

EDITORIAL: BEHOLDING JEHOVAH'S DESOLATIONS

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Come, behold the works of the LORD, what desolations he hath made in the earth. He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth; he breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder; he burneth the chariot in the fire (Ps. 46:8-9).

Introduction

COVID-19, coronavirus and social distancing are new concepts in 2020. Coronaviruses are, in fact, not new: they are types of virus which cause respiratory disease in mammals (including humans) and birds. It might be useful for our readers to understand some of the background before we proceed.

The coronavirus (from the Latin *corona* for crown) is so named because of its shape. The word coronavirus describes not only a single virus but also a group of related viruses. COVID-19 or Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) is the successor to SARS-CoV-1, commonly known as SARS, which caused about 1,000 deaths worldwide in 2002-2003. Officials attribute many more deaths worldwide to this new virus whose name, COVID-19, reflects the fact that it was discovered in 2019. Since this new virus spreads so easily and since hospitals the world over would be overwhelmed if there were a surge in cases, most governments across the world have implemented social distancing to keep the virus from spreading through their populations. This does not stop the virus—it certainly does not offer a cure—but in theory it slows down its spread, a theory on which the editor makes no comment.

While the rate of disease has supposedly been slowed down, the socio-economic consequences have been catastrophic. People have been kept from family and friends, workers have been forced to stay at home, many “non-essential” businesses have closed, unemployment has sky-rocketed and church services have been cancelled.

Jehovah's Desolations

It is easy at such times to point the finger of blame at various entities: China, the World Health Organization, the scientists and the civil governments. Instead, we remember Psalm 46:8: “Come, behold the works of the LORD, what desolations he hath made in the earth.”

Jehovah's works are clearly on display today, although few have the eyes of faith to see them. What we see happening in the world is to us unprecedented but it is not the first pandemic in human history and it will not be the last. Indeed, because the nations of the world are so interconnected today, in ways unheard of in previous generations, a disease that originated in China can—and did—travel around the world with startling speed. The Psalmist calls us to “come, behold the works of the LORD: what desolations he hath made in the earth.” The Hebrew word for “desolation” comes from a verb that means “to be horrified” or “to be appalled.” Desolation, therefore, is a work of judgment that leaves the onlooker appalled. It is a work that evokes horror. It is a work that stuns.

The Psalmist illustrates Jehovah's desolating works in verse 9 when he sings about the bow, the spear and the chariot. Centuries ago, bows, spears and chariots were weapons of war. Chariots, the ancient equivalent of armoured tanks, were fearsome in the ancient world: if the enemy was equipped with chariots, his victory was almost certain (Ex. 14:7; Judg. 4:3).

Jehovah delivered his people by destroying the weapons of war. Each of the verbs in Psalm 46:9 expresses violence. He “breaketh the bow;” we might say, “he shatters it” or “he smashes it.” He “cutteth the spear in sunder;” we might say, “he hews it in pieces” or “he cuts it up.” He “burneth the chariot in the fire;” He utterly destroys it, so that the chariot rider perishes and the chariot can never be used again.

The image of burning chariots, shattered spears and hewn bows is one of the complete destruction of the enemy. The Psalmist, therefore, calls the citizens of the city of God to see the devastation that Jehovah has wrought upon the enemy. Observe the piles of rotting corpses, gaze upon the smouldering wreckage and consider the shattered weapons. “Come, behold the works of the LORD, what desolations he hath made in the earth”!

E d i t o r i a l

We can apply this to the global pandemic of today. Jehovah in His wrath against a wicked world has performed His works. He has sent a virus upon the earth, which has killed hundreds of thousands of people. Death and destruction have been visited upon the nations of this earth. While we do not know the precise reason for God's judgments, we know that this world is guilty. Death in whatever form is God's judgment on sin. It is God's judgment to bring the wicked to everlasting destruction in hell. In other judgments, people will die in famines, earthquakes, floods or fires; others will die of a myriad of diseases; and war and violence will wipe out many more.

Not only has God devastated the lives of hundreds of thousands, He has also disrupted the world's economy. Millions of people have been furloughed: many of them will permanently lose their jobs. Travel has been disrupted across the globe. Civil governments in many cases are overreaching: some of them are exploiting the pandemic in order to increase their power. The masses are restless, itching for freedom. And we are tempted to become impatient also.

