

# *The World Upside-Down # 5*

## **5 Things God is Doing in the Coronavirus (Various Scriptures)**

NOTE: Much of the credit for this sermon outline is due to John Piper's book, *Coronavirus and Christ*

Amen and amen.

Summit, as you heard from a few of our Campus Pastors earlier, **God is still at work**. He's still on the move. He's still advancing his kingdom. **We may be quarantined, but I assure you God is not...**and that is evidenced by the **199 people who texted in last weekend** saying they wanted to take the next step in their relationship with JC. Isn't that incredible?! My favorite might've been one that came in **at 3:49am**. I didn't even know the HS was up working at that hour, but evidently he is.

This is week # 5 of doing church at home. I don't know about you, but I really miss gathering together. This is going to be me when we finally get back to church ([Chris Farley](#)). If you agree, say so in the comments.

No one knows how long this will last, but we're committed to doing church like this for as long as we're on lockdown, and here's our plan. In a few weeks, I'm going to start a series through 1 Peter, because 1 Peter was written to a group of Christians whose foundations had been rocked. The letter of 1 Peter is always a great study, but I think it will be especially poignant now.

For these first few weeks, however, my goal has been to equip you to think correctly about this moment we are in--how believers should respond when the world has been turned upside-down.

This week, I want to step back and give you a big picture view of 5 things the Bible teaches us that God is doing in the coronavirus. A couple of weeks ago I read a short little book that John Piper wrote called *The Coronavirus and Christ*. And I know your question is, "He had time to write and publish a book since shutdown started? Who does that?" Suddenly your gardening project and garage clean-out don't feel that impressive.

But it's a short read; it only took me an hour total, and definitely worth it. In this book Dr. Piper outlines 6 things God might be doing in a time like this. Our family has discussed each of these around the dinner table for the last 6 nights. It's made for great discussion, and I wanted to share 5 of them with you. (for the other one, you'll have to get the book!)

BTW, John Piper has spoken to our church and has remained a friend and counselor to us here, and he has graciously made copies free for all Summit members. This week, you should be receiving some good 'ole fashioned physical snail mail from us with a link to the book especially for you. For those of you who are not Summit members, you can access the book on our website at [summitchurch.com/coronavirusandchrist](http://summitchurch.com/coronavirusandchrist). I hope you'll read it.

Now, one caveat before we jump in. You say, "How can any of us claim to know what God is doing?" I mean, after all, God tells us in Romans 11 that his ways are *inscrutable*, "**How unsearchable are your judgments and inscrutable your ways! Who has known the minds of the Lord?**" (Rom 11:33-34) Inscrutable "means unable to be known." So, how can we claim to know that this is what is in his mind?

You're right, and so we should approach this with caution. But that said, God is not silent about what he is doing in the world, and one of the primary purposes of our Bibles, he says, is to help us understand those purposes! Paul tells us in Eph 3, for example, that by "reading" the Bible we can gain insight into the mystery of what God is doing, and in multiple places NT authors give us handles to understand what God is up to in our lives.<sup>1</sup>

So even though we may not know exactly what God is doing every second in every situation, and he's always doing more than we recognize, we can know the general patterns of how he works.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Jesus even criticized the religious leaders of his day for not understanding the meanings of his divine work in history. He said, "You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" (Luke 12:56–57). You can read the weather and predict what's about to happen, but you can't read the works of God?

In fact, how about before we even jump into this, let's take a moment and posture ourselves before God. Let's go back to our worship team and have them lead us in singing to the God who is in control of history, the one who promises to pursue *his* good purposes in our lives in all things--good and bad. Let's remind ourselves that even when the world seems upside-down, Jesus is still at the center of it all. Let's sing together, and then I'll briefly unpack these 5 things.

### [SONG: *Jesus At The Center*]

So what is God doing? Here are the first 3, following Piper:

#### 1. In the coronavirus, God is giving the world A PHYSICAL PICTURE of the moral horror of sin.

Sin is, of course, why any misery and suffering exist in the world at all. The word God used repeatedly to describe the creation was 'good'--God saw it and it was "good." Good means a world 'without the coronavirus.' It was human sin that brought the curse of disease and death into the world.

