

## REVERSALS

### Psalm 22:1-5 II Corinthians 1:3-II

We know what this novel virus looks like—a big, ugly pinball; or a cat toy—we can see microscopic images of it; and we know it seeks out human hosts so that it can multiply and that it specifically likes to house itself in a warm, mucous-y environment—namely your lungs. Every week, we know more and more about its properties, but no one has yet satisfactorily explained to me what exactly it is. It is not a species of animals and neither is it a plant. So what is it?! It is definitely a physical entity, but is it alive in the sense that we know life? Does it have intelligence, a will, a soul? What is its nefarious purpose? Take over the earth? Does it want to rule us? If it wiped out our entire species, it would itself die from lack of any host. That would be totally self-defeating. So what indeed does it want?

As I lay awake at night pondering this question, it seems to me that from a spiritual perspective, it must be understood functionally from the point of view of what it is doing to us. It has caused misery and suffering to millions and death to thousands. It has touched everyone in the world as it alters our ways of life, decimates the global economy and upsets the entire order of human civilization. So in this sense, it can only be described as a force of evil. For in a biblical sense, evil is regarded as a power that is separate from the natural order of things. The ancients personified it as the work of Satan. It means us harm in order to satisfy its own desires.

This is consistent with the message Paul is conveying in our scripture. In eight verses, he uses the word *affliction* four times. And the Greek word for *affliction* has a very specific meaning—to suffer evil together. *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles **us** in all **our** affliction...* Notice the use of the plural, *us* and *our*. The word *my* is not mentioned here. The psalmist, on the

other hand, speaks in the singular: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

Affliction and suffering, of course, are inseparable. We do not know the root of the psalmist's suffering in as much as he is very general about it. But we do know what had caused Paul his anguish. He is writing to the church in Corinth following a horrible experience during his mission trip to Macedonia: *...we were so unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself.* He was actively evangelizing with Silas and Timothy when they ran afoul of the local authorities who were not pleased with their message. It ended in a bitter dispute following which Paul and Silas were beaten nearly to death and thrown into prison. Call it an act of God, perhaps, for they were actually saved by an earthquake that caused considerable disruption in the prison and resulted in the jailor's conversion. He then advised the authorities that Paul was a Roman citizen and had been illegally detained. A subsequent apology was issued and they were released...but not unharmed.

It was shared suffering. And to a more or lesser degree, isn't this what the entire world is enduring with the pandemic? The *afflictions* for some are clearly much worse than for others—particularly those who already live beneath the standard of living all of us would consider unacceptable. But no one is exempt. The chaos created by this virus—which can only be adequately described as a force of evil—has thrown everything off kilter.

And really, what this experience is magnifying is the fact that our world is actually a very tragic place. Tragedy is the story of life on earth and the human experience. For life never conforms to our wishes. Every attempt to make it into some sort of paradise results in abject failure. The biblical story really begins with God's pledge of a Promised Land to Abraham. But the history of the Jewish people is a four thousand year tragedy as they continue to be subjected to discrimination and terror attacks to this day. Communism resulted from a fantasy of an egalitarian society. It turned out to be a force for repression, violence and immense human suffering. And all of the theocracies of history intended to build a society upon a religious foundation have evolved into cults dependent upon absolute obedience to an

authoritarian dictator. I'm talking to you, Iran. Name one dictatorship under any flag at any point in history that has brought peace and prosperity to its population.

We are looking at evil as an invisible force with visible effects. But in exactly the same sense, so is love. While *affliction* is mentioned four times in our scripture, *consolation* is mentioned five. The Greek word, *paraklesis*, literally means to call alongside for help. Listen again: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation which we ourselves are consoled by God.*

This scripture mirrors the story of the Bible. While *affliction* is the tragic dilemma of life on earth, *consolation* is God's response to it. The psalmist too who has cried out in great distress, quoted by Jesus on the cross, in the very next breath proclaims, *Yet you are holy...In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted and were not put to shame.*

What this means is that while our human story is one of tragedy and suffering, God's story is one of love and redemption. Evil is a reality, an invisible force with visible consequences. We cannot explain it, but we do have an answer for it. The answer is love which is an even more powerful invisible force with visible effects. The cross is followed by the resurrection. The captivity in Babylon was followed by the release and the restoration of Israel. Job's devastation ended with the recovery of all that was lost. The extermination of the Jews resulted in the founding of a nation. The Great War was followed by the reconstruction of Europe.

In the scriptures, there is a characteristic Reversal from *affliction* to *consolation*. And remember that *consolation* is an action which requires the company of others. We call God alongside us to join in our suffering. Isn't that the meaning of the cross? In the same way, we call each other alongside us to stand with us in our pain. This is love. This is faith in practice. In his novel, "I'm Thinking of Ending Things," Iain Reid writes, "People talk about the ability to

endure. To endure anything, to keep going, to be strong. But you can do that only if you're not alone. That's always the infrastructure life's built on. A closeness with others. Alone it all becomes a struggle of mere endurance."

Without love, there can be no Reversal. I don't know why evil happens and I don't know where it comes from. But it is real and none of us can escape it. I do not believe God creates it and God may not even have any power over it. This is one of those unknowables. And yet, what I do believe is that God will work alongside of us in *consolation* to create a Reversal. Our responsibility is to work alongside each other to use this *affliction* to promote the greater good in the world. That's why we wear masks. It is why we make sandwiches and support the food supply for the hungry. It is why we practice social distancing. It is also why we shall align our politics with those who will work for the greater good of our entire society. You shall know them by their fruits.

This virus is not the end of the world. It is an opportunity for the world to use our *affliction* to be in *consolation* with one another.

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