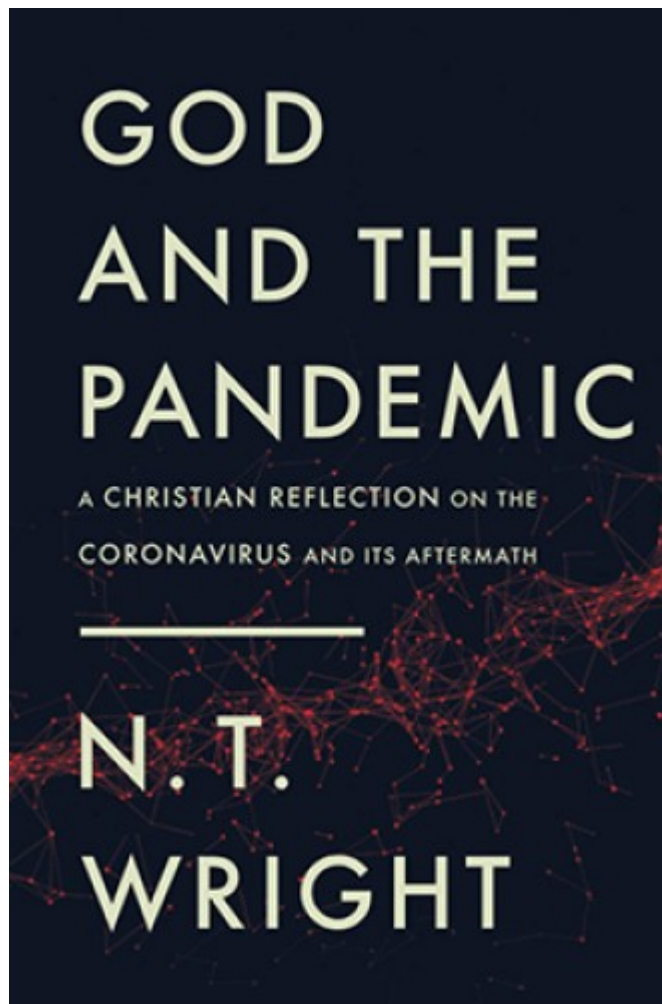


N. T. Wright and Walter Brueggemann look to the Bible for wisdom during the pandemic

## **They both resist easy answers to the problem of suffering.**

by [Jason A. Mahn](#) in the [October 21, 2020](#) issue

### **In Review**



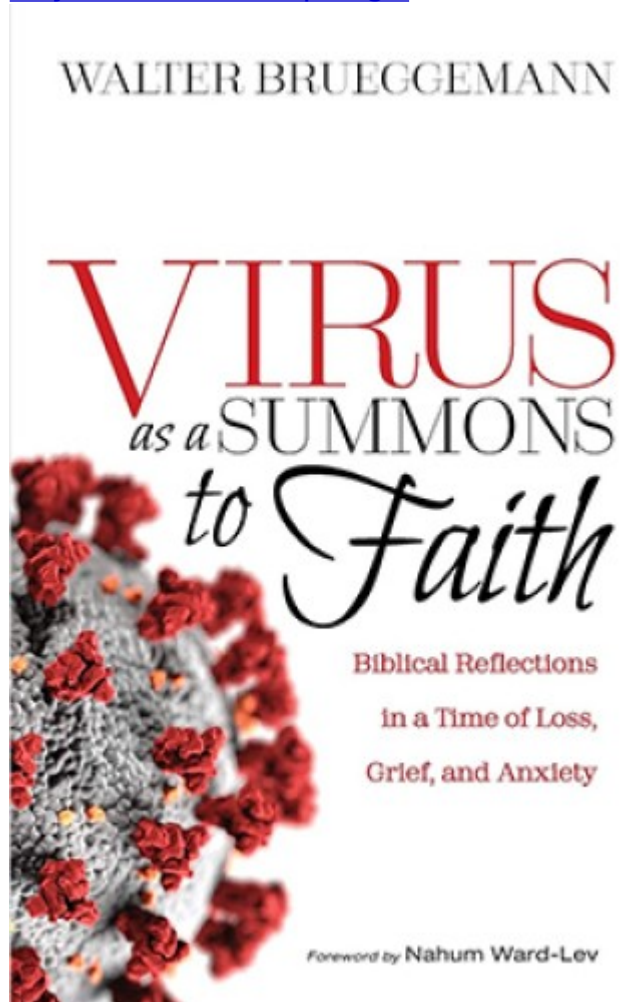
### **God and the Pandemic**

## A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and Its Aftermath

By N. T. Wright

Zondervan

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### **Virus as a Summons to Faith**

Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Uncertainty

By Walter Brueggemann

Cascade Books

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Dorothee Sölle's best-known book, *Suffering*, was published near the end of the Vietnam War, an event that interrupted America's myth of innocence 50 years

before George Floyd's death interrupted it again. Having seen her childhood Lutheran church become ideological cover for the Nazi Party, the German theologian vowed after the Shoah to explore the meaning of human suffering—including Christ's suffering.

Sölle knew the dangers of theodicy. Those who use theology to explain away the question of suffering end up justifying the status quo, numbing us from the pain of others and curbing compassionate care. But it's also dangerous to avoid theological reflection on suffering altogether. Those who seek only technological solutions—vaccines to stem a pandemic, body cameras to prevent police violence—fail to ask what our susceptibility to viruses and violence means. Sölle argues in *Suffering* that such purely practical responses can numb us to suffering no less than airtight theodicies do. We must find or make some kind of meaning within meaningless suffering if we are to learn from it, live well with it, and become more fully human.

In their short, packed books on biblical wisdom and the pandemic, both N. T. Wright and Walter Brueggemann join Sölle in rejecting the easy answers that Christians are tempted to give in times of tragedy: the virus is God's punishment for sin or God's teaching tool to strengthen faith or a tragedy that will be recompensed in heaven.

Both show as well how easily biblical themes can become fodder for self-serving eisegesis. Wright calls out interpretations that splice the coronavirus with bits of Revelation to provide fresh material for the lucrative end times industry. Brueggemann shows that the Hebrew Bible's interpretations of pestilence as a sign of God's judgment, power, or unfettered freedom do not (and should not) easily map onto our experience with this pandemic.

Both authors believe that stretching the biblical world to encompass the coronavirus, or vice versa, distorts our experience of each. Yet both of them attempt—cautiously and confidently—to shine some theological light on COVID-19 by bringing the Bible into the conversation.

Wright wrote his book after publishing a short piece in *Time* magazine that lifted up lament as the proper Christian response to COVID-19. He argues that before Christians can offer "'solutions' to the questions raised by the pandemic," we need "a time of lament, of restraint, of precisely not jumping to 'solutions.'" His final chapter, "Where Do We Go from Here?" rephrases its own question in terms of why

we must learn to voice our pain.

Psalms of lament are foundational for Wright, as is Paul's language in Romans 8 of humans groaning together with the entire creation as the Spirit intercedes on our behalf with groans too deep for words. Wright underscores the importance of cries to God that cannot be deciphered and are meaningful precisely as such:

Not only do we, the followers of Jesus, not have any words to say, any great pronouncements on "what this all means" to trumpet out to the world (the world, of course, isn't waiting eagerly to hear us anyway); but we, the followers of Jesus, find ourselves caught up in the groaning of creation, and we discover that at the same time God the Spirit is groaning within us. *That is our vocation: to be in prayer, perhaps wordless prayer, at the point where the world is in pain.*

This call to pray in the midst of what we do not comprehend remains central to Wright's response.

Other meaningful and purposeful work will emerge from the cries of God's people. That work also will entail signs that go beyond words and sighs too deep for them. We are called to be "sign-producers for God's kingdom . . . to set up signposts—actions, symbols, not just words—which speak, like Jesus' signs, of new creation, of healing for the sick, of food for the hungry, and so on."

There are two tensions that run throughout the book. The first is between Wright's moving call for the church to serve and heal the world with cruciform love, on the one hand, and his claim that this service becomes a sign of Christ's primacy, on the other.

