

What is God Doing?

March 20, 2020 by Daniel Kleven

At Bethlehem Seminary we exist to spread a passion for the supremacy of God *in all things*. Most times, that's exciting and fun: the supremacy of God in *literature*, the supremacy of God in *business*, the supremacy of God in *the arts*. But times like these can cause you to do a double take: what about the supremacy of God in *global pandemics*? Do we have a passion for *that*?

As I've tried to get my head around what's happening, I've drawn on some lessons from history. I've been helped by Francis Grimké's "[Reflections](#)" on the 1918 Spanish influenza. I've been inspired by Martin Luther's [response to the bubonic plague](#). Perhaps most profoundly, though, I've been pushed hard by Charles Spurgeon to consider God's sovereignty in times like this.

London, England, where Spurgeon pastored, experienced multiple outbreaks of cholera between 1832 and 1866. Spurgeon responded in both word and deed, [visiting the sick](#) and preaching to his city as it grappled with these realities. His 1866 sermon, "[The Voice of the Cholera](#)," is worthy of extended reflection.

Before expounding on his text, Spurgeon acknowledged that "there are different ways of looking at this disease. Men viewing it from one point of view alone, have frequently despised those who have regarded it under another aspect." (Did they have Twitter back in 1866?!) Spurgeon refused to fall into a false dichotomy between divine sovereignty and human responsibility: "It seems to me that this disease is to a great extent in our own hands, and that if all men would take scrupulous care as to cleanliness, and if better dwellings were provided for the poor, and if overcrowding were effectually prevented, and other sanitary improvements carried out, the disease, most probably, would not occur."

Yet, Spurgeon's main point in this sermon is to expound on the other side: what is *God* doing in the midst of this plague? And he refuses, again, any

oversimplification: “I am not among those, as you know, who believe that every affliction is a judgment upon the particular person to whom it occurs. We perceive that in this world the best of men often endure the most of suffering, and that the worst of men frequently escape.” Spurgeon did think, though, that God had something important to say to England as a whole: “but we do nevertheless very firmly believe that there are national judgments, and that national sins provoke national chastisements.”

He called attention to several notable sins that characterized London: drunkenness, debauchery, neglect of the worship of God, and false Christianity. Could God walk favorably with England while these sins were thrown in his face? Americans in 2020 could craft our own lists: greed, racism, sexual immorality, abortion, and our own forms of false Christianity. We sing “God bless America,” but times like this force us to ask: Have we grieved God as a nation?

Spurgeon is not content to talk about sins “out there,” though. He presses every Christian to consider: “You who profess to be the people of God, and who recognise God’s hand in this visitation, I ask you how far has justice found provocation in *you*? What have *you* had to do, professing Christians, with the drunkenness of this city? Are you *sure* that you are quite clear of it? Have you both by your teaching and by your example shown to men that the religion of Jesus is not consistent with drunkenness?” One could repeat these questions regarding any of our own nation’s sins. “Have we spoken out about that? Or do we lend it our direct or even indirect support?”

Spurgeon’s words of warning to 19th century London ring true in 21st century America:

But it is much to be feared that a constant run of prosperity, perpetual peace and freedom from disease, may breed in our minds just what it has done in all human minds before, namely, security and pride, heathenism and forgetfulness of God.

What, then, does Spurgeon think God is doing in the midst of a plague?

If you ask me what I think to be the design, I believe it to be this—to waken up our indifferent population, to make them remember that there is a God, to render them susceptible of the influences of the gospel, to drive them to the house of prayer, to influence their minds to receive the Word, and moreover to startle Christians into energy and earnestness, that they may work while it is called to-day.

This brings to a head the difficult question raised at the beginning of this letter: what about the supremacy of God in global pandemics? Many of us believe that God can do good in spite of all the suffering caused by this pandemic. But is there more? Is God actually working *in the suffering itself*? This question caused Spurgeon to tremble:

Shall there be cholera in the city, and God hath not done it? My soul cowered down under the majesty of that question, as I read it; it seemed to stretch its black wings over my head, and had I not known them to be the wings of God, I should have been afraid.

I, too, cower under the majesty of this question. I cringe to hear trite appeals to Romans 8:28. I know that I live in one of the most well-equipped countries on earth, and that as a young, healthy person, I am likely not to be too hurt by this disease. Tens of thousands of people have experienced tremendous suffering so far, and many more will before this is all over. My own loved ones may be affected. No one knows the future. But Spurgeon calls me not to shrink back from the question: *What is God doing right now?* And he has a word for Christians and non-Christians.

First, for Christians:

Be awake, Christian, and be aware of God's design, for the trumpet is sounding, and when the trumpet sounds, the Christian must not slumber. Let the presence of God infuse into you a more than ordinary courage and zeal... I charge you, as you love Jesus, as you know the value of your own soul, now, if never before, be in earnest for the salvation of the sons of men.

And if there are any non-Christians reading this letter (or any to whom you could send it):

And oh! those of you who are not his people, can you bear to be at disagreement with God? How can he walk with you? You ask his protection, but how can you expect it if you are not agreed with him? Now, if two men walk together, there must be a place where they meet each other. Do you know where that is? It is at the cross. Sinner, if you trust in Jesus, God will meet you there. That is the place where true at-one-ment is made between God and sinners. If you go repentingly to Jesus, saying, "Have mercy upon my iniquity; wash me in thy blood," you shall be agreed with God, and then you may look forward to living or dying with equal delight, for if we live we shall walk with God on earth, and if we die we shall walk with God above.

Our hope in times like these is the same as it has always been: in a sovereign God who is working *all things* for good, even a global pandemic. Here at Bethlehem we're wrestling with all that this means; we're praying for courage and zeal; we're asking God for wisdom daily; and we're continuing to spread a passion for his supremacy *in all things*, for the joy of all peoples, through Jesus Christ.

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