

Voices: COVID-19 and the Apocalypse: Not what you think

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As the respiratory disease called COVID-19 sweeps the globe, it is causing massive disruptions to humanity's way of life.

Beyond the threat of severe illness and possible death, COVID-19 has taken a massive toll on education, the economy, mental health, relationships, infrastructure, etc. The damage goes far beyond human lungs and will be felt for years to come.

I think it is appropriate to label COVID-19 “apocalyptic.”

Defining an “apocalypse”

Modern English-speakers typically understand an “apocalypse” to be a world-ending cataclysm. “The Apocalypse” is the end of the world, at least as we know it.

We have derived that understanding from the book of Revelation, which has also been called The Apocalypse and which begins with the words, “The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ” (1:1a). Because Revelation describes the final judgment and the sudden destruction of this present world order, we have come to associate apocalypses with the same.

But this is not what the word means. A [standard Greek-English dictionary](#) of the New Testament and early Christian literature defines ἀποκάλυψις (*apokalypsis*) as “of revelations of a particular kind, through visions, etc.”

An apocalypse is fundamentally a revelation of truths previously hidden. It can be and often is about the end of the world as we know it, but is not

necessarily so.

COVID-19 as apocalyptic

I believe this new pandemic is proving to be profoundly apocalyptic. That is, I believe it is revealing many significant and often unpleasant truths which we would rather not face.

Many governments, including our own here in the United States, have floundered in responding to this new threat. Our national infrastructure was completely unprepared for this sort of thing. While widespread shutdowns, travel bans and other restrictions hopefully will mitigate the worst of this crisis, our government made and continues to make many serious missteps.

Many people now are without work, have had their education disrupted, cannot get the medical care they need, etc. The economy is tanking. A microscopic virus has brought the world to its knees and is thoroughly disabusing humanity of the notion we are in control.

But perhaps most disturbingly, this crisis has revealed the fear and selfishness that sits deep in humanity's heart (Jeremiah 17:9). As panic and hysteria take hold of many people, our response is to lash out at others and protect ourselves. People unnecessarily are stockpiling food and other essential commodities, leading to shortages. People are fist-fighting in grocery stores over toilet paper.

COVID-19 has laid bare the weakness, fear and sinfulness of humanity in a powerful way. Some could argue these realities were not previously "hidden." Fair enough. But the COVID-19 crisis is shining a bright light upon them and forcing us to face the facts.

An apocalyptic Savior

However, there is another previously “hidden” truth this pandemic has brought to the fore. We humans cannot save this world; we cannot even save ourselves. But there is someone who can.

The book of Revelation gives a picture of Jesus quite distinct from those found elsewhere in the New Testament. One of the key images of Christ that emerges is “the Alpha and the Omega ... who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty” (1:8). Christ was dead, but now he is alive forever, and he holds “the keys of Death and Hades” (1:18).

God alone is sovereign. God alone holds power over life and death. God alone can save. Jesus Christ is our only hope. The vapid, worthless god of American civil religion can’t save us. The vanity of human effort and ingenuity holds no true power over life and death. COVID-19 is far more powerful than any idol we can construct. Only the one true God is powerful enough finally to overcome disease and death.

This pandemic most likely will pass. Within a few months, Lord willing, the worst will be over. Within a year or two, things mostly will return to normal. Many of us will give credit to ourselves or to whatever our idol of choice may be. But we Christians should never forget this sobering reminder that there is only One who can save.

Spirituality in the age of coronavirus

When an apocalypse appears, there always is a question, either implied or explicit: “How will you respond?”

So, how will we respond to the apocalypse of COVID-19? A good first response to any apocalypse is to humble ourselves, repent of our sins and cast ourselves on the mercy of God. We should acknowledge and repent of

the ways we have sought to provide our own security by our own strength. We ought to ask God's forgiveness for selfishly lashing out at others in fear.

But the isolating measures implemented by our government also provide us with a unique opportunity. For many of us, the weeks and perhaps months we will spend mostly alone give us the perfect chance to spend extended periods of time in prayer and the reading of Scripture. Turn off Netflix. Pause your cat videos on the internet. Put down the video game controller. Spend some time with God and his word.

And as you pray, pray for others. Pray for those who are sick, dying and vulnerable. Pray for those who are lonely and isolated. Pray for those whose lives have been not just inconvenienced, but possibly ruined. And don't just pray for them; reach out to them. Community is vital, even if we must pursue it in unconventional ways.

And through it all, turn your eyes toward Jesus. The first question of the *Heidelberg Catechism* asks, "What is your only comfort in life and death?" The answer begins, "That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ." Amen.

Joshua Sharp is a Master of Divinity student and graduate assistant in the Office of Ministry Connections at Truett Seminary in Waco, Texas. The views expressed are those solely of the author.