

A COVID Post-Mortem: Why Did So Many Godly People Get It Wrong?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 28 March 2025

Preacher: Chris Oswald

[0 : 00] . . .

. . .

Well, I'm going to attempt to do something interesting today. I am going to attempt to do an analysis on why so many people got so much wrong about COVID.

But I'm going to attempt to do that in a way that has absolutely no sense of victory lap for those that were getting it right, or shame for those who got much of it wrong.

So, my aim here is to simply do what I've been attempting to do in my own life for the past several years, and that is to look at my regrets through a lens of both rejoicing over the Lord's faithfulness, and also redeeming my regrets by learning from them.

[2 : 01] It's been a big theme for me over the past several years. I made some kind of a commitment to the Lord at some point in the last probably five, six years, where I wanted to, within reason, so far as it was helpful, be open with my congregation about the things in my past that I regret.

And the reason for that is, of course, most plainly, because all wisdom only comes about because of pain.

The only way you can buy wisdom is through pain. But if you listen to the Lord and you read His Word and you do what He says, you will actually be able to acquire wisdom at someone else's expense.

And so you can actually acquire wisdom that someone else paid for with their pain. And this is, of course, a major theme in the Scriptures. And so I have been attempting in ways that don't feel mournful or, you know, kind of worldly grief that leads to death.

I don't want to talk about my regrets in that sense. I don't think that's appropriate. It doesn't make any sense. I want to talk about my regrets in a way that gives much glory to God for carrying me through my many failures and also that gives not only myself but others the opportunity to learn from my mistakes.

[3 : 45] And so when I go into this discussion, I want you to understand the aim is not to... Let me be just straightforward, authentically kind of honest.

I spend a lot of time thinking about COVID. It was a very difficult period of time in which to be a pastor.

And I spend a lot of time thinking about it in particular because I took several risky stands that wound up being the right choices and yet felt very lonely within the company of fellow pastors and in particular felt relatively unhelped by the majority of the evangelical world that I would typically rely on to offer help and clarity.

You see, like, I'm just a, you know, I'm just a two-bit player in a much bigger situation. And I'm all about the fifth commandment, man. You honor your fathers and mothers.

And, you know, I'm all about the Westminster take on that. You got to know when... You got to know who your superiors are. Parents is just a stand-in for a much larger concept.

[5 : 17] You got to know where you rank. Know your position in the hierarchy. And then if there are people that are above you, you submit to them, you learn from them, you listen to them, and so on and so forth.

And so the typical way you go through life is, you know, you rely on certain people to tell you the truth, to give you guidance and wisdom and so on and so forth.

And during that season, there were very few voices that wound up being trustworthy. So I want to talk about that tonight a little bit. And again, not in any sense to make anyone who was wrong about COVID in various ways to feel guilty.

But I do want you to understand, like, if you look back and see that you got stuff wrong, first of all, have you done that? Have you actually just taken a moment?

You know, sit down for an hour and just think about this. And if not, why not? Because how is it that you learn? And to me, like, one key way of learning is to look back at things I've gotten wrong and try to understand why I got it wrong.

[6 : 31] Like, are you doing that? Have you done that with COVID? I want to try to help you do that a little bit in this podcast. I also want to try to understand why it is that so many people that we look to typically for sensemaking and helping us apply the Word of God to our particular situations.

Why is it that so many of those people got so much wrong? I've thought about this so much that actually I don't expect this podcast to be very long because I think I've just distilled it in all the time I've spent thinking about this.

I think I've distilled this down to some pretty simple ideas. Well, first of all, let's get into our hymn for the day before we get into this discussion of COVID.

And the hymn for today is The Power of God by R. Burnham. And one thing I've learned as I've been reading these hymns is that, you know, these were often written for a British accent in which some of the words rhyme better in a British accent.

As best as I can imagine in my British accent interior monologue. Anyway, I've noticed that like some of the rhymes are a little bit more awkward with this kind of flat Midwestern accent.

[7 : 54] But anyway, the hymn is a great hymn. In fact, I think we probably need to figure out a way to sing this. I don't actually even know what the melody sounds like. In a situation like with these older hymns, sometimes the melodies aren't good.

So you might potentially even have to rewrite a completely new melody. But the lyrics on this one, man, are solid. God is my everlasting King. God is my strength and I will sing.

His power upholds my feeble frame. And I'm victorious through His name. Devils retreat when He appears. Then I arise above my fears.