Wright focuses on Romans 8:28, typically translated as: "All things work together for good to those who love God." Cast in this way, our consolation in times of crisis would be indistinguishable from the stoic acceptance that God is in complete control and so things will work out fine. Wright renders the Greek *synergeo* as God working with humanity rather than unilaterally for humanity: "God works all things toward ultimate good *with and through* those who love him." Christians are called to hard work—healing, teaching, feeding, comforting, caretaking, canvassing—knowing that it is God who is at work through them.

But Wright also insists that this other-regarding work of the church directly witnesses to Christ and thus is ultimately about making disciples. As the primary rejoinder to those who find biblical signs and wonders in the coronavirus, Wright repeatedly lifts up Jesus as the “ultimate sign,” the “sign par excellence of all that the One God has done,” and the “gold standard” for how we think about providence, suffering, and new creation. Few Christians would disagree.

More will be concerned with the idea that Christians are sign producers who set up food banks or care for the sick as a way of pointing to the supremacy of Christ. At moments, Wright seems a bit too interested in whether secular culture is taking credit for all the hospitals and hospices that were first established by Christians. He draws on research from Rodney Stark to assert that Christianity first spread because “Christians were much better at looking after the sick, and for that matter the poor, than the ordinary non-Christian population.” This juxtaposition of the sacred and the secular raises a question: Can contemporary Christians really extend a hand to those in pain while battling a “rampant secular culture” with the other hand?

A second tension is related. Wright at his best prompts us to suffer faithfully, knowing that in our cries we are comforted by a wordless Advocate working for and with us. He reminds us not to rush past our faithful lament for the pain of the world. Of course, sighing with the Spirit and suffering alongside the Messiah do not entail the final word. Glory awaits, and Wright uses Paul’s words of rising with Christ to emphasize a staple of his biblical theology—namely, that the end goal is not bodiless life in an ethereal heaven but a new heaven *and a new earth*, which is no less bodily or physical for having corruption, death, and decay purged from it.

I find the argument about cosmic salvation utterly convincing when Wright is arguing with dualists or dispensationalists. Inserted into *God and the Pandemic*, though, it functions like a theodicy—a way of framing our present pain through ultimate vindication, thereby containing and curtailing it. Explicating Paul on the way of the cross, Wright notes that “suffering, it seems, is the inevitable path we must tread, even though, as Paul quickly adds, this suffering is small and trivial compared with ‘the glory that is going to be unveiled for us.’” How might Christians testify to Christ’s final defeat of death and look forward to glorious, immortal physicality while still fully attending to the not-yet-trivial pain—and joy—that our bodies experience now?

While Wright reflects on prayer as a central theme, Brueggemann does his own praying. Each chapter of *Virus as a Summons to Faith* ends with a poetic prayer composed by the author. These include prayers of thanks and wonder before God's incomprehensible holiness, prayers affirming trust in God, prayers of thanksgiving for God's "new normal," prayers for the end of the virus and the recovery of the economy, and prayers that cry out to God to hear, help, and save.

Given the author's lifelong work with the psalms of lament, it is not surprising that his final chapter, "The Matrix of Groan," attends to Paul on creation's groaning alongside the words of Isaiah: "Now I will cry out like a woman in labor / I will gasp and pant." What is surprising is that throughout the book Brueggemann underscores not just the necessity of lament but also its dangers.

Psalms of disorientation (Brueggemann's longtime name for psalms of lament) are essential for fully facing our personal and collective agony. But the self-concern they express can also turn in on itself, become self-consuming, and refuse the reorientation that comes from reimagining our relationship with a wholly free God.

Explicating Psalm 77, Brueggemann attends to the pivotal verse 10, typically taken as the apex of despondency: "Has his right hand, I said, lost its grasp? / Does it hang powerless, the arm of the Most High?" (NEB). Hidden deep in this complaint that God is no longer coming to our aid is the awakening of a different kind of relationship with a mysterious other whose freedom and power transcend anything manageable or handy. Somehow, somewhere after verse 11, the psalmist "makes the leap from the preoccupation with self to an imaginative acknowledgment of the primacy of the other."

