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Heaven Will Offer All Answers to the Coronavirus: A Response to NT Wright

As the coronavirus has exploded around the world resulting in over 800,000 confirmed cases and over 39,000 deaths, and as the world's economy has crashed and burned, resulting in extreme economic hardship for millions, and as hundreds of millions of people are living under stay-at-home orders, it is natural for people to ask ultimate questions of meaning and direction: Why is all this happening? Where is all this heading?

This morning, I read Professor N.T Wright's article with this stunning headline: "Christianity Offers No Answers About the Coronavirus. It's Not Supposed To." In it, Dr. Wright argues that the Bible offers no ultimate answers to this virus and all the suffering it has caused worldwide. He says that the seeking of rational explanations for such evil and suffering is a "knee-jerk reaction" that is effectively

barking up the wrong tree. Rather than trying to locate ultimate meaning in answers about what God is doing in all this, we should follow the Psalmists in hopeless lament. Yes, hopeless... for Wright quotes T.S. Eliot saying “the only advice is to wait without hope, because we’d be hoping for the wrong thing.”

But true Christianity is rooted in the Bible, and the Bible was written to give us hope. And Christian hope shines the brightest when all earthly hopes flicker and are extinguished. Unlike T.S. Eliot, we Christians have been instructed in the Bible what to hope for. What is hope—any hope—but a feeling, a sense in the heart that the future is bright? Worldly hopes are often dashed because they have no foundation in real information about the future, but only in good wishes and sweet dreams. As Scripture says, “We don’t know what will happen tomorrow” (James 4:14)! But Christian hope is radically different, because Christianity is different than every other religion and philosophy in the world. Why? Because it is eternally founded on the prophetic words of God, revealed to prophets who wrote down what he said about the future. The God of the Bible is eternal, infinitely above the unfolding

of time. He is the “Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End” (Rev. 22:13). He wrote the complex story of human history in his mind before the world began. And he has revealed everything we need to know about the future in the prophecies of Scripture. No other religion in the world predicts the future, for God challenged the idols to that very duel—“Tell us what the future holds, so that we may know you are gods” (Isa. 41:23). They failed in Isaiah’s day and they will always fail. For God is the King of the future, and he alone decides what will happen. And he has told us in Scripture where the journey of history ends: in a New Heaven and New Earth radiant with the glory of God, populated by redeemed people from every nation on earth who have been purified by faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ (Rev. 7:9-14). In that beautiful world there will be no more death, mourning, crying, or pain (Rev. 21:4). The tree of life will be there, and the leaves of that tree will be for the healing of the nations (Rev. 22:4). So, despite what T.S. Eliot says, we Christians know exactly what to hope for! We have been clearly instructed by the prophetic Word of God, and therefore, we Christians should be radiant with hope—an

unshakeable conviction that the future is indescribably bright. The world is “without hope and without God” (Eph. 2:14). So when Christians radiate hope, the world notices and is moved to ask us to give a reason for the hope that is within us (1 Pet. 3:15).

But what of the tragic details of history, the seemingly irrational twists and turns along the way? Christianity offers the proper stance for those as well... it is a beautiful combination of scriptural truth (rational explanations) plus heartfelt compassion (including lament). N.T. Wright pits these against each other. The Bible harmonizes them perfectly. And no chapter in the Bible displays this harmony better than John 11.

What questions are posed in this chapter? Here are some: 1) Why did God allow Lazarus to become sick at all? 2) Why did Jesus delay coming to his sick friend's side in a timely fashion? 3) If Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, and could have healed him, why did he let him die? 4) Why did Jesus weep? The narrative offers clear answers to all these questions, often through the lips of our Savior himself. Answer #1: “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory, that God's Son may be glorified through it” (Jn. 11:4). Answer #2: “Jesus

loved Martha and her sister, and Lazarus. *Therefore* when he heard Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days” (Jn. 11:5-6) (The emphasis is mine, and the “therefore” is in the Greek). And Jesus said to his disciples, “Lazarus is dead. And for your sakes I am glad that I was not there, *so that* you may believe” (Jn. 11:14-15). The delay was clearly intentional by Jesus, to bring his loved ones (including us) to a much stronger faith in his resurrecting power. This is also the answer to #3... Jesus allowed Lazarus to die to put this powerful truth on display for all time: “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die” (Jn. 11:25-26).

But why did Jesus weep? And even more, why did he rage (as the Greek word in John 11:33 says he did, but inwardly)? These questions become all the more poignant when we realize that Jesus knows full well he is about to raise Lazarus from the dead. But he knows that Death is the final enemy (1 Cor. 15:26), and that his enemy Death will cost his beloved people immeasurable anguish over the centuries yet to come before it is finally defeated at the end of all things (Rev. 20:14). So Jesus

laments with deep compassion for the temporary suffering of his people. Yes, temporary, because moments after Jesus wept, he said “Lazarus, come forth!” and the dead man was raised to life! So rational explanations and lamentations ultimately give way to Jesus’ resurrection power.

And when all his believing people are resurrected in glorious bodies like his, I believe God will allow us to look back over the magnificent tapestry of redemptive history, with all its dark and light threads, and see the wisdom and glory in it all. For God’s redeemed, no sickness ever ended ultimately in death, but all of them were for God’s glory, that God’s Son might be glorified in them all. And God is not willing that we shall be eternally in the dark about his intentions. Jesus said, “I no longer call you servants because a servant does not know his Master’s business. Instead I have called you friends, because everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you” (Jn. 15:15). God is not going to hide his purposes from his children. And though we may never know in this world the full dimensions of God’s purposes in suffering like the coronavirus, in heaven it will be made clear.