

# Pandemic Thinking: Making Sense of Madness

Deut 29:29

**MPS** Jesus calls us to live by faith so we can rest and walk in Him as our Covenant Keeper.

**OBJ** Every person can believe in Jesus for faith to make sense of the madness by three faith responses.

**INTRO** Three months ago I preached a message entitled “A Personal Pandemic: What To Do When Life Disappoints”. In that message, I drew from Philippians 2:5-11 to offer three actions to take from the mind of Christ to navigate faithfully through our situation. My main point in that message was “how a Christian must think in the midst of a pandemic.” Today I want to offer a complimentary message by helping you think Biblically and theologically about our pandemic. Maybe more than any other time in my life, narrative and how you think about your life and is becoming an ever more critical discipline for the Christian. **HOW you think ABOUT your life in this season is as important for your well-being as how you think IN this pandemic.**

The Scriptures are filled with attacks to believe false narratives because it is Satan’s principle strategy of attack.

- Job is a book of how “friends” offer false narratives one after another argued to a man in his suffering, trying to make sense of what it taking place.
- David is repeatedly attacked by false narratives as recounted in the Psalms when he states, “*My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, ‘Where is your God?’*” Psalm 42:3
- Goliath taunted the Israelites to “defy the armies of the living God”. (1 Samuel 17:26)
- The soldiers mocked Jesus saying, “*If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!*” (Luke 23:37)

And lest we forget the most infamous, the very first.

- Adam & Eve (Genesis 3:1, 4-5): “*Did God really say?*” Then, “*You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.*” Eve believed the false narrative (lie) the Serpent told her. That’s why Genesis records (Genesis 3:6), “*So when the woman saw...*”. She SAW it because she had already believed it by trusting the Serpent above God.

I assure you, false narratives are filling the airwaves of your life today as they litter newsfeeds, seep in to darken thinking, overwhelm emotions, sear consciences, numb affections, severe relationships, etc. **Have you not heard their echoes, “Where is your God in this pandemic? If He is a God of love, why is He allowing people to die? Why is He doing this to us?” Your God is not good. Your God is not even real.**? The narrative you entertain and continually repeat in your mind will become the anchor upon which you build your life and frame all your thinking. **I want you to understand, Christian; Faith IS Sight: WHERE YOU place your faith determines what you see when the lies of false narratives waft by, tickling your ears and tantalizing temptations.**

A few weeks into the present pandemic I received a request for some Biblical context on all that is taking place. That email has served as a catalyst for much of what I share with you today. I must begin, however, with a disclaimer: As I have often found myself in pastoral ministry, so I say today, I wish I had a better answer for you on this. I can’t fully answer your question, not only because I don’t know but because there is no definitive answer. What I aim to provide today is a Biblical perspective for HOW we can make sense of the madness of our situation, according to God’s Word, and WHAT we should think in order to continue walking with Jesus faithfully. **What I can promise you is that the One to whom we look will prove sufficient for us.**

**Jesus calls us to live by faith so we can rest and walk in Him as our Covenant Keeper.**

Turn to Deuteronomy 29:29. Today I want us to peer into the secret things of God and deepen our trust in who we KNOW Him to be, even, and especially, when we do not know how to make sense of the madness we find ourselves in.

*The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.* **Deuteronomy 29:29**



Today we consider God's secret will that we might come to know and trust Him more deeply, to worship Him more faithfully and walk with Him more obediently. I want to approach this topic from two simple questions. First, "HOW can we think about our situation from a Biblical perspective?" And second, "WHAT should we think / DO?"

**Question #1: HOW can we think about this pandemic Biblically?** In a season like this, or in any circumstance that is wholly beyond our control, we must think Biblically according to the whole counsel of God. This is what I want to try to help you do today. *The secret things of God are called that for a reason; we don't know, but we do know who does know.*

**The Bible speaks to our situation in many ways.** How many Bible stories can you think of where people were hit by unexpected, life-altering situations where they had no idea what was going on or what to do? Now, in some instances the Bible provides insight to the reader for how situations arose. We know how Job's situation arose because are told. But the point is, Job didn't know this when it was happening. And, we must be careful not to project our situation on a Biblical story so to conclude that God will and must act in the same manner. Rather, we can glean lessons and principles to bring a faithful application upon our own situation.