And every fiery dart repel and vanquish all the force of hell. Through the Redeemer's precious blood, I feel the mighty power of God. Through the rich aid divinely given, I rise from earth and soar to heaven.

Dear Lord, Thy weaker saints inspire. And fill them with celestial fire. On Thy kind arm may they rely.

[9 : 00] And all their foes shall surely fly. Now, Lord, Thy wondrous power exert. And every ransom's soul support. Give us fresh strength to wing our way to regions of eternal day.

There may we praise the great I Am. And shout the victories of the Lamb. Raise every chorus to His blood.

And triumph in the power of God. What a good hymn. Okay. And somewhat related to our conversation. Why is it that we got COVID wrong?

Why did so many get COVID wrong? Well, one of the things I'd like to point out is that beginning in the mid-90s, I guess I remember this starting to emerge in 1993.

Probably goes back to about 1989. That would be my best understanding. I wasn't aware of it in 1989, but I was aware of it in 1993.

[10 : 09] And kind of look back now and realize it started then. One of the things that had been happening over the last several decades is what we now refer to as the gospel-centered movement.

And that is probably not the right term. The right term is probably the justification-centered movement.

Now, this might get a bit into the theological weeds, but in a way that I think would actually be helpful to you. And that is just to understand that, you know, the gospel entails a wide variety of benefits.

It's good news in, like, really just a ton of different ways. You know, the first gospel promise appears in Genesis 3.15, in which God promises that the seed of Eve would one day rise up and crush the serpent's head, the same serpent who had deceived them.

And so that's the first gospel promise. We call it in the theology world the euangelion, the first gospel promise. And that's not a promise of justification per se.

[11 : 21] It's a promise, really, of, like, defeat of the deceiver. Anyway, so somewhere around 1993, 1999, something around there, a long time before a lot of you were born, this gospel-centeredness arose.

And by the time the 2000s rolled around, it was kind of codified as the way that Reformed people talk about themselves, gospel-centered.

Looking back now, it is pretty easy to see that, for the most part, by gospel-centered, they meant one particular aspect of the gospel, namely justification, the idea that God sent his Son to become a propitiation for our sins, to make propitiation for our sins, to satisfy God's righteous requirements, expressed in his wrath against sin.

Jesus Christ took on flesh, lived a perfect life, and offered himself as a perfect sacrifice. to win our forgiveness, a forgiveness that we could never have accumulated through even a perfect life. God's wrath is satisfied against our sin through the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ. And so, when people talk about being gospel-centered, that's really what they mean.

[12 : 56] They mean justification-centered, for the most part. But as I mentioned a moment ago, gospel is actually much bigger than that. It has to do with redeeming the whole world, judging the serpent, and the serpent's seed, judging not only the devil, but the people who are ruled by the devil.

And so there's actually a whole bunch more to the gospel. I mean, adoption is way more consequential, ultimately, than justification, even. And so, one of the reasons why I think COVID caught a number of typically theologically solid guys by surprise is that they weren't actually as gospel-centered as they thought they were.

They were really more justification-centered. They were focused on one particular benefit of the gospel, or one particular part of the gospel. And the part that they were focused on had to do with God's dealing with our sin.

The part that they were not focused on was somewhat pertinent to the psalm that we had just read, or the hymn that we had just read. And that is, God is judging His enemies.

And who are His enemies? His enemies are deceivers. His enemies are liars, as Satan was from the beginning. It really hasn't been a sufficient focus within the gospel-centered movement on God's broader redemptive work, not only to forgive you, but to judge deception.

[14 : 40] Deception is a key element of the Scriptures. And I just don't think that we were on good footing, good gospel footing, to encounter a mass deception.

Simply did not have a broad enough gospel window, a gospel filter, or gospel lens, that's the word I'm looking for, lens, through which to view the world that we live in.

And so we were really teaching people to think mostly about themselves and mostly about their own sin, and not about the enemy outside of them, which is the deceiver, the first enemy, before our sin ever came onto the scene.

There was the serpent who was wiser than all the other creatures. Schroeder, I think, maybe, not wiser. Anyway, so one of the things that I would say had been brewing for a long time is this justification-centeredness that is called gospel-centeredness.

And it leaves us vulnerable to a whole very important aspect of our kind of navigating reality, and that is, like, not all of our problems are due to us.

[16 : 11] Exactly. The world is full of deceivers who do the will of their father, the devil. And the true gospel, like the gospel that's actually presented in the Bible, focuses on this a lot.

