



Grace Notes

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COVID-19 AND GOD'S PROVIDENCE

Coronavirus 2019 (a.k.a. COVID-19) is a respiratory illness that, as of 21 April 2020, has 2,531,804 total confirmed cases of infection in an ongoing worldwide pandemic. The total number of deaths attributed to the virus so far is 174,336. That puts this disease in the upper range of modern pandemics, such as: Asian Flu (1957-58), Hong Kong Flu (1968-69), AIDS (1981-present), and the Swine Flu (2009-10). The most lethal of all modern pandemics was the Spanish Flu (1918-1920), with a total estimated number of deaths at 17 to 100 million.

At times like this, people wonder about God's involvement in plagues, epidemics, pandemics, and other natural disasters, like earthquakes, hurricanes, tornados, volcanic eruptions, floods, etc. Of course, people who don't believe in God, such as secular Marxists and atheists, see all these things to be purely "natural phenomena." Other people who have a "deistic" view believe in a creator God, of some sort, but don't believe that he intervenes in the world today.

Christians have understood God's involvement in world events and natural disasters under the category of "providence." Martin Luther summarized this teaching about "providence" in the *Small Catechism* in his explanation to the First Article of the Creed, which states:

I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul . . . and still takes care of them.

He also gives me clothing and shoes . . . and all I have. He richly and daily provides me with all I need to support this body and life.

He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil. All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me.

The noun "providence" is found as a verb in Luther's phrase "He richly and daily provides." I remember many widows telling me about their deceased husband:

“He was a good provider!” God gives us government, parents, and spouses to serve as his agents in the process of “providing,” but He is the ultimate and best “provider.”

How does God’s providence harmonize with natural disasters? Natural disasters and human-caused disasters seem to conflict with the idea that God is a caregiver and provider for mankind. But there is another actor on the stage! Listen to Luther’s explanation of the Fourth Petition, “Give us our daily bread,” in his *Large Catechism*:

This petition is especially directed against our chief enemy, the devil whose whole purpose and desire it is to take away or interfere with all we have received from God.

Did you get that? The devil’s whole life purpose and desire—the thing that gives him the greatest joy and pleasure—is to take away, or interfere with, God’s redemption (spiritual goods) AND God’s providence (temporal goods). Christians know that the devil is the source of their temptation to sin and unbelief, but we often forget that the devil is constantly “running interference” against God’s providence. Luther continues:

[The devil] is not satisfied to obstruct and overthrow spiritual order, so that he may deceive men with his lies and bring them under his power, but he also prevents and hinders the establishment of any kind of government or honorable and peaceful relations on earth. This is why he causes so much contention, murder, sedition, and war, why he sends tempest and hail to destroy crops and cattle, why he poisons the air, etc. (LC Third Part, 80; Tappert, 431).

The devil “poisons the air”? This is not a reference to air pollution, but to the miasmatic theory of disease that was popular in the Middle Ages (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miasma_theory). Thus, Luther blames the devil for natural disasters of all sorts, including infectious diseases. Although we don’t support the miasmatic theory today, the idea that the devil is active on earth and is responsible for these disasters is taught in Luther’s Catechisms and the Bible (e.g., Job 1:9-2:10; Luke 10:18; John 8:44; Acts 10:38).

Luther explains more about the conflict between God and the devil in the realm of providence in his explanation of the Last Petition, “Deliver us from evil,” also in his *Large Catechism*:

This petition seems to be speaking of the devil as the sum of all evil in order that the entire substance of our prayers may be directed against our arch-enemy. It is he who obstructs everything that we pray for: God’s name or glory, God’s kingdom and will, our daily bread, a good and cheerful conscience, etc.

Therefore we sum it all up by saying, “Dear Father, help us to get rid of all this misfortune.” Nevertheless, this petition includes all the evil that may befall us under the devil’s kingdom: poverty, shame, death, and in short, all the tragic misery and heartache of which there is so incalculably much on earth. Since the devil is not only a liar but also a murderer, he incessantly seeks our life and vents his anger by causing accidents and injury to our bodies. He breaks many a man’s neck and drives others to insanity; some he drowns, and many he hounds to suicide or other dreadful catastrophes. Therefore there is nothing for us to do on earth but to pray constantly against this arch-enemy. For if God did not support us, we would not be safe from him for a single hour. (LC Third Part, 113-116; Tappert, 435).

All sorts of people around the world are working around the clock to reduce and eliminate the damage being caused by the COVID-19 disease: government officials, public health officers and staff, doctors, nurses, medical staff, policemen, firemen, emergency medical officers, “first responders,” manufacturers of medical masks and protective equipment, etc.

What can you do to help? 1) Cooperate with the health authorities and their orders; 2) Pray for the safety and welfare of all the people mentioned above, who are working to reduce and eliminate the COVID disease and its effects; 3) “Pray constantly against this arch-enemy” the devil, our old evil foe, who now means deadly woe; and 4) Thank God daily for his grace and mercy on us poor miserable sinners, which grace we receive through His Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Yours in Christ, Martin R. Noland, Pastor of Grace Lutheran Church, San Mateo, CA