"What is going on?" is a question many ask. (Actually, anyone who is at all interested or concerned with God should want to know this.) In answering there are a few possibilities that I will frame in this way: "Is the Covid19 pandemic caused by God (divine act), sent by God (through people / history), allowed by God (among people / history)?" Great diversity remains among theologians about "categories" to identify or discuss the *secret things* of God. But these **three categories**, "caused", "sent" or "allowed", form a Biblical framework for us to glean understanding and think about the pandemic.

**Category 1:** that which is "caused" by God. This category is **God's Divine will**, or "*will of decree*"<sup>1</sup>. This includes the things God ordained before the foundation of the earth, are established and cannot be interrupted or thwarted in any way. In this category, what transpires comes directly from God's hand.

I reference **Three Examples**. First, we see the exercise of God's Divine Will in the Old Testament when He rains down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah [Gen19:23-25](#) in judgment of their great sin. Judgment of sin is always an act and timing of God's Divine Will. This reveals God's Divine will because He exercises the volition of His being to bring about His Divine purpose on earth. Scripture reveals that God does actively works in the world in this way. Second, God caused the plagues on Pharaoh / Egypt to demonstrate his mighty power to Pharaoh. In this situation, Pharaoh was the object of God's mighty works. Some were natural phenomena, while others were supernatural, like the death angel moving throughout Egypt in one night to kill the firstborn of every household without blood over their door post in obedience to Him. But each plague was of divine origin, and, therefore, caused by God to serve His purpose in the world and bring about His plan. Finally, and most notably, when the New Testament speaks of God's perfect timing, often denoted by words like "*Kairos*" [Rom5:6](#), it identifies this category. And this refers to the most important act of God's Divine Will. The cross of Jesus Christ was God's Divine will to judge sin once for all by offering up His only Son, Jesus, as a propitiation. [Romans3:25](#)

**Can or will we ever know whether this pandemic was "caused by" God's Divine will?** No. We only know these things because the Bible reveals that God does work in this way. *The Divine Will of God proclaims to us that God is working in this world to bring forth His sovereign plan of reconciliation of all things through Christ Jesus.*

**Category 2:** that which is "sent" by God. This category is **God's Providential Will**. Now, to clarify, in some sense all of these are God's providence. I use this term here, though, to refer to times when God intentionally chooses to work through the existing or active propensities, disposition or actions of people / creation to accomplish His purposes on earth. While God is active in this, He is ultimately not responsible as the cause of any sin. Scripture makes clear that man is always responsible for His sin and sinful actions. Tension remains in this understanding for us, but not for God.

<sup>1</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p214.



**Two Scripture references help us here.** Consider HOW God used Pharaoh's responses to His plagues. Romans 9:14f tells us that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, but that Pharaoh was responsible for his actions caused by a hard heart. Paul says God raised Pharaoh up for this very purpose. Romans says that God is the potter and we are the clay. He uses some clay for noble and some for ignoble purposes, and that He is the one who decides how it will be used. All of this is in full accord with His divine nature and purpose.

Also, consider what John 12 says regarding Isaiah 6. Here John refers to Isaiah 6 to interpret God's commissioning of Isaiah's preaching for this very end of "blinding eyes and hardening hearts" to accomplish His purposes. **Can the gospel actually "harden a heart"?** Yes, it does this every time it is preached. Just as water either softens or hardens soil when placed on it, so the gospel has the same effect on the heart of man. **Every time you hear the gospel and fail to believe, your heart is hardened toward God.**

In this second category this is what I mean when I say, "sent by" God. The activity or work of God acts upon the disposition and activity of people / creation to accomplish and bring about His purposes. **The Providential will of God reminds us that God remains active in the everyday affairs of His creation to bring about His glory and sovereign plan.**

**Category 3:** that which is **"allowed" by God**. This category is **God's Permissive Will**.<sup>2</sup> In this category God does not "cause" nor "send", but "allows" events in history to unfold to bring about His will. By "permissive" I do not mean to infer that God is passive, un-involved nor un-caring. Rather, He allows the natural flow of events for His glory.