According to Revelation 5-6, the Lord Jesus was given a book at His ascension, which symbolizes the counsel of God. The role of our Saviour is to open the book, thus executing God's decree in the New Testament age. Part of God's counsel is the going forth of the four horses and their riders, who are commonly called "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse." Two horses with their riders are especially active in this pandemic. The black horse brings judgment on man's economy, dividing the rich from the poor and causing civil unrest. On the pale horse (Greek: *chloros*, a yellowish-green colour; think of chlorine gas) rides Death, which mows down multitudes. In Revelation 6:8 ("to kill with ... death") the reference includes pestilence, such as this COVID-19 pandemic, as well as many other diseases throughout history. In 1918 the Spanish flu killed about 50 million people worldwide, while the bubonic plague (the Black Death) killed some 75-200 million people in the 1300s. The "beasts of the earth" probably do not refer to viruses, since a virus is not a beast. Instead, we should think of the many venomous, or otherwise dangerous, animals that kill humans every year.

When we observe this pandemic and its aftermath or when we observe other judgments of God, we exclaim in faith, "Come, and behold the works of the LORD, what desolations he hath made in the earth"! He wipes out hundreds of

thousands with disease, He destroys others with famine, He sends war upon the earth, He shakes the earth with quakes, He covers the earth with floods, He burns the earth with fires and He disrupts the world's economy. Worse than that, He sweeps the wicked into hell. And through all of these works He accomplishes His purposes. Great is He and greatly to be praised!

Whose Works?

We behold Jehovah's works by acknowledging whose works they are. They are Jehovah's works. Sometimes they are Jehovah's direct works. That is, Jehovah works without creaturely, and especially without human, instruments. Creation was such a work. The plagues on Egypt were such works, although one might argue that God employed Moses' rod as an instrument. God turned water to blood; caused frogs, lice, flies and locusts to devastate the land; and He sent hail mingled with fire, for example.

Other works are God's works through human instruments. When God slew Goliath with a slingshot, He worked through David, giving David the faith, the courage and the precise aim to slay that ungodly giant. Yet David ascribed glory to God for killing Goliath, thus delivering Israel (I Sam. 17:37, 45-47, 49-50). Sometimes God destroyed the heathen without any human involvement, such as in the days of Hezekiah when an angel of the Lord wiped out 185,000 Assyrians in one night (Isa. 37:36). At other times, God empowered the army of Israel to destroy the enemies of God: Joshua killed the Canaanites, Samson killed the Philistines and David killed the Ammonites, for example. Yet the glory of these works returns to God, who empowered His people to do these mighty deeds. "Through thee will we push down our enemies: through thy name will we tread them under that rise up against us" (Ps. 44:5).

Indeed, the shattering of the bow, the breaking of the spear and the burning of the chariot are God's works through human instruments. God did not shatter the bow by striking it with lightning. God did not break the spear by destroying it with His own bare hands. God did not burn the chariot by sending fire from heaven to consume it. God destroyed the Canaanites by directly killing some of them, by enabling the Israelites to kill many of them and then by causing Joshua to burn their chariots with fire (Josh. 11:6). There is no contradiction, however. Jehovah burned the chariots. Joshua burned

E d i t o r i a l

the chariots. Joshua was a means in Jehovah's hand, an intelligent, willing, conscious means, to burn the chariots.

We should think similarly about the COVID-19 pandemic. There are theories about its origin. The bottom line is this: God caused the virus to enter the human population and to spread across the world. God moved the scientists to offer advice to world leaders, whose advice He caused them to follow. The result is that, whether directly or through human instruments, God has brought devastation on the earth.

God's Word does not say, "Come, behold the works of the Wuhan laboratory, the World Health Organization, the scientists, the chief medical officers, and the mainstream media outlets: what desolations they have made in the earth!" The Psalmist urges, "Come, behold the works of the LORD: what desolations he hath made in the earth." If Job were alive today, he would not say, "The Lord gave, but the Wuhan laboratory, the World Health Organization, the scientists, the chief medical officers, and the mainstream media outlets have taken away." Job would say, as he said then, "The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21). Job made that confession although he knew that God used human instruments—the Sabeans and the Chaldeans (Job 1:15, 17)—in his trials.