You've heard me say many times that Psalm 110 is the most quoted or alluded to Old Testament passage in the New Testament, specifically Psalm 110.1. Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool.

So this is all Genesis 3.15 stuff. And Jim Hamilton, a theologian from Southern Seminary, wrote a good book on this. But he argued that that's actually the main theme of the Bible, God judging his enemies.

Now, just as an aside, like as a theological aside, remember what I just talked about in my podcast on my kind of John 14 sermon gone wrong?

Because it's like really key to understanding this. If the whole program of the Bible is actually more broadly God dealing with his enemies, then justification becomes a way of shutting the accuser's mouth.

[17 : 25] Like that, it becomes filtered kind of more through that lens. There's a beautiful passage in the Old Testament where a vision is put before Zechariah and he sees Joshua the high priest standing before God.

And Satan is kind of positioned there as a prosecuting attorney. And Satan is just pointing out just all the rubbish, the filthy garments of the high priest.

And then God says, enough. Put new clothes on this priest. Give him glory clothes, you know, not sinful tatters.

And it's almost as if he's shutting up the devil. It's like, now what are you going to say? And of course, you know, we all, the gospel-centered people, you know, love Romans 8.

But, you know, Romans 8 is rooted in that very concept, the concept that started in the garden. And who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is him who justifies. So even justification needs to be set in a lens or in the context of this broader issue, this broader cosmic battle between God and the devil.

[18 : 44] But because we were just kind of focused on, you know, we thought that we were being gospel-centered with this justification focus, like we forgot that living in a world full of people who lie and so, why was it that so many of our prominent theologians, men I respect and love and would have absolutely no problem, you know, listening to on 99% of the issues in the world, why were so many of them wrong or passive, you know?

Why did so many of them sin in sins of omission and not bringing like clear truth to God's people during this time? Well, I think it's in part due to this emphasis on justification that is robbed of its greater biblical context in which the real drama is a cosmic drama between light and darkness. And yes, we're sinners and we've been lied to and we believe the lies and there's a part of us that wants to believe the lies, that's our flesh. But it's bigger than that and justification is actually just part of what God does.

And, you know, Peter talks about us being transferred out of the darkness and into the kingdom of light. So anyway, one of the things going on is is that basically all of our theologians, more or less, were bookish nerds who were focused on this one particular theme of the gospel and yet had carefully over time, you know, not maliciously probably, but had staked out sort of the authority to say this is what gospel-centeredness is and they were just wrong.

So then when we get into a situation where a mass deception is occurring, the gospel-centered guys are like, oh, you know, they just don't understand any of it because they just weren't actually gospel-centered.

[20 : 55] You know, masks don't work for the general public. You've got to wear a mask. Two weeks to flatten the curve. The virus doesn't spread asymptotically. Herd immunity is the goal.

The vaccine stops transmission. Lockdowns will stop the virus. No one is safe until everyone is vaccinated. The lab leak theory is a conspiracy theory.

Blah, blah, blah. We just had no category for people that are evil and lie. And so I believe that is actually the centerpiece of my understanding of why so many people got it wrong.

we literally just didn't get what is actually a fundamental in the Bible. And that is people in power are generally not trustworthy.

Generally not trustworthy. And, and this is something I'm guilty of, in fact, it is still, it is still confounding to me.

[22 : 03] And that is, I literally constantly underestimate the role greed plays in the average person's motivation. I have just been raised, you know, since I was a kid to believe in eternity and to believe in like an evening out and in fact to kind of to believe in a ultimate eternal reward that is based on justice and grace.

It's hard for me to remember that a lot of people think this life is all there is and that pleasure is the main point and consuming is more or less the only thing that matters.

I just don't live in that world. I don't think that way. At least I hope I don't. And so I believe that one of the reasons why so many people got jobs they now regret or did a bunch of other things they now regret related to COVID was they just didn't have this category that the Bible has clearly provided and that category being governments lie, people are greedy prepare accordingly.