For this category I point to two larger narratives. First, God "allowed" the Israelites to be defeated because of Achan's sin. Joshua 7:10f God was angry because of their sin, so He did not go with them to war. When Israel attacked Ai, God allowed the enemy to be defeated. This Old Testament story provides rich insight to Romans 1:18f when it says that the wrath of God is being revealed against all godlessness. **God allows the natural course of events to accomplish His will and glorify Him through both judgment and redemption.**

A second narrative is explicitly stated for us in the life of Joseph, which actually illustrated both categories two and three. His brothers kidnap and sell him into Egyptian slavery. Many years later when they are reunited, Joseph has risen to be the second most powerful person in Egypt by God's hand. Genesis 50:20 tells us that while Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, what God allowed. Then, in slavery God used it for good. **Genesis 50:20 demonstrates what Romans 8:28 declares to us, that though we do not understand because we cannot understand all that transpires in history, we can rest in God's faithfulness to bring good to His children. The Permissive will of God reminds us that while God remains active in His creation and promises good to His people, His glory comes by allowing the natural course of history and events to transpire.**

**These three categories provide a framework for us to consider our pandemic;** God's Divine will, what He "causes", Providential Will, what he "sends", and Permissive Will, what He "allows". In all of these categories God is never dormant, passive, unconcerned, uncaring nor blind to what is transpiring, nor is He ever out of control. **Though we may be unsure of what God is doing, we can remain certain that He is working out His Will for His glory at all time and in all situations.**

**A word of STRONG CAUTION.** The reason we see God exercising His Will in outward actions against sin in the Bible is because He willed to reveal these things to us, to teach and show us that He can and does do such things. These acts are always in perfect harmony according to His holy nature and character. However, my caution is this: we know what transpires in Scripture because it is revealed for us. Theologian Millard J. Erickson helps our caution when he writes, "If God sends his sunshine and rain on the unjust and the just alike, then in a world in which sin has brought ravages of nature and disease, misfortune may also fall on the just and unjust alike."<sup>3</sup> **Today it is sufficient for us to know that God can, that He**

<sup>2</sup> John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2002), 531-533. Frame acknowledges the use of God's "hidden" or "secretive" will, but does not like what it infers. However, he acknowledges the limits on his term "preceptive" as well. He recognizes that God's "will of permission" as an Arminian or Open Theist concept. Frame goes on (p539-542) to discuss a third will. In this he speaks of wisdom, which as a type of preceptive will, comes by our discernment from God's whole counsel specific to our lives, like in romans 12:1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology, Second Edition*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), p454.



does, and even to say of our current situation that He may be, but never to declare with certainty that He is using some crisis or calamity for judgment. We cannot say this with certainty and are far more likely to speak incorrectly in so doing.

**TRANS** So, “**what should we say?**” OR, for our second question, **WHAT should we think?** Remember, at all times...

**Jesus calls us to live by faith so we can rest and walk in Him as our Covenant Keeper.**

**OBJ** When we look to the Bible, **Jesus makes sense of the madness by three responses of faith.**

**First, Deuteronomy says, “The secret things belong to the LORD our God”.** Not everything is for us. God conceals for His glory, just as He has revealed for His glory. While it is always right to seek the Lord and His will, it is wrong to demand more of God than He has willed to reveal. These “*secret things*” are His. IF we demand of God to know all things, then ours is not a relationship of faith of evidence and proof. What we must do is declare that God is worthy to be trusted and praised. **What we DO know about GOD tells us that HE is worthy of all praise, honor, glory and worship EVEN WHEN and ESPECIALLY IN times of unknown-ness and uncertainty.**