Brueggemann finds here a clear point of contact between the world of the Bible and contemporary American culture. Our consumerist culture has schooled us and fooled us into keeping "us as the agenda, an excuse for not ceding life beyond the self, an inability to transfer attention beyond our needs and appetites." This, coupled with the shibboleths of a thoroughly enculturated Christianity, encourages us to replace our lament with numbing—Brueggemann here cites Sölle—rather than with the painful, liberating move to deep faith. Many people make do with such numbness, having counted the high cost of true deliverance.

Biblical faith can and should illuminate our present crisis. Brueggemann cautions against mapping biblical views of pestilence as a sign of sin or of divine deliverance

directly onto the coronavirus. But he also critiques the ubiquitous two-dimensional thinking that eschews ultimate meanings and focuses only on cure. In the midst of matters that consume our minds and sequester our bodies, our imaginations do indeed “range beyond the immediate to larger, deeper wonderments.” The Bible gives us “proximate language” for naming them.

With biblical eyes, we might just glimpse the God of the gospel “in, with, and under the crisis of the virus without imagining that God is the cause of it.” Brueggemann repeats that trio of sacramental prepositions multiple times. It would seem that the real presence of God is both hidden and revealed among infections, uprisings, vaccines, and defunding—for those with imaginations attuned to mystery.

Christians might hear sighs, too, as signs of God’s new creation. Wright would have us lament up until the day that God defeats the power of death. Brueggemann agrees, but he quickly turns from God’s sovereignty to a repentant faith that is costly in its loss of control: “From God’s side, I suppose, new creation will come as God chooses. But the coming of new creation is with an ethical passion that requires us to consider the groan of newness from a human side.” He continues with words that have become even more convincing since this past spring when he wrote them:

The truth of newness from the human side is that God’s gift comes at huge cost, the cost of acknowledging that old creation has failed and is dysfunctional, the awareness that new creation requires disciplined, intentional reception. As a result, the move from old to new entails bewildering loss of control that comes in relinquishment. The move from an old creation marked by rapacious acquisitiveness to the new world of justice, mercy, compassion, peace, and security is one that in socio-economic, political terms necessitates renunciation, repentance, yielding, and ceding of what has been.

Groans of pain are not only a faithful posture that waits on God. They also accompany the hemorrhaging of a body politic that is learning (one hopes) to relinquish the narcotic-like ease of its former ways.

Both authors finished their books in early April. They were thus grappling to make sense of things early on, long before the first wave crested and COVID-19 shapeshifted to expose the pandemic of systemic racism. While racism is not central to his diagnoses, Brueggemann glimpses and names systemic underlying conditions

below the coronavirus. Before maskless libertarians demanded emancipation from sheltering in place, he described God's new creation as a "new network of care" that "depends on a willingness to think of creation not only as wondrous gift but also as uncompromising limit." Before the summer's uprisings over police brutality, he linked groans of pain with shouts of hope for hard-won justice and new ways of living together.

Such groans and shouts do not need to be offset by the coming of the kingdom. They are the very sounds of expectancy and receptivity to its coming—a kind of dissonant harmony between lament and hope that is sung out somehow, somewhere between the painful undoing of our culture of domination and our having been reordered for neighborliness. Brueggemann ends his book with a rejoinder for those who hope for an end that would mute our cries, whether it comes on the "wings of technological progress" or at the hand of God:

The task of faithful, candid, expectant imagination is to give absence full play, to give the groan full sound. . . . If it were easier than that or less costly than that, we would not be into birth pangs but into serene maturity with no pangs and without anguish. But we are only at the pangs. Nobody will say about such candor and hope, "Well, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

Some have criticized the early release of these books, wondering whether they were written too soon to know what to make of our plight. But the assumption that we cannot know what pandemics mean until they are over, properly explained in light of their resolutions, belies the flat thinking of secular theodicies. All acute suffering has an anachronistic character, Sölle claims. Those who aren't suffering rush toward the future; the afflicted remain stuck in another time, which passes with agonizing slowness. Cheap consolations try to pull them forward, assuring them that everything happens for a reason and will work itself out in the end. Such explanations don't help. We can only help, says Sölle, by stepping into the timeframe of those who are suffering. It is there that suffering means something. Otherwise it's best not to try.

*A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The Bible and the pandemic."*