

CORONAVIRUS AND
CHRIST



JOHN PIPER

**CORONAVIRUS
AND
CHRIST**

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CORONAVIRUS AND CHRIST

John Piper

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Coronavirus and Christ

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THE OCCASION: CORONAVIRUS

I AM WRITING THIS little book in the last days of March 2020, on the front end of the global pandemic known as the coronavirus, or technically, “coronavirus disease 2019” (abbreviated COVID-19). The virus affects the lungs, and in the worst cases kills by suffocation.

The first death by the virus was reported in China on January 11, 2020. Today as I write, there are hundreds of thousands of cases of infection worldwide, with tens of thousands of deaths. There is no known cure—yet.

By the time you read this, you will know far better than I how things will develop. So I need not detail the measures being taken to slow the spread of the virus or the economic toll being exacted. Social mingling, travel, conferences,

church gatherings, theaters, restaurants, sporting events, and businesses are nearing a standstill.

This is not unprecedented—either globally or in America. In the global influenza epidemic of 1918 (to use the estimates of the Centers for Disease Control), fifty million people around the world died.¹ Over five hundred thousand of those were in the United States. People felt symptoms in the morning and were dead by nightfall. Bodies were picked up from front porches to be carted away to graves dug by bulldozers. A man was shot for not wearing a mask. Schools were closed. Ministers spoke of Armageddon.

Of course precedents prove nothing. The past is warning, not fate. Nevertheless, this is a time when the fragile form of this world is felt. The seemingly solid foundations are shaking. The question we should be asking is, Do we have a Rock under our feet? A Rock that cannot be shaken—ever?

Part 1

**THE GOD WHO REIGNS
OVER THE CORONAVIRUS**

Chapter 1

COME TO THE ROCK

I AM MOVED TO WRITE because playing the odds is a fragile place to put your hope. Odds like 3 percent versus 10 percent, youth versus old age, compromised health versus no history of disease, rural versus urban, self-isolated versus home meeting with friends. Playing the odds provides little hope. It is not a firm place to stand.

There is a better way. There is a better place to stand: a Rock of certainty rather than the sand of probabilities.

WHEN CANCER CAME

I recall being told on December 21, 2005, that I had prostate cancer. For the next several weeks, all the talk was about

odds. Odds with waiting to see. Odds with medications. Odds with homeopathic procedures. Odds with radical surgery. My wife, Noël, and I took these numbers seriously. But in the evening, we would smile at each other and think, *Our hope is not in the odds. Our hope is in God.*

We did *not* mean, “It is 100 percent certain God will heal me, while doctors can only give me odds.” The Rock we are talking about is better than that. Yes, better than healing.

Even before the phone call from the doctor telling me I had cancer, God had already reminded me in a remarkable way about the Rock under my feet. After my usual annual exam, the urologist had looked at me and said, “I’d like to do a biopsy.”

Really? I thought. “When?”

“Right now, if you have the time.”

“I’ll make time.”

While he was going to get the machine, and while I was changing into the typical unflattering blue gown, there was time for me to ponder what was happening. *So he thinks I may have cancer.* As my future in this world began to change before my eyes, God brought to my mind something I had read recently in the Bible.

GOD SPOKE

Now, let's be clear. I don't hear voices. At least I never have. My confidence that God speaks is rooted in the fact that the Bible is his word. (More on that in the next chapter.) He has spoken, once for all, and he still speaks in his word. The Bible, rightly understood, *is* the voice of God.

Here is what he said to me in that urologist's office as I waited for the biopsy that would confirm that I had cancer. "John Piper, this is not wrath. Live or die, you will be with me." That's my paraphrase. Here's what he actually said:

God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him.
(1 Thess. 5:9–10)

Awake or asleep—that is, live or die—I will be alive with God. How can that be? I am a sinner. I have never lived a day of my life—not *one*—without falling short of God's standards of love and holiness. So how can this be? How can God say, "You, John Piper, will be with me—live or die"?

God didn't even wait for the question before he answered. It's because of Jesus. Jesus alone. Because of his death, there

will be no wrath toward me. Not because of my perfection. My sins, my guilt, and my punishment fell on my Savior, Jesus Christ. He “died for us.” That’s what his word says. Therefore, I am free from guilt. Free from punishment. Secure in God’s merciful favor. “Live or die,” God said, “you will be with me.”

That is very different from playing the odds with cancer—or with the coronavirus. This is a firm Rock under my feet. It is not fragile. It is not sand. I would like it to be a Rock under your feet. That is why I am writing.

IS THE ROCK SOLID ONLY IN THE BY-AND-BY?

But that’s not all. Someone might read that and say, “Religious people like you can find hope only in the by-and-by. If they are safe beyond the grave, they have what they want. But this ‘voice of God’ they talk about offers little involvement right now. God got everything started in creation, I suppose, and makes happily-ever-after endings. But what about in between? Where is he now—right now, during this coronavirus outbreak?”