We also recognize human instruments. We do not deny that God uses human instruments, when it pleases Him. And those human instruments are responsible for their wicked deeds. Nevertheless, we do not allow human instruments to distract us from the works of Jehovah. The World Health Organization is not God! Scientists and medical advisors are not God! The state is not God! Only Jehovah is God, and that did not change when the pandemic and worldwide lockdowns came. That does not change when famine, pestilence, wars, economic collapse or other devastations come. God sent them! God devastated the earth! Pay attention to God's works and do not allow theories about men's works to captivate your attention at this time.

We need this reminder especially today because we live in a materialistic world. Every day we hear reports about devastations and desolations: we hear about wars and violence; we hear about death and destruction; we hear about murder and mayhem; we hear about floods, famines, fires and pestilences; and we hear about this pandemic. But we receive the information from a purely

naturalistic perspective. The virus is the product of evolution, we are told. The world looks to scientists, medical experts and political leaders to help them out of the pandemic. But God is not mentioned. There is no call from the media to behold the works of Jehovah. There is no call from the World Health Organization, the United Nations or the world's media to repent and seek the mercy of Jehovah.

Believing Response

Sometimes we Christians give lip service to the idea of God's sovereignty. We will admit, if pressed, that the pandemic is the work of God. But that truth does not really live in our consciousness. We do not respond to the pandemic, as we should, according to *Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord's Day 10: "patient in adversity; thankful in prosperity;" by placing "our firm trust in our faithful God and Father." Instead, when our plans are disrupted, we complain. We spend our days railing against the civil government: it is the state's fault, we say. That might be but is not God our sovereign Father? Does God not turn the heart of the king whithersoever He wills (Prov. 21:1)? We fret about the future, as if God cannot provide for us and care for us in a pandemic. We grumble about persecution when we are not permitted to gather for worship, when we have never experienced true persecution. Compare the inconvenience of a temporary lockdown of the whole of society, in which churches are not specifically targeted, to the reality of life in China or North Korea. We complain that our standard of living might be reduced, as if we were entitled to anything. We fret that we might get sick, as if health were guaranteed to us. Have we forgotten, as Christians, how to suffer?

Dear reader, have you used the stay-at-home orders to pray more earnestly to the Lord, to confess your sins to Him and to study His Word? Have you used this opportunity to read solid literature to feed your soul? Have you humbled yourself under God's mighty hand or have you squirmed and struggled to submit and be thankful? Afflictions reveal what is in our hearts, do they not? How we need the mercy of God to cleanse us from our sins of selfishness, discontentment, malice, envy and pride! Cleanse us, O Lord, from these sins!

That is comfort for us. The present mayhem in the world serves our salvation. God distracts the world from its goal of destroying the church by sending

E d i t o r i a l

a pandemic, perhaps followed by a worldwide recession or even an economic depression. And even when the world uses this pandemic to prepare for a more globalist society, which will eventually usher in the Antichristian kingdom, the Antichrist himself serves our salvation. All things, including a pandemic, economic collapse and a globalist new world order, serve our salvation. We cannot prevent the coming of the Antichrist. We do not have the power; we do not even need to try. Our calling when the Antichrist comes is not to fight him with earthly weapons but to suffer for the sake of Christ, overcoming him by the blood of the Lamb, by the word of our testimony and by not loving our lives unto the death (Rev. 12:11).

Christ has already accomplished peace by destroying the kingdom of darkness. When Jesus came into the world, He did not come to establish peace with Satan but to wage war upon Satan. Satan underestimated Christ: he brought his most cunning temptations against Christ but Christ stood firm. He stirred up the world to persecute and even to kill Christ but God used Satan, Pilate, the Jews and the Romans to accomplish His purposes (Acts 4:27-28).

“Come, behold the works of the LORD”! See the ruin of Satan’s kingdom. See Satan bound, and his goods plundered and spoiled. See Satan’s captives released by the power of the cross. See Satan confounded by the resurrection of God’s Son. See Satan flailing in fury because his days are few. See the coming of Christ’s kingdom through the signs in the creation, among the nations of the world and in the church. And worship Him, submit to Him, believe in Him and trust Him.

The day is coming—soon—when Jesus shall reveal all of God’s works and when He shall judge all of men’s works. On that day, we will gaze upon the wreckage of humanity and we shall praise God. On that day, war shall have finally ceased forever. On the day we shall enjoy perfect peace. “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Ps. 46:1).