American Christians, have had it soft and cozy and nice for a long time, and we want it

to stay that way. So, here in America, evangelical leaders go bowing and scraping and making deals with political scoundrels to get their way in return for propagandizing their congregations to vote the party line. And, they get involved in political fights against local leaders of the opposing party while presenting themselves as standing up for the Constitution. Political issues choke like thorns (Matthew 13:7, 22), and they entangle devotees in the affairs of this life. This falling away from Christ and His kingdom and becoming *of* this world rather than just *in* it *is* apostasy!

Taking another look at 2 Thessalonians 2, we see that Paul said apostasy—defection from the faith—must occur and the man of sin must be revealed before the coming of Jesus Christ and our gathering to Him. John pictures in visionary language a coinciding, related event in Revelation 20:

And after the thousand years, Satan will be released from his prison, and he will come out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to the war; the number of whom is as the sand of the sea. They went up over the width of the earth, and surrounded the camp of the saints, and the beloved city. Fire came down out of heaven from God and devoured them.

Revelation 20:7-9

These church leaders who are standing up for the Constitution, who are hitting all the right issue buttons to energize the voter base as they speak at political conventions, who push those same buttons in their sermons, who even act as advisors to the President—will these people be in the camp of the saints, or will they be on the opposing side? Given the present atmosphere, it's a legitimate question. But you, brethren, focus on Christ!

I don't know whether we're entering into the time Paul and John wrote of, but we are certainly in a time of great apostasy. My prayer is that, under the circumstances in which we now find ourselves, instead of being "like Esau, who sold his birthright for one meal" (Hebrews 12:16), instead of getting lost in worldly issues, believers would shine forth as lights for the Gospel. That's our calling, and the trials God has brought into the world should galvanize us to focus upon it.

Jesus left us with the commission to bring the Gospel to the world. Can you see that it hurts our credibility if people see us as associated with a political party? Similarly, how can we be a light for the Gospel if people associate us with a church that breaks the law during a public health crisis? What witness does it give to the Gospel if we are associated with pastors who fawn over

self-serving politicians? How are we showing Christ to the world if we encourage, or even participate, in street violence?

Please give serious, prayerful consideration to what I've said here. God is sending us a wake-up call. It should get us out of our lethargy. It should make us recognize that the trials are from God, possibly for the reason of bringing down our society. It should cause us to see that a lot of people standing behind pulpits don't have oil and, instead of going to the only Source of that oil, they're committing spiritual idolatry and harlotry by going to this world's politicians. The wake-up call should drive us closer to God. It should open our eyes to see that we're not entitled to the good life many of us have been living in the Western world. It should cause us to see that much of what passes for Christianity is anti-Christian because it doesn't express the love of Christ for sinners, for those less fortunate, and for the vulnerable. It should cause us to look for opportunities to show God's love. It should cause us to focus upon the Gospel and upon Jesus Christ Himself.