Well, I guess I do put a really high value on joy in the presence of God after death for unending billions of years.

As opposed to, say, endless suffering. That seems reasonable to me. But the Rock under my feet (the one I would like you to share) really is under my feet *now*. Now!

The coronavirus pandemic is where I live. Where we all live. And if it weren't the coronavirus, it would be the cancer just waiting to recur. Or the unprovoked pulmonary embolism from 2014 just waiting to break off and go to my brain and turn me into a mindless man who will never write another sentence. Or a hundred other unforeseen calamities that could take me—and you—down at any moment.

The Rock I am talking about is under my feet now. I *could* say that the Rock is under my feet now just because hope beyond the grave is *present* hope. The *object* of hope is future. The *experience* of hope is present. And that present experience is powerful.

Hope is power. Present power. Hope keeps people from killing themselves—now. It helps people get out of bed and go to work—now. It gives meaning to daily life, even locked-down, quarantined, stay-at-home life—now. It liberates from the selfishness of fear and greed—now. It empowers love and risk taking and sacrifice—now.

So be careful before you belittle the by-and-by. It just may be that when your by-and-by is beautiful and sure, your here and now will be sweet and fruitful.

HIS FINGERS IN VIRUSES

That's what I *could* say in defense of God's sweet word to me in the urologist's office: "Live or die, you will be with me." Such hope (through the death and resurrection of Jesus) makes me want to pour out my life for the good of others *now*—especially their eternal good. It makes me passionate not to waste my life. It takes away dithering. It fills me with a zeal to make the greatness of Jesus Christ known. It makes me want to spend and be spent (2 Cor. 12:15) to bring as many people with me as I can into everlasting joy.

But even though that's what I *could* say, when someone objects that Piper's God specializes in the by-and-by, not the here and now, it's not the only thing that needs to be said.

In fact, what I'm about to say will probably make someone object, "Whoa! That's way too much involvement for God in the here and now. Now you've gone from a God who only fixes the future to a God with his fingers in viruses."

NOT “I’M FINE,” BUT “I FEEL FINE”

Let’s put it this way. People would often ask me before my cancer diagnosis, “How’s your health?” And I would answer, “Fine.” I don’t answer that way anymore. I say, “I feel fine.” There’s a difference. The day before I went for that annual prostate exam, I *felt* fine. The day after, I was told I had cancer. In other words, I was *not* fine. So even as I write these words, I do not know if I am fine. I feel fine. Way better than I deserve. For all I know, I have cancer right now. Or perhaps a blood clot. Or the coronavirus.

What’s the point? The point is this: the ultimate reason we ought not to say, “I *am* fine,” is that God alone knows and decides if you are fine—now. To say, “I am fine,” when you don’t *know* if you are fine, and you don’t *control* if you are fine, is like saying, “Tomorrow, I will go to Chicago and do business there,” when you have no idea if you will even be alive tomorrow, let alone doing business in Chicago.

Here’s what the Bible says about a sentence like that:

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears

for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.”
(James 4:13–15)

So the God who is involved only in the by-and-by just evaporated. That’s the effect of the bright sunlight of biblical truth on the ephemeral mists of our opinions.

IF HE DECIDES, WE DO THIS OR THAT

The Rock I stand on (and want you to stand on) is the Rock of God’s action in the world *now*, and *forever*. “If the Lord wills,” the Bible says, “we will live.” That’s about as involved now as you can get. Not just, “Whether you live or die, you will be with God,” but also, “God will decide if you live or die—now.”

And not just live or die. He’s even more involved than that. “If the Lord wills, we will . . . *do this or that*.” Nothing is excluded from “this or that.” He is totally involved. Totally. *This* health, or *that* sickness. *This* economic collapse, or *that* recovery. *This* breath, or not.

Which means that while I waited in the doctor’s office for the biopsy machine to arrive, God could have said (which he did later), “Fear not. Whether you live or die, you will

COME TO THE ROCK

be with me. *And* in the meantime, while you live, nothing will happen to you—nothing!—that I do not appoint. If I decide, you will live. If I decide, you will die. And until you die at my decision, I will decide if you do this or that. Get to work.”

This is my Rock—for today, tomorrow, and eternity.

COME TO THE ROCK

This book is my invitation for you to join me on the solid Rock, Jesus Christ. What that means will, I hope, become clear. My aim is to show why God in Christ is the Rock at this moment in history—in this pandemic of the coronavirus—and what it is like to stand on his mighty love.

Chapter 2

A SOLID FOUNDATION

IT MATTERS LITTLE WHAT I THINK about the coronavirus—or about anything else, for that matter. But it matters forever what God thinks. He is not silent about what he thinks. Scarcely a page in the Bible is irrelevant for this crisis.

SOLID AND SWEET

My voice is grass. God's voice is granite. "The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever" (1 Pet. 1:24–25). Jesus said that God's words in Scripture "cannot be broken" (John 10:35). What God says is "true, and righteous altogether" (Ps. 19:9). His word is,