Paul says in Romans 5 that because of sin "the curse death passed to all men," and "Creation itself was subjected to futility, not willingly...longing to be set free from the bondage of corruption... groaning together in the pains of childbirth." (Romans 8:20–21). Words like futility, bondage to corruption, groaning--these are all images of global devastation and misery, All of that came because of our rebellion.

But most of us, Christians or not, live our whole lives never grasping the true ugliness of sin. We just don't think of it as that bad. We say things like, "I need to be a better person," or "I'm not perfect" or "God will forgive me." But our sin against God is a deadly serious thing, and physical suffering screams that at us. To quote Piper, "Hardly anyone in the world feels the horror of preferring other things over God. Who loses any sleep over our *daily* belittling of God by neglect and defiance? But oh, how we feel our physical pain! How indignant we become if God touches our bodies! Physical pain is God's trumpet blast to tell us that something is dreadfully wrong in the world!"

Whenever I suffer, I always try to remember--all this is here because of sin. This is a picture of how bad sin actually is. I pray that all of us in this will learn this--this is how ugly and offensive our neglect of God is; this is how hideous our casual treatment of his commands is; how outrageous it is that we give less attention to him

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. James 1:2–4; Romans 5:1–5

<sup>2</sup> Piper: Inscrutable simply means that apart from God telling us we wouldn't know what he is doing, and he is always doing more than we can see at the moment.

every day than we do the style of our hair!<sup>3</sup> And in this we'll feel the grief God has over how sin has ruined his creation.

*So that's the first thing God is doing. Here's the second:*

## **2. God intends the coronavirus to be A WAKE-UP CALL to be ready for the second coming of Christ.**

Now, we know that Christian history is littered with false predictions about the end of the world. I told you about a book that came out when I was in high school, "**88 Reasons why Jesus is Coming Back in 1988**." This thing took the Christian world by storm! The guy who wrote it--a NASA scientist who was also a Christian--identified a 3 day span in 1988, Sept 11–13, when he said Jesus would return. People were like, "Didn't Jesus say we wouldn't know the day or the hour?" And he said, "Yeah, that's true, but he never said we couldn't know within a 3-day window." This book was a big deal at my Christian school. On the afternoon of the last day, Sept 13, my soccer coach ended practice 30 min early and said, "We're going to sit here on the bleachers and wait. And then he looked at me and said, "If Jesus does indeed come, J.D., make sure all the equipment gets back in the bin." Which I thought was unkind. Of course that day came and went and Jesus didn't come back. Well, the next year the author released a follow-up called **89 reasons Jesus would come back in 1989**--he explained that he had miscalculated because he used the Gregorian calendar and not the Hebrew one, which, of course, happens to the best of us!

So we're all familiar with false predictions. But even though Christians have often botched this up, and we can't know the day or the hour or even the 3-day span, it is true that Jesus is coming back, and Scripture says it could be at any moment. He says it will come like a thief in the night--unexpectedly, when we're not looking for it. When a thief breaks into your house he doesn't schedule an appointment. "Hey, just want you to know I'll be there between 1 and 1:30. I'll text when I'm on my way." He comes suddenly when you are not looking for it.

But it's also true, Jesus said, that there will be pointers as it gets closer--wars and rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, and plagues. In Matthew 24 he compares these things to birth pangs the world will show before it gives birth to the new world that Jesus will bring at its coming. Just like a woman, in the hours leading up to the moment of birth, has moments of intense anguish, so the world will experience painful moments like the Coronavirus showing that the coming of Jesus is near.

In this virus Jesus is saying to us, "Wake up! This world you are living in will not last forever. You need to think about the world that is coming and prepare for it!" When was the last time you went to bed with the idea that "It could be tonight," or got up in the morning with the thought, "Today might be the day"? We are so frantically busy taking care of daily needs we never even think about this! We're totally asleep to it. The coronavirus is God's merciful wake-up call to be ready!

I don't know when he's coming, but signs like this show us it is not likely far away. The last words of the New Testament are Jesus saying, "Surely I come quickly." He's coming back!