That's going to be I think if I'm reading the tea leaves correctly that's going to be a major theme over the next several years maybe even to the point of provoking a civil war this the exposure the degree to which the government has been corrupt and motivated by greed is well beyond what most

Christians understood a few years ago.

now let me see if I can keep let me see if I can keep a couple ideas in my head because I want to say two things about about this sometimes I do these podcasts with scripts I'm not doing that here one of the things that is kind of like really consequential in all of this it seems to me anyway is that folks just didn't didn't understand that by and large you can't trust sorry back up folks did not understand that the Bible teaches that by and large you cannot trust the government now you may be called to submit to it but you're not supposed to trust it and that is actually not a niche idea in the scriptures it's throughout the whole scriptures and it also just fits with what the Bible says about man you know the Bible has a theory or you know more than a theory of anthropology like what is a man what is he about what is he motivated by that's been that was there for us in

[25 : 08] March of 2020 friends all that data was there for us and that leads me to kind of another broad kind of problem a systemic problem I guess you could say as to why we got so much of this wrong first one was we did not actually have the full gospel in mind we were not sufficiently trained on the full gospel we were told that we were gospel centered if we were justification centered that is simply not true that's the first one the second one is well backing up we we did not have a proper understanding of the role the deceivers play in the great story of God and number two we were simply trained for many years well before COVID to be what is sometimes referred to as biblicists biblicists what I mean by that is this need to have a verse a proof text speak very specifically about the issue that we're dealing with so this is a great challenge for

Christians today it actually is a fault of our forefathers our spiritual forefathers some of whom are still alive and that is we have been training Christians to think that if the Bible doesn't speak explicitly about something then there's no biblical data about that issue we have not learned how to we've actually this was a key feature of Puritanism and key feature of Protestantism we used to be able to reason from the Bible I believe I mentioned at some point earlier on in this podcast that this idea of the fifth commandment and it's not just about parents it's about superiors it's really got the view of a hierarchy in mind learn who your superiors are learn who your inferiors are that all comes from the Westminster Catechism Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechism both deal with good and necessary inferences from

God's word in the fifth commandment though it speaks specifically of parents is the blueprint for dealing with those in authority or those who are your superiors but we've been trained to think that if the Bible doesn't say it explicitly if it doesn't use the word we use for something for instance we we don't know how to figure things anymore and so there was this whole group of prominent theologians who literally were with biblicist instincts who didn't know how to navigate this novel coronavirus because the Bible doesn't ever talk about a novel coronavirus and it was just weird to watch the relative lack of theological agility that was playing out in real time back in 2020 is a really weird thing and you know it's funny because like

John MacArthur did really well with this like he handled things well but he's like he's an extreme biblicist in many respects and for him it was just simple it was like well the Bible says we have to meet for church which you know fair enough but there was much more to be learned I remember reading one prominent theologian who I really respect say that the Bible doesn't give us any clear guidance on how to handle COVID-19 and I'm thinking well the Bible tells us that the government is typically untrustworthy the Bible tells us that people are motivated by greed the Bible talks plenty about mass hysteria you know there's a lot of things so anyway one of the other reasons why a lot of people got things wrong is they actually don't know how to reason from scripture if the verse doesn't exist for the particular thing they don't know how to get truth well that's a big problem that's a real burden of my preaching is to try to help people do that to try to help people this is a thing we encounter from time to time because for instance say you're single and I'm preaching a sermon and I make an application related to marriage well you know years ago

Christians could understand the basic principle and learn how to apply the basic principle to their context even if the preacher didn't specifically mention their context they could do that mental work on their own people can't do that as much anymore and so there's people that feel singled out because they weren't mentioned in an illustration it's like well honestly you know you have to learn how to take God's word and understand its basic principles and then apply it to your situation there's pretty much single every single passage is rooted in the same basic physics the same basic spiritual physics I guess you could say it's just a matter of like figuring out how it applies to your unique situation so people were really impaired in their judgment because they didn't know how to

do this reasoning it was all there for them it just didn't work ironically this also led to really clumsy interpretations of Romans 13 13 a very literalist like just absolutely no nuance or understanding of lots of occasions in scripture where that's that's there's a deepening of what is meant in Romans 13 and people didn't know how to handle that so they took a very wooden interpretation of that and then like the one place they were the most elastic you know the one place they were the most like willing to apply things had to do with the weak neighbor thing the weak brother thing and oh my goodness that was a whole travesty of hermeneutics

[31 : 34] I think the most angry I ever got during COVID had to do with that because I just bad biblical interpretation really annoys me and I'm thinking what are you doing here this is nothing this is not the passage to use for this anyway so we had a couple problems just to sum it up one we are the gospel centered thing is not what it says it is it was a justification centered movement focused mostly on an individualistic understanding of God's forgiveness so that we don't go to hell which is glorious of course but the gospel is much broader than that and number two there was a wooden biblicism that needed a passage to say explicitly wear a mask or don't wear a mask and in absence of those passages people were just lost so like I told you there's nothing about this that is rooted in some kind of victory lap or making people feel bad

