

Faculty Work Comprehensive List

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Viral Blessings

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Viral Blessings

Abstract

"No thoughtful Christian—and especially Reformed Christian—can dismiss either God's sovereignty or his propensity for allowing troubling events to both refine wayward thinking and action and bring blessing."

Posting about effects of the coronavirus pandemic from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/viral-blessings/>

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July 21, 2020

Viral Blessings

John Visser

No one in his right mind would dare suggest that the novel coronavirus spreading around the globe in 2020, with all its sickness and death, is a good thing. But, no thoughtful Christian—and especially Reformed Christian—can dismiss either God’s sovereignty or his propensity for allowing troubling events to both refine wayward thinking and action and bring blessing.

It should be noted, of course, that to suggest that God works mysteriously through a pandemic is not, in any way, to assume that any of us is capable of discerning the mind of God or explaining why bad things happen to good people, or why a loving God would permit the kind of carnage associated with a pandemic. Nor is it to say we can’t benefit greatly from reflecting on these kinds of difficult questions, even though we “see through a glass darkly.”¹ However, other thoughtful people have already dealt extensively with these kinds of questions, so no attempt will be made here to summarize, critique or otherwise engage their thoughts on this.

I do, however, want to note here how blessings seem always mysteriously mixed up with struggle and hardship, and reflect on what some of those blessings might be in the current pandemic. To do this, it makes sense to take a quick look back at the world just prior to the unannounced arrival of this deadly adversary. Perhaps the best way to describe this world would be through a list of descriptive adjectives that paint a picture of both what our world has become and what it has forgotten.

Our world, or at least the U.S. and similar high-income countries, had become consumptive, individualistic, a bit frantic, and—frankly—quite arrogant. Oddly, what we didn’t seem to realize was how uniquely vulnerable this type of world is. We didn’t seem to understand that allowing our spending to gradually shift from things that address the

needs of large numbers of people to spending largely focused on satisfying our own wants had created an economy that can be stopped dead in its tracks almost overnight.

Turns out, not only can we *survive*, but we can *live* for fairly long periods without dining out, going to major sporting events, movies, casinos, or celebrity concerts more easily than we might have thought. It also turns out that many of us aren't nearly as good at some other important things as we would have hoped—like interacting well with family in a confined space, teaching our children, showing appreciation, or finding joy in the absence of emotional crutches or distractions.

In short, the pandemic not only brought a lot of sadness; it also exposed and toppled some pervasive idols: “the good life,” our self-indulgent bucket lists, sport and celebrity worship, and seeing the economy, government or science as almost God-like in their ability to rescue us—just to name a few. Thankfully, it also gave us an opportunity to witness extraordinary courage and creativity, becoming fundamentally different kinds of people—humble, caring, selfless, sharing, and perhaps most importantly, self-aware. For Christians, it is hard to argue that such a rearrangement of our priorities, at least if it has some staying power, is anything other than a blessing.

Perhaps, then, we need to see both the pandemic and its irony as another example of an age-old commentary on the human condition. The simple truth is that it has always been hard to find examples of humans becoming fundamentally better people when life is getting easier or more comfortable, especially when they start believing they've become wealthy or accomplished because of how smart or deserving they are.

At the very least, recognizing this unfortunate aspect of the human condition, along with God's mysterious ability to “make all things work together for good for those who are called according to his purpose”² can help us both weather the pandemic and balance the suffering it brings with some very real benefits from the challenges it poses.

FOOTNOTES

1. 1 Corinthians 3:12, KJV
2. Romans 8:28, NLT