## **3. The coronavirus is GOD'S THUNDERCLAP to realign our lives with the infinite worth of Christ.**

In Luke 13, a tower had collapsed on a crowd of people and 18 died. The people wanted to know if this was a specific judgment on those 18, like God was angry at all of them and saw them standing together and thought,

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<sup>3</sup> If not, we may cry out for deliverance "from the penalty of sin, but we will never see and hate the God-demeaning moral ugliness of it."

'Now's my chance' and knocked the tower onto all of them and squashed them. Jesus' response was pretty jolting: "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." Luke 13:5. They wanted to know what the disaster meant for *the victims*; Jesus responded with what it meant for the rest of us. Disasters like these aren't usually God's specific judgment on someone, but they are a message to all people to repent!

Sin is serious, friend. Disasters like this are a gracious summons from God to repent and be saved while there is still time. Here is what God requires of us: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind... Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." (Matt 10:37)

Let me ask: *Is this your heart? Is God calling you through this disaster to repent, to finally take your relationship with God seriously?* Is he trying to get you to wake up? Don't ignore his call, friend! The gospel, of course, is not that you could ever love God enough to be worthy of him. The gospel is that you haven't, but Christ has paid that penalty for you and offered to receive you fully on the basis of what he's done. But when you receive, the life you are surrendering yourself to is one where you begin to pursue him above all things, and treasure and obey him, above everything. Are you living that way?

I feel like we ought to just take a moment and realign our hearts around the worthiness of Christ. Friend, if there's something not right in your heart, and you need to surrender yourself to God, use this moment to do it:

**[SONG: *Lord I Need You*]**

OK, last 2:

#### **4. God uses distress as A THEATRE TO DISPLAY the distinctive generosity of believers**

I won't talk much about this one because we've talked about it so much before, but times like this are where Christians demonstrate the distinctive generosity of the gospel.

Piper says, "It is not mere good deeds that give Christianity its tang and luster. It is good deeds in spite of danger. Many non-Christians do good deeds..." but seldom do they do them at great cost to themselves with the sole purpose of glorifying God, not themselves.

It is in a time of distress that Christian generosity shines forth. In Matthew 5 Jesus said, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven. You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world." (Matt 5:13-16). He said, "For this reason, you will be the light of the world." Because you show generosity in a time of distress. Now, the distress Jesus is talking about here is persecution, not disease, but the point is the same. Gospel-fueled generosity goes far beyond the bonds of normal human goodness. Lots of people are kind and gracious in a time of prosperity--when goodness and generosity are relatively easy. But when generosity is costly, when it comes at great personal cost, that's when the gospel shines forth. At the center of our faith is a Savior who laid down his life for his enemies. It means in moments like this we go forward in faith and self-sacrifice, not backwards in fear and self-preservation. It is during times like this we rise above self-pity and go outward toward danger with "courageous joy to do good works of love that glorify God."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther put it this way (in his essay on plagues): "A man who will not help or support others unless he can do so without affecting his safety will never help his neighbor. He will always reckon that doing so will bring some disadvantage and damage, danger and loss."

This has always been true of Christians through the centuries. And let me just say. During this time, Summit, I've been blown away by your generosity. A lot of it has happened organically, as you've taken care of one another and just loved your neighbors. But you've also continued to give God your first and your best here. And because of your generosity, we've been able to set aside \$350,000 to minister to people in need. Some of that has gone to help members here in our church having difficulty making ends meet.

Some of it has gone to families in our community whom this pandemic is leaving truly destitute. [Wake County asked us to partner with them to help provide shelter and emergency provisions for 300 families who had fallen through the cracks of the CARES act.](#) Their first idea was for us to rent a hotel and put all these families up in it, where we could provide ongoing meals and care for them. We were ready to do that, but they came back to us and said they wanted to keep these families where they were, and asked us to provide meals and provisions for them in their communities.