Theologian Michael Horton writes, “Where God has not revealed his secret plans in Scripture, we have no way of discerning them. In fact, often God’s providence in the world is not apparent to us except by the clear promises in his Word. So we are directed to seek out God’s Will only in that which he has revealed – “in the law and the gospel.”<sup>4</sup> We have God’s covenant promise that He WORKS all things “*for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.*”<sup>ROM8:28</sup> And covenant promise is exactly what Deuteronomy appeals to here with the use “LORD”. “LORD”, spelled with all capital letters in the Old Testament, references God’s covenant Name, “Yahweh”. Those who know God as Yahweh need not demand to know every detail of the times because we know He is faithful and true to His covenant. **Response #1: Jesus makes sense of the madness in the secret things when we trust in Him because HE is our Covenant Keeper!**

**Second, Deuteronomy continues, “but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever,”.** There are things that belong only to God. But the things that are revealed to us are for us, and specifically to pass on to our children forever. The gospel by which we are saved is entrusted to us to pass on, first and foremost, to our children for their children. It is interesting, is it not, how differently you receive a gift when you know it is only yours for a time, and then you must pass it on. Surely, our salvation in Jesus is eternally secure. Bu the gospel, the good news through which that salvation is shared, is entrusted to us for only a time with the purpose that we will share it. And first and most importantly, with our children. **Response #2: Jesus makes sense of the madness as we live in and pass on our faith in Him as our Covenant Keeper!**

**ILLUS** I assure you, one reason my faith in Jesus is so strong today is because of who I have watched follow Him; my life is filled with a family of Jesus followers. I’ve watched my siblings and cousins follow Jesus. I’ve watched my parents and aunts and uncles follow Jesus. I’ve watched three grandparents and great aunts and uncles teach me why they follow Jesus. I watched three great-grandparents and a great, great aunt how to follow Jesus! And all that “watching” included listening and learning. **What HAS been revealed to us is FOR us. And I will tell you it is vitally important FOR us, for what we do with it.**

**APPL** **What are you doing with what has been revealed by God TO you that is FOR you? Who are you entrusting it to?**

**Third, Deuteronomy says, “that we may do all the words of this law.”** God has revealed all we need to know so we can do all He has purposed for us to do. (Let that soak in for a moment.) God has revealed all we need to know to do all He has called us to do, no matter what else remains that we do NOT know. Knowing God is about walking with Him by faith in relationship, NOT winning accolades or arguments about Him with perfectly constructed rationales of Him, without knowing Him. **Obedience, NOT intelligence, is the aim of God’s revelation and our faith.**

<sup>4</sup> Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims On The Way.* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), p363.



**APPL** Are you walking in what you DO KNOW about God in the midst of the madness of what you do not know? Is there any area of your life where you know, though you may be suppressing or ignoring it, that you are not walking in obedience by faith to the Lord Jesus today?

At the end of this pandemic, you may not know any more about what, why, how or when. But as you trust to obey Jesus in all that you do know, one thing you can be guaranteed that you will know, is this: Jesus is worthy! **Response #3: Jesus makes sense of the madness as we walk in obedience by faith to Him as our Covenant Keeper!**

**Jesus calls us to live by faith so we can rest and walk in Him as our Covenant Keeper.**

When a big problem or crisis arises that demands bigger faith than what you have, God is always inviting you to a deeper knowledge and understanding of Him, a greater trust in Him, and a more complete surrender to Him, so He can work and bring His glory to your life. He's inviting us all today!

Don't give up, Christian. Jesus is still worthy of ALL your faith, your worship, your life! **Not knowing every detail of the times changes NOTHING about what we do KNOW of the One who is LORD of all, Jesus.**

*33 Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!*

*34 "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?"*

*35 "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?"*

*36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. Rom 11:33-36*