I really want to just understand why did so many people get this wrong basic claim of God's word is is that if you're a Christian you become wiser over time and you become more discerning and you have your conscience trained and your mind trained through regular discernment of good and evil why did so many people miss the fact that Anthony Fauci was evil why did they miss that I think it's because they actually were raised in a kind of boomerism that had altruistic kind of charitable assignments toward their leaders they didn't understand that no people are pretty nasty without Christ and so-called public servants are usually grifters this is all relevant like one of the reasons I'm bringing all this up is because we're going to go through a period of time where the thing that Dwight D. Eisenhower warned about in his departing address from the presidency this is going to be almost everything for a while and that is Eisenhower warned explicitly about the development of a military industrial complex which war became a profit motivation what you're going to see and what you've seen when the JFK files were released and you'll see it elsewhere is that you honestly need to be much more skeptical of anything to do with military action and that is because humans are motivated by greed to an extent that is hard to understand if you're a Christian and they really will let millions die to buy a nicer house as disgusting and crazy as that sounds that's actually true and the

Bible has told us that all along you're either in one or two camps as a human being you're either in the darkness or in the light you either have God as your father or the devil and the devil has come to steal kill and destroy and so we would love to kind of live in this world where we can trust our doctors and we can trust the big time doctors like Fauci or we can trust Zelensky or Putin or whatever no you can't I was at Sam's today getting a few things for the church and I saw a pan on sale and I looked at the pan and the pan was Teflon coated and I was thinking about my kids and how none of my kids will use Teflon coating I was thinking about how for my kids they live in a world where it's sort of understood that the government has completely relinquished any actual benevolent intention in like guarding food even or food or food related products like pans like they don't even they're not even trying to take care of you and so my kids are living in this world where they have to think through ingredients think through pan uses this whole world where essentially their brains have to work all the time because the authorities that have been placed in above them are more or less not taking care of them they're not exercising their responsibility as outlined in Romans 13 and I was just thinking about how much more thinking they have to do and how much more careful they have to be and I can see why some people were just like just give me the jab because I'm just tired of thinking about this I don't want to I can just see how people would rather rent out it's perfectly understandable it's extremely disconcerting and it's a lot of work to just think through all these things all the time and to not believe like your doctor when he talks about when your kids should get vaccines and so on it's just such a different world than we thought we had but that is the world we have and the truth is that when we look at God's word we can see that that's the world we've always had we are living in a world that is by and large run by people who work for the enemy of our souls and yes

[37 : 38] I'm an optimistic guy when it comes to eschatology and I do see many evidences Christ's reign taking hold on earth but we are not even close to the place where we can stop being

suspicious and street smart and people I think just weren't prepared to live in the world of deep skepticism toward our authorities and it's just like well that's the world we live in so to review why did so many get COVID wrong first one there was this whole period of time probably 20 30 years worth of time where all of our Bible teachers only taught about justification for the most part at least in the reform world and they were like gospel centered you know trademark and they did not prepare us to live in a world with bullets shooting past our head and vaccines that were not at all tested and potentially quite dangerous we weren't taught the spiritual dynamics of the world and that is that it's a war and it's a war yes not flesh and blood per se but the spiritual principalities and authorities they do occupy human actions and occupy human hearts so we were not really prepared to think well about the fact that so many people wanted to would gladly sell us for \$20 sell our bodies for \$20 and so forth so that was one thing the other thing is we had this biblicism this wooden biblicism so we weren't able to reason from

God's word it was all there all along don't trust the government too easily people are motivated by greed you know blah blah blah there's lots of things you could have reasoned out of God's word some of us did that was there and then like lastly I just think that it is actually a really hard pill to swallow to realize that you have to think all the time now because we're just living in a particular moment where it's just very dangerous to trust people and yeah so you know there's plenty of reasons why we got stuff wrong and I don't bring that up for any kind of shaming reason I actually bring it up because I want you to learn from this I don't think we're even close to the end of this particular period of history all right well thanks so much for listening I feel much better now that's been something I've wanted to share for a long time and you know we all took different positions during that time and some of us were more right than others definitely don't care about any of that just want us all to be humble enough to learn from our mistakes and also humble enough to acknowledge them so that others can learn from them too and you know and it's like my experience with my regrets it ultimately just reminds us boy I'm sure glad

God's in charge and that my eternal joy doesn't depend on my own street smarts because sometimes I can be fooled too all right God bless my friends hope this was interesting provocative helpful edifying whatever have a great day