Some of it has gone to Summit church plants or smaller churches in our community. Some of it has been allocated to our missionaries abroad. Our ServeRDU team continues to work within our church and our community identifying strategic areas for us to respond. Even though we have been in this for over a month now, we haven't even begun to see the full impact this will have on the most vulnerable in our community. Our response is going to be a marathon not a sprint. All this is because you give your first and best to God even in a time of uncertainty and distress. That glorifies the gospel and shows that we serve a Savior who ran toward danger and need, not away from it. These good works glorify our gospel and our Father in heaven.

*Lastly,*

#### **5. God uses the coronavirus to LOOSEN THE ROOTS of settled Christians to send them to the unreached peoples of the world**

This one is probably my favorite. I'm not sure if you know this, but I have a book coming out this summer called *What Are You Going to Do with Your Life?* It's an encapsulation of one of our core messages around here--all people are called to the mission of God, and you should consider doing something new and radical with your life, maybe planting it somewhere where the gospel is not known. You have to get a job somewhere, why not get it in a place greatly in need of the gospel where you can be a part of one of our church plants? My prayer has been that this book will motivate thousands--maybe even tens of thousands--to go and serve among unreached peoples and in less-evangelized areas in the US.

Well, then this coronavirus hit and I thought, "*Well, great. This is a terrible time for a book about moving your life overseas. People can't even leave their houses! This is going to go over like a lead balloon.*" I know that's a very selfish concern during a time like this, but I was pretty discouraged but then Piper sent me a copy of this book I'm sharing parts of with you today, and in it he points out how in Acts 7 God used a calamity--a religious persecution, that started with the stoning of Stephen--to produce the greatest worldwide expansion of the gospel up to that point. They hadn't asked for it. They weren't prepared for it. Satan was behind it. His purpose was to discourage the church. But God used it instead for a great worldwide gospel advance.

I wrote John Piper and told him about my discouragement, and he wrote back and said, "On the contrary, J.D., you should be very encouraged. Many around the world are praying that at this very moment, which Satan means for hindering the Mission of the King to the nations, God will use for strategic advance. Your book will be well-timed. **May God grant thousands to grasp what God is doing, and madden the evil one by turning his tactical ripple against the kingdom into a tidal wave of completion.**"

First, let's be real: "*Madden the evil one by turning his tactical ripple against the kingdom into a tidal wave of completion*" has to be the most Piper-esque line ever written in an email. Who talks that way? But second, do you sense that he is right? In Gen 50 God promises that what Satan means for evil, God will use for good. He takes Satan's tactical ripples of opposition and transforms them into tsunami waves of his completion.

Piper tells this story: "On January 9, 1985, Pastor Hristo Kulichev, an evangelical pastor in Bulgaria, was arrested and put in prison. His crime was that he preached (without government permission). His trial was a mockery of justice and he was sentenced to eight months in prison. During his time in prison, he made Christ known in every way he could. When he got out, he wrote, 'Both prisoners and jailers asked many questions, and it turned out that we had a more fruitful ministry there than we could have expected in church. God was better served by our presence in prison than if we had been free.'<sup>5</sup>

This is often God's way, Piper says. The global scope and seriousness of the coronavirus is too great for God to waste. He is going to use it for a great advance of the mission.

Summit, I have started to pray that we will see coming out of this a movement of people out of our church toward the field like never before. That hundreds of us will use this shaking to sense the urgency of the Great Commission and uproot our lives to take the gospel to the places that most need it.

Is he perhaps calling you? Can you sense that? Will you pray with me about this?

## Conclusion

Those are the 5 things. Again, I'm not saying that I understand all that God is doing in this situation. The totality of his ways are inscrutable. At any given point God is doing 10,000 different things in my life and I'm only aware of about 3 of them. But what I do know is that God is sovereign, and he is faithfully fulfilling the purposes he declared he was pursuing. He is shaking the world; he is calling it to repentance; purifying his church; trying to wake us up; and repositioning us to get the gospel to the people and the places that haven't heard it.

Don't waste this coronavirus! Have you surrendered yourself to these purposes of God during these times? Which of these best encapsulates what God might be doing in your life during this season? Jot one down and talk it over later with your family!

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<sup>5</sup> Herbert Schollossberg, *Called to Suffer, Called to Triumph*